

Comte de Cholet. Excursion en Turkestan. 1889.

Young French aristocrat. Officer in the French army, Quite obviously a tourist, as the title of his book clearly indicates: superficial, ignorant, thoroughly racist, snob, infatuated and a trifle «precious».

The kind of people who complains about the lousy quality of «Rigoletto» given at the Tiflis Opera House. He has the opportunity of a lifetime to write an interesting report, since he is invited to travel during a whole month together with Alikhanoff through the Tejen- and Murgab Valleys. He does meet Teke-, Salor- and Saryk Turkmen, but does not even bother to describe his outstanding travel companion, nor the Turkmen's way of life.

Page 27: Uzun-Ada: A port south of Krasnavodsk on an island of the Caspian, head station of the Transcaspian railway, which at the time (1889) was about to cross the Amu-darya, near Charjew (now Türkmenabat)

Page 34: Watering stations of the railway every 15-20 miles with houses for the employees, freshly planted young trees and a spring.

page 35: General Annenkoff, in charge of building this strategic highway did a brilliant job.

Page 39-44: «...the steppe that they (the Turkmen) left neglected is now covered with crops...».

Arrival and stay at Ashkabad, the new capital of the province, with its new railway station, a few modern buildings and about 10 000 inhabitants. General Komarov is the governor of the province. The city is already an important commercial center, a hub for many caravans, mainly to/from Khiva, and Persia.

De Cholet indulges in racist remarks about the Turkmen and their wives («... one wishes they would be veiled as in Persia...»).

He meets general Komarov and his subordinate, colonel Alikhanov, governor of Merv.

Page 46:

(Note: Manifest error of de Cholet who attributes the numerous little towers in the fields near the city to the Akhal Tekes. In fact they surely date back to the Persians who lost Ashkabad (then a rather large city) around 1810. The Turkmen destroyed it and left it deserted.

The towers with their narrow and low doors were built by Persian farmers as a shelter against Akhal Teke's raiders. Similar towers were ubiquitous all over the Persian frontier area.)

Page 50: Stay in Merv: Superficial, in part erroneous history of the Turkmen of Merv, but a reasonably correct biography of Colonel Alikhanoff:

A Lesghi Moslem, he manages to be a Colonel before age 28, is degraded for dueling with another officer, fights gallantly as a private soldier in several battles and is re-integrated to the grade of lieutenant. On his own initiative (*This is false*) he goes then to Merv disguised as a Turkmen, gets quickly intimate with the young heir of the Veldi Tekes and creates a strong pro-Russian party which allows General Komarov to enter Merv without any significant resistance in 1884. The friendly Khans are maintained in their position, get Russian military grades, salaries and medals. They sincerely accept the Russian rule.

Captain, then major, the Colonel Alikhanoff is named governor of Merv. He then induces the Saryks and Salors of Yolatan, Pendj-deh and Sarakhs to accept Russian rule as well.

Sarakhs (right bank of the Tejen) is annexed by Russia (with the Shah's consent), while Pendj-deh is seized from Afghanistan after a victorious battle in which Alikhanoff fights with great distinction. In 1889, at age 38, Alikhanoff is Colonel. He is venerated by the Turkmen for his bravery.

The new, and fourth in history, city of Merv is being built and «*should become quite successful once its agricultural potential will be fully exploited*».

Page 55: De Cholet stays 10 days at Merv as Alikhanov's host. Very superficial opinion about the Turkmen way of life and just plain wrong description of the business process of slave hunting.

Page 58: Horses and horse covers: «... *summer or winter, the horses are covered with a thick felt ...which the Turkomans hardly ever remove. Before using their horses they roll the front part and folds over the back part of the felt.*» Here we can believe de Cholet, he is a horseman.

Page 68: De Cholet mentions the carpet dealers of the Merv market.

Obviously the commercialization of rugs has started immediately after the Russian take over.

Page 69: Even before the end of these 10 days at Merv our tourist «...*does not think of any reason to remain longer in Merv.*», although he had yet to make an interesting note about the inhabitants.

«...*we reach the (Merv) train station where we find many people drinking champagne*».

This is surely a note of outstanding ethnologic value!

From the same bottle comes «...*general Annenkoff, who is as much a Parisian as we are ...*»

Page 80-94: Arrival at Sarakhs on the right bank of the Tejen, together with colonel Alikhanoff,:

Barracks for about 1500 troops and a few Russian houses have already been built.

The valley is fertile, and there is a large Turkmen population (they are Salors, but who cares?).

Visiting the fortified Persian village on the left bank of the Tejen.

