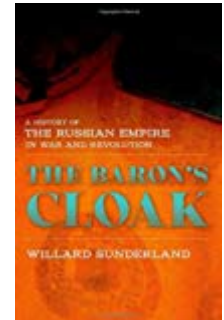


Willard Sunderland. *The Baron's Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. xiv + 344 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5270-3.



Reviewed by Ian Lanzillotti

Published on H-War (November, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Willard Sunderland's *The Baron's Cloak* uses the cosmopolitan life of the Baltic German baron, Roman Ungern-Sternberg, to tell a larger story of late imperial and revolutionary Russia's multiethnic and multi-confessional empire. This important work is more microhistory than biography because the actions, decisions, and interiority of the historical figure around which Sunderland's book is structured take a backseat to the era's larger imperial, trans-imperial, national, and transnational processes. The titular cloak is the Mongolian *deel* stitched with Russian military insignia that Ungern wore in 1920 and 1921 as the fiercely anti-Semitic and anti-Bolshevik commander of the Asiatic Division—a motley multiethnic splinter force of the White Army that established a short-lived military dictatorship in Mongolia with the hope of using it as a base for the conquest of the nascent Soviet state and the reestablishment of Russia's imperial order with a Romanov back at the helm. It is for this “Mongolian campaign,” with its aura of extremism and exoticism, that Ungern, dubbed “the mad baron of Mongolia,” has become a noto-

rious and legendary historical figure. Sunderland uses Ungern's *deel* as a metaphor for the patchwork of imperial cultures and places that influenced Ungern, and Ungern, in his turn, as a lens into the diversity of the empire and the cultural hybridity of its peoples.

In following Ungern's life trajectory—a progressively eastward, trans-imperial journey from its beginnings in the Austrian imperial city of Graz and Russia's Baltic province of Estland (present-day Estonia) to Mongolia and Siberia in the year of his execution by Bolshevik forces—Sunderland's “goal [is] to use Ungern's life to offer a tableau of the Russian Empire” (p. 229). The book's eleven chapters are organized around the key sites of Ungern's life. Each of these sites, with their distinct ethno-social hierarchies and mixes of peoples, reveals an important part of the story of the twilight years of a Russian Empire struggling to maintain its cohesion and very existence as it is gripped by processes of modernization and nationalism. The consequences of these processes—Russification, war, and revolution—link these

geographically and contextually disparate stories together. A few examples can serve to illustrate Sunderland's approach. In chapter 2, where Ungern's childhood takes us to Russia's Baltic province of Estland, Sunderland explores the ethnically stratified social structure of the region and how Russificatory policies were unsettling the imperial status quo by diminishing the position of the once-dominant German nobility (to which Ungern's family belonged) within it. Chapter 4 follows Ungern on a circuitous path to the Imperial College of Naval Cadets in the empire's cosmopolitan capital, the Manchurian front of the Russo-Japanese War, and back to St. Petersburg. This phase in Ungern's life highlights the role that Russia's military academies played in advancing the cause of Russification while at the same time forging transnational imperial identities and dynastic loyalty among an ethnically diverse officer corps. Sunderland explains that "rather than losing or rejecting his former identity, [Ungern] simply continued adopting another, becoming, in effect, a cross-cultural hybrid with attachments to both cultures" (p. 61). By following Ungern to the Far East during the Russo-Japanese War, Sunderland explores geopolitical competition between empires, the Russian colonization of "Asiatic Russia," and the role of the Transiberian railway in these processes. In chapter 5, we find Ungern stationed along the Argun River in eastern Siberia beginning his career as an officer with the Trans-Baikal Cossacks. Here Sunderland offers an ethnography of the Trans-Baikal and uses the region as a window on the multicultural world of that quintessential borderland community—the Cossacks.

In following Ungern's trajectory, Sunderland demonstrates the diversity of the lived experience of empire and the flexibility of tsarist policies in response to a dizzying array of unique imperial situations. In contextualizing Ungern's service with the Trans-Baikal Host, where he "found himself in a different environment of Russification than those that he had known in Estland or St. Petersburg," Sunderland highlights "the fact that ev-

ery region of the empire—even every local or institutional setting—was defined by its own mix of ethnicity, history, and geography, which in turn affected the way in which Russian authorities interpreted their interest" (p. 76). Sunderland's study of Ungern's journey, however, also brings pan-imperial trends into focus (for example, Russification was everywhere, just in different forms) and, more important, demonstrates just how integrated and interconnected Russia's multiethnic and multi-confessional empire was. The stops on Ungern's journey become the pieces of a puzzle of empire, and Sunderland's contribution is to demonstrate how "the various parts ... fit together" (p. 6). He uses "the knots of connection [across the empire] to explain how the empire 'worked'" (p. 10).

