



DRAWN BY HENRY SANDHAM.

ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

GEORGE KENNAN.

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# SIBERIA AND THE EXILE SYSTEM



BY GEORGE KENNAN

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## PREFACE

THE idea of exploring some of the less known parts of Siberia, and of making, in connection with such exploration, a careful study of the exile system, first took definite form in my mind in the year 1879. From such observations as I had been able to make during a residence of two and a half years in the country, and a subsequent journey of five thousand miles overland to St. Petersburg, it seemed to me that Siberia offered to a competent investigator an extremely interesting and promising field of research. To the Russians, who had possessed it in whole or in part for nearly three centuries, it was, of course, comparatively familiar ground; but to the average American, at that time, it was almost as much a *terra incognita* as central Africa or Thibet. In 1881 the assassination of Alexander II., and the exile of a large number of Russian revolutionists to the mines of the Trans-Baikál, increased my interest in Siberia and intensified my desire not only to study the exile system on the ground, but to investigate the Russian revolutionary movement in the only part of the empire where I thought such an investigation could successfully be made,—namely, in the region to which the revolutionists themselves had been banished. It seemed to me a hopeless task to look for nihilists in the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, or to seek there an explanation of the political events and the social phenomena that interested me. Most of the leading actors in the revolutionary drama of 1878-79 were already in Siberia; and if the imperial police could not discover the few who still remained at large in European Russia, it was not at all likely that I could. In Siberia, however, communication with exiled nihilists might perhaps be practicable; and there, if anywhere, was to be obtained the information that I desired.

Circumstances, and the want of time and means for such an extended journey as I wished to make, prevented me from taking any definite steps in the matter until the summer of 1884, when the editor of *The Century Magazine* became interested in my plans, and proposed to me that I should go to Siberia for that periodical and give to it the results of my work. I thereupon made a preliminary excursion to St. Petersburg and Moscow for the purpose of collecting material and ascertaining whether or not obstacles were likely to be thrown in my way by the Russian Government. I returned in October, fully satisfied that my scheme was a practicable one; that there was really nothing in Siberia which needed concealment; and that my literary record—so far as I had made a record—was such as to predispose the Russian Government in my favor, and to secure for me all the facilities that a friendly investigator might reasonably expect.

The opinions which I held at that time with regard to the Siberian exile system and the treatment of political offenders by the Russian Government were set forth fully and frankly in an address that I delivered before the American Geographical Society of New York, in 1882, and in the newspaper controversy to which that address gave rise. I then believed that the Russian Government and the exile system had been greatly misrepresented by such writers as Stépniak and Prince Kropótkin; that Siberia was not so terrible a country as Americans had always supposed it to be; and that the descriptions of Siberian mines and prisons in the just-published book of the Rev. Henry Lansdell were probably truthful and accurate. I also believed, although I did not say, that the nihilists, terrorists, and political malcontents generally, who had so long kept Russia in a state of alarm and apprehension, were unreasonable and wrong-headed fanatics of the anarchistic type with which we in the United States had become so familiar. In short, all my prepossessions were favorable to the Russian Government and unfavorable to the Russian revolutionists. I lay stress upon this fact, not because my opinions at that time had intrinsically any particular weight or importance, but because a just estimate of the results of