



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume IV: Resistance from Aristotle to Star Wars

Historicizing Tyranny and Resistance in Persepolis

Curriculum Unit 26.04.11, published September 2026
by Tara McKee

"The powerful will stay mighty so long as the legitimacy of their acts remains unquestioned and their authority uncontested."¹ – Behrooz Ghamari

Introduction

We live in a time where political leaders bring "the language of brutality, rape, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny into an open element of normative political discourse."² This normalized hatred seeps into every nook and cranny of everyday life. Because of this, I am scared and my students are scared. Now, more than ever, teachers and students should be thinking about and discussing tyranny and resistance, and there is no better way to do this than through literature. This unit will use the graphic novel *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi to navigate these difficult topics and to use a story from the past to make sense of our present and hopefully change our future. This unit is less about the content of *Persepolis* and more about its historical context and reading the book through the lens of power and resistance.

As we look around at worldwide power struggles, "*Persepolis* remains hauntingly relevant."³ The study of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and Iran's culture of resistance will help my students contextualize our current political climate. Grace Guernsey writes, "*Persepolis* would be a necessary read in ordinary times but is a mandatory read amidst the political turmoil of the present."⁴ This shows us the power literature has to help us understand our world and to fight against tyranny. Guernsey posits, "Youth no longer means innocence. In such trying times, it demands the opposite: involvement."⁵ We see this through students walking out of school in defiance of ICE, participating in local protests, and posting their political views on social media. This is what *Persepolis* teaches students: resistance to tyranny demands action. And if I can teach this to my students, I have hope for our world.

Teaching Situation and Rationale

I teach at a magnet school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Booker T. Washington has a diverse student body, ranging from students who help support themselves and their families to those who are extremely wealthy. This unit will be written for my IBHL Literature I classes, but the information and texts will be useful for other grade levels as well.

Bringing Marjane Satrapi's black-and-white graphic novel *Persepolis* into my junior IB English class is intentional. Many world issues are seen as black and white. You are either for this side or the other one. There is no room for questioning, no room for grey areas. Although Satrapi created her graphic novel *Persepolis* in black-and-white illustrations, she does so ironically. Sabrina Citra comments on Satrapi's binary color palette saying "that [it] carries both aesthetic and symbolic weight...it visually echoes the stark dualities imposed by ideological systems—light and darkness, right and wrong, faith and freedom. Yet Satrapi resists moral binaries in her storytelling and opts to be expansive in her language and by extension, her illustrations. Instead, her world is populated with contradictions, compromises, and pain."⁶ Satrapi exposes a world full of hypocrisy, nuances, and grey areas, especially where tyrannical power rules. Reading and analyzing *Persepolis* gives students the framework to not only learn about a world and history they are unfamiliar with, but also gives them the insight into the universal black and white power struggles in politics, in social class, in gender, and in individual expression. This graphic novel also makes students recognize the importance of resistance in times when human rights are violated, as well as the consequences of that rebellion – not to scare students but to make them aware that when power and tyranny are threatened, the powers-that-be will do anything to suppress resistance.

In a world where there are 30-second summaries on TikTok and AI to condense years of historical content in a paragraph, I want to meet my students where they are. By using what seems to be a "simple" graphic novel, I will pair *Persepolis* with Aristotle's definition of tyranny, protest posters of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Ayatollah's propaganda, and brief excerpts from *Remembering Akbar* to bring this 2-D black and white story into a collage of color, rendering the historical context of the novel into something that they can see, understand, and explore, focusing on the lens of power and resistance.

Unit Content

This will be a 10-15 day unit focusing on *Persepolis* and its historical context. While I plan on giving brief information about Islam, the hijab, and communism to my students, this unit will primarily focus on power and resistance in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. When I first introduce *Persepolis*, it is important to tell students that this is one girl's experience growing up in a tumultuous time in Iran. This is not the only story. Citra explains, "What Satrapi offers is not a total history of Iran but a fragment—a vivid, courageous, and important perspective that opens space for further dialogue. It is one testimony among many."⁷ Before students read the graphic novel, I show them Anthony Bourdain's Iran *Parts Unknown* episode and Morgan Spurlock's *30 Days "Muslims and America"* episode to add to their knowledge base about Islam, Muslim culture, and countries that have strict Islamic law. By adding other visual elements, such as propaganda, protest posters, and excerpts of a memoir, to this graphic novel, this will create more understanding of a moment of Middle

Eastern history that feels so distant to many of my students, showing students the importance of immersing themselves in a subject and thinking critically about historical context, power, and resistance.

Using Aristotle's Definition of Tyranny to Explore The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and *Persepolis*

As I begin this unit, one of the first concepts I will focus on is Aristotle's definition and characteristics of tyranny. Students will take notes on tyranny and, then, apply them to the Iranian Revolution and *Persepolis*. I envision this to be sort of like a scavenger hunt situation where students will take these methods of tyranny and find examples of them from the graphic novel, historical context information, propaganda, and excerpts from *Remembering Akbar*. They will be asked the question: do the Shah and the Ayatollah fit this definition of tyranny and why? It is important for students to think about power and how people use it to authoritatively control a group of people, especially in our current political climate. The following information focuses on the characteristics of tyranny that Aristotle lays out for us with examples of what students could notice during our study. Below, in the Classroom Activities section of this unit, will explain how I will have students record their findings about tyranny.

