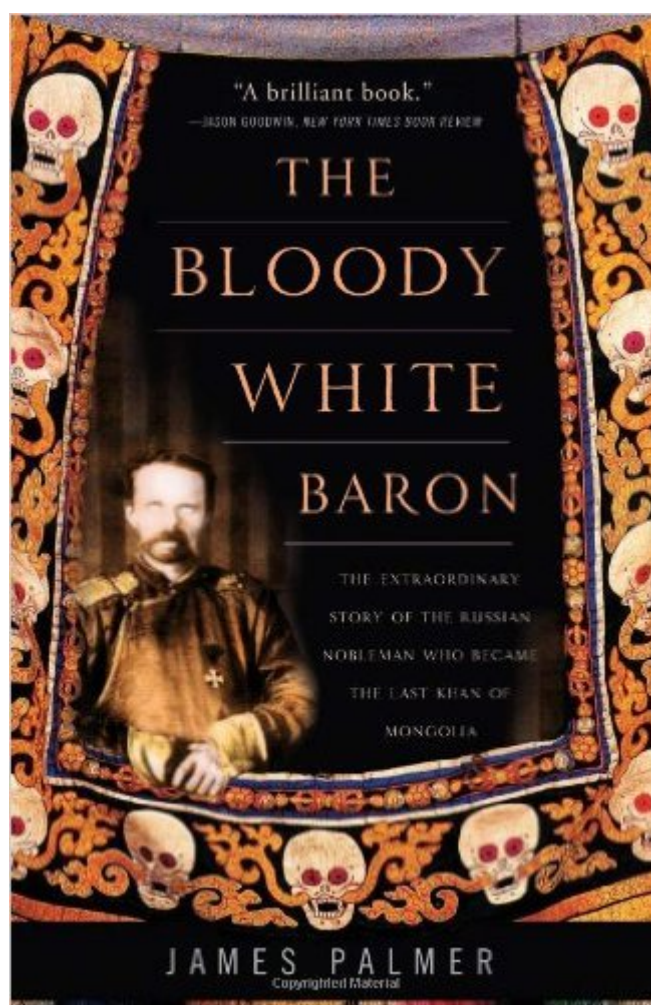


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The Bloody White Baron: The Extraordinary Story Of The Russian Nobleman Who Became The Last Khan Of Mongolia



Synopsis

In the history of the modern world, there have been few characters more sinister, sadistic, and deeply demented than Baron Ungern-Sternberg. An anti-Semitic fanatic whose penchant for Eastern mysticism and hatred of communists foreshadowed the Nazi scourge that would soon overtake Europe, Ungern-Sternberg conquered Mongolia in 1919 with a ragtag force of White Russians, Siberians, Japanese, and native Mongolians. In *The Bloody White Baron*, historian and travel writer James Palmer vividly re-creates Ungern-Sternberg's spiral into ever-darker obsessions, while also providing a rare look at the religion and culture of the unfortunate Mongolians he briefly ruled.

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Customer Reviews

The life of Baron Ungern-Sternberg was indeed a gruesome adventure of unbelievable proportions, therefore, it is difficult for any portrait of such an man to be dull. Palmer's account is fascinating, and he goes to great lengths to give readers sufficient background in the situation of the Far East in the early 1900s, as well as offering a glimpse into Mongolian culture, Buddhist spirituality, and Russian mysticism; all of which had a significant impact on the Baron's career. Unfortunately, Palmer's book is far from perfect. Given the fact that the Baron's rise to infamy in the Transbaikal and Mongolia was enabled by the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, one would think that Palmer would strive for accuracy when referring to the greater conflict which Ungern-Sternberg was a part of. Instead, the reader is informed that there were prominent officials in Admiral Kolchak's government in 1917 (p. 183), Baron Vrangel evacuated his men from the

