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Rahul Markovits, *A Passage to Europe: The Global Politics of Mobility in the Age of Revolutions*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black and Ashoka University, 2023. xx + 369 pp. ₹995.00 (hb). ISBN 9-78-8178246666.

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In the early hours of one April morning in 1796, a procession began from the French residence in Constantinople to the gates of Topkapı Palace to present the special envoy of the French Revolutionary Republic, Raymond Verninac, to Sultan Selim III. Though early modern diplomacy frequently hinged on such ritualized interactions, there were some signs of trouble on the horizon. Verninac represented a republican regime that resented the connotations of "vassalage" (p. 5) that this ritual imposed upon foreign diplomats, and the fact that the diplomatic gifts and jewels destined for the Sultan had not arrived did not augur well for the meeting. But the absence of presents, Rahul Markovits notes, was soon overshadowed by excited chatter surrounding the unexpected presence among Verninac's cortège of a "guest of honor": a man identified as "Achmet [Ahmad] Khan, son of a nawab from India" (p. 6). Along with the Ottoman and European observers at the time, the modern readers of the book now ask: who was the mysterious Ahmad Khan, and how did he find himself among the French diplomat's entourage?

Markovits' study--a narrative yarn that traces Ahmad Khan's peregrinations from South Asia, through the Ottoman Empire, southern Europe, France, England, and back again--aims at answering that question. Studies of mobility in the Age of Revolutions have largely focused on the Atlantic world, and accordingly, Markovits' book is a welcome contribution to recent efforts by Junko Takeda, Sujit Sivasundaram, and others to integrate Asia more deeply into the picture.[1] As a microhistory of Ahmad Khan's life and (often mistaken) identities, the book may remind readers of Natalie Zemon Davis' telling of the Martin Guerre case, which Markovits references early on as one of the models for his work. However, he makes clear that he wishes to pursue a very different methodological strategy than Davis. Rather than present a "smoothened-out narrative," embellished with speculation, Markovits' story privileges "the search for documents, the careful appraisal of what they can (and cannot) tell us, and reflections on how to interpret them" (p. 22). He focuses as a result on searching for the documented traces that Ahmad Khan left in archives during his travels--traces that turn out to be plentiful, given that Ahmad Khan was traveling in a world seeing the emergence of modern state surveillance of foreigners. The result is a microhistory of one individual's journey that reads, in part, as the historian's own research diary. It exposes, at every turn, the author's own methodological and archival choices, as well as the research avenues or hypotheses that did not pan out, to "lay bare the foundations of my renditions of the story" (p. 22). Accordingly, there are moments in the book where

the reader feels a bit as if they are looking at the reverse side of an embroidered image, with all of the knots and messy stitchwork visible, without a clear view of the whole picture itself. Yet, what this method brilliantly illustrates is the astounding range of multi-sited, multi-lingual archival work used in the reconstruction of Ahmad Khan's story, as Markovits pursues his trail, making use of sources in French, English, and Persian in order to reconstruct Ahmad Khan's life. Unlike I'tisam-ud-Din in Sanjay Subrahmanyam's recent account,[2] Ahmad Khan left no sources in which he himself speaks in his own voice--something that becomes a point of historiographical contention later on.

Markovits first must sort out the question of his subject's actual identity. Ahmad Khan was not the son of an Indian nawab. He was instead, probably, an Afghan sepoy and travel companion for Navazish Khan, one of the sons of Mu'azzaz Khan, the late nawab of Broach (modern-day Bharuch in western India). The British East India Company conquered Broach in 1772, sending Mu'azzaz Khan into exile, where he suffered a mysterious death. The late nawab achieved a post-mortem celebrity status in India and Europe, where "he became a symbol of valiant if ill-fated resistance to British aggression" (p. 122). Tales of the conquest of Broach and the fate of the nawab's family populated British debates about the East India Company's debts and governance, as well as Enlightened critiques of empire by the abbé Raynal and others, such that the story of Broach's fate was recognizable, or at least legible, to the Europeans Ahmad Khan would later encounter. In India, the nawab's surviving wives and children regularly petitioned the East India Company for redress, and twenty years on, several of the sons--including Navazish and his companion Ahmad--set out on a "last-ditch" voyage (p. 138) to London to petition British officials directly.

