

The Catastrophe of Cinema Rex
the Fire of
the Islamic Revolution

by
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An introduction by
The son of the first judge of the case
Mahmoud Moradkhani Tehrani

Dedicated to the last audience of Cinema Rex of Abadan, to those who were victims of the expert charlatans' thirst for power, and dedicated to the families of the victims of Cinema Rex, who were bereaved of fair justice.

Synopsis

The fire at Cinema Rex in the city of Abadan in southwestern Iran a few months before the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the burning alive of over 500 people was the biggest catastrophe of that revolution and the most important element in drawing the people to join the revolution. It is astonishing that no book had been written on this subject and the people of the world are almost totally uninformed about it.

Now Majid Ahmadiyan has written a book on the subject in Persian, entitled *The Catastrophe of Cinema Rex, the Fire of the Islamic Revolution*, and he intends to translate it in English.

The book follows the circumstances surrounding the revolution, detailing events such as the following: the preparation of a few naïve youths by the religious leaders of the city for performing terrorist actions and setting the theater on fire; the deception of the people by the Islamic fundamentalists who claimed that it was the former Shah's regime that had committed the crime; the strike by the workers of the oil industry in that oil-rich province in protest against the former regime, which finally led to its fall; as well as the struggle of the man who had set the theatre on fire as he worked in the months following the revolution to restore his reputation, based on the argument that he had not been a member of the former regime's intelligence organization (an accusation which the Islamic fundamentalists had hurled at him); and finally this man's revelations in court regarding the involvement of the Islamic fundamentalists in that heinous crime.

The book begins with the trial of those men accused of the arson at Cinema Rex. The main culprit, Hosein Takbalizade, describes the events surrounding and leading up to the catastrophe, in which he reveals that Islamists are deeply involved in the crime. The Islamic judge attempts to discredit him. The reader is introduced to the drama.

The story continues with a description of the fire, looking at the event from eyewitness accounts as well as various other contemporary sources. Due to its extent, the task of extinguishing the fire proceeds very slowly. Finally, the firemen finish their job, and the rescuers enter the auditorium, where they find the charred bodies of the audience.

The people of Abadan demonstrate, demanding that the perpetrators be found and punished. Some among them spread the rumor that the country's security organization has set the cinema on fire. The people, hurt and looking for someone to blame, can be easily manipulated; the protests become violent and turn against the regime. A process of regular anti-government demonstrations had already begun in other parts of

Iran, but this is the first of such activity in this region, where the country's vital oil industry is located.

In exile, Ayatollah Khomeini holds the Shah's regime responsible for that crime. In that period, he and other Islamic fundamentalists claim to be freedom-seekers and have not yet revealed the dark side of their characters. Due to an extreme deep-seated hatred toward the Shah, small groups and large, right-wing and left-, all opposition parties fall to the bait of the Islamic fundamentalists. In unison they accuse the Shah's regime of setting the theatre on fire while this voice reaches the people. Larger segments of the people join the revolution, and the workers in the oil industry, the former regime's jugular vein, go on strike in protest against the Shah.

In the face of these incredible incidents the former regime acts feebly. After some time, although it arrests Hosein Takbalizade, belatedly, the government has decided to seek reconciliation with the clergy and so does not wish to offend them by opening the case of the arson. Due to these events, the Shah's regime falls, the Islamic Revolution triumphs, Khomeini gains power, and Takbalizade is released from prison.

One day, while thumbing through a newspaper, Takbalizade sees his own photo with the caption, "The Shah's intelligence organization official, who set fire to Cinema Rex." He goes to see one of the leaders of the religious group, but it leads nowhere. Then he goes to see the religious leaders of the nation as well as some of the officials of the new Islamic regime, and he tells them that he had set fire to the theatre by order of the clergy, and that he was not an official of the former regime's intelligence organization. He is told to return to his home until they contact him. However, no one contacts him.

The relatives of those who had burned in the theatre fire are dumbfounded when they observe that the new regime does not pursue the case. Thus they form an association. The representatives of the association meet with municipal officials as well as with Ayatollah Khomeini; however, upon meeting with cold reactions they become suspicious. Meanwhile, Takbalizade continues his meetings with religious and political officials, without tangible result—efforts which finally lead to his arrest.

The relatives of the victims gather in the courtyard of a government building and avow that until a trial begins they will continue to protest and will not leave the site. For four months these protests repeatedly come under attack by gangs of Islamic thugs until the new regime surrenders and begins court hearings on the case.

One of the demands of the relatives of the victims is that Ayatollah Ali Tehrani should become the judge of the case. He was head of the judicial branch of Khuzestan Province and one who had raised criticism of the monopoly being established by the clerical rulers. However, the new regime selects a clerical supporter of Khomeini as the judge of the case.