Return to the Russian Sarakhs on the right bank (*With supper, ball and toast: It is really a hard life and sooo different from the Parisian Salons*).

Visiting the local Khan, an influential Salor chief, surprisingly called Teke khan. De Cholet mentions «...*nice Teke rugs on the walls (ahem..or were they perhaps Salor chuvals?)*».

Page 99-105: For once some reasonable remarks about the incredible speed at which a highly dangerous area has been fully pacified and about the differences between the behavior of the Russians in Trans-Caspia and the British in India.

(Note: The Turkmen were poor, they did not exploit the agricultural potential of their oases to the full and their raids made any regular commercial activities impossible anyway. Russian peace and the railway made commercial, industrial and agricultural activities much more attractive (including cotton growing and exporting).

Competent merchants (Armenians & Jews) had followed the troops. The thousands of soldiers, officials, railroad builders, dealers and the first tourists created a new, relatively wealthy customer base. The social structure had been left nearly unchanged, the Khans and elders being the intermediaries between the Russians and the people. However corruption and arrogance of the Russian functionaries was already spreading and will cause serious trouble and even famines less than two decades later)

Page 180: Arrival at Pendj-deh, with Alikhanoff: Four years after having thrown the Afghan garrison out of Pendj-deh, the Russians have already built barracks, while about 30 houses had been built by Armenian merchants and about 100 Turkmen yurts were planted near the village. De Cholet mentions that there are many rich (?) Turkmen aouls in the oasis, the larger ones having up to 2500 inhabitants.

As in Sarakhs the author does not identify the local tribe.

(Note: And why should he? These people did not drink champagne and did not even know the last rumors from Paris and St Petersburg).

Page 184-187: Watching and describing (rather well) the weaving of a (probably Saryk) khali on which three women are working together. They belong to a local Khan's household.

At the bazaar, Turkmen (??) merchants sell indigo among other usual products.

Many Armenian merchants sell textiles, Russians sell leather riding boots, wine and vodka. The author notices as well some camels carrying rugs.

(Note: Also in this town there was evidence of the growth of rug production and sale.)

(Note: The author signals the broad use of roasted meat which he calls chichlik. Certainly another recently imported fashion, since all the explorers of the region until 1881 clearly stated that Turkmen eat surprisingly little meat and eat their meat boiled.)

Page 191: Prosperous Turkmen villages of the Pendj-deh valley, thanks to the production of wool exported to Russia and the Caucasus.

Page 193-194: The battlefield where the Russians and their Teke- and Saryk cavalry defeated the Afghans. Description of the battle.

Page 200-201: At Yolatan: The Russian local officer and «Saryk khan» meet Alikhanov and de Cholet.

(Note: de Cholet apparently tends to confound the name of the Khans he happens to meet with the name of their tribe.

*«Saryk khan» the chief of the Yolatan Saryks, surely enjoyed as well a real name!! Earlier in this trip he also met a certain Teke khan, who, in that case, indeed was an influential Salor elder. He was mentioned by Russian sources (quoted by Marvin) as responsible for regrouping some Salors at Sarakhs, after the Russian take-over. Bdw, at least **this** Salor seemed to have recovered a good standard of living).*

At Yolatan, a concrete dam («bent») was being built by the Russians, at a location where the Arab conquerors once built a huge one, which irrigated and fertilized an area four times larger than the present system of Turkmen dams. The Russian were also installing a special device able to keep the fertile soil in suspension.

Dining in the yurt of the Khan of Yolatan, not a word of description. Nor did the author use the unique opportunity of living one month with Alikhanoff (surely with O'Donovan and de Blocqueville, the best connoisseur of the Turkmen), to make a well informed report to his readers.

Page 209: Arrival by train at the New Charjew rail station, a few miles of the old city, on the left bank of the Amu darya, in the Khanate of Bokhara.

The author notes a few large trees, for the first time since his arrival in Turkmenistan. He also notes the high number of caravans.

Page 214-234: History of the Russian conquest of Turkestan between the Amu darya and the Syr darya, more than 20 years earlier. For once it is a trifle better documented than usual. Informations delivered by the highest ranking Russian officers in the area:

The Russian columns were involved:

On the northeastern front:

Slow progress along the Syr darya, building forts. Tashkent is conquered in **1865**. First defeat of the Khan of Bokhara in **1866**. Second defeat in **1868** and loss of Samarkand to general von Kaufmann. The same year, a revolt of local nomad tribes and of the Samarkand population leads to a bloody Russian repression and to three days of pillage of the city. A peace treaty is signed, with leonine conditions, by the Khan (or rather the

Amir as he was known). The «russification» of the (now smaller and only nominally independent) Bokhara Khanate is started.