Author Ivan Jordović analyzes Aristotle's definition of tyranny in his article "Aristotle on Extreme Tyranny and Extreme Democracy." He lays out Aristotle's definition in several tenets that will make it simple for my students to understand. Jordović writes, "The first method of extreme tyranny: the prosecution and removal of prominent individuals."⁸ The Shah was put into power after a coup and the Ayatollah helped rid Iran of the Shah. The Ayatollah also tried to get rid of the communist revolutionaries who helped overthrow the Shah. Next is favoring flatterers.⁹ Tyrants use these flatterers to do their dirty work. This could be likened to the Shah's Savak and the Ayatollah's Revolutionary Guards. Jordović points out that another method of a tyrant is "sowing the seeds of dissension and slander, turning friend against friend, demos against aristocrats, and the rich against each other."¹⁰ This is about creating divisions and spreading lies amongst his people. In a time of tyranny, when people dislike each other and issues are seen as black and white, this creates inner fighting. This fighting distracts people from the negative actions of the tyrant, and, therefore, the people do not take political action against him. Students can see this with the Shah blaming Islamic fundamentalists for the burning of the Rex Cinema, when it was the Shah who did this, according to Satrapi. The Shah also blamed the Israelis for the killings on Black Friday when it was indeed the Shah who let his military fire upon protesters. Both events show that creating division and enemies helps to control and maintain confusion. "Preferring the company of foreigners"¹¹ is the next strategy of a tyrant. The Shah did this with his alignment with the U.S. and Great Britain, pushing Western ideals onto his country. Although the Ayatollah was against any foreign involvement in Iran - he was anti-capitalist and anti-communist - he did use the Revolution to spread Islam to the rest of the world, using propaganda to do so. It could also be argued that the aim in his version of "spreading Islam" was protecting the regime's interests at home.

Another practice for a tyrant is to prohibit "clubs (hetaireiai), common meals (syssitia), education (paideia), study circles and other gatherings for debate or anything of that nature, so as to suppress everything that might raise people's pride and confidence."¹² Both the Shah and the Ayatollah suppressed political opponents' right to meet, and, although they were proponents of education, both pushed their ideologies through textbooks. The Ayatollah also forced young poor boys to join the military to fight Iraq which prohibits the education of the poor as we see in the chapter "The Key." Tyrants also "prevent[] the subjects from knowing each other"¹³ and encourage distrust. Satrapi shows us this distrust both under the Shah's and the Ayatollah's regime. Under the Ayatollah, as we see in the chapters "The Heroes" and "The Sheep," people fled Iran in sneaky ways to avoid being caught. In the chapter "The Wine," Marji's mom uses black curtains so that the

neighbors couldn't see inside. Everybody was turning on each other. We see it also in Ghamari's book *Remembering Akbar* when prisoners would be tortured into naming names. This mistrust and isolation renders people powerless. Another method of tyranny is "the prevention of leisure ... to deprive the citizens of leisure is the central element of Aristotle's theory. A tyrant achieves this through taxation, an active building policy, and incessant warfare."¹⁴ In addition to this, a tyrant wants "to weaken the citizens and deprive them of any possibility for political action."¹⁵ The Shah undeniably created a huge disparity between the rich and the poor, and we can tell when Satrapi writes "All the country's money went to the ridiculous celebrations"¹⁶ that taxes were not being spent appropriately. The Ayatollah immediately was at war with Iraq and this kept his constituents busy with wartime worries like bombings and lack of resources. All of this takes the fun out of life and their concerns are more about surviving the everyday rather than the rule of the tyrant. Tyrants also need "to know everything the subjects say or do."¹⁷ This is the use of spies which we see with both the Shah and the Ayatollah with their Savak and revolutionary guards. We see this specifically in the chapter "The Wine" when Marji's dad gets stopped at a road checkpoint by the revolutionary guards. It is also noted that "Two other broad recommendations emerge from Aristotle's writings: tyrants must know how to use violence, and they must be adept at deception."¹⁸ The Shah and the Ayatollah used violence to control their people, especially with political dissidents in Evin prison which can be seen in the chapter "The Heroes" and in the excerpts from *Remembering Akbar*. Again, the Shah deceived the public with the events of the Rex Cinema and Black Friday. We see this with the demonstrations as well against the Shah and the Ayatollah. Both deceived their public with the Ayatollah being the most adept through his use of propaganda. This is featured in his control of the media seen in the chapter "The Trip."

Understanding Tyranny and Resistance: Historical Context for *Persepolis*

The historical context of *Persepolis* is one of power and resistance. This is the lens students will use to read this graphic novel, tracking who has power and who does not. To set the stage for students to understand the historical context for *Persepolis*, an in-depth introduction to the Shah and the Ayatollah must be given. The best way to do this is to pair explanations with protest posters and propaganda. Before I show them the protest posters and propaganda of this time period, I will give a brief history of the Shah and his demise, as well as the Ayatollah's rise to power.

Very simply put, the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was put in power in Iran with the help of the U.S. and Great Britain. He represented Western ideals and instituted what is called the White Revolution where he modernized and secularized Iran. In "How Iran's 1979 Revolution Deposed Hated Shah," Rob Hoveman writes, "However, the Shah alienated wide sections of Iranian society. His government was corrupt and the benefits of capitalist development went overwhelmingly to the rich, and the Pahlavi family in particular."¹⁹ Also, the Shah did not tolerate political dissidents and specifically banned, jailed, tortured, and killed communists. His secret police, the Savak, trained by the CIA, enforced his rule and took out anyone who disagreed with the Shah. This angered most people in Iran— the religious, the middle and working class, and communists. Specifically, "The workers in the oil industry and beyond hated the government managers and unions controlled by the Shah's brutal Savak secret service. And national minorities—such as Kurds, Baluchis and many others—resented the denial of their national rights."²⁰ Eventually, the secular and religious banded together and began protesting the Shah beginning in 1977. In their book *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Revolution*, authors Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi discuss the main proponents of the revolution. They write, "Very broadly, three major ideological claims were laid on the Revolution of 1979: nationalist, Marxist, and Islamic."²¹ When all groups came together, the Shah eventually fled Iran, but not after "Demonstrations were met by brutal repression, with the Shah's army murdering many demonstrators."²² While the Shah was

