TURKESTAN

THE terms “ Turkestan ” and “ Central Asia” are often used indiscriminately to describe the whole of the immense territory to the east of the Caspian, comprised between Siberia on the north and Khorasan (Persia), Afghanistan, and Tibet on the south, or to designate separate, sometimes arbitrarily determined, parts of the same region. In the beginning of the 19th century the whole of the territory just named, with its great variety of altitudes, climate, inhabitants—these last differing as much in their history as in their present characteristics— was comprised under the vague denomination of High Tartary, or High or Interior Asia. After the appearance of Humboldt’s first draft of *Asie Centrale* in 1831, the term “ Central Asia ” came into favour. But Humboldt’s limits of Central Asia were too mathematical (from 39½° to 49½° N. lat.), and were further unsatisfactory because influenced by his erroneous conception of the mountains of Central Asia, which he supposed to run either along parallels or along meridians. Richthofen made an attempt to limit the sense of the term, proposing to apply it only to that region—embracing the Tarim drainage area and the Gobi —which has no outlet either towards the ocean or to the Sea of Aral and Lake Balkash (Balkhash), and which constitutes the Hang-hai of the Chinese and the supposed bed of the Tertiary Asiatic Mediterranean. But this ter­minology, besides the drawback of including within Central Asia the steppes of the Gobi as far east as Transbaikalia and the Great Khingan, notwithstanding the broad differ­ences by which they are distinguished from the drainage area of the Tarim, was open to another objection, which has been pointed out in Μ. Mushketoff's *Turkestan.* It excluded from Central Asia Turkestan proper, which never­theless has had the same recent geological history as the Tarim region, and therefore has so many features in com­mon with it as regards soil, climate, flora, fauna, popula­tion, and even civil history. On the other hand, if Central or Interior Asia were to include West Turkestan, and its limits to be determined by those of the drainage-areas which have no outlet to the ocean, the basins of the Volga and Ural,—that is, territories purely European in charac­ter,—would have to be comprised under the same denomi­nation. The fact is that in Asia, as so often elsewhere, hydrographical considerations alone furnish no sound basis for geographical delimitations, and that these last must result from a complicated variety of considerations, chiefly orographical, inasmuch as orographical are indicative of other physical characters, such as geology, climate, flora, fauna, and so on. Such were the views of Ritter and Hum­boldt, and we are now brought back to their conceptions, but corrected into accordance with improved knowledge of the Asiatic continent. The name Central Asia can still be used with great advantage to designate that immense por­tion of the continent to the east of the Caspian and the Ust-Urt plateau which is limited on the north by the im­portant climatic and geo-botanic boundary of the Irtish and Aral water-parting and the Great or Ektagh Altai, on the east by the eastern Gobi, and on the south by the northern border of the Khor plateau (Aɫtyn-Tagh and Kuen-Lun), the Hindu-Kush, and the Kopet-Dagh. Ex­tensive as it is, this territory has its own climatic and geo- botanic features ; it forms a distinct part of the continent, when the orography of Asia is broadly viewed ; and its inhabitants have a number of common characteristics re­sulting directly from the physical features of the territory. But this immense area must be subdivided ; and its sub­divisions become apparent as soon as the orographical features are grasped.

Two great plateaus constitute the two backbones, as it were, of the orographical structure of Asia,—that of east­ern Asia, an immense triangle stretching north-eastwards, having the Himalayas for its base and the peninsula of the Tchuktchis for its apex ; and that of western Asia, which extends at right angles to the above, from the lower Indus to the Black Sea. The Hindu-Kush connects these two massive swellings, both continents of the oldest forma­tion in Asia. Both are fringed on their northern edges by lofty chains of mountains. The Tian-Shan, the Altai, the Sayan, and the Vitim Mountains rise in a long succes­sion on the borders of the former, while a series of chains, which might be described under the general name of Kopet-Dagh, continued into the Transcaucasian chains, rise on the north-eastern edge of the western plateau.

An immense trapezoidal depression occupies the angle on the west where the great plateaus meet, and this de­pression is West Turkestan. Its south-eastern limits are the Hindu-Kush and the Tian-Shan ; on its south-western edge it has the Iranian plateau ; and its north-west and north-east boundaries correspond with the edge of the Ust- Urt and the Irtish and Aral water-parting, which separates it from Siberia. The trapezium is 1100 miles long from south-west to north-east, and 900 miles wide from south­east to north-west. It thus includes, not only the depres­sion at the junction of the two plateaus, but also the girdle of alpine tracts which fringes them, and in whose deep and sheltered valleys the Turkish and partly Iranian popu­lation of Turkestan find a fertile soil and plenty of water for their fields, while their herds graze on the rich alpine meadows in the very heart of the Tian-Shan. Not oro- graphically only but also in respect of its recent geological past, its climate, flora, fauna, and inhabitants, this region forms a geographical domain by itself, quite distinct from the steppes of south-eastern Russia, the prairies of Siberia, and the two great plateaus by which it is inclosed ; and, although it is easily subdivided into two parts—the dry lowlands of the Transcaspian depression and the plains and highlands of Turkestan proper—it presents one geo­graphical whole when contrasted with the surrounding regions. Some doubt may arise as to the propriety of including in it the plateau of Pamir ; but its flora and fauna are so closely connected with those of the Tian-Shan that, although better treated as a separate sub-region, like the Transcaspian Turcoman steppes, it cannot be separated from the above. For the orographer, the “Roof of the World ” is merely a succession of the wide *syrts* or alpine plateaus that are characteristic of the Tian-Shan. Most of this territory has within recent years been annexed to the Russian empire. Bokhara, with its vassal khanates in the gorges of the Pamir slopes, and Khiva, although they are still described as independent, are in reality rapidly becoming dependencies of Russia, and the railway from the Caspian, which is about to connect Merv with Samar­kand, will complete the annexation of Bokhara. West Turkestan, therefore, is often called Russian Turkestan, as distinguished from Chinese or East Turkestan.

This second great region of Central Asia also has well- defined limits. A glance at any recent map shows that there is in the great eastern plateau a depression bordered by the deep slopes of the Pamir (Humboldt’s Bolor) on the W., the border-ridges of Tibet (Kuen-Lun and Aɫtyn- Tagh) on the S., the eastern Tian-Shan on the N., and the western Gobi on the E.@@1 Although we call it a depression,

@@@1 In the map (issued October 1887) embodying the results of Prje- valsky’s fourth journey, East Turkestan is plainly demarcated from the Gobi. This last falls by a steep slope towards the Tarim depression,