Expansion in Central Asia: 
St. Petersburg vs. the Turkestan Generals (1863-1866)

The 1860's was a time of rapid Russian imperial expansion in Central Asia undertaken by an impoverished government whose main efforts were being devoted to domestic reform. These overland advances into the heart of Asia preceded by a decade or more renewed overseas expansion by Great Britain and France.

Soviet and western historians have long debated the causes of Russia’s conquest of Central Asia. Certainly economic factors such as the desire to expand Russian trade, obtain raw materials, and secure markets were important. But considerations of power and prestige appear to have played an even greater part in causing the Russian advance. Much of Central Asia constituted a power vacuum lying between the British and Russian spheres of influence; it was virtually inevitable that one power or the other would fill the void. Central Asian geography favored Russia because there were no

1. For Soviet views, emphasizing such factors as the search for raw materials and markets and pressure upon the Government by capitalist elements see A. L. Popov, "Iz istorii zavoevanii Srednei Azii," Istoriicheskie zapiski, IX (1940), 198ff.; E. V. Bunakov, "K istorii snoshenii Rossii s sredneaziatskimi khanstvami v XIX v.," Sovetskoe vostokovedenie, II, 5ff.; Aminov and Babakhodzhaev, Ekonomicheskie i politicheskie posledstviia prisoedineniia Srednei Azii k Rossii (Tashkent, 1966), pp. 3, 11-16; Istoriia SSSR, II (Moscow, 1949), 580-81. The fullest Soviet account of Russia's economic relations with Central Asia before the conquest is M. K. Rozhkova, Ekonomicheskie sviazi Rossii so Srednei Azii 40-60-e gody XIX veka (Moscow, 1963). Some Soviet accounts also emphasize that Russian expansion was a defensive reaction to aggressive moves by England. See E. L. Shteinberg, "Angliiskaia versiia o 'russkoi ugroze' Indii," Istoriicheskie zapiski, XXXIII (1950), 47ff.

important obstacles to an advance from the steppe to the north nor was there a genuine natural frontier short of the Hindu Kush range. Russian military men argued that limited expansion which would close the gap in its lines of steppe fortifications would establish a shorter, more defensible frontier, safeguard friendly tribesmen from attack, and protect the trade routes between Russia and Central Asia. And the generals and governors on the spot who employed such arguments were anxious to achieve, like their British and French counterparts, personal advancement and glory for themselves and their country.

A general picture of the Russian conquest and its results has been provided in recently published works, but the need for specialized studies of this era remains. For the crucial period of the mid-1860's when rapid expansion was resumed, the views of Russian statesmen and commanders can be examined in detail with the aid of extensive published documents and some unpublished materials. This paper seeks to explain the motives of those responsible for Central Asian imperialism during those years and provide answers to the questions: Was there genuine debate about its desirability and extent? Did the Foreign Ministry's public opposition to major annexations there merely camouflage aggressive expansionism? Did specific advances result from carefully formulated official plans or from unauthorized adventures by local commanders? Why could St. Petersburg not control ambitious commanders?

2. N. A. Khalfin, Prisoedinenie Srednei Azii k Rossii (60-90-e gody XIX v.) (Moscow, 1965), based on painstaking research in numerous Soviet archives, is the most authoritative account of the Russian conquest. While emphasizing the primacy of commercial motives in expansion (1860-90's), it devotes attention also to political and military factors and contains a complete bibliography (pp. 446-67). See also Seymour Becker, Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865-1924 (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 16ff.

3. Turkestanskii krai. Sbornik materialov dlia istorii ego zavaevani, compiled by Colonel A. G. Serebrennikov, I-VIII, XVII-XXII (Tashkent, 1912-16). Serebrennikov gathered material from all of the principal archives of Imperial Russia for the period, 1837-76, enough to fill seventy volumes. Only fourteen volumes were published, but XVII-XXII span the years, 1864-66, and contain hundreds of reports, memoranda and comments by Government leaders and generals who directed the process of expansion.

4. Notably Gosudarstvennyi Muzei (Moscow), Otdel pismennykh istochnikov, M. G. Cherniaev fond (henceforth GIM, Cherniaev), the general's personal archive; and Otdel rukopisei biblioteki im. Lenina (Moscow), D. A. Miliutin fond (henceforth ORBL, Miliutin).

5. The controversy over this question is suggested by differing views in Lederer's Russian Foreign Policy. Hajo Holborn asserts in "Russia and the European Political System" (p. 391) that Alexander II could have forbidden Russian generals from advancing southward, but instead he "tolerated the refractory attitude of his colonial proconsuls . . . . This colonial expansion appealed to him." And Firuz Kazemzadeh declares: "But in fact the military were tightly controlled from St. Petersburg, all their moves being decided on the highest governmental level (p. 496)." How inaccurate this statement is for the mid-1860's will be shown below. Raymond Garthoff notes correctly that contrary to the British belief that the Russians were deceiving them about advances in Central Asia, "in fact there was simply lack of control from St. Petersburg." "Instruments of Policy," p. 248.