in power, Khomeini was exiled and “began to gather his forces both within and outside Iran from among the traditional merchant class, the clerical establishment, as well as the Muslim student associations.”²³ He also gained the support of communist groups due to his use of “vague, liberal-sounding phrases.”²⁴ Most communist groups “believed that because the regime was ‘anti-imperialist’ (i.e. anti-American) it was in some sense progressive.”²⁵ Soon, they would realize that their support of Khomeini was in vain. After the Shah left, Islamists took power by popular vote and the Ayatollah became the supreme leader of Iran and established a theocracy. Unfortunately, the Ayatollah was just as bad as the Shah in his forceful rule. Although he was anti-capitalist, he was anti-communist as well, imposing Islamic law throughout the country. Soon, “all forms of opposition were ultimately brutally suppressed using the so-called revolutionary guards, a new version of the Shah’s Savak.”²⁶

Art as Resistance: Down with the Shah

After giving students the brief history of the power exchange of the Shah and Ayatollah, I want to focus on the revolutionary art, usually in the form of protest posters, that was made by the people of Iran. This section will also focus on the protest art of Group 57, named after the year in the Iranian calendar that the revolution succeeded.²⁷ Group 57 was composed of about 30 leftist professors and students in the Fine Arts Department of the University of Tehran, not tied to any political party. They invited all people to participate, regardless of ideology and belief, in the revolution to rid Iran of the Shah. ²⁸ In the article “Legacies of Protest Art in Iran: The Revolutionary Art Workshop of 1979,” the authors describe that the revolutionary art that this group produced “has been largely ignored and at times simply assimilated into the kind of art that appeared later and was dominated by Islamist themes and symbols supported by the postrevolutionary state.”²⁹ The next section will focus on the postrevolutionary art that came in as soon as the Ayatollah returned to take power.

The art of Group 57 was “revolutionary art... made to be reproduced for city streets and demonstrations. Though eclectic in style, their posters drew on the bold colors, clear and communicative text, symbolic imagery, and easy reproducibility of international radical poster art and commercial graphic design as well as the mural art of the Mexican and Cuban revolutions and the early Russian revolutionary avant-garde”³⁰ This was truly art for the people and brought to life by the need to revolt against a true tyrant – the Shah. The artists from Group 57 would “go out during the day to record slogans from the streets to be used on the posters. People would also come in and tell the art students about the slogans they heard on the street on a particular day and would offer their own ideas.”³¹ This collaboration of artists and people “was unique in modern Iranian history.” I want students to understand that this art was not created in isolation; it was fueled by collective resistance. They even got ideas from “high school students whose textbooks always contained a headshot of the Shah on the very first page began putting horns and other doodles on this picture.”³² This group using ideas from rebellious Iranian youth will be appreciated and connected to Marji and her rebellious nature.

One of the artists from Group 57 describes how they “tried to create simple meanings with images. Protest art cannot be too subtle. In form it should be direct and honest.”³³ I will have students look at six protest posters from this group analyzing the symbols, colors, text if any, and image placement. These images can be found in the article “Legacies of Protest Art in Iran: The Revolutionary Art Workshop of 1979.” I plan on creating a slidedeck with saved images from this article to show my students. There is also a wealth of other images featured as well. Below, I will do a sample analysis for each protest poster that I want to feature from this group of revolutionary artists. Students will be adept at art and line analysis due to the notes I give before we start reading *Persepolis*.

It is important to note at the end of analyzing these protest posters that “Not a year later the new government deemed members of the art workshop anti-revolutionary.”³⁴ Many of the artists of this group were fired from the university, left the country because they could not find work, and some ended up in Evin prison, truly showing the dangers of resistance in the face of true tyranny.

Forward to the Formation of the People's Revolutionary Court

This poster was created by Nicky Nodjourni and obviously inspired by high schoolers’ doodles on the Shah with the horns and fangs. In this piece, students should notice the cartoonish caricature of the Shah which diminishes the power he has. The fangs and horns characterize him as monstrous and vampiric, sucking the life force from the people of Iran. The lines used on the Shah are harsh and chaotic, mimicking his rule. The medals on his military jacket look like skulls which represent all the lives unfairly taken by the Shah. Students should notice the size of the Shah in comparison to the revolutionary people in the bottom right hand corner. The revolutionaries are colored in black, making them seem like an indistinguishable, unified force. They have several strings tied around the giant tyrant’s hands. Although the revolutionaries are smaller than the Shah they are clearly the ones in control, leading him to exile. There is writing in a different language but, according to google translate, it reads as the title of this poster. The poster is in black and white maybe representing the clear division between the Shah’s tyrannous power and the revolutionaries’ collective resistance. It will be important to note that for all posters that there is a fist and a star on the bottom corner that represent Group 57; they usually did not sign their work individually to emphasize that their art work was of the people.³⁵

Oil Derrick Sword Splits the Shah's Crown

This poster is by Arapik Baghdasarian and was “evidently made by Group 57 after January 1979”³⁶ as it shows the power of the revolution and its evident destruction of the Shah’s reign. Immediately, because of its color and placement, we notice the red sword with the oil rig handle. The red is the symbol of the revolution and the oil rig is a symbol of Iran and the Imperialist desire to extract Iran’s treasured resource. This sword, representing the revolution, breaks the Shah’s crown and is now poised above the USA collar the Shah wears, suggesting that the revolution is not only ousting the Shah, but also America’s control over Iran. Students may point out that it looks like the Shah’s eyes are blacked out or looks like he is wearing sunglasses, possibly indicating that he was blind to his people or maybe blind to the control America had on him and Iran. The Shah’s crown and collar that reads USA are filled in with black, representing the evil doings of both.

