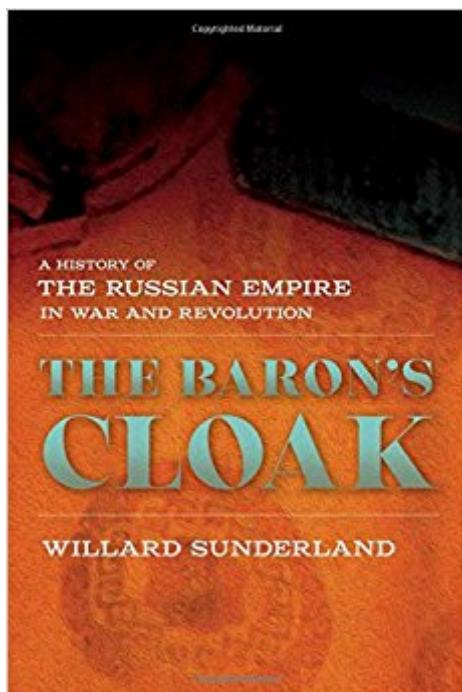


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# The Baron's Cloak: A History Of The Russian Empire In War And Revolution



## Synopsis

Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg (1885–1921) was a Baltic German aristocrat and tsarist military officer who fought against the Bolsheviks in Eastern Siberia during the Russian Civil War. From there he established himself as the de facto warlord of Outer Mongolia, the base for a fantastical plan to restore the Russian and Chinese empires, which then ended with his capture and execution by the Red Army as the war drew to a close. In *The Baron's Cloak*, Willard Sunderland tells the epic story of the Russian Empire's final decades through the arc of the Baron's life, which spanned the vast reaches of Eurasia. Tracking Ungern's movements, he transits through the Empire's multinational borderlands, where the country bumped up against three other doomed empires, the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Qing, and where the violence unleashed by war, revolution, and imperial collapse was particularly vicious. In compulsively readable prose that draws on wide-ranging research in multiple languages, Sunderland recreates Ungern's far-flung life and uses it to tell a compelling and original tale of imperial success and failure in a momentous time. Sunderland visited the many sites that shaped Ungern's experience, from Austria and Estonia to Mongolia and China, and these travels help give the book its arresting geographical feel. In the early chapters, where direct evidence of Ungern's activities is sparse, he evokes peoples and places as Ungern would have experienced them, carefully tracing the accumulation of influences that ultimately came together to propel the better documented, more notorious phase of his career. Recurring throughout Sunderland's magisterial account is a specific artifact: the Baron's cloak, an essential part of the cross-cultural uniform Ungern chose for himself by the time of his Mongolian campaign: an orangey-gold Mongolian kaftan embroidered in the Khalkha fashion yet outfitted with tsarist-style epaulettes on the shoulders. Like his cloak, Ungern was an imperial product. He lived across the Russian Empire, combined its contrasting cultures, fought its wars, and was molded by its greatest institutions and most volatile frontiers. By the time of his trial and execution mere months before the decree that created the USSR, he had become a profoundly contradictory figure, reflecting both the empire's potential as a multinational society and its ultimately irresolvable limitations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Baron's Cloak succeeds in drawing our gaze away from the metropolitan centres in which we conventionally chart the upheavals of the 'Russian Revolution' to a periphery that turns out to have been far from peripheral. The revolution was an intrinsically imperial affair - a vast, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state pulled apart by messy conflicts across fractured frontiers; a new one forged and contested by men and women with their own multilayered local, regional and imperial identities. Willard Sunderland's innovative analysis of the dynamics which both destroyed the Russian Empire and shaped its Soviet successor is a triumph of scholarship and

imagination." Daniel Beer, *Times Literary Supplement* (December 19, 2014) "This book is a genuine page-turner and a scrupulously researched microhistory, a finely stitched tapestry that captures well the loosely construed unity, diversity, and plural identities of Russia's borderlands of empire. . . . The book has lucid and elegant prose, and a deep sense of place. The Baron's Cloak is full of insight and logistical sophistication, and Sunderland proves equal to the task. The final result is a gripping Bildungsreise (educational journey) and a model text for how historians should interrogate sources, depict the back-stories of scenes, change course, reconstruct identities, and tentatively formulate new questions about world history."

Steven Seegel, *American Historical Review* (February 2015) "In this magnificent book, Willard Sunderland, Associate Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati, invites the reader to perceive the Russian Empire from a different perspective. Rather than surveying it from the vantage point of 'policies, structures, or ideologies, as historians usually do,' we should step into the shoes of imperial people and look for another set of truths. . . . The result is an engaging combination of micro-history, historical geography, and insightful travelogue."

