



# The Baron's Cloak: A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution

By Willard Sunderland

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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.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"*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 War's imperial apocalypse."?Peter Holquist, University of Pennsylvania, author of *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*

#### About the Author

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*

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