



PROJECT MUSE®

The Last of the White Moustaches: Recent Books on the
Anti-Bolshevik Commanders of the East

Willard Sunderland

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 9,
Number 3, Summer 2008 (New Series), pp. 595-607 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.0.0018>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/245145>

The Last of the White Moustaches

Recent Books on the Anti-Bolshevik
Commanders of the East

WILLARD SUNDERLAND

Evgenii Aleksandrovich Belov, *Baron Ungern fon Shternberg: Biografiia, ideologiya, voennye pokhody 1920–1921* [Baron von Ungern-Sternberg: His Life, Political Ideology, and Military Campaigns, 1920–21]. 238 pp., maps. Moscow: Agraf, 2003. ISBN 577840252X.

Jamie Bisher, *White Terror: Cossack Warlords of the Trans-Siberian*. xix + 452 pp., illus., maps. London: Routledge, 2005. ISBN 0714656909. \$170.00.

Andrei Vladislavovich Ganin, *Chernogorets na russkoi sluzhbe: General Bakich* [A Montenegrin in Russian Service: General Bakich]. 238 pp., illus., maps. Moscow: Russkii put', 2004. ISBN 585887200X.

Sergei L'vovich Kuz'min, comp. and ed., *Baron Ungern v dokumentakh i memuarakh* [Documents and Memoirs on Baron Ungern]. 661 pp., illus., maps. Moscow: Tovarishchestvo nauchnykh izdaniï KMK, 2004. ISBN 5873171645.

Sergei L'vovich Kuz'min, comp. and ed., *Legendarnyi baron: Neizvestnye stranitsy grazhdanskoi voiny* [The Legendary Baron: Unknown Pages of the Civil War]. 336 pp., illus., maps. Moscow: Tovarishchestvo nauchnykh izdaniï KMK, 2004. ISBN 5873171750.

In the great clash of whiskers of the Russian Civil War, the Reds were good, but the Counterrevolution was bushier. With the exception of Admiral Kolchak, who persisted in shaving, almost every White commander made a habit of crowning his upper lip with an ample swatch of facial hair, from shaggy toothbrushes and walruses to elaborate handlebars that rolled out to

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 9, 3 (Summer 2008): 595–607.

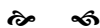
the edge of the cheek and then, with just the right dab of wax, soared optimistically upward. Some of the most luxuriant growths bloomed in eastern Siberia. The military ruler of the Trans-Baikal, Ataman Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov, and his lieutenant and erstwhile conqueror of Urga, Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg, were both well-moustached men, and so too were commanders like Andrei Stepanovich Bakich, who ended up on the Mongolian slopes of the Altai, and Ivan Pavlovich Kalmykov, who led Cossacks on the Amur and the Ussuri. Based in remote regions, most of these men were able to continue fighting against the Bolsheviks long after their counterparts in European Russia and western Siberia had been overcome. Their moustaches were not only the best in the anti-Bolshevik gallery—they also lasted the longest.

Writing on the White commanders of eastern Siberia and the Far East has tended to emphasize political and military events. The books under review here follow this tradition. They have little to say about the cultural identities of Semenov and Co., less still about moustaches. But by reading the books as a group, one gets some sense of the White commanders' collective world—and of the meanings hidden in appearances. The firmament of the late tsarist empire was studded with constellations of imperial subcultures—discrete groupings of like-minded individuals shaped by the particular configurations of ethnicity, ideology, and imperial power that coalesced in different environments. The early Georgian Marxists described in a rich recent study are one such subculture.¹ The White commanders between Chita and Vladivostok are another. Compared to the Social Democrats of Tiflis, they were a much less subtle group; and their ethos—a brew of authoritarianism, militarism, opportunism, antisemitism, apocalyptic messianism, geopolitical dreaming, and sheer ruthlessness, with an added dash of frontier ethnophilia—was, to say the least, unappealing.² The question is to explain

¹ Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy 1883–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). In a similar vein, see Alfred J. Rieber, "Stalin, Man of the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 106, 5 (2001): 1651–91.