Stephen N. Norris, *Journal of Historical Geography* (June 2015) "While Sunderland's new book is certainly the deeply researched microhistory that he claims it is, it is also more. The Baron's Cloak builds, and it offers an important new interpretation of key issues in the late imperial period from

colonialism and modernization to Russification and nationalism. . . . The Baron's Cloak is a delight to read, and Sunderland's ability to combine forceful argument with a careful historian's circumspection is admirable."  Samuel J. Hirst, *Ab Imperio* (January 2015) "This work is an imaginative kind of history in how it reveals the historian's craft, a sort of 'laying bare his technique,' as the Russian formalists who emerged from this same period would have expressed it. Sunderland not only paraphrases or translates from archival documents but he often traces how those documents got to the archive and what sorts of notes and marginalia he finds in them. He also reminds us how incomplete the archival record on his subject is, and he does a very conscientious job of finding alternative sources to help us better enter [his subject's] many intersecting and overlapping worlds. The Baron's Cloak is beautifully written and a wonderful contribution to borderlands history, to the history of empire and nation, and to the history of war, revolution, and civil war."  Mark Von Hagen, *Slavic Review* (Summer 2015) "[The Baron's Cloak] demonstrates just how important an understanding of the multinational and frontier aspects of the imperial state are to a comprehensive view of its last years, and perhaps even more importantly, to the transition from tsarist to Soviet empire. . . . Perhaps most significant is this work's contribution to our understanding of the process of imperial collapse through its analysis of the failure of Ungern's efforts in Mongolia, in particular his attempt to reunite the various nationalities of the Russian state and reinstate imperial rule by bringing them together under the banner of loyalty to the monarchy."  Laurie Stoff, *The Russian Review* (July 2015) "The Baron's Cloak can serve as an excellent introduction to the study of empire; it clearly describes the essential features of this now extinct political construction. Ungern's life history further demonstrates the devotion to the idea of empire that remained prevalent among non-Russian elites but can never be accurately quantified. As such, the book will be of great interest to Russian historians who have to wrestle with the longevity and sudden collapse of the tsarist regime."  William Pomeranz, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (August 2014) "A specialist on the Russian Empire and borderlands, the historian Willard Sunderland in *The Baron's Cloak* draws on his considerable talents as a storyteller to craft a fluidly written and engaging account of the twilight of the Russian Empire as it succumbed to the hard-hitting blows of war, revolution, and civil war."  Donald J. Raleigh, *Journal of Modern History* (March 2016) "The result is a splendidly readable microhistory that brings together much excellent recent work on the multiethnic, imperial history of Russia    a literature to which Sunderland has been a leading contributor    to show how    'the personal experience of empire has much to tell us about the bigger picture'    In sum, this is an exemplary and engaging study that newcomers to Russian history and the broader history of

empires will find accessible and interesting -- and that more seasoned readers will find enormously insightful. It deserves a very wide readership. — Mark A. Soderstrom, *World History Connected* (2016) "Rare is the book this creative, engaging, and written with such unpretentious grace. The baron of the title is Roman von Ungern-Sternberg. . . . After the Bolsheviks took power, Ungern-Sternberg attempted to establish an independent state in Mongolia -- a monarchy that he himself would rule. In 1921, that dream was crushed by the Red Army, which captured and executed the baron. Sunderland does a remarkable job of blending Ungern-Sternberg's life story with an exquisite portrait of the far-flung reaches of the Russian empire, producing an utterly absorbing tale of one man encountering historic change in almost incomprehensibly complex surroundings." — Robert Legvold, *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec. 2014) "Many scholars have analyzed the peculiar dynamics that make up the vast, diverse world of the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union, but few have produced works as engaging and insightful as Willard Sunderland's book, *The Baron's Cloak*. . . . Centered on one man, the Russian-German noble, Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg, Sunderland's work is a brilliant portrait of the Russian Empire and its collapse in the face of revolution and civil war. With eloquence and wit, *The Baron's Cloak* brings a complex historical epoch to life and provides a highly readable primer for anyone seeking to understand the Russian Empire and the legacies of imperial rule across Eurasia." — Mark Sokolsky, *Origins* (November 2014) "The Baron's Cloak is the best book I've read in a very long time. It is brilliantly conceived and crafted. Willard Sunderland's research and erudition are unrivaled, and his writing is fast-paced, accessible, and often poetic. Sunderland does a terrific job of reimagining the Russian empire, territory, and power; this book will set the standard for a long time to come." — Robert Crews, Stanford University, author of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* "Willard Sunderland's *The Baron's Cloak* is a wonderful and an important book. Beautifully written, with an abundance of photographs and maps, it tells one man's life story as a prism as way to explore the Russian empire at its twilight. Baron Roman Fedorovich Ungern-Sternberg was both a fascinating and appalling individual. (Imagine a character from a Dostoevsky novel transposed to the borderlands at the twilight of empire, in conditions war, revolution, ruin, and chaos.) Sunderland uses Ungern-Sternberg's life to illustrate the far-flung empire that made the life possible. His book unfolds almost cinematically across Eurasia: Graz, Austria; the Baltic Provinces; St. Petersburg; Manchuria; the Russian Far East; the killing fields of the First World War in Prussia, Galicia, Persia; climaxing with Ungern-Sternberg's doomed campaigns in Mongolia and Siberia. Sunderland is the first to understand Ungern-Sternberg as a

type, an imperial cosmopolitan. His book is compelling reading not only for Russian and Soviet historians but also for any reader who seeks to understand the full scope of the Great Warâ€”imperial apocalypse."â€”Peter Holquist, University of Pennsylvania, author of *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*

Willard Sunderland is Associate Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of *The Baron's Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution* and *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*, both from Cornell, and coeditor of *Russia's People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present* and *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History*.