Woman in Step with the Revolution

Morteza Momayez created a fascinating poster that invited women, religious and nonreligious, to continue the fight against the Shah. This poster has “The repeated figure of a woman whose head is covered ambiguously either with her long hair or with some kind of covering, fist raised, declares solidarity with the revolution. The figure singled out in red invites the viewer to connect to the women and to feel themselves a part of the movement. Red, which could be read as either the color of the people's revolution or as the color of sacrifice and martyrdom, does not necessarily signify a specific political association, but rather evokes the affective passion of revolutionary commitment.”³⁷ Again, students can assume the language at the top of the poster is the name of the poster. The white background symbolizes the hope of the revolution and the optimism of solidarity and a future without the Shah. The placement of the protesting women with their fists raised moves the eye vertically; vertical lines show strength and in this case, the strength of the revolution. Juxtaposing this image with the image from the first chapter of *Perepolis*, “The Veil,” where women are divided and protesting the Islamic law of women wearing hijab. There was unity for the fight against the Shah and division when the

Ayatollah came to power.

From the Blood of the Country's Youth, Tulips Blossom

Another poster from Morteza Momayez uses a popular symbol of a tulip which represents martyrdom. This symbol is “deeply rooted in Iranian literary and epic imagination.”³⁸ The slogan at the top of this poster “is a line from a famous poem and song, which in turn becomes a revolutionary slogan and a popular song”³⁹ and is the title of the poster. This poster is unique in its color scheme of black, white, and gray. The black figure at the bottom of the poster is clearly representative of those young people who were killed protesting the Shah. The tulips growing from the fallen youth are not your typical tulip as they are fists, suggesting that violence against protesters and their subsequent martyrdom is just creating more people to join the revolution against the Shah. The fact that the tulips are grey instead of the typical red should cause students to wonder what this may represent. Some interpretations of this color is that grey represents intellect; the more people are made aware of the Shah’s atrocities against young people is informing more people to join the revolution. Grey can also represent being controlled or institutionalized and these fist-tulips are growing despite that. Students may also associate the color grey with concrete, suggesting that these deaths are solidifying people’s belief in the revolution. Students may also point out the jaggedy lines of fist-tulips possibly indicating the anxiety and uncertainty of the revolution.

Art as Propaganda: The Rise of the Ayatollah

After analyzing the protest posters, students will examine art as propaganda. With this section students should clearly see how the Ayatollah stole concepts from the secular protest posters to use in his postrevolutionary campaign to take power in Iran. In the book *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, there are so many examples of the types of propaganda used to sustain and assert Khomeini’s power and demonize his enemies. This can be seen in graffiti, textbooks, posters, bank notes, stamps and even chewing gum wrappers. This book has a wealth of images, and I plan on showing my students more images than are discussed in this unit, but know there is a plethora of propaganda to supplement the ideas mentioned in this section. Discussing the effects of propaganda and likening Khomeini’s use of it to Hitler’s, Arash Azizi writes, “Propaganda in Iran can be identified in just the same way as anywhere else in the world: by how it appeals to people’s strongest values and traditions, activating emotion, oversimplifying concepts and ideas, suppressing dissenting voices, and attacking perceived enemies.”⁴⁰ It will be important to note to students that all tyrants use deception and manipulate the masses; this is seen throughout history. By focusing on how the Ayatollah uses propaganda to solidify his rise in power and fill the power vacuum caused by the Shah’s exile, students will see how the use of propaganda by tyrants spans cultures and times.

Keep in mind that “posters are the most powerful vehicle of the art of persuasion,”⁴¹ and the Ayatollah and his political regime capitalized on this knowledge. Since the revolution, “Iran has been plastered with posters inside and out.”⁴² Seeing the power of this poster art, the Ayatollah’s regime “eliminated or forced underground”⁴³ political dissidents and the Islamic Republic appropriated this art form and these propaganda posters “became an unofficial spokes-art of the Islamic Republic.”⁴⁴

Because the Islamists realized the power was in the image, “The Islamic ideologues launched a massive propaganda program to claim the Revolution for themselves.”⁴⁵ Although this revolution happened due to all three groups coming together, as Khomeini and his supporters took over, “a massive propaganda machinery

was gradually set in motion to color the event 'Islamic.'"⁴⁶ Khomeini set out to eliminate political rivals and opponents by rewriting the narrative. Khomeini and his loyal supporters knew the effectiveness of using mass media to rally behind this new leader and took ownership of the revolution for themselves. Because the majority of Iranians were "semi-illiterate,"⁴⁷ "the ideologues very soon realized the power and potency of the spoken word and the drawn picture- and dramatically delivered them with razor-sharp effectiveness."⁴⁸ The key to control and buy-in to their newly formed Islamic Republic was propaganda and because of this, they knew they had all the power. Tyranny and propaganda go hand-in-hand.

