“This fine scholarly book on the development of modern primary and secondary education in Iran through the efforts of the Baha’is fills an important gap in scholarship. It presents the most important developments by examining thoroughly the introduction and expansion of modern education in Iran as a part of the general reform and Westernization efforts in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Shahvar’s in-depth knowledge of Iran, full knowledge of several languages, detailed research in various archives and careful attention to nuances of culture and religious traditions in Iran make this book a substantial addition to our knowledge of reform movements in Iran and the larger Middle East region. The Forgotten Schools fills an important lacuna in literature on modern education and reform in Iran, dealing specifically with the Baha’i schools and their impact as a vehicle for modernization.”

Farshad Ezati, Professor of Politics, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, New York University

“Shahvar’s study fills a major gap in studies of modern education in Iran. It also sheds light on the ongoing struggle between the anti-clerical Reza Shah Pahlavi and the Baha’i leadership in the 1930s and on why the shah ultimately closed down non-Muslim and foreign schools. Janet Afary, Professor of History, Purdue University

By the end of the nineteenth century it became evident to Iran’s ruling Qajar elite that the state’s contribution to the promotion of modern education in the country was unable to meet the growing expectations set by the end of the nineteenth century. Modern schools were established by foreign religious missions in Iran, but these were limited mainly to Christian areas and communities and were far from meeting the growing demands of the majority Shi’i population for modern education. Muzaffar al-Din Shah sought to remedy this situation by permitting the entry of the private sector into the field of modern education. In 1899, the Mazandaran-ye Ta’labi, the first Baha’i school, was established in Tehran. The Baha’i were a significant religious minority in nineteenth-century Iran, and traditionally under-represented and often persecuted. By the 1930s there were dozens of Baha’i-run schools, single-sex primary, secondary and pre-schools. Their high standards of education drew many non-Baha’i students from all sections of society. The Baha’is saw this as an opportunity to bring recognition to and expansion for their community, and a means to establish themselves in the open as a minority while fulfilling their religious duty of educating those beyond their own community. Shahvar assesses these ‘forgotten schools’ and investigates why they proved so popular not only with Baha’is, but Zoroastrians, Jews and especially Muslims. Shahvar explains why they were closed by the reformist Shah in the late 1930s and the subsequent fragility of the Baha’i position in Iran. Here for the first time, Soli Shahvar presents the history of modern education in Iran, the Baha’i position in Iran, the significant role of the Baha’i Community in modern education and how their curricula were inspired by the teachings of Baha’ullah, and redressing the balance in this regard. Shahvar presents a complete and nuanced picture of the movement behind the establishment of these Baha’i-run schools and how their curricula were inspired by the teachings of Baha’ullah, and ‘Shahvar’s study is a significant contribution to the fields of contemporary Iranian history, the history of modern education in the Middle East, and Baha’i Studies. The contribution of the Baha’is to the introduction and financing of modern education methods and techniques in Iran has yet to be fully recognised, and the present monograph by Shahvar goes a long way to redressing the balance in this regard. Shahvar presents a complete and nuanced picture of the motivation behind the establishment of these Baha’i-run schools and how their curricula were inspired by the teachings of Baha’ullah, and ‘Shahvar’s study fills an important lacuna in literature on modern education and reform in Iran, dealing specifically with the Baha’i schools and their impact as a vehicle for modernization.”

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