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Research Report

Subject: Transfer of firearms technologies from Western Europe to Persia in the 19th century

When: July 17, 2011 - September 3, 2011

Where: National Archives of the United Kingdom (Surrey), British Library (London)

1. Object

The object of this trip was to procure from the British Library and the National Archives of the United Kingdom copies or photographs of documents relevant to my doctoral dissertation topic, the transfer of firearms technologies from Western Europe to Persia in the 19th century.

Great Britain, having established diplomatic relations with the Qajar dynasty which had ruled Persia since the beginning of the 19th century, became involved in the transfer of firearms and related technology from several countries of Western Europe (including Great Britain itself) to Persia. The East India Company (the India Office after 1858) initially managed the process, but the Foreign Office in London took over by the middle of the 19th century. Records showing the decision-makings and activities of these two departments are now stored in the British Library and the National Archives of the United Kingdom.

2. Research activities

At the National Archives, I went through a collection entitled “Foreign Office: Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence before 1906, Persia (FO60).” I perused their Registers (lists of documents) prepared in the form of microfilms or handwriting books, and listed up related documents of the period from 1798 to 1896. I took pictures of these documents as researchers are permitted to take photographs with their own cameras. I also looked for pertinent documents in the War Office Records (WO).

At the British Library, I focused on documents in the India Office Records, particularly on “Political and Secret Correspondence with India, 1875-1911 (L/ P&S/ 7),” “Correspondence Relating to Areas Outside India, 1781-1911 (L/ P&S/ 9),” and “Political and Secret Department Memoranda (L/ P&S/ 18).” Since most of these collections have Registers for documents only from 1860 on, I drew up a list of relevant documents after this year and requested microfilms to obtain the paper copies. Unfortunately I did not have enough time to check documents from other periods.

On days these two institutions were closed, I went to places appropriate for my research, such as the Imperial War Museum and the Royal Army Museum in London, and the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich where the Royal Arsenal was until the middle of the 20th century.

3. Accomplishments and Prospects

I have collected a total of over 1500 pages of documents, mainly from the National Archives. What I obtained at the India Office Records makes up only about 5% of all that I found in this trip, and even when taking into account the fact that I could not do research on the documents prior to 1860, what I did gather at the British Library is fewer than my expectation. Moreover, as I found that copies of the documents collected at the India Office Records are included in the Foreign Office Records, it became clear that the India Office had sent those documents home for the information of the Foreign Office. These facts seem to suggest the superiority of the London-based Foreign Office over both the East India Company and the India Office regarding the process of arms transfer to Persia, at least in the latter half of the 19th century.

In terms of quality, the documents I collected provide detailed information on the decision-makings, procedures, and problems in the purchase and transport of firearms. In addition, I have obtained photographs FO60/591 which show documents on arms traffic regulations in the Persian Gulf. They contain valuable information on smuggling, the unofficial transfer of arms into Persia. Such information cannot be found in the Persian sources which I have already turned to.

From now on, I will develop my study by combining the information gained from this trip with that from the Persian sources. I am now preparing a paper about arms transfer in the first half of the 19th century, particularly in the reign of Mohammad Shah (1834-1848), and hope to complete it by the end of this year.