Below will be subsections of popular propagandist techniques, used globally, and an example analysis of propaganda that fits that technique, along with other names and page numbers of images that could be discussed with students. My source for these images is *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, but many of these images can be found on *The University of Chicago Library's "The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Arts."*

Making a Leader: Figure 4.2

One of the goals of a tyrant is to make themselves appear good and chosen by god to rule. (Aristotle 469). This propaganda poster featured on page 70 in *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, is labeled as figure 4.2 and is described as "A political demonstration, symbolically assimilated into a Cosmic order."⁴⁹ Students will notice the superimposed, disembodied upper body of Khomeini floating above a political demonstration filled with thousands of people, warmly tinted orange. This suggests that Khomeini is the reason for and overseer of the revolution. The color yellow is in the background of the upper part of the poster representing hope and prosperity. The vertical radiating lines cutting through the yellow imply holiness as they create a halo effect around Khomeini's head and torso. At the top is a dark blue map of the world, smaller in scale than Khomeini's image. Students may point out that this could be a symbol of the world watching or maybe even the world supporting Khomeini's rule of Iran. This poster makes Khomeini seem larger than life, ordained by God, protector of the people, and the designated leader of Iran.

Other posters to use are Figure 1.6⁵⁰ and Figure 2.8⁵¹ in *Staging a Revolution*. Teachers can also use "Wounded Protestor under Khomeini Breaking Through US Flag" and "The Shah's Exile and Khomeini's Return" featured on *The University of Chicago Library's "The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Arts."*

Appropriating the Communist Cause and Rallying the Masses: Figure 6.5

Figure 6.5 is a good example of the Ayatollah and his regime using the rhetoric and visual imagery of the Marxist revolutionaries, but transferring the religious cause through the use of Arabic, the sacred language of the Qur'an, therefore Islamicizing the poster. Chelkowski and Dabashi write, "The overwhelming majority of the revolutionary participants did not actually read or understand the meaning of the Arabic phrases," however, the use of the calligraphy and language immediately Islamicized the messages and "thus competed effectively against all secular challenges to its monopolizing the event."⁵² Figure 6.5 is described as "A calligraphic message appropriates May Day into an Islamic mold."⁵³ In the center of this image, there is a red worker, clad in overalls. Again, red could be a symbol of the revolution and symbol of communism. He is clearly waving a large flag with Arabic words on it that read, according to Google Translate, "Happiness and Career In the Light of Islam and faith, contentment and complete well-being in this world, peace and happiness in the hereafter." Also, we can look at how large the flag is and the way it is drawn. Students should notice the use of subtle, gentle curves of the flag and how it gets bigger towards the right of the poster. This

could represent the strength of the message. There are three gears that the worker is standing on, colored blue, black, and green. The blue could represent the worker, the black could represent oppressive forces, green could represent prosperity and it is the color of Islam, so this could be another Islamicized image on the poster. The gears are obvious signs of labor, connecting to Marxist thought. The Arabic at the bottom says, "International Workers Day." The background is grey and could be representative of capitalist oppression. Although Khomeini aligned himself with leftist, Communist organizations and messaging at the beginning, he soon banned them. As Satrapi reminds us, "Those who opposed the regime were systematically arrested and executed together."⁵⁴

In *Staging the Revolution*, teachers could also use Figures 6.2⁵⁵ and 6.3⁵⁶ and specifically Figure 9.42⁵⁷ for rallying the masses without the communist association. There are a plethora of Islamicized May Day posters on the *Ajam Media Collective* website.

Defining the Enemy: Figure 9.40

The Ayatollah demonized many enemies: America, the Soviet Union, Britain, The Shah, Iraq, especially Saddam Hussein, and Israel. In order to create a national community rooted in anti-imperialist and Islamic traditions, he needed to blame scapegoats to maintain power. Satrapi makes clear points that America and Britain were the puppeteers of the Shah, reinforcing how tyrants align themselves with foreigners and that when Khomeini took power he used the Iran-Iraq war to distract his people as tyrants do. Students will focus on the propaganda used against Saddam Hussein. So in figure 9.40, which is also featured on the *University of Chicago Library's* website called *An Iranian Fist Punches Saddam Hussein, the Growling Mutt*, Saddam is pictured as an attack dog being controlled by America and the Soviet Union, clearly represented by the leashes using the iconic imagery of the stars and stripes for America and the hammer and sickle for the Soviet Union. The leashes represent control while his dog tag is the Star of David which implies that Saddam Hussein is owned by Israel. The tail of the "Saddam" dog looks snake-like, suggesting deceit and greed. The artist used this crosshatch style of rendering which feels like the chaos or anger that Khomeini would want the Iranian people to feel about Iraq's threat to Iran. Saddam's teeth are sharpened and look vampiric or vicious, clearly portraying the danger the Iran-Iraq war has on the people of Iran. The red fist, a symbol of Iranian resistance, is punching Saddam's face, clearly knocking out some of his teeth. Red is used for impassioned resistance against Iraq and there is the clear emblem of Iran on the wrist. The *University of Chicago's Library* describes that "By depicting Saddam as merely an attack dog of foreign world powers, the poster insults him and diminishes the danger posed by the Iraqi leadership, while predicting its eventual destruction by the Islamic Republic."⁵⁸ This propaganda suggests that the Ayatollah is defeating one of many enemies, but then in the chapter "The Cigarette" of *Persepolis*, we see the deceit of the Ayatollah prolonging this war just to maintain power-another characteristic of a tyrant. Again the chapter "The Cigarette" references the Ayatollah's prolonging of the Iran-Iraq war and this was Marji's awakening to tyrannical corruption.⁵⁹

Figures 9.13⁶⁰ and 9.17⁶¹ from *Staging a Revolution* would be good examples to use for defining an enemy, the Shah and the Soviet Union and America. There are many examples of propaganda on the *University of Chicago Library's* website under the section entitled "Demonizing the Enemy" that teachers could have students examine as well.