In using Ungern to explain the functioning and unraveling of Russia as a multiethnic, dynastic empire, Sunderland brings his previous project on Russia's "people of empire" to fruition.^[1] Ungern was a man of empire par excellence. It was people like Ungern who made the empire "work" in the era before nationalism. He was a loyal servant to the dynastic state and its ideal of a vertically segmented society. He did not represent or reflect a particular national culture and he was fundamentally anti-national. He was not rooted to a specific part of the empire; rather, he developed connections to people, places, and cultures across Russia's diverse lands. But the world that created imperial people like Ungern was going through a rapid transformation, of which the cataclysms of war and revolution were the last phases, and Ungern was incapable of changing with the times: "Ungern was operating within a very old system of political values, one that even the conservative tsarist empire had started to question as it cut its complicated imperial path through the national age" (p. 224). The Bolsheviks, though also "imperial people with diverse ethnic backgrounds and long-standing habits of mobility and cross-cultural combination," Sunderland notes, "appreciated the power of the 'national

question' and used it to their advantage" by touting their support for national self-determination (pp. 221, 223). To the bitter end, which came at the hands of the Soviet Cheka, "the link that mattered most [to Ungern] was the one between the emperor and his servitors, which was not a bond of nationality but of dynastic allegiance" (p. 223). Militarily, both Ungern and his Red opponents operated with a mercilessness learned through years of total war and used the forces of a shattering frontier zone to their advantage. The key difference between the two was that the Bolsheviks also had a political program and an understanding of the problems of governing that were well suited to the twentieth century. The Bolsheviks had "organized party cells, implemented programs, indoctrinated an army, and adopted a state-centered language of territorial sovereignty, class interests, and national liberation, all of which allowed them to impose themselves on the frontier in a way that Ungern never could" (p. 226).

The most innovative and engaging studies of Russia as a multiethnic empire to be published over the last several years have been biographic microhistories.[2] If this is indicative of a trend, it is indeed a welcome one because these studies provide readers with a sense of the lived experience and the interconnectedness of Russia's Empire in a way that traditional monographs are unable to do. For this reason and for its overall accessibility, *The Baron's Cloak* is an excellent point of entry for nonspecialists looking to understand the dynamics of late imperial and revolutionary Russia as a multiethnic and multi-confessional empire. This book is also ideally suited for a general audience, because, in addition to providing readers with an understanding of the central issues of diversity in a dynastic empire in the age of nationalism (cultural mixing, hybrid identities, official nationalism, and Russification), Sunderland's work also offers broad overviews of other key historical processes along the way: modernization; geopolitics; and, of course, the dynamics of war (the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, and

the Russian Civil War) and revolution (1905 and 1917). Indeed, one of the aspects of *The Baron's Cloak* that makes it so unique is that it highlights the centrality of the multiethnic empire to the big questions of late imperial and early Soviet history. In this regard, *The Baron's Cloak* could arguably be used as a substitute for a portion of a textbook or, perhaps more appropriately, as an ideal supplementary text in tsarist and/or Soviet survey history courses. Sunderland writes in clear and exciting prose and he does not assume a large degree of prior knowledge on the part of his reader. That said, readers well versed in the literature on empire and nationalism in tsarist Russia will find this work illuminating, because, by following Ungern around his paths of empire, Sunderland ties together what scholars, at least implicitly, often treat as unrelated and disconnected.

Notes

[1]. Sunderland and Stephen Norris edited an illuminating volume of biographical sketches of Muscovite, imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet figures who reflect the cultural diversity and interconnectedness of Russia's enduring imperium. *Russia's People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

[2]. In addition to this book and Sunderland and Norris's *Russia's People of Empire*, Michael Khodarkovsky's excellent work on the Caucasus deserves mention here. See his *Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Ian Lanzillotti. Review of Sunderland, Willard. *The Baron's Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44285>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.