Through their travels, Markovits traces how, over time, Ahmad Khan came to "reframe" his story (p. 76-77) and successfully "pass" (p. 79) as royalty. The sons traveled first through Arab commercial networks that connected South Asia to the Middle East in ways that, as Markovits reminds us, are often obscured to scholars today by the separation of Middle East and North African (MENA) and South Asian studies departments. Passing through the Ottoman Empire, one of the sons was so taken with life in Constantinople that he chose to settle there permanently. But Navazish and Ahmad continued their journey, arriving in revolutionary France in 1793. After receiving a warm reception in Marseille, where they were acknowledged not so much as Muslims but rather as worthy recipients of "revolutionary hospitality" (p. 179), being fellow complainants against British tyranny, they proceeded on to Lyon, where they unexpectedly weathered the winter--and brutal civil war--of *an II*, due to Navazish's failing health. He died in Lyon in spring 1794, and his body was embalmed for later repatriation to India.

Now traveling alone, Ahmad Khan proceeded on to Paris, where the story reaches if not its climax, then perhaps its most familiar point to H-France readers. Some may recognize Ahmad Khan's name from Ian Coller's 2020 *Muslims and Citizens*, where Khan is identified as one of the "Muslim Jacobins," as Coller argues for a cosmopolitan vision of the Revolution's "essential compatibility with Islam" and "to contribute to a rethinking of the Revolution for the modern age."[3] Coller accordingly identifies Ahmad Khan as the author of "his own volition"[4] of a Persian translation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (now held in the Archives départementales des Yvelines), which he purportedly composed while residing in the Versailles home of Pierre Ruffin, the famed orientalist translator. Coller places heavy conceptual weight on this document--despite noting himself that there are questions about its authorship--suggesting that it reflected Ahmad Khan's adherence to the revolutionary project, his desire to spread revolutionary values throughout the Muslim

world, and that "his own experience of the Revolution helped him understand the context and struggles encoded in the document."[5] In other words, Coller understands this translated, Persian document as evidence of Ahmad Khan's own active adherence to the principles of the French Revolution--principles that ultimately manifested, per Coller, in a later career as an "agent of the republic," or a spy (p. 188).

Over the course of three chapters, Markovits constructs an alternate understanding of the document's origins and purpose. Rather than finding in one another kindred revolutionary spirits, Markovits suggests that Ruffin and Ahmad Khan's relationship was self-serving on both sides: Ruffin, as a translator and public official, helped Ahmad reframe, as it were, his identity as being one of the wronged, royal sons, giving him documents and credentials that allowed him to continue the journey to London. In turn, Ahmad Khan's presence in the household enabled Ruffin--a ministerial bureaucrat under some suspicion by the Jacobins himself--to make himself useful in the eyes of the Committee of Public Safety. Per Markovits, all the documents that the two men produced during their time together served one (or both) of these purposes, including the translated Declaration. Although transcribed in Ahmad Khan's hand (in both Persian and French), the document itself makes clear--again, both in Persian *and* in French--that the actual translator was the orientalist Ruffin, suggesting that the primary purpose of this transcription "was to demonstrate Ahmad Khan's scribal performance in French" (p. 240) as a testament to Ruffin's ability as a language instructor. Per Markovits, it is unreasonable to assume, as a result, that the existence of this document proves Ahmad Khan's comprehension of--let alone adherence to--"the key concepts of political philosophy embedded in the Declaration" (p. 244).

Moreover, Markovits argues that the implication of Coller's insistence on Ahmad Khan's adherence to Jacobinism is to propagate a set of counter-revolutionary myths that, in real life, ultimately led to Ahmad Khan's arrest and detention by the British. Ahmad Khan did eventually make it to London, where he also successfully passed as one of the nawab's sons and received a pension. As he set out to retrace his journey back to India--now with Navazish Khan's coffin in tow--he was firmly on the radar of Ottoman, French, and British officials simultaneously. The fact that he visibly accompanied Verninac in his diplomatic retinue on his return to Constantinople--again for largely self-serving reasons on both sides--drew attention from hostile British observers, who promptly flagged him as a probable Jacobin agent, en route to India to liaise with Tipu Sultan of Mysore and stir up resistance to the East India Company. When his ship arrived in Bombay, Company agents detained and interrogated him, demanding that he open his companion's coffin so that it could be searched for evidence of revolutionary conspiracy--a demand that Coller notes would not have been "unfounded," given Ahmad Khan's longstanding French connections.[6] He was imprisoned for three years, before finally being released following the death of Tipu Sultan (p. 303) and vanishing into the historical record without a further trace.