Indoctrinating the Youth: Figure 17.7

The propaganda poster chosen is one that connects directly to *Persepolis's* powerful chapter "The Key" which shows the Ayatollah's manipulation of the poor youth of Iran to join the front lines in the war against Iraq.

Figure 17.7 is a poster given the description “The young Iranian soldier with his commanding images of militant piety. This poster is based on a photo by Kazem Akavan.”⁶² This image is sepia colored which seems to romanticize the situation the young soldier finds himself in. In his left hand he holds a gun with a picture paying homage to Khomeini, solidifying his power. The soldier is resting his head on his right hand and is staring off into the distance which may signify the promises that Khomeini made to young soldiers, most of whom were poor: “First they convince them that the afterlife is like Disneyland, then they put them in trance with their songs...It’s nuts. They hypnotize them and just toss them into battle. Absolute carnage.”⁶³ This is what Satrapi tells us and, honestly, we can see this reflected in this propaganda poster. Again, I looked up the Arabic on the young man’s bandana and it reads, “O Moon of Bani Hashim.” This phrase is a representation of devotion and submission to the Ayatollah, mimicking the cultural memory of Imam Hussein’s brother who is known for “heroism, bravery, dedication, altruism.”⁶⁴ This idea is what the Ayatollah was using to manipulate young boys to martyr themselves for Iran.

In *Staging a Revolution*, Figures 8.2⁶⁵, 8.3⁶⁶, and 8.4⁶⁷ also show the educational indoctrination of children under the Shah and the Ayatollah. This is definitely highlighted in the chapter “The Veil” where we see from Marji’s perspective of school under the Shah and under the Ayatollah. This would definitely be worth exploring with your students and timely, especially in Oklahoma.

After exploring both the protest art of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, representing the power of collective resistance, and the propaganda the Ayatollah used to take power in Iran, depicting the power of tyranny and its deceptive techniques to control people, students should have a better understanding of this historical moment and of the current political world.

Teaching Strategies

Observation Journal

This strategy may be used more for science classes, but it does have its place in an English classroom as well. Students take a certain principle or idea and then record where they see this principle or idea in a text. Then, they can take that principle and idea and connect to their own lives. Typically a graphic organizer is used to collect data. This is a simple strategy, but one that will have students intentionally seek out the concept that this unit focuses on.

Supplemental Nonfiction Texts

Using additional nonfiction texts to strengthen students’ understanding of a novel can be beneficial in your students’ depth of knowledge about a subject. You can use articles, posts, and excerpts of nonfiction books. This helps contextualize books, plays, and poems. For this particular book and because it is drawn in black-and-white and with cartoonish figures, bringing in a supplemental nonfiction text about this time period will make students realize that this graphic novel is not fiction – it is a true story set in a true time period.

Poster and Propaganda Analysis

When analyzing the posters and propaganda in this unit, I will have students answer the following questions.

You can have students answer these questions as a class, in groups, or individually.

1. What are the main colors used in this image? What do these colors mean?
2. What symbols are used in this image? What do these symbols mean?
3. Who was the intended audience for this image?
4. Where would this image have been used or displayed?
5. What emotions does this image prompt? Was it meant to invoke good feelings or bad toward the subjects?
6. Do you think this image was effective in getting its message through to its audience?
7. What is being left out entirely? (Ideas, facts, points of view, etc.)
8. What facts are being skewed or misrepresented? Do you spot any outright lies?

Simulation

To actively engage my students, I love to use simulation in my classroom. According to Kent State University, “simulation has been promoted as a means to challenge student's misconceptions...[and] encourages higher-order learning, which promotes critical thinking abilities and self-directed learning.”⁶⁸ Examples of simulations can be a mock trial, a press conference, or a podcast with characters from literature. Depending on what type of simulation you are doing, you may want to define the roles, make sure the simulation is focused on using text evidence, and afterwards always debrief on what students have learned.

Classroom Activities

Tyranny and Resistance Observation Journal

In order to aid in my students' understanding of tyranny and resistance, I will have them keep track of it and their thoughts about these concepts as we explore the world and historical context of *Persepolis* in a four-columned graphic organizer, labeled Tyranny Tenet, Examples from Texts/ Notes, Connection to Today, My Thoughts. For tracking examples of tyranny, I will have students write down the tenets of tyranny as the first column. Students will have these from their notes on Aristotle. For the Examples column, they should have examples from the Shah and the Ayatollah that come from either their notes about the historical context, from the graphic novel with panel and page number included, and examples from Ghamari's memoir, *Remembering Akbar*, with page numbers included as well. For the Connection to Today column, they can add where they see this tenet of tyranny in their own lives, using home, politics, school, etc. The last column, My Thoughts, should be the column where they reflect about what they are learning about tyranny and power.

Students should have another section where they record examples of resistance using a three-columned graphic organizer, labeled Person/Group, Act of Resistance, My Thoughts. While reading *Persepolis* and the excerpts of *Remembering Akbar*, they should record which person or group is resisting tyranny, using text evidence, and how they are resisting. It may be worthwhile to have a discussion about the different types of resistance. Students may mention protests, marches, strikes, boycotts, and sit-ins. Questions you should direct your students to when thinking about resistance: Do the agents of resistance work within the system or do they try to burn the system down? Is it organized? Is it violent or nonviolent? Is it through written word or physical action, or both? In the My Thoughts column, students may reflect generally about this act of resistance or connect it to their own lives.

