Chapter 2

Persian Restoration
(1724–1735)

Whether Tahmasp liked it or not, ratification or no ratification, Peter was ready to annex the territories ceded to him in the Treaty of St. Petersbourg, especially now that the Ottoman sultan had recognized Peter’s title to them. On December 11, 1724, Admiral Matiushkin, with 300 men, landed at Anzali and proceeded toward Rasht. The chief of Gasgar, with 20,000 men, lay in waiting, vastly outnumbering the Russian force, which consisted of 6 battalions, 500 horsemen, and a few squads of Armenians, Georgians, and Cossacks from the Don region. Tahmasp himself was holed up in Farahabad, a coastal town some 16 miles north-northeast of Sari, the seat of Mazandaran, situated on the Bay of Gorgan at the seaward base of the Miyankaleh Peninsula. Matiushkin sent an emissary to ask Tahmasp to order the Persian forces to stand down. Tahmasp refused.

The Armenian and Persian traders tipped off the Russians about the impending Persian assault, so when the Persians attacked the Russians repelled them with ease. Dispersed, the Persians returned three days later and were again repelled, with the Russians this time giving chase for some five miles. In the next three months, week after week, the Persians would repeat this attack and retreat routinely, often taking refuge in the forest, which the Russians now began to cut down. In one of these skirmishes, the Russians faced the chief of Astara and his three detachments of foot soldiers and horsemen on the banks of the Piri River. Many Persians drowned in the process and many more took flight.1

Peter died on February 8, 1725, and was succeeded by his second wife, Empress Catherine I. During her reign, which was conducted in most part by a regency council, the Russians placed greater focus on European affairs. In June 1725, Matiushkin left Rasht, leaving behind the Lieutenant-General Vasili V. Levashev in charge of building a fort at Anzali and renaming the place Catherinople; the building was commenced, but a short while later it fell to ruin.2

In 1725, Mahmud, whose brutality had split even the loyalty of the Afghan ranks, was removed from power and replaced by his nephew, Ashraf. In 1726, Ashraf stood up to the Russians at Darband and also scored a major victory against the Ottoman Turks, who had been advancing on Isfahan. Yet, Ashraf failed to keep the allegiance of Kandahar, the main source of Afghan recruits for his armies.
Meanwhile, an Afsharid Turkmen named Nader, from the northeastern Persian province of Khorasan, had joined forces with Tahmasp. In the name of the Safavid crown, in 1727 Nader conquered Mashad, the seat of the province, and then took the Afghan city of Herat. Tahmasp rewarded him with the rank of commander-in-chief and the honorific title of Tahmaspqoli, meaning “Tahmasp’s slave.”

In Russia, Catherine I died on May 17, 1727, and was succeeded by Peter’s grandson, Peter II, an eleven-year-old, in whose reign, in 1728, the Russian capital was moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow. The Russians wished to buy either time or peace in the Caucasus. Ashraf, too, could use a cessation in hostilities, especially in view of Nader’s successes and Ashraf’s own dwindling source of man power. On February, 13, 1729, Vasili Levashev, “commander in chief of the Russian army in Gilan and governor general of the provinces situated on the shores of the Caspian Sea,” and Sepahsalar Mohammad-Saeed Khan, representing Ashraf, signed a treaty of peace and friendship, known also as the Treaty of Rasht.

In Article 2 of the treaty, Russia ceded back to Persia “the provinces of Astarabad and Mazandaran, situated in the proximity of the Caspian Sea, on the condition that these provinces in no manner be given to another power, in which event said provinces, with their dependencies, would return and revert in perpetuity to the dominion of Russia.” This left in Russian hands the province of Gilan. In Article 3, Ashraf affirmed and recognized Russia’s title to the territories conquered by Russia in the area south of Darband down to the Aras River.

The Treaty of Rasht made no reference to any part of “the length of the Caspian Sea” being ceded back to Persia. Article 8, however, recognized the right of each party’s subjects and inhabitants to trade “by land or by water,” as they had before the disputes between the two countries. It is not clear what the term “water” may have referred to; one could surmise the term included rivers as well as the Caspian Sea.

Russia had not occupied Mazandaran and Astarabad in 1722–1723 and so by ceding the two provinces back to Persia in 1729 it was relinquishing territory that it had acquired only by virtue of the Treaty of St. Petersburg. In accepting the two provinces from Russia, Ashraf therefore was impliedly recognizing the validity of the Treaty of St. Petersburg, which had conferred title to Russia. That admission, as tacit as it was, also implied that at the time of the Treaty of St. Petersburg, Tahmasp would have had to have the legal capacity to cede the two provinces.

In ceding Mazandaran and Astarabad to Ashraf, the Russians in effect were inviting Ashraf and Tahmasp to take on each other. In October 1729, Nader attacked and defeated Ashraf’s forces at Damghan, a city and region south of Gorgan that had been laid to waste by the Afghan invaders earlier in 1723. Ashraf died while retreating. In 1730, the Persians liberated Isfahan from the Afghans. In the next year, Nader moved again against Herat but this time the Afghans routed his forces; he himself barely escaped with his life.

In the course of one of Nader’s campaigns in 1729–1730, Nader sent word to Levashev ordering him to evacuate Persia; the Russian government responded by sending an envoy to Mashad in order to negotiate with him over Gilan. The envoy arrived and for a long time Nader refused him an audience, making the envoy accompany his campaign. One day, fresh from a victory, with his hands and clothes reeking with blood, Nader summoned the envoy and let him know that he would never surrender Gilan.

On January 29, 1730, Peter II of Russia died of smallpox, just one day before his wedding ceremony, and was succeeded by Anna Ivanova (1730–1740), Peter the Great’s