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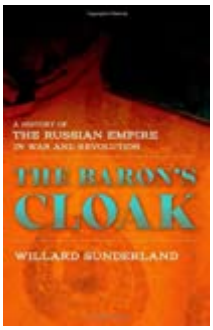

Willard Sunderland. *The Baron's Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. xiv + 344 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5270-3.

Reviewed by Ian Lanzillotti (The Ohio State University)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Willard Sunderlandâs *The Baronâs Cloak* uses the cosmopolitan life of the Baltic German baron, Roman Ungern-Sternberg, to tell a larger story of late imperial and revolutionary Russiaâs multiethnic and multiconfessional empire. This important work is more microhistory than biography because the actions, decisions, and interiority of the historical figure around which Sunderlandâs book is structured take a backseat to the eraâs 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 Divisionâa 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 Russiaâs imperial order with a Romanov back at the helm. It is for this âMongolian campaign,â with its aura of extremism and exoticism, that Ungern, dubbed âthe mad baron of Mongolia,â has become a notorious and legendary historical figure. Sunderland uses Ungernâs *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 Ungernâs life trajectoryâa progressively eastward, trans-imperial journey from its beginnings in the Austrian imperial city of Graz and Russiaâs Baltic province of Estland (present-day Estonia) to Mongolia and Siberia in the year of his execution by Bolshevik forcesâSunderlandâs âgoal [is] to use Ungernâs life to offer a tableau of the Russian Empireâ (p. 229). The bookâs eleven chapters are organized around the key sites of Ungernâs 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 processesâRussification, war, and revolutionâlink these geographically and contextually disparate stories together. A few examples can serve to illustrate Sunderlandâs approach. In chapter 2, where Ungernâs childhood takes us to Russiaâs 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 Ungernâs family belonged) within it. Chapter 4 follows

Ungern on a circuitous path to the Imperial College of Naval Cadets in the empireâs cosmopolitan capital, the Manchurian front of the Russo-Japanese War, and back to St. Petersburg. This phase in Ungernâs life highlights the role that Russiaâs 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 ârather than losing or rejecting his former identity, [Ungern] simply continued adopting another, becoming, in effect, a cross-cultural hybrid with attachments to both culturesâ (p. 61). By following Ungern to the Far East during the Russo-Japanese War, Sunderland explores geopolitical competition between empires, the Russian colonization of âAsiatic Russia,â 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 communityâthe Cossacks.

In following Ungernâs 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 Ungernâs service with the Trans-Baikal Host, where he âfound himself in a different environment of Russification than those that he had known in Estland or St. Petersburg,â Sunderland highlights âthe fact that every region of the empireâeven every local or institutional settingâwas defined by its own mix of ethnicity, history, and geography, which in turn affected the way in which Russian authorities interpreted their interestâ (p. 76). Sunderlandâs study of Ungernâs 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 Russiaâs multiethnic and multi-confessional empire was. The stops on Ungernâs journey become the pieces of a puzzle of empire, and Sunderlandâs contribution is to demonstrate how âthe various parts … fit togetherâ (p. 6). He uses âthe knots of connection [across the empire] to explain how the empire âworkedââ (p. 10).

In using Ungern to explain the functioning and unraveling of Russia as a multiethnic, dynastic empire, Sunderland brings his previous project on Russiaâs âpeople of empireâ to fruition.[1] Ungern was a man of empire par excellence. It was people like Ungern who made the empire âworkâ 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 Russiaâs 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: âUngern 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 ageâ (p. 224). The Bolsheviks, though also âimperial people with diverse ethnic backgrounds and long-standing habits of mobility and cross-cultural combination,â Sunderland notes, âappreciated the power of the ânational questionâ and used it to their advantageâ by touting their support for national self-determination (pp. 221, 223). To the bitter end, which came at the hands of the Soviet Cheka, âthe 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 allegianceâ (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 âorganized 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 couldâ (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 Russiaâs Empire in a way that traditional monographs are unable to do. For this reason and for its overall accessibility, *The Baronâs 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), Sunderlandâs 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 Baronâs 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 Baronâs 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 Russiaâs enduring imperium. *Russiaâs People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

[2]. In addition to this book and Suderland and Norrisâs *Russiaâs People of Empire*, Michael Khodarkovskyâs 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).

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