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James Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron: The Extraordinary Story of the Russian Nobleman Who Became the Last Khan of Mongolia*. New York: Basic Books, 2009. Pp. xiii, 274. ISBN 978-0-465-01448-4.

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James Palmer has written a biography of a bizarre and terrifying man, Baron Roman Nikolai Maximilian von Ungern-Sternberg (1885–1921; hereafter “Ungern”), a minor nobleman of German ethnicity from Estonia, then part of the Russian Empire. An officer in the Russian army, Ungern joined the White forces after the October Revolution of 1917 and participated in the Civil War against the Red or Communist forces in the border area between Russia and Outer Mongolia. He became entangled in Outer Mongolia’s quest for independence from China, which had already taken many twists and turns since the Chinese revolution of 1911. In 1921, Ungern’s ragtag army successfully ousted the Chinese from Mongolia and briefly installed a Buddhist theocracy under his control; he was in turn captured by opposing Russian communist forces and executed later that year. This colorfully written biography of a little known man fills a void in the literature on Mongolia in the early twentieth century.

Palmer is a historian and travel writer with extensive knowledge of Mongolia and Central Asia. He succeeds in bringing his subject to life, a formidable task because Ungern kept few records and some of those have been destroyed. Although he has mined the recently opened archives of Estonia, Mongolia, and Russia, he does not use Chinese sources on China’s own role in Mongolia, an omission that results in inaccuracies. For example, Palmer states that warlord Zhang Zuolin (Chang Tso-lin), ruler of Manchuria from 1912 to 1928, was an ethnic Manchu who favored the restoration of the Qing dynasty (180). In fact, Zhang was a Han Chinese who opposed the restoration of the Qing dynasty and was appointed High Commissioner for both Outer and Inner Mongolia in 1921 by the Chinese government. (The vast region north of the Yellow River valley is divided into Inner and Outer Mongolia—Inner Mongolia is closer to the Chinese heartland and has a mixed population of Mongols and Han Chinese, while Outer Mongolia, farther north, is mainly inhabited by Mongols. Palmer’s book deals with Outer Mongolia, referred to simply as “Mongolia.”) Zhang’s mission was to maintain Chinese influence in the entire region, but he failed in Outer Mongolia, which was conquered by Communist Russian forces in June 1921 and became a Soviet satellite state.¹

Descended from German crusaders who settled in the Baltic region that became part of the Russian Empire, the Ungern family enjoyed wealth and status, and served with distinction in the Russian military. Young Roman Ungern initially enrolled in the Russian naval academy but was expelled before graduation. He then enlisted in the army and briefly served during the Russo-Japanese war (1904–5). After the war, he was admitted to the military academy and, after graduating, was posted with a Cossack regiment stationed in the Transbaikal region near the Chinese border. While there, he studied Mongolian, the language of many of the men in his unit, and also became interested in Lamaist Buddhism, the religion of the Mongols.

Its location made Mongolia a pawn in the strategic struggle between the Russian and Chinese empires. When the Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911, Mongol nobles declared Outer Mongolia independent from China, expelled the small Chinese garrison from the capital Urga, and installed Bogd Khan, a Living Buddha and religious leader, as their ruler. Taking advantage of political turmoil in China, in 1912 the Russian government signed an agreement that recognized Chinese suzerainty over Mongolia and sent military advisors there to train its army. It is not clear whether Ungern was dismissed from the Russian army around 1913 as Soviet sources claim. In any case, he traveled to Urga in 1913 and tried unsuccessfully to join the corps of Russian military advisors.

¹ On Zhang, see the entry in the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern China*, ed. H. Boorman (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1967) 115–22.

The outbreak of World War I changed Ungern's fortunes. He was recalled to the Russian army and fought with great bravery as a cavalry officer in the disastrous campaign in East Prussia and later on the Carpathian, Galician, and Caucasus fronts; he was wounded five times and received several medals. During service in the Caucasus he met Grigori Semenov, a half Buriat Mongol officer in a Cossack unit (Mongols were subdivided into many groups; several had for centuries lived in the Russian Empire). They later became allies during the civil war.

