CHAPTER IX

CONQUEST BY RAILWAY

Introduction of railways into Russia—Main Siberian highway the only road till 1880—Origin of the Trans-Siberian railway—Central Asiatic railway scheme—Peculiarities of construction—Strategic aim of the line—Its future development—The branch to Kushk—Effect of Transcaucasian railway as a civilising influence—Siberian line—Changes in original plan—Engineering difficulties—Distances—Manchurian branch—Exaggerated popular estimate of its military importance—Schemes for Chinese railways—Vastness of Russian railway schemes—British interest to check these.

Railways were first introduced into European Russia so far back as 1838, when a short line was opened between St. Petersburg and Pavlovsk, and this was followed, after an interval of a few years, by the line constructed at the cost of a hundred million roubles between St. Petersburg and Moscow. The outbreak of the Crimean War served to impress the necessity of the construction of strategic railways on the authorities, and it is generally believed in Russia that the difficulties of transport, added to those of maintaining communications between the shores of the Black Sea and the administrative centres of the country, were largely responsible for the course of events which ended the campaign. So recently as 1880, Russia had no railways in Asia, though Great Britain had constructed nearly 10,000 miles of iron road in India. The only means of communication available in Asiatic Russia at this period were the routes consisting of mere tracks or water-ways by which the districts of Siberia and Central Asia were traversed. The main Siberian highway ran from the mouth of the Ural river across the steppe to Orenburg, and thence, through Petropavlovsk and Omsk, towards the Chinese frontier in one direction and