This monograph is a microhistory that centers around the life of Baron Roman Nikolai Maximilian von Ungern-Sternberg, also known by the moniker of the "Mad Baron." Sunderland remarks that most historians take note of Ungern because of "the extremism and exoticism of the Mongolian campaign," and that both historians and contemporaries have portrayed Ungern as

"mad," dismissing him as a minor footnote in history (9). Sunderland differs by drawing original conclusions from anecdotes, historical research, and his own experience of the localities that were important to Ungern's story. As a result, Sunderland attempts to reposition the way we look at Ungern so that he can help us make sense of the complicated experience of the empire in a remarkable time (9). In short, it is the task of *The Baron's Cloak* to appropriate Ungern's life story in order to reveal the relationship between the center and the peripheries of Russia during the fin de siècle, World War I, and the Russian Civil War. At the center of *The Baron's Cloak* lies the argument that connections (or linkages) within the Russian Empire and between Russia and other states can serve to demonstrate how the Russian Empire functioned, fell apart, and was reconstructed by the Bolsheviks (10). Sunderland describes Imperial Russia as "a puzzle of accommodations made between the tsars and the different peoples of the realm, reflecting the alternating stages of the empire's history and its varied physical and cultural environments" (6). He also argues that Imperial Russia was able to exist for so long due to the balance of "violence and exploitation" and "recurring accommodations" between the center of the Russian Empire and its peripheries (230). Sunderland

reveals that one of the important connections of the empire came in the form of a multi-ethnic nobility, which, as a Russo-German, Ungern was able to embody. Yet, with the rise of nationalism and the ensuing programs of Russification, the “supranational ambiguity that had been a mainstay of the Russian Empire”<sup>128</sup> had success for centuries had weakened (128). This led to an exacerbation of “divisions within national and imperial communities,”<sup>129</sup> resulting with the demise of Russia, along with other multi-ethnic empires, during or at the end of World War I (128-29). As the empire crumbled around him, Ungern attempted to restore the old autocratic government by joining the Whites in the Russian Civil War, and by raging a campaign of destruction in Mongolia and Siberia. Unfortunately for Unger, the Bolshevik leaders were able to effectively reestablish many connections of the old empire, including material connections such as the trans-Siberian railway, and were effectively able to combat the Whites and capture Ungern, executing him shortly thereafter.

Where this book fails is in attempting to be both the history of a period, The Civil War, and the history of an individual. In attempting to be both it fails to be either. However, it remains an interesting book and if you’re interested in the Russian Civil War you will undoubtedly be interested in this small sideshow.

The author, a professor of Russian History at the University of Cincinnati, has written several books on the eastern periphery of Russia. This one follows the Russian participation in the First World War and the subsequent revolutionary period through the career of Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, a scion of an old German family in the Russian Baltic area. The baron was a bold and dashing man. The book is a highly interesting and enjoyable approach to the complex history of this era.

Thoroughly enjoyed this book and would recommend to anyone. Prof. Sunderland has an incredibly engaging writing style, and his story covers an incredibly wide swath of history over a vast expanse of geographies and time periods, while still finding space for a rigorous analysis of the sources he used and drawing useful and often surprising conclusions from his material.

This was a tour de force depicting the brutality of the Russian Revolution.

Solid history in a gripping story.

What little bit I have read so far is interesting.

Born to Austrian nobility, a soldier of the Russian empire, a Cossack, a megalomaniacal, murderous anti-revolutionary, Baron Roman Feodorovich von Ungern-Sternberg was a reflection of his age. The turning of the twentieth century through the First World War was a time of great flux and modernization, when empires tore apart at their seams, when millions were sacrificed on the crucible of ideas, when a single soldier could muster a small force and commandeer a nation. For Ungern, notorious for his cruelty, anti-Semitism, and ruthless leadership as a White commander during the Russian Civil War, that nation was Mongolia, and he (almost unwittingly, it seems) sought, in the final year of his life, to make it the vanguard of a new Asiatic power to counteract the scourge of Bolshevism. He failed in his ÂfÂ¢Â ªÂ“campaignÂfÂ¢Â ªÂ• to take Mongolia (which Sunderland shows to be far less intentional than has been ascribed), was captured and shot. Yet he also partially succeeded, in that Mongolia gained a semi-autonomy that lasted through the Soviet era. Unlike other accounts of Ungern, Sunderland does not give overmuch attention to this final year of his life, instead focusing on the broader sweep of events, on the full arc of UngernÂfÂ¢Â ªÂ„cs life from Austria to Estland, from Trans-Baikal to Mongolia. In part, this is because there is really very little to know about Ungern, but also because Sunderland wants to show how the multinational, ever-bored Ungern was an apt, if sociopathic, mirror of his times. The effort succeeds and this is a fine history of the era. As reviewed in Russian Life magazine

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