Using *Remembering Akbar* to Understand “The Heroes” and “The Sheep”

In this section, I want to carefully select excerpts to pair with the two chapters “The Heroes” where we first learn what was going on in Evin prison by way of two communist prisoners, friends of Marji’s parents, and then “The Sheep,” where we not only meet Marji’s Uncle Anoosh, a communist revolutionary, but learn the fates of the two prisoners from “The Heroes.” Behrooz Ghamari’s memoir *Remembering Akbar* will complement these two chapters on what actually went on inside this prison’s walls and what went on in the minds of the prisoners. Reading short excerpts from this book will give students a better understanding of the Revolutionary Guards’ treatment of prisoners and the mental and physical toll it took on communist inmates. Using the chapters “This Too Shall Pass,” “A Theory of Praxis,” “Things Fall Apart,” and pages 162-164 from “Mahler’s Symphony No. 1,” students will get a better understanding of what life was like in Evin prison. To show the dangers of being a communist in Iran, have students read the chapter “What is to be Done.” Lastly, I would use the chapter “Arzhang.” Teachers could also use Ghamari’s article “I Was a Prisoner in Iran. I’ve Seen the US Meddle in the Region for Decades” instead of the memoir’s chapters for the sake of time. I would assign these as additional outside readings to be discussed in class while discussing the two chapters mentioned in this section.

Protest and Propaganda Simulation

For the end of this unit, I want my students to really think about power and resistance and actually put it through a simulation. Here is the beginning of the simulation: As a petty nobody in the kingdom of Room316 in the land of IBLAL (ruled by beautiful yet merciless Queen McKee), you have long been frustrated with your lot in life. Now that you have become familiar with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the resistance to the Shah with protest posters, the Ayatollah’s uses of propaganda, and Aristotle’s break-down of tyranny, you have to decide whether to take steps to improve your position and take power or to keep Queen McKee’s rule for fear of another tyrant ruling after she is displaced.

I will divide the students in half –those who will support Queen McKee’s rule and those who want to rebel against her tyranny. Students will individually come up with a propaganda campaign to keep Queen McKee in power or a protest poster to take Queen McKee down that will be displayed all over the BookerTLand. I will have a gallery wall of all the propaganda on one side of the room and the protest posters on the other. Students will have to put their knowledge of our analysis of protest posters against the Shah and propaganda for the Ayatollah to use, remembering the importance of symbols, colors, placement of image, and collective messaging.

Using their tyranny and resistance observation journals as inspiration, each side will also write a collective speech, with each person contributing a reason for the continued rule of Queen McKee or the need for a revolution. Combining ideas and editing for clarity and conciseness, each group will create a short three-to-four minute speech. Each group will choose someone to deliver the speech. The two opposing speeches will be read and then the floor will be open to political debate. The open political debate will need to have some rules: one person can speak at a time from each side, limited to only one minute. This will be done for a duration of eight minutes. Then, students will do a gallery walk of both the propaganda and protest posters. Students will at this time decide if they want to stay with their group or change sides due to the art and speeches created. After the speeches and gallery walk, students will get to vote if Queen McKee stays or goes. Those for McKee’s rule will walk to the propaganda side of the room and those for a revolution against McKee will walk to the protest side of the room.

All in all, no matter the outcome of this final activity, students will actively put their knowledge of tyranny and

resistance to use. This activity will bring to life the historical context of *Persepolis*, showing the complex power dynamics in a society, real or imagined.

Appendix

Standards -- Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts -- 11th grade. These standards can be easily cross-referenced to other standards.

11.2.W.5 Students will routinely and recursively publish final drafts for an authentic audience (e.g., publishing digitally, community and professional audiences, newspapers and magazines, entering contests). Students will do this through their protest and propaganda posters and their speech for the final activity.

11.3.R.1 Students will analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts. This is the heart of this unit- truly understanding the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the historical context of *Persepolis*.

11.3.R.2 Students will evaluate authors' perspectives and explain how those perspectives contribute to the meanings of texts. Before reading this graphic novel, students will have to understand Satrapi's unique perspective of this historic event and understand this is one of many experiences during this time.

11.3.R.7 Students will evaluate how two or more texts address similar themes or topics, using textual evidence to support their claims and inferences. Through their analysis of Aristotle's definition of tyranny, protest posters and propaganda of the Iranian Revolution, *Persepolis*, and excerpts from *Remembering Akbar*, students will analyze these texts through the lens of power and resistance.

11.7.R Students will analyze and evaluate the techniques used in a variety of multimodal content and how they contribute to meaning. This will be done through the analysis of the protest posters and propaganda of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

11.7.W Students will create engaging multimodal content that intentionally enhances understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence for diverse audiences. In our final activity, students will be creating either protest posters or propaganda for our revolution simulation.

Resources

Aristotle. Selections from *Politics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 264. Harvard Univ.

Press, 1932. Reading this for teachers' background knowledge is essential for this unit.

Azizi, Arash. "Four Decades of Propaganda in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Iran Wire*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/special-features/68335/>. This article not only talks of the propaganda of the Iranian Revolution but also the use of propaganda that persists today.

Boesche, Roger. "Aristotle's 'Science' of Tyranny." *History of Political Thought*, Spring 1993, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 1-25, Imprint Academic Ltd., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26214417>. Another good journal article explaining Aristotle's thoughts about tyranny.

Charbonneau, Mateen. "The Moon of Bani Hashim." *Sirat Project*, 23 Sept. 2021, <https://siratproject.alkisafoundation.org/the-moon-of-bani-hashim/>. This provides a brief history of important figures in Iranian cultural history that focuses on heroism and resisting corrupt power.

Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. New York University Press, 1999. This book has so many examples of propaganda, along with in depth explanations of the images and historical explanations. This really is a must buy if you are using this unit.