In an attempt to recruit Ahmad Khan's story to the revolutionary canon, Markovits sees Coller as both propagating a counter-revolutionary myth that harmed Ahmad Khan in his own lifetime, and thereby of dragging him into a fight that was never properly his--a fight over the meaning and universalism of the French Revolution. For Markovits, it is both false and Eurocentric to assume that Ahmad Khan ever wanted anything to do with the French Revolution: there is no evidence to support that he saw it as a meaningful, transformative, world-historical event in which he wanted to participate, but rather "a kind of spacio-temporal rift where [he got] caught in limbo" (p. 26) by the turmoil of civil war and the red tape of bureaucracy. From the perspective of Navazish Khan and Ahmad Khan, the French

Revolution was no more than a travel disruption that threatened their family's petition for reparations from the imperial center; what gave the French Revolution world-historical meaning in the eyes of French or European observers cannot be simply imputed to non-Westerners. But Markovits goes further. To read Ruffin's letters and documents as representing anything other than *his own* performative narrative--as an orientalist bureaucrat obsequiously addressing the Committee of Public Safety--is, for Markovits, not only misleading but "naïve" (p. 25). Markovits pointedly (and repeatedly) states that Ahmad Khan's supposed identity as a Jacobin was "naïvely endorsed by historians eager to seize the opportunity of adding an Indian protagonist to the dramatis personae of the French Revolution, or of promoting an 'inclusive' research agenda" (p. 308). In a world where any pretense of promoting an "inclusive" research agenda is now fair game for political targeting, this latter remark has not entirely aged well. But Markovits' reading of the sources is convincing, despite some of this acerbity--though, it is worth noting that there are moments in the book where he perhaps makes some of his own assumptions about the level of agency expressed by a subaltern person through writings nominally authored by a white Englishman (this occurs in one of the book's many subplots concerning one of the other sons of the nawab of Broach). This moment is a reminder, I think, that excavating poorly-documented lives always involves a certain degree of what Sara E. Johnson termed in her acclaimed *Encyclopédie Noire* "informed speculation,"[7] though as Markovits reminds us here, the fruitfulness of such speculation is dependent on precisely assessing and acknowledging the purposes for which a given document was created.

Markovits insists that the misinterpretations of Ahmad Khan's life also owe to "the omission of original material in Persian" (p. 26) from Coller's study. Many of the documents that Markovits uses to challenge Coller's interpretations were French reports by Ruffin himself, so I'm not sure if this claim actually holds. But what he poses here is a methodological problem that has dogged global history from the start and will continue to do so. Global history as a field cannot reach its full potential without scholars continually expanding their repertoire of languages through one means or another. Here, Markovits does not hide that, like the story he tells within this book's pages, the making of the book itself was also a story of translation: the acknowledgements state that he relied on a translator, Jean Arzoumanov, to read the Persian sources for this project. The embrace of these kinds of expansive projects is what makes global history exciting, but nonetheless, the pessimist in me (and she has been on a winning streak in 2025) finds herself fretting about the fact that we live in an age when private foundations, universities, and governments are ruthlessly slashing investment in research and language study, and graduate student time-to-degree is being routinely capped. Studying languages, working with translators, even working onsite in the archives themselves for extended periods no longer seems as feasible (for many) as it once did. Co-authorship and collaboration across languages and across borders offers one potential solution, though humanities fields have been slow to embrace, recognize, and reward these practices. All of this is to suggest that Markovits' enjoyable and thought-provoking book leaves the reader far from where they started: far from being a single microhistory of Ahmad Khan's journey, it is a meditation on the rewards and pitfalls of writing global history in the broadest sense.

NOTES

[1] Janet Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders: the Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015); Junko Thérèse Takeda, *Iran and a French Empire of*

Trade, 1700-1808: The Other Persian Letters (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[2] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Question of I'tisam-ud-Din: An Indian Traveler in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 54 (2025): 1999-224.

[3] Ian Coller, *Muslims and Citizens: Islam, Politics, and the French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 2, vii.

[4] Coller, *Muslims and Citizens,* 3.

[5] Coller, *Muslims and Citizens,* 186-187.

[6] Coller, *Muslims and Citizens,* 188.

[7] Sara E. Johnson, *Encyclopédie Noire: The Making of Moreau de Saint-Méry's Intellectual World* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture / University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 8.

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