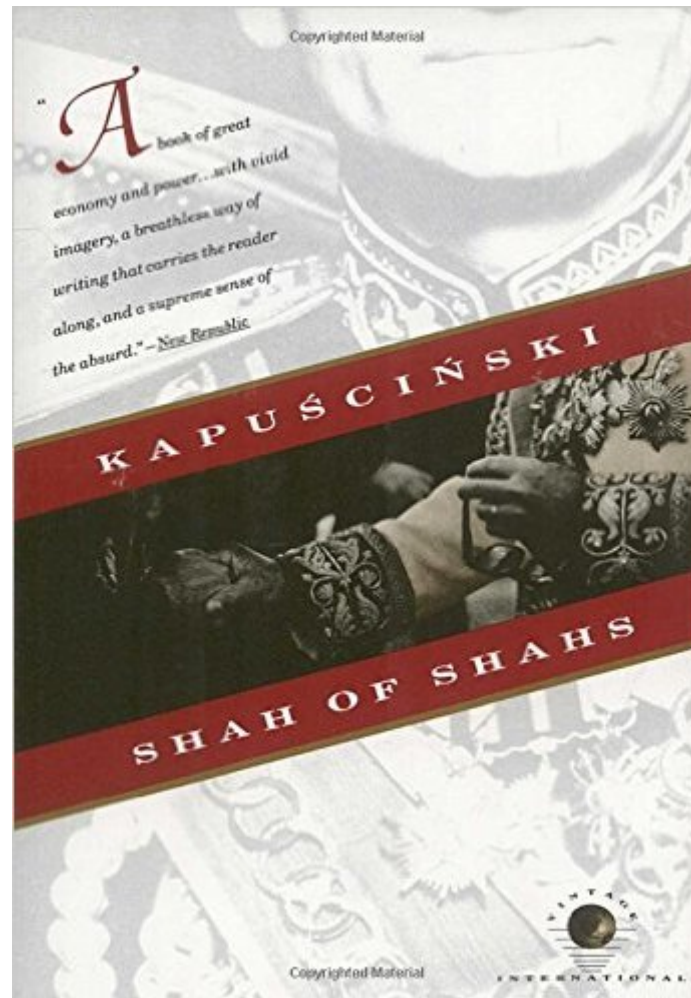


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Shah Of Shahs



Synopsis

In *Shah of Shahs* Kapuscinski brings a mythographer's perspective and a novelist's virtuosity to bear on the overthrow of the last Shah of Iran, one of the most infamous of the United States' client-dictators, who resolved to transform his country into "a second America in a generation," only to be toppled virtually overnight. From his vantage point at the break-up of the old regime, Kapuscinski gives us a compelling history of conspiracy, repression, fanaticism, and revolution. Translated from the Polish by William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Kapuscinski was born in Poland in the 1930s and lived through World War II. He would go on to write for Poland's national news service (their version of the AP) as a foreign correspondent. He covered the "little wars," the insurgencies, revolutions, and coups that are barely reported in the western media. His point of view is fascinating: a man living behind the Iron Curtain serves his country by reporting on terrifying conflicts in the most inhospitable parts of the world. When you read Kapuscinski's work you may at first feel like something is missing, and then you realize that what's missing is a Western perspective and the presumption and detachment that comes with it. Kapuscinski, like no other writer I've read, is able to delve into the psyche of his subjects and produce remarkable insights about their nature and the nature of their oppression. Which isn't to say that his writing is dry. More often than not, the episodes he relates are quite harrowing. *Shah of Shahs* is no exception. Quite unexpectedly, I found this book about the Shah and his overthrow by

Ayatollah Khomeini to be very relevant to today's conflicts, specifically, the difficulties inherent in replacing a brutal and oppressive regime without falling prey to extremism. His discussion of the horrors of the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, is astonishing, and his insight into the vulnerability of the Iranians as they attempted to move on from decades of oppression is fascinating. In assessing the difficulties of undoing the damage of a regime like the Shah's, the parallels to today's struggles in Iraq are hard to ignore, and, as such, the book was especially interesting to read at this moment in history. I have one book by Kapuscinski left to read, and after that, I can only hope that some benevolent publisher decides to put out more of his work.

This is the first of Kapuscinski's books that I've read and it takes a little while to get used to his style, but once you've settled in, it is quite entertaining. The book is historical, but written by a journalist, so you expect the style to fall somewhere between that of an historian and a journalist. Surprisingly Shah of Shahs reads more like a novel. The book is divided into three sections: One which introduces the unrest in Iran in the 1970s, another of descriptions of photographs and recollections from notes and interviews, and lastly section called the "The Dead Flame" that hints at what is coming the wake of revolution. It poignantly shows through the author's own experience (Iran's revolution was the 27th that he'd witnessed) that things were no different there than they were in a multitude of Latin American and African countries. Kapuscinski's style is seductive and addictive. I know I will be reading more of his work in the future.

An outstanding first-hand account of the events and causes of the Iranian revolution. I lived through those days and the vivid nature of this book brings those days alive. Most people will judge this book in accordance to their political opinion of the revolution and its aftermath, but, leaving that aside, the book is an excellent account of the snowballing events that took place.

After reading a couple of Kapuscinski's works, the gold standard in my mind continues to be 'Another Day of Life' (his tale of the Angolan conflict). Still, though, it's tough to belittle in any fashion the work of a man who - as he notes late in the book - has just witnessed his 27th revolution in 'the Third World' (and I want to make clear it is the author, not the reviewer, that consigned the Iran of 1979 - 1980 to that category). This short book (no more than a couple of hours' read) does have a some insightful things to say about power, most notably how to abuse it, and how to squander it. And, for those wondering how Iran could shake off the shackles of plutocracy/kleptocracy and plunge into theocracy, Kapuscinski pithily comments: "The Shah left people a choice between Savak

and the mullahs. And they chose the mullahs...It is not always the best people that emerge from hiding...but often those that have proven themselves strongest, not always those who will create new values but rather those whose thick skin and internal resilience have ensured their survival."Towards the end of the book (originally published in Polish in 1982 and first translated into English in 1985), pessimism sets in with Kapuscinski as he notes "the conservative hardliners gradually gained the upper hand over the enlightened and open ones." But, as he points out "a democracy cannot be imposed by force, the majority must favor it, yet the majority wanted what Khomeini wanted - an Islamic republic."

This is the best case study I have ever read of how absolute power drains away. Kapuscinski's "I am a camera" technique gives voices to many different voices of the Islamic revolution in Iran, but the best part of the book is the way it demonstrates the folly and sheer bad timing of the Shah. This book has a kind of torque: as the Shah's reign gets closer to the end, events seem to speed up. The Shah and his circle must make more decisions more rapidly, and they come up short. Kapuscinski's eye for the absurd detail and ear for the casual but prescient remark are used to beautiful effect in this book.

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