

J.A. Mac Gahan

Campaigning on the Oxus and the fall of Khiva. 1876.

<http://archive.org/stream/campaigningoxus00gahagoog#page/n9/mode/2up>

Mac Gahan is an American war correspondent who, after a daring journey through the Kyzil Kum desert, joined von Kaufmann's army on the banks of the Amu-darya, shortly before the fall of Khiva.

Interesting and lively report with description of Kazakh- (systematically called «Kirghiz», following the confusing habit of Russian historians) and Yomud Turkmen nomads, as well as of the settled Uzbek-, Sart - and of enslaved Persians of the Khanate.

Probably one of the most complete and most objective descriptions of the fall of the Khivan Khanate to three Russian columns which reach it from North and from East, after difficulties due to the climate and the huge distances. The young American makes many friends about Russian officers and gets a lot of informations directly from the horse mouth.

There is also a well documented report about previous Russian attempts to conquer Khiva, which all turned into disasters.

The rather civilized behavior of the Russian army with the vanquished Khivans contrasts very much with their cruel and unfair treatment of the brave Yomud nomads, who offer the only serious military opposition despite their heavy losses. The urban Khivans « do not show any inclination nor capacity for self defense». The Khivan oasis is described as being very fertile and outstandingly well cultivated.

While Mac Gahan is impressed by the beautiful gardens and orchards of the Khanate, he is disappointed by the city of Khiva, the capital, main residence of its ruler and second largest city of the Khanate. Even the Khan's palace (in which he is allowed to spend a few days by the Russian authorities) is disappointing. He visits the treasury-room of the palace, in which the fleeing Khan left most of his possessions. He also left his whole harem behind, in his precipitous escape.

The text is illustrated with numerous engravings from original designs and paintings by artists (and Russian officers), like Vereschagin and Feodoroff, and enriched with a great number of anecdotes.

The historian and ethnologist will find many interesting informations in this book, The chapter on the Turkmen and about von Kaufman's campaign against them, is particularly interesting, but, unfortunately a ruggie does not find enough in it to satisfy his passion.

Page 184-188 Mac Gahan describes with great enthusiasm the oasis around Khiva as a green paradise in which the Uzbeks of the ruling class live as gentlemen farmers in fortified farms in the middle of «.. little fields of waving grain, fruit trees of all kinds bending under their loads of ripe and green fruits, tall noble elms, spreading their long arms, thick green foliage, and dark shadows over little pools of water.... ».

«the newness, the strangeness of the place, the mystery hanging over it ,... »

« ...tall young poplars lifted their slender forms and streams of water, shaded with bushes ran about in every direction... »

Every farm is a tiny fortress with quite gloomy and dark interior, being lit only by little holes in the walls, but is very often fitted with a quantity of colorful carpets, kilim and textiles.

Page 303-314: The bazaar « ..simply a street covered in, and it is altogether a very primitive affair... properly speaking there are no shops; an elevated platform runs along one side, and men are seated among heaps of wares, with no apparent boundary lines between them...After a heavy arched gateway one enters the Tim or bazaar proper, in this bazaar is transacted the principal retail business of the city...».

Page 313. « ...Khiva manufactures much silk, the whole oasis is planted with white mulberry trees and in every house throughout the country we found two or three large rooms full of the busy little spinners, feeding on the leaves... ».

But the Khivan dyers and weavers are less creative than their competitors in Kokan and Bukhara.

Page 349-415 The Turkmen:

According to Mc Gahan and his Russian informants, part of six Turkmen tribes are settled in the Khiva Khanate around 1875:

- Imrali 2500 yurts
- Chodor 3500 yurts
- Karardashli 2000 yurts
- Kara Jigledi 1500 yurts
- Alieli Igoklen 1500 yurts
- Yomud 11000 yurts

In all about 110 000 souls. These figures, as usual, differ from those of other contemporaneous visitors and, as usual too, tribes are missing in this list (the Ata for example) while others are new entries. Apart from the quality of the sources which surely is a variable, we must also understand that counting very mobile people who don't even understand the concept of frontiers is no piece of cake and that each tribe is also divided in sub-tribes.

