CHAPTER III

THE CONQUEST OF THE KHANATES

Early Relations with Central Asia—Bekovitch's Expedition—Surrender of Kirghiz Hordes—Dealing with Khiva—Missions to Bokhara—Line of Forts commenced—Porovski's Attempt on Khiva—Campaign against Khokand—Province of Turkestan created—Fall of Bokhara—Annexation of Zerashan Valley—Fall of Khiva—Expedition against Turkomans—Yomud Massacre.

The precise date at which Russia first had relations with Central Asia is not known, but it is on record that so far back as the beginning of the seventeenth century the Tsar, Michael-Feodorovitz, held communications with the Khan of Khiva, these being necessitated by the action of the Cossacks of the Ural, who on more than one occasion made raids in Khivan territory. The dwellers in Khaurism, however, proved themselves more than a match for their invaders, and the Russians appear to have been invariably worsted, and sometimes whole parties of them annihilated. In 1703 the Khan of Khiva, impressed doubtless by the reports of Russian prowess in Siberia, voluntarily declared himself a subject of the Tsar, and despatched an envoy to Moscow with the request that Peter should take Khiva under his protection. Nothing came of this application, and the matter was allowed to rest until ten years later, when the stories told of the wealth of the Amu river by a Turkoman named Hadji Nefes, who came as a trader to Astrakhan, attracted attention to the territories of Central Asia. Nefes stated that much gold was to be found in Khiva and whereabouts, and his story was believed. Shortly after this Prince Gagarin, Governor of Siberia, sent word that he had received a trustworthy report of large discoveries of
gold deposits in Bokhara, a country at that time practically unknown.

These rumours made Peter eager to prospect the unexplored regions beyond the Caspian Sea, and with a view to obtain further particulars of the Amu Valley, he ordered that Nefes should come to St. Petersburg. The visit took place in 1713, and the tale told by the Turkoman greatly increased the cupidity of the Tsar. The moment was auspicious. Charles xii. had been finally disposed of, and the war with Turkey had come to an end. There were no more lands to conquer in the West, so Peter determined to turn to the East. He appears to have been deeply impressed by Nefes' account of the course of the Amu, which he declared at one time had flowed into the Caspian, but had been diverted by the Uzbegs, who had dammed up the old bed from fear of the Russians, and caused the river to flow into the Aral Sea. And he decided to despatch an expedition into the country of Turkestan with the double object of exploiting its wealth and making an attempt to turn the Oxus into its original bed, so that it might flow once more into the Caspian, and enable the Russians to reach the Khivan territory direct from Astrakhan.

Peter entrusted the command of the expedition to Prince Bekovitch-Tcherkaski of the Imperial bodyguard, whom he instructed before beginning any military operations to pay a visit to the Khan, and make a secret reconnaissance of the country.

Bekovitch followed his instructions, and on his return reported to Peter that the Amu or Oxus had, as was stated, formerly emptied itself into the Caspian, and that during his exploration he had come upon the old bed of the river, to which he thought it would be a simple matter to restore it. The Prince was accordingly ordered to take command of an expedition of three thousand men, infantry, Cossacks, and dragoons, to return to Khiva, and to call upon the Khan to submit to become a Russian vassal, and to establish himself in Khiva as the Tsar's representative. From Khiva two caravans were to