CHAPTER VI

RUSSIAN POLICY IN ASIA

First intrusion of Russian merchants into Asia due to chance—Objects of Yermak and Chabaroff—Necessity of inflicting a lesson on Kirghiz Nomads—Difference between Russian invasion of Siberia and Central Asia—Reasons which have led to continued conquest—Benefits conferred by Russian rule—Cruelty of Russian methods—Skobelev's justification of same—Russia's impulse towards the East—Russian social system—Military methods in Asia—Love of decorations—Corruption—Russian love of intrigue—The Oriental mode of reasoning—Balance of evidence as to benefit of Russian rule in Asia—Civilising influence—Universal militarism of Russian system—Neglect of the needs of the people—Restriction of freedom and lack of public opinion—The Church and the Army—The outcome of their influence—Russian diplomatic methods—Unscrupulous and successful—Secret agents—The only limitation of Russian growth.

The reader who has followed the facts recorded in the preceding chapters cannot fail to have been impressed by the constancy with which successive exploiters of Russian empire have forged their way further and further afield. It will also have been noted that at the outset the intrusion of Russian merchants into Asia was the outcome rather of chance than of any settled policy on the part of the ruler of Moscow.

The doings of Yermak and of Chabaroff in Siberia aimed rather at the attaining of fresh markets for Russian produce than at the increase of Muscovite dominion; and the subsequent invasion of Central Asia was brought about, not by any political designs on the part of Russia, but by the necessity of teaching a lesson to the Kirghiz marauders who made the limits of the Orenburg steppe unsafe to the caravans which traversed it in the direction of Khiva. The circumstances of the peoples affected in these different districts of Asia varied greatly. In the north, the inhabitants of what
has become Western Siberia were neither a very fierce nor a very warlike race, and as soon as the occupants of the capital of Siber had been taught the superiority of the Cossacks of the Ural, the races of Tobolsk accepted the dominion of Moscow. The rest of the acquisition of Siberia was accomplished by a process of gradual absorption, varied by an occasional massacre; the only opponents met with who were at all qualified to dispute the onward march of Russian agents were the Chinese, whose opposition succeeded only in delaying the final acquisition of the Amur provinces for a brief space of time.

In Central Asia, the circumstances which accompanied Russian absorption were quite different. The peoples against whom it was found necessary or politic to despatch military expeditions, were wild and warlike, possessing good physique, used to life in the open air, fierce by nature, cruel and remorseless. The Kirghiz of the Steppes proved themselves no mean opponents, and were only finally subdued after a conquest extending over many years. And when the Kirghiz leaders surrendered to Anna Ivanovna, Russia found in the people of Khiva and Bokhara, and still more in the Turkomans of the Kizil Kum, races far more difficult to deal with than had been those already subdued. Indeed the fact is worth noting, that among the populations of Central Asia, the races appear to be ranged in the order of their ferocity from north to south. Thus the Turkoman excels the Kirghiz, and is in turn surpassed by the Uzbeg, whose dominions are bordered by the Tekke Turkomans, a people who for inherent wilderness and the readiness with which they take to arms are only excelled by their neighbours, the tribes of Afghanistan.

The conquest of these people and the acquisition of their territory was only achieved by a vast expenditure of life and money. And it is a matter for grave doubt whether the enormous amount of treasure which has been expended in the conquest of Central Asia will ever bring a commensurate return. The first question which