In spite of the desperate efforts of the judge, during the trial, which some of the victims' relatives have refused to attend as a sign of protest, Takbalizade reveals that he had committed his action by order of the Islamic fundamentalists and religious leaders.

During the trial the relatives of the victims begin to understand the facts and reach the conclusion that Takbalizade is no more than a naïve and deceived pawn in the plot, and become certain that the clergy wish to eliminate him. In order to prevent his execution, they decide to dispatch their representatives to Ayatollah Tehrani, who had traveled to his native city, Mashhad, some 2,000 kilometers from Abadan, to tell him that they withdraw their complaint of Takbalizade. They travel the distance only to hear on the car radio, as they were approaching Mashhad, that Takbalizade had been executed. In tears, they reach Ayatollah Tehrani's home where they are informed that he has been removed from his post as head of the judicial branch of Khuzestan Province.

Two weeks after the execution of Takbalizade, the eight-year Iran-Iraq War begins. Meanwhile, the Cinema Rex episode falls under the shadow of this much larger event, which causes it to approach oblivion in the memory of the public. The city of Abadan comes under siege by Iraqi troops while most of its residents flee the city and scatter to other parts of the country.

At the end of the book there will be photos of the burned theatre, some victims and victims' relatives, and certain scenes from the trial which had been printed in the newspapers of the time. There will also be an index of the relevant news reports and analyses which the writers have used as sources.

Authors

For many years Majid Ahmadiyan has been considering writing such a book, and in this period of time he has gathered all information available on this subject. During the revolution he was a student of sociology at the University of Tehran and actively participated in the events of the revolution. Some time after the revolution, accused of opposing the new regime, he was expelled from the university, arrested, and imprisoned. Later, he left the country. Ahmadiyan has written a few materials on Iranian cultural issues in Persian.

Dr. Mahmoud Moradkhani Tehrani is going to write an introduction for the book. He is the son of Ayatollah Ali Tehrani, who is an integral character in the story of Cinema Rex. When the case of Cinema Rex went to court, he was originally chosen to reside as judge. Naturally, as such, he became acquainted with many of the details of the arson. In fact, he has been one of the most reliable sources concerning the truth about the cinema fire. A while after the victory of the revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Tehrani actively opposed the ruling clerics. Now in his late eighties, he is living in Tehran under severe restrictions. His son, Mahmoud, however, has maintained regular phone contact with him from Paris. Mahmoud Moradkhani Tehrani is also the nephew of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader, as well as one of his opponents. His stand against the regime has earned him a measure of fame in France as an Iranian dissident.

Outline

Chapter 1 Takbalizade Reveals

Hosein Takbalizade, the main culprit of the arson at Cinema Rex of Abadan in Iran reveals in court that, about a year before the Islamic revolution, he had made acquaintance with some religious figures in Abadan and that he had begun to participate in their meetings for Quran reading and political discussions. The leaders of this group, he claims, were disappointed in the people of Abadan for their lack of participation in revolutionary activities. Five months before the revolution, he and three other members of this group set fire to Cinema Rex. Almost all of the audience together with the perpetrators, except for Takbalizade, lost their lives in the fire.

The Islamic judge perseveringly attempts to claim the account of the incident that the Islamists have maintained for the two years since the arson, namely, that the former regime had committed the crime. The bereaved families are already suspicious of the Islamists because of their apathy toward arranging a trial and now, given Takbalizade's disclosures, the judge has a very hard job to fulfill.

Chapter 2 The Fire

On the evening of August 19, 1978, Cinema Rex in Abadan catches fire. The pedestrians gather, and the police and firemen soon appear. The firefighters try to quench the flames, but the fire is very extensive and the work progresses slowly. They cut holes in the roof and finally extinguish the conflagration after many hours of hard labor. The charred bodies of more than 500 victims, the majority of whom remain unidentified due to extreme disfigurement, are retrieved. The rumor spreads through the city that the police had used a chain to lock the entrance to the cinema from outside and that the firefighters had arrived too late on purpose. The people suspect the Shah is involved in the crime, and during the ensuing burials some begin to chant slogans against his authority. Violent anti-regime demonstrations and police shootings take place.

Chapter 3 The Unstable Political Background

A more free political climate prevails in the country for nearly a year before the tragedy at Cinema Rex. During this time, a number of in anti-governmental demonstrations take place, and Ayatollah Khomeini soon becomes the leader of the movement

Chapter 4 The Background of Abadan

Although anti-government Islamic demonstrations are common throughout the country, the people of Abadan and other communities in the south have not begun to participate in the growing unrest. In fact, this area has been quite different from other areas of Iran. Due to the existence of the country's oil industry in this region and the various ports in the Persian Gulf, these people have been in close contact with Western culture for many decades. Further, the people of Abadan in particular are known for their cheerful culture, which is not so agreeable to the Islamists. It is not until after the arson at Cinema Rex that the first anti-government demonstration takes place in this city, beginning at a mosque after a clergyman's impassioned call for justice. (This chapter makes the Western reader sympathize with the people of Abadan.)