The second or October Revolution in Russia in 1917 resulted in a civil war that raged throughout that vast country between the Red forces (Bolsheviks) and their White opponents. Semenov and Ungern joined other Whites and raised a multiethnic army in the Transbaikalian region led by Russian officers. They soon went their separate ways. Semenov established headquarters at Chita, operated along the Trans-Siberian Railroad line on both the Russian and Chinese sides of the border, and reached understandings with the local Chinese authorities. He also received help from the Japanese and cooperated with other White units. Ungern made his headquarters at Dauria, a frontier town in Russia where the Trans-Siberian Railroad crossed into China near the border between Mongolia and Manchuria. He remained there for two years, looting passing trains and seizing food from local peoples. In this period, Ungern gained the moniker "Bloody," "White," or "Mad" Baron, due to his horrific treatment of his own men and prisoners, his ascetic habits, Mongol dress, use of opium (after giving up alcohol), and virulent anti-Semitism. After the murder of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, he pinned his hopes for an imperial restoration on Grand Duke Michael, younger brother of the tsar, but Michael was also murdered by the Reds. Many groups could be called the most brutal during the Russian civil war, and the followers of Semenov and Ungern certainly rank high among them. However, Palmer seems to give the "prize" to Ungern because Dauria came to be known as the "gallows of Siberia," where captured Reds were sent for execution. Besides the hellish conditions caused by killings and plunder by Reds, Whites, and peasant partisans, famine and epidemics of typhoid fever and cholera swept through Siberia during 1919–20. No one trusted anyone else and both Semenov and Ungern used Mongol bodyguards because they were deemed more reliable than Russians.

By summer 1920, the White cause was collapsing: one important White leader, Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, had been captured and executed and another, General Pyotr Wrangel, had evacuated his forces from the Crimea. In August 1920, Ungern ended his relationship with Semenov and crossed into Mongolia, claiming the resurrection of Genghis Khan's heritage and the building of a pan-Mongol empire as his new goal. Meanwhile, after the collapse of the tsarist government, China again attempted to assert control over Mongolia and won over some Mongol nobles who deeply resented Bogd Khan's capricious and autocratic ways. China even negotiated a new agreement with friendly Mongol leaders in which Mongolia acknowledged Chinese sovereignty but would enjoy autonomy. Chinese influence was, however, short-lived due to the high-handed actions of its new commissioner to Mongolia, Xu Shuzheng. Fearful of resurgent Chinese power, Bogd Khan turned to Ungern, whose forces had just advanced into Mongolia.

Ungern's mixed army of 2,000–2,500 Cossacks and Buriat Mongols, plus a few Japanese and Tibetans, marched under two banners, Grand Duke Michael's and the Buddhist swastika. Ungern led his motley force riding a white horse, wearing a yellow Mongol gown, and accompanied by a retinue of shamans and soothsayers. His paranoid and sadistic behavior reached bizarre proportions. Discipline was brutal, partly to prevent desertion, partly as "spiritual purification." As Ungern's army advanced toward Urga, an additional 3,000 Mongols rallied to his banner. For various reasons, they called him "god of war." Some joined in hopes that he would restore Mongolia's glory days, while Mongols from Inner Mongolia (under Chinese administration) had economic motives—their grazing land had been turned into farms by Han Chinese. Early in 1921, Ungern's forces captured Urga from the Chinese garrison. After several days of mayhem, only around 800 of the 3,000 Chinese troops survived, plus a few Chinese residents (there was a "Chinese city" in Urga consisting mostly of merchants and their families). Most of the approximately 600 Jews in Urga were brutally murdered under Ungern's anti-Semitic order, issued earlier in Dauria, that "neither men, nor women, nor their seed should remain" (157). Bogd Khan returned to power, but real authority rested with Ungern, who

was declared a reincarnation of Bogd's predecessor (that deceased Living Buddha thus had two concurrent reincarnations).

Up to now the Communist government in Russia and its ally the Far Eastern Republic had paid little attention to Mongolia and Mongol Marxists. But with Ungern in Urga, Mongolia became a strategic objective for the Communist regime, and Lenin ordered the 5th Red Army to oust him. However, the outbreak of war between Russia and Poland claimed higher priority and the invasion of Mongolia was postponed.