Citra, Sabrina. "Veiled Truths: Memory and Resistance in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *Grafis Masa Kini*, 23 June 2025, <https://grafismasakini.com/article/veiled-truths-memory-and-resistance-in-marjane-satrapis-persepolis/en>. This article had a great explanation about how this memoir functions as an example of resistance.

"The Failure of the Left." *Worker's Liberty*, 30 Jun. 2006, https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2017-07-26/failure-left?language_content_entity=und. I like this article because it does address why the communists aligned with the Ayatollah and the religious faction. It also explains why this strong ideology failed. This connects significantly to *Remembering Akbar*.

Ghamari, Behrooz. "I Was a Prisoner in Iran. I've Seen the US Meddle in the Region for Decades." *The Walrus*. 7 March 2026, <https://thewalrus.ca/i-was-a-prisoner-in-iran-ive-seen-the-us-meddle-in-the-region-for-decades/>. If you want to know about the author of *Remembering Akbar* and his views on past and current events, read this article.

Ghamari, Behrooz. *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution*. New York: OR Books, 2016. This book was so enlightening about the Evin prisoners' experiences. You could have students read this alongside *Persepolis*, but excerpts could be enough.

"The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Arts." *University of Chicago Library*, Accessed July 13, 2026. <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/turnstile/challenge/?next=/collex/exhibits/graphics-revolution-and-war-iranian-poster-arts/>. This website was the genesis of this unit. If you do not want to buy *Staging a Revolution* book, you could really rely on this website alone for a plethora of propaganda.

Guernsey, Grace. "From Young to Bold: Youthful Resistance in *Persepolis* and at Present." *The Georgetown Independent*, February 8, 2026, <https://www.georgetownindy.com/post/from-young-to-bold-youthful-resistance-in-persepolis-and-at-present>. This is a beautiful article that explains the significance of reading *Persepolis* now.

Hoveman, Rob. "How Iran's 1979 Revolution Deposed Hated Shah." *Socialist Worker*, 30 Jun. 2025, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/in-depth/how-irans-1979-revolution-deposed-of-hated-shah/>.

Jordović, Ivan. "Aristotle on Extreme Tyranny and Extreme Democracy." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 2011, pp. 36-64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29777247>. This journal article has a great breakdown of Aristotle which I used to help my students understand what Aristotle was saying about tyranny.

Moss et al. "Legacies of Protest Art in Iran: The Revolutionary Art Workshop of 1979." *Public Culture*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1 May 2024, pp.153-179., <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-11158958>. This source has so many images from Group 57 and explains the group's importance to the Iranian Revolution.

Satrap, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Pantheon, 2003. This is the anchor text for this unit.

"Simulation as a Teaching Strategy | Center for Teaching and Learning." Kent State University. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://www.kent.edu/ctl/simulation-teaching-strategy>. A great webpage to justify simulation in your classroom.

Zarkar, Rustin. "The Poster Arts of May Day: International Worker's Day in Revolutionary Iran." *Ajam Media Collective*, May 1, 2013. <https://ajammc.com/2013/05/01/may-day-in-poster-art-international-workers-day-in-revolutionary-iran/>. This source has many images used to show the Islamizing of the Marxist cause in Iran.

Notes

1. Ghamari, Behrooz. "I Was a Prisoner in Iran. I've Seen the US Meddle in the Region for Decades."
2. Ibid.
3. Citra, Sabrina. "Veiled Truths: Memory and Resistance in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*."
4. Guernsey, Grace. "From Young to Bold: Youthful Resistance in *Persepolis* and at Present."
5. Ibid.
6. Citra, Sabrina. "Veiled Truths: Memory and Resistance in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*."
7. Ibid.
8. Jordović, Ivan. "Aristotle on Extreme Tyranny and Extreme Democracy," 40.
9. Ibid., 42.
10. Ibid., 43.
11. Ibid., 46.
12. Ibid., 47.
13. Ibid., 52.
14. Ibid., 53.
15. Ibid., 61.
16. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*, 28.
17. Jordović, Ivan. "Aristotle on Extreme Tyranny and Extreme Democracy," 55.
18. Boesche, Roger. "Aristotle's 'Science' of Tyranny," 18.
19. Hoveman, Rob. "How Iran's 1979 Revolution Deposed Hated Shah."
20. Ibid.
21. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 25.
22. Hoveman, Rob. "How Iran's 1979 Revolution Deposed Hated Shah."
23. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 26.
24. "The Failure of the Left."
25. Ibid.

26. Hoveman, Rob. "How Iran's 1979 Revolution Deposed Hated Shah."
27. Moss et al. "Legacies of Protest Art in Iran: The Revolutionary Art Workshop of 1979."
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 41.
39. Moss et al. "Legacies of Protest Art in Iran: The Revolutionary Art Workshop of 1979." '
40. Azizi, Arash. "Four Decades of Propaganda in the Islamic Republic of Iran."
41. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 143.
42. Ibid., 143.
43. Ibid., 143.
44. Ibid., 143.
45. Ibid., 25.
46. Ibid., 25.
47. Ibid., 26.
48. Ibid., 26.
49. Ibid., 70.
50. Ibid., 27.
51. Ibid., 42.
52. Ibid., 98.
53. Ibid., 101.
54. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*, 117.
55. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 98.
56. Ibid., 99.
57. Ibid., 166.
58. "The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Arts."
59. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*, 114-115.
60. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 150.
61. Ibid., 152.
62. Ibid., 278.
63. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*, 101.
64. Charbonneau, Mateen. "The Moon of Bani Hashim."
65. Chelkowski, Peter and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 129.
66. Ibid., 130.

67. Ibid., 131.

68. "Simulation as a Teaching Strategy | Center for Teaching and Learning."

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