Conquest of the Khokand Khanate.

In **1888** a railway line links Bokhara and Samarkand to the trans-Caspian railway. A few years later also Khokand is linked to it.

On the northern front:

In **1878** three Russian columns penetrate into the Khiva Khanate, on the low Amu darya, south of the Aral sea.

(Note: only one column actually saw battle, another one reached Khiva but did not have to fight before the Khan surrendered.)

Two crushing victories on the field against Yomud Turkmen- and Khazak irregular cavalry open the doors of Khiva to general von Kaufmann. The Khan is forced to accept Russian rule, while keeping his title and a reduced territory. Depending on sources, between 25 000 and 40 000 slaves were liberated and escorted to Persia

(Note: unfortunately many freed Persian slaves were re-captured or killed by Merv- and Akhal Tekes on their way back to Persia.

(Note: The author forgets to mention an episode typical of von Kaufmann's ruthless method. The Yomud tribes, which alone opposed serious resistance to the Russians, were heavily fined after the Khan surrendered. As they had the unfortunate idea of playing a bit for time, they gave von Kaufmann the excuse for launching a terrible repression in which women and children were not spared and most aouls were thoroughly pillaged).

(Note: A fact which has perhaps contributed to the large number of Yomud rugs on the market. Hypothesis which could be valid for Akhal Teke- and for some 'Bokhara' rugs from lower- or middle Amu-darya or from the Samarkand area as well, where the populations shared the misfortune of a pillage.

Merv Tekes, Salors, Saryks, Göklen and (perhaps) Chodors escaped this fate. Thus their genuine rugs may have in part escaped the exile to Occident).

On the southwestern front:

In **1869 and 1871**, the Russian opened two beach-heads at Krasnovodsk on the mid Caspian shore and Tchikislar on the southern shore near the mouths of the Atterek- and Gurgien Rivers.

(Note: Actually 3 beach heads, since they also created a new military post on the northeastern Caspian shore near the Mangyshlak peninsula, in Kazakh and Chodor territory).

After having made friends with the local Yomud tribes, a first, rather poorly prepared attempt at taming the Akhal Tekes failed in front of the Geok Tepe fortress in **1878**.

General Skobelev, the new commander, prepared carefully a new attack and stormed Geok Tepe in **1882**, causing heavy casualties among the Akhal Tekes, who soon after this defeat mostly surrendered and accepted Russian rule.

In **1884**, the diplomacy of the infiltrated lieutenant Alikhanoff and an impressive Russian army encamped at one marching day from Merv persuaded the Merv Tekes to accept Russian rule without significant fighting.

In **1885** the Russians took over, with the Shah's consent, the right bank of the Tejen River, until well south of Sarakhs.

The same year, a Russian army, supported by a joint Saryk / Merv Teke cavalry unit led by Alikhanov, defeated the Afghan garrison of the Pendj-deh and annexed the Oasis.

Back to New-Charjew, the Russian town on the left bank of the Amu-darya. A small city of about 1200 inhabitants, mainly railroad- and bridge builders, merchants, military and administration.

At Old-Charjew, near by, there is a market which de Cholet does not bother to describe, except that he mentions some rugs being sold. He pays a visit to the Bokharan Uzbek beg in his fortress.

Page 220: A journey on the right bank of the Amu darya, following the railroad in construction toward Bokhara.

For once an interesting note: near Bokhara the soil is much more intensively and competently cultivated than at any place between the Caspian and the left bank of the Amu darya. High number of people travel to and from the city, often in small two-wheeled chariots.

(Note: The Turkmen ignored the use of such vehicles, using instead camels, horses and asses).

(Note: For whatever this is worth, de Cholet's pictures show farmers which do not don the typical Turkmen attire but the Tadjik costume, turbans etc...). The settled « competent cultivators » were most probably Tajiks, not Turkmen.

Page 252-255: Arrival at Bokhara, a city of over 70 000 inhabitants (some sources mention even 150 000) where de Cholet stays during 3 days:

Description of Bokhara: as usual, superficial and uninteresting, with arrogant and racist remarks.

Visit of the bazaars: As in most large Moslem cities, there are several specialized bazaars.

The author notes the much higher variety and quality of the goods offered, compared to what he saw in Turkmen bazaars. He mentions bazaars dedicated to metalware, to textiles, to carpets, weapon makers, etc...Many cheap European imports are on sale.

(Note: Some European ware, especially cast iron pots, textiles and leather were already prominent in Bokharas bazaars 20 years before.)

Page 260: Inauguration of the railway bridge on the Amu darya. The river looks «like liquid mud» to de Cholet too)