Probably because his earlier popularity as liberator of Urga had worn thin due to his chaotic manner of governing, Ungern decided in May 1921 to evacuate Urga with his army of 4,000 Mongols, 3,000 Whites, and 1,500 assorted foreign troops. They marched toward the Russian border town Kaichta, with the declared goal of liberating Russia from Marxists and Jews. By August 1921, the Red Army had decisively defeated Ungern's forces at Kaichta. Most of his 500 surviving followers advised him either to attempt to join Semenov's forces by marching northeast, or to head for Manchuria for protection under Chinese or Japanese authorities. Instead, he opted to head for Tibet. This irrational decision ignored critical problems of terrain and logistics posed by the Gobi Desert, the Himalayas, and a lack of supplies, as well as the need to cross intervening Red-held territories. Predictably, most of his men deserted him; others mutinied. Ungern himself was captured by Red forces and sent to Novonikolaevsk in Siberia for trial.

As the highest-ranking White captive since Admiral Kolchak, Ungern was treated well:

His trial was held two weeks later, on September 15, 1921. There was never any question as to the verdict; Lenin had sent a telegram with clear directions: the tribunal should proceed with all due speed, and pronounce a sentence of death by shooting if the evidence against him was valid.... Appropriately enough for a staged trial, it took place in the Sovnoska Garden Theater, in the centre of the city.... In a dramatic touch, Ungern's yellow coat was hung above the stage. From beginning to end, the trial lasted five hours and twenty minutes. Witnesses were unnecessary since Ungern freely admitted his guilt.... The final verdict was unsurprising. He was guilty on all charges, and the only punishment was execution (229-31).

The Red Army then installed the Mongolian People's Revolutionary (communist) Party in power in Urga, renamed Ulaanbaatar (or Ulan Batar), and, when Bogd Khan died in 1924, discontinued the system of picking his reincarnation as Mongolia's religious/political leader.

The Bloody White Baron is an important biography because it focuses on a fascinating but little known figure whose actions influenced events in Mongolia. It also highlights Mongolia's role as a player and pawn in Sino-Russian relations in the early twentieth century. However, Palmer has over emphasized Ungern's importance on two scores. First, by linking Ungern's virulent anti-Semitism with that of the later German National Socialist regime. Anti-Semitism was widespread in both Russia and Germany and Ungern's views on Jews were hardly original. It is a stretch to think he was important enough to have influenced Nazi racism decades later. Palmer also links Ungern's swastika-emblazoned battle banner with Nazi symbolism. "Swastika" is a Sanskrit word that means "good, auspicious symbol" and is used in all Indian religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongol Buddhists also used the symbol to signify good fortune and virtue. The Nazis adopted it because they believed in the Indo-Aryan origin of the German people.

Secondly, Palmer conclusion that "without Ungern, the Chinese would have remained in Mongolia, the Soviets would never have taken over the country, and it would have remained a part of Chinese territory" (245) disregards Tsarist Russia's targeting of Mongolia, Manchuria, and Xinjiang (Sinkiang) for its imperial expansion since the late nineteenth century. As the Qing dynasty that ruled China teetered toward disintegration, several imperialist powers had mutually agreed to make parts of China their respective spheres of influence. Thus, in 1898, Russia had forced China to concede, and Great Britain, Germany, France, and Japan to accept, that Mongolia, Manchuria, and Xinjiang were within its sphere of influence. The fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 was threatening to hasten this process when World War I supervened. The Russian civil war then sucked Mongolia into Russia's internal struggle, and the triumph of the Communists resulted in its submission to Soviet power, as confirmed by the Soviet-Mongolian Treaty (5 November 1921). In 1945, at the Yalta Conference, Stalin won U.S. and British acceptance of the independence of Mongolia from Chi-

na as a condition for Soviet declaration of war against Japan. Considering the importance Stalin continued to attach to Mongolia, Ungern's incursion into that land merely gave the Communist government a pretext in 1921 to seize a prize that Russia had long sought.

Notwithstanding these problematic points of interpretation, Palmer's absorbing biography of Ungern brings to life a sinister but important man who helped shape events in a remote part of the world in the early twentieth century. Palmer is to be especially commended for his resourcefulness and diligence in piecing together the scant and scattered available source materials. Two useful maps, appropriate footnotes, and a bibliography of archival sources and secondary material in English, Russian, and German will prove helpful to both general readers and students of history.