Willard Sunderland


The enigmatic figure Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921) is known mostly for what sets him apart from other White commanders in the Russian Civil War. He led his troops across the border to conquer the Mongolian capital, Urga (modern Ulaanbaatar); he spoke of resurrecting Genghis Khan’s empire in Central Asia and restoring the monarchies in Russia and China; and he wore a traditional Mongolian cloak called a _deel_, to which he affixed his tsarist medals and epaulets. Yet, for all their eccentricities, important elements of his life ground him firmly in the experience of Russian empire in the first decades of the twentieth century. Willard Sunderland’s _The Baron’s Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution_ explores Ungern’s tale not as an aberration to Russian imperial rule, but as in many ways its essence. Using a range of sources in several languages, Sunderland paints Ungern as an imperial cosmopolitan whose life and career spanned the Eurasian continent and crossed myriad social, political, and ethnic borders. As a Baltic German serving a Russian government in Central Asia, his life mirrored the overlapping and interconnected patchwork of policies and peoples that held the empire together and, eventually, helped it come apart (p. 7).

For the most of his life, Ungern left a scant paper trail, making it difficult to construct a cohesive image of his thoughts and motivations. Sunderland uses this to his advantage and constructs a vivid microhistory that uses the Baron to explore the nature of the old regime and its disintegration during the Great War, Revolution, and Civil War. The Russian Empire sustained itself and managed its multi-ethnic subjects by alternating between policies of flexibility and rigidity, coercion and accommodation. The tsars did not aspire to transform the empire into a Russian nation-state and their subjects on the peripheries might operate with considerable autonomy if they fulfilled their responsibilities to St. Petersburg. Ungern lived in the intermediate spaces this system engendered. He crossed numerous real and imaginary borders and inhabited various identities, all in service to the larger monarchical, tsarist ideal. This model persisted for centuries, but the unprecedented strain of the Great War and the overthrow of the tsar in 1917 profoundly upset its balance. Yet, for all the ways the tsar’s fall shattered old imperial bonds, White and Red forces could reinvigorate crucial elements of this system as they struggled to reassert central authority. As Sunderland argues, Ungern’s misadventures and idiosyncratic choices in the Baikal region in 1920 and 1921 were part of a larger competition “to secure multiethnic and transborder allegiances and then create new states and communities”
from the tatters of the tsarist state (p. 231). In the end, his Bolshevik adversaries won this contest because they more ably exploited these borderlands and their ambiguities.

*The Baron's Cloak* begins with Ungern's birth in Austria and early migration to the Russian governorate of Estland (modern Estonia). European aristocrats were inherently cosmopolitan, having definite roots but speaking numerous languages and regularly traversing European borders for business and pleasure. Though Baltic Germans held a privileged place among the empire's ethnicities, by this time, the regime had begun “Russification” policies aimed at more fully incorporating its various peoples into the tsarist fold. At gymnasium in Reval (Tallinn), and later Paul 1 Military Academy in St. Petersburg, Ungern joined a group of mostly aristocratic students from across the empire's heartland and western reaches. Despite enforcing the Russian language and tsarist loyalties in these schools, the idea was not to erase the diverse identities of these students. Managing the empire entailed crisscrossing internal borders and navigating the in-between spaces. The Imperial government needed cosmopolitan elites like Ungern that could undertake this task.

Sunderland then follows the Baron to the Far East for his brief service in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and then his return to the region upon his graduation from military school in 1908. By choosing a position with the Trans-Baikal Cossack Host, Ungern now took part in an imperial project that sought to Russify the other end of the empire. Throughout the nineteenth century, the empire had created various Cossack hosts along southern Siberia as frontier defense forces and advanced guards for Russian settlement. Stationed on the eastern side of Lake Baikal, he would have become accustomed to a setting where the tsar's servants intermarried with Buryat and Tungus populations and interlaced their language with local words. At the same time, however, he would have also been exposed to the anti-Chinese and anti-Jewish currents among tsarist authorities in the region that led to mass deportations and several pogroms in the 1900s and 1910s.

The second half of the book focuses on the armed conflicts that dominated the last seven years of the Baron's life. He fought with distinction on the Eastern Front during the Great War, but earned a court martial and stint in the stockade for a drunken incident at a hotel near the Carpathian front. After the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, he returned to Central Asia and served as a commander for Cossack ataman Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov's White forces based in Chita. The Baron now donned the deel and led a corps of Cossacks, Buryats, Mongols, and perhaps sixteen or so other ethnicities, to secure the Trans-Baikal sections of the Trans-Siberian Railway from various Bolshevik and other local forces. Here, Sunderland draws an interesting, and often overlooked,