Chapter 5

The Shah, the Main Accused

Khomeini and various opposition figures and parties point to the Shah as the main culprit. Many people join the movement. Slogans concerning the regime's involvement in the crime are heard throughout the country.

Chapter 6

The Regime's Weak Reaction

The regime does not have a clear and firm policy in confronting Khomeini and the rest of the opposition. Regarding the arson at Cinema Rex, too, it acts feebly. The police arrest a man who is known to be mentally ill. After being tortured, he confesses to the arson. This adds fuel to the fire of accusation against the regime.

At last, Hosein Takbalizade, a young welder with a drug addiction—the real culprit behind the cinema fire—is arrested. He admits that he has ties to a fundamentalist Islamic group and that he committed the arson under the guidance of the revolutionary clerics of the city—who, incidentally, have close contact with Ayatollah Khomeini. At this interval, however, the regime hopes for reconciliation with the clergy; no one is put on trial, and not even a word is said to the people about the real culprits. This is the last—and perhaps the best—chance the regime has to close the scroll of the Islamic Revolution and save Iran, the Middle East, and the rest of the world from Islamic fundamentalism which will soon appear.

Chapter 7

The Victorious Revolution

The revolution led by Khomeini advances, and the regime grows more unstable. The Shah is largely unresponsive to the growing unrest. Although later, it will be revealed that his passivity is due to the side effects of his cancer treatment, his failure to respond effectively is disastrous. The country is drawn into unceasing demonstrations and strikes. Finally, the revolution is victorious, and Hosein Takbalizade is released from prison.

Chapter 8

Takbalizade's Reputation Damaged

Some time after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Takbalizade sees his picture in a magazine with the caption: "Official of the nation's intelligence organization, the one who set fire to Cinema Rex." He does not intend to remain silent concerning this description and will settle for nothing less than the complete restoration of his reputation. He goes directly to the religious leaders of the city, under whose guidance he set the cinema on fire. There, instead, he receives an offer to go to Lebanon and Palestine in the struggle against Zionism, in effect an attempt to remove him from the scene.

Chapter 9

The Regime stalls

Under the pretext of not being able to find an appropriate judge and of the file being incomplete, the new regime stalls. Through their representatives, the relatives of the victims continue to push for a trial. The representatives meet with various authorities. They even arrange to meet with Khomeini, who treats them coldly.

Chapter 10

The Bereaved Follow the Case

The families of the victims at Cinema Rex are waiting for a trial to be arranged and justice to be observed, but the trial never makes it to court, and time goes by. By the first anniversary of the tragedy of Rex, various political groups still condemn the Shah as the criminal. Meanwhile, despite having ample opportunity to attack the former Shah, Khomeini never utters a word concerning Cinema Rex.

Through their representatives, the relatives of the victims continue to push for a trial. The representatives meet with various authorities. They even arrange to meet with Khomeini, who treats them coldly. They enter the yard of a government institute and begin a sit-in demonstration that lasts four months. Islamic troublemakers led by a revolutionary cleric from Abadan assault the demonstrators and injure many of them. Along with demanding a trial, the families also call for Ayatollah Ali Tehrani to preside as judge over the case. Ayatollah Tehrani has been harshly criticizing the ruling clerics and their hunger for power. He is also head of the new judiciary of Khuzestan province, to which Abadan belongs.

Chapter 11

The Clergy's Role in the Crime

The ruling clerics act coordinately in order to keep the people in the dark concerning the truth of the arson.

Years after the event, Ayatollah Tehrani, now considered an opposition figure, reveals that, when he was the head of the judiciary in Khuzestan province, he studied the file of Cinema Rex. There, he noticed that a group of four clerics in Qom who were responsible for coordinating the progress of the revolution had ordered the cinema to be burned in the hope that people in that oil-rich corner of the country would join the revolution.

A number of clerics are seen whose terrorist activities under Khomeini's orders bring them to the forefront in the investigation of Cinema Rex. Here is a world of conspiracies.

Chapter 12

The Regime Surrenders

Nearly two years after the arson at Cinema Rex, the regime finally surrenders under the pressures bearing upon it from the victims' families and Takbalizade. The government agrees to hear the case and appoints as judge a cleric who lived in Abadan at the time of the disaster and is quite familiar with the atmosphere of the city. In addition to examining the life of the judge, a glance is cast at the backgrounds of three other members of the juridical board. In particular, the mysterious prosecutor, who intentionally refused to mention his complete name to the media, is put under the spotlight for the first time, and it is demonstrated that this prosecutor has been involved in many other bloody, dubious trials.