« .. the state does not exist among Turcomans... Their head men have a kind of nominal authority to settle disputes, but they have no power to enforce decisions....and yet they have such well-defined notions of right

and wrong as between themselves, and public opinion is so strong in enforcing these notions that there are rarely dissensions or quarrels amongst them.....»

« ...the Khan of Khiva has never been able to exert any control over the Turcomans inhabiting his dominions, ... the reverse is nearer the truth.... ».

« ...They are always ready to fight for the Khan, however- when not fighting against him. It is on them he principally relies for his soldiers.... »;

When the Khan tries to subdue the Turkmen and fields his regulars against them , « ...the Turcomans enjoy the thing immensely and this is for them a kind of holiday, ... ».

The whole thing comes to nothing , the Khan makes with the Turkmen yet another treaty which changes their relations in nothing and marches back in triumph to his capital while the Turkmen resume their ordinary occupations.

(Note: Perhaps a bit unfair: A couple of strong Khans did manage to impose their will, for a short time, upon « their » Turkmen. One of them even expelled definitely 3 large and annoying tribes out of Khoresm (The Salors, Saryks and Ersaris), even though he had to buy the Yomuds' and Chodors' help to succeed. Others managed to cajole Turkmen into paying some taxes for a while or moved forcefully tribes to new abodes where they would be easier to control).

« ... Everything considered, however, the Khan had more reason to be satisfied with the turkomans than otherwise. In spite of these little misunderstandings, they were always faithful to him.. ».

(Note: They surely were a great source of revenues for the Khan, even when they refused to pay taxes, since they were by far the main providers of slaves to this heavily slave-dependent state)

Von Kaufmann's decision to ask an exorbitant war indemnity (41 000 £!) from the Yomud, to exige its payment in cash within two weeks and then to attack them without even waiting for the end of this delay, is severely criticized even by some of his own officers.

Mac Gahan thinks that this decision is not only morally wrong, but is also a political error. He supposes that the von Kaufmann does not trust the Turkmen to accept sincerely the Russian Peace and that he wants to give them an unforgettable lesson, at the same time pleasing the Khan and his Uzbek ruling class, who do fear their unruly nominal subjects.

(Note: Other critics suggest that he wanted to please his officers by giving them the opportunity of obtaining promotions, medals and glory in combat).

Whatever von Kaufmann's reasons, his decision nearly leads to a defeat of the column he sends against the Yomud, who again fight bravely, cleverly using the superiority of their horses. They even come close to overrun the Russian camp.

Once the Yomud counter attack is broken, von Kaufmann orders to give to the flying warriors no quarter. In the hot pursuit whatever has any value is pillaged, including many carpets.

Page 412-413 : The Turkmen tribes who had chosen not to get involved in the war against the Russians must nevertheless pay a heavy penalty in Khivan silver coins, but especially in horses, camels, rugs and their wives' silver jewels.

« ...The *(other Turkmen's-)* carpets, too, were very much in demand, and sold readily, in spite of the high prices demanded for them and of the fact that hundreds had been looted in the campaign against the Yomuds. A carpet, four yards long by two wide, brought £ 4 to £ 8. A curious feature of the sale was, that although the Turkomans must have been hard-pressed for money to pay the indemnity, they could not be induced to lower their prices a single kopeck. They simply named their price and you might take the article or leave it, as you pleased. The carpets are made by the women and will compare favorably with the best carpets made anywhere. Each family has a different pattern, which is handed down from generation to generation as an heirloom, without undergoing the slightest change. The colors are principally red and white *(sic)* interspersed with small patches of green and brown and are really very pretty, as well as durable...»

«... The principal part of the war indemnity was paid, strange as it may seem, by the women. Every Turkoman woman possesses a great number of ornaments, such as bracelets, necklaces, buttons and head-dresses, in solid silver. In fact the principal wealth of the Turkomans, apart from horses, seems to consist in these silver ornaments....., the ornaments were all of purest silver, of very rude workmanship and usually very massive.....sometimes traces with gold and always set with cornelians....»