Crimea in November of 1919 (p. 115), and one of Ungern-Sternberg's worst sadists, Colonel Sipailov, was present at the murders of the Irkutsk hostages on Lake Baikal on January 6, 1919 (p. 114). In reality, Kolchak's government was not formed until November of 1918, Baron Wrangel evacuated the Crimea in November of 1920, and the massacre on the icebreaker in Lake Baikal occurred in January of 1920, not 1919. Apparently, both the author and the editors could have benefited greatly from a basic history of the Russian Civil War which, not surprisingly, is missing in the book's bibliography. After detecting such errors on a subject I am familiar with sprinkled throughout the book, I naturally questioned how many other errors were present on events newer to me, such as Mongolian struggle for independence, which I might be unable to detect. The errors aside, Palmer's account is readable and covers a personality and events which are all but ignored by most modern histories. That is fortunate for Palmer, since a more carefully crafted account on Ungern-Sternberg could quite possibly displace his work in many libraries.

Baron Roman Ungern Von Sternberg is one of those peripheral characters who always gets brought up in passing: he's too colorful to overlook, but arguably too minor to warrant extensive coverage. He was name-dropped in Robert Edgerton's *Warriors of the Rising Sun*, Peter Hopkirk's *Setting the East Ablaze*, David Mitchell's *1919: Red Mirage* and Richard Lockett's *The White Generals*, to name just a few of the books I'd encountered him in. The Mad Baron was overdue for a full-length biography, and James Palmer brings him to vivid and grisly life. The Bloody Baron was a nobleman of German descent, who early on revealed a predilection for violence and sadism - and an interest in Eastern mysticism. He had a fairly successful military career, decorated for service in the Russo-Japanese War and World War I, and found himself on the White side of the Russian Civil War, fighting for the restoration of the Tsar. Already showing a penchant for violence, he was dispatched to Mongolia in the waning days of the conflict, converting to Buddhism, raising a rag-tag multi-national army and conquering Mongolia amidst much bloodshed. His disastrous administration and the encroachment of the Red Army only convinced Ungern to greater ambition - to try and recreate Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire and extirpate Jews and Bolsheviks. Palmer ably shows two salient points about Ungern: that he was very much a product of his time, and that he was a harbinger of things to come. As horrifying as Ungern's pogroms and atrocities were, in a sense, they were a logical (or illogical) extension of one of the cruellest wars in history. For all his appalling cruelty, Ungern was a piker compared to other leaders, Red and White, in more powerful positions. In fact, the Reds, in "liberating" Mongolia from Ungern, would commit far worse crimes than his short-lived regime. The primary appeal is not Ungern's atrocities, but his sheer weirdness: a

demented Russian nobleman with a personal religion. He has few redeeming features as such, but remains a gruesomely compelling figure throughout. What made Ungern unique and dangerous, however, was his ideology: a curious blend of anti-Semitism, Nietzschean superman rhetoric, vaguely-defined occult mysticism and absurd megalomania, he was a clear precursor of the Nazis, who indeed venerated Ungern as a heroic precursor to Hitler. Palmer does make the point that Ungern had no deep understanding of Buddhism per se, but he had enough appeal to garner him thousands of devoted followers, and the love of a nation (apparently, he's still worshipped by some Mongolians). And just twenty years later, the world would be driven to the verge of destruction by a frighteningly similar ideology. Palmer does a fine job introducing the reader to Mongolia in general, and in particular a branch of Buddhism that endorses violence and mayhem. This is a fascinating topic, largely swept under the rug in the West, where Buddhism is seen as a benign force. Palmer shows this is an incredibly patronizing and limited view: Ungern's crimes were unique mostly for their being perpetrated by a European. He does a slightly-lesser job of depicting Tsarist and Revolutionary Russia, which is perhaps forgivable since it's not his area of expertise. As a writer, Palmer provides fine prose, with vivid descriptions of towns, set pieces and military campaigns. He has a fascinating subject matter and cuts through the veils of myth and distortion to make Ungern a credible (if still horrific) character. His biggest failing is his attempts at psychohistory, telling us to "imagine" certain key scenes in Ungern's life. That sort of "insight" should be saved for a novelist, or at least someone better-qualified than Palmer. Despite some flaws, *The Bloody White Baron* is a fascinating - and frightening - book. Monsters always make for fascinating history, and the Mad Baron provides a particularly interesting case of how vicious and depraved humans can be.

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