The relatives of the victims are invited to the trial, but a part of them still demand Ayatollah Tehrani as Judge, and so they boycott the proceedings.

Chapter 13

The Trial

The atmosphere of the court shifts between tears and laughter. The bereaved relatives laugh at the role the judge plays and particularly in how Takbalizade continually ignores his authority, although he is a judge otherwise known to be very harsh and aggressive. During one part of the trial, a man arrested and charged as the pyromaniac, a man known to be mentally ill, tells the story of his arrest...

Chapter 14

The Society

The opposition parties are involved in other important disputes with the Islamic Republic rulers and various other factions. All but one small party ignore what is going on in the trial concerning the burning of Cinema Rex.

Chapter 15

The Trial Continues

Not one of the prominent religious figures of the city whom Takbalizade names during the trial, and who now hold important posts in the new system, is called to the court even as a witness. None of the other defendants, who are various officials of the city, fight as Takbalizade does, although they refute the accusations. It becomes evident, however, that the rumors like the chained door of the cinema and the empty water-tanks had been empty tricks. One can see that the majority of the accused—policemen, firemen, security agents, etc—are in fact totally innocent; only a part of them have committed mistakes like leaving the job at the cinema temporarily in order in order to take care of their personal errands.

Chapter 16

The Verdict

In his last defense, Takbalizade appears more calm and self-reliant than he has yet appeared. He talks directly to the bereaved families, attempting to give them more information about the culprits.

The victims' relatives come to the conclusion that Takbalizade has been deceived by the clerics and is not the main culprit. They become certain that the other accused are innocent. They send Jafar Sazesh and two other representatives to Ayatollah Tehrani, who has now travelled 2000 kilometers away to his city of Mashhad, to tell him they have no charges against the accused. As they approach Mashhad, however, they hear on the radio that, by the court's decision, Takbalizade has been executed together with the owner, the manager of the cinema, and a three others. With tears in their eyes, the representatives enter Tehrani's house and discover that Ayatollah Khomeini, in response to Tehrani's criticism, has fired him from his position as judge.

Chapter 17

A New Catastrophe

The bereaved relatives protest against the court's decree and begin to demonstrate.

Only two weeks after the court issues its decision, Iraqi forces led by Saddam Hussein initiate an extensive attack against Iran, occupying a portion of the country. Abadan is surrounded by these forces and much of its population flees to other parts of Iran. The war lasts eight years, and it is called a blessing by Khomeini, who ruthlessly eliminates all of the opposition parties and figures under its shadow. During these long years, of course, no word is heard in the official media concerning Cinema Rex.

Jafar Sazesh is persecuted on the pretext that he had met with the former queen of the country after the arson. The real reason behind the harassment, however, is that he led the camp of the bereaved families for a trial.

The families of the victims of Cinema Rex also move from Abadan. The name of Cinema Rex is never mentioned in the official calendars nor are any anniversaries observed for those "highly praised martyrs." Also, in the official reports and analyses of the history of the revolution, the name is omitted.

Chapter 18

After the War

After the end of the war with Iraq, a part of the victims' relatives who had not yet died of old age or grief return to Abadan. Each year, at the memorial day of the arson, Jafar Sazesh and some other families of the victims gather in the cemetery; the officials atypically neglect these occasions. Their sorrow is fresh, as they have not yet had an occasion to utter their grievances, and their case was never brought to justice despite the trial. Many of them die, including Jafar Sazesh.

Some opposition authors write articles about the arson at Cinema Rex, which clearly demonstrate the ruling Islamists were involved in the crime. In response, a few Islamists also publish their version of the story, merely repeating the same account the Islamists have always held, that the Shah committed the arson.

Chapter 19

MaRex

The relatives of the victims insist the building of Cinema Rex to be renovated and declared a monument in memory of the victims. Yet this never happens. The building remains as it is, shops on the ground floor doing their daily business, until 1985 when another severe fire leaves the structure badly damaged. It is subsequently demolished, and another shopping center erected. Now, the bereaved relatives request that a memorial structure be placed in front of the demolished cinema's location. At last, the authorities put a small monument in a side alley. According to one of the relatives, however, this monument is more a disgrace than an honor; it is unsightly and has been placed behind a large tree so that its text is only partially visible. Instead of reading the words "Cinema Rex," passers-by read "ma Rex."

References

Photos of the burnt theatre, some victims and relatives, court scenes which were printed in the newspapers of the time, as well as photos of some of the abettors in the crime will be appended, along with a bibliography.