² Some of the leanings and behaviors on this list fit within the broader credo of the White movement in general, but others are more particular to the Cossack commanders of the Trans-Baikal and the Far East. For general overviews of the mentality and ideologies of anti-Bolshevik officers, see Peter Kenez, "The Ideology of the White Movement," *Soviet Studies* 32, 1 (1980): 58–83; V. M. Voinov, "Ofitserskii korpus belykh armii na vostoke strany (1918–1920)," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 6 (1994): 51–64; E. V. Volkov, *Kolchakovskie ofitsery: Opyt istoricheskogo issledovaniia* (Cheliabinsk: Iuzhno-ural'skii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2001); Leonid Heretz, "The Psychology of the White Movement," in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and Civil Wars*, ed. Vladimir N. Brovkin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 105–21; and Paul F. Robinson, "'Always with Honor': The Code of the White Russian Officers," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 41, 2 (1999): 121–41.

how and why the ethos took shape on the Russo-Asian frontier and to make sense of its implications.



Of the four books here, Jamie Bisher's provides the broadest overview of the general landscape, focusing on the "rule of the atamans" (*atamanshchina*) identified with Semenov's power in the Trans-Baikal and the work of his partners in Mongolia, Manchuria, and the Russian Far East, in particular Ungern-Sternberg and Kalmykov. Bisher declares that his goal is to present "a coherent and accurate picture" of "the Cossack warlords," who have been identified by historians as a "nasty lot" but otherwise insufficiently explained (xvi). He then sets out to do this in eleven chapters that cover the eastern war from Semenov's takeover in the Trans-Baikal in November 1917 to "White Russia's Last Spasms" in Vladivostok five years later, followed by a brief investigation of the White emigration in Manchuria, largely up to the time of Semenov's arrest, trial, and execution in August 1946. Bisher makes some use of Russian memoirs and newspapers, but the bulk of his source material comes from the records of the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia and other U.S. institutions. The documents are a wonderful mishmash: intelligence reports, regional newspaper summaries, cables, and orders, which Bisher uses to relay "the drama, excitement, fear, and confusion of the moment" (xvii).

The problem with the book is that it does not relay much else. Echoing the jaunty style of many of his sources, Bisher offers evocative descriptions of armored trains flashing across the rails, cavalry dashes across howling spaces, smoky dens of vice in Chita and Harbin, senseless massacres, devious backstabblings, and portraits of one "morbidly picturesque and bloodthirsty" Cossack crew after another, but unfortunately, he adds almost no explanation. In part, this is because he seems more interested in description than analysis, but it also has to do with his decision to rely so much on American materials. The mostly well-intending but uninformed Yanks Bisher quotes at length throughout the text are poor guides to "the epic struggle [that] cast its shadow over the Trans-Baikal plateau" (1). Most of them were bewildered by the events they were witnessing, and they were arguably even more confused about what they were doing in Siberia in the first place. U.S. servicemen assumed that they had been sent to Russia to fight the Reds, but according to their commander, General William Graves, their mission was to guard the Trans-Siberian and "help the Czecho-Slovaks," while scrupulously avoiding taking sides in Russia's "internal conflicts." This disconnect led to episodes like the following, related by a *New York Times* correspondent who traveled with Graves on an inspection tour in late 1918:

Frequently [Graves] would approach an officer or a non-com and ask the blunt question:

"What are you here for?" ...

"I am here to fight the Bolsheviks."

"Are those your orders?" the general would ask.

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get those orders?"

At this point in the quiz, the men were usually in such an uncomfortable position that they were prepared to make a quick retreat ... [b]ut the general's questions came like bullets from a machine-gun....

"Who are the Bolsheviks?" the general would ask.

It was seldom that any man or officer gave the same reply. One lieutenant, looking the general square in the face, remarked boldly and confidently:

"The Bolsheviks are the men who are trying to destroy Russia by killing off the good people and burning the property."

"Have you seen any Bolsheviks around here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what do you do with them?"

"We arrest them, sir."

"Have you any in jail now?" the general asked.

There was in one town a Russian in the army prison, and I walked with the general to see my first Bolshevik.... All of us took a good look at the prisoner. He was nothing more than a replica of the type of Russian peasant which one sees by the hundred thousand in all parts of Siberia....

"What did this man do?" General Graves asked.

"Why, nothing, sir," the officer said hesitatingly.

"Why do you have him under arrest then?"

"Why, he said he was a Bolshevik."

"Do you have orders to arrest the Bolsheviks?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get those orders?"

This left the officer in the quandary the general expected to place him in. To this young warden, the general made the following statement:

"Whoever gave you those orders must have made them up himself. The United States is not at war with the Bolsheviks or any other faction of Russia.... Because a man is a Bolshevik is no reason for his arrest. You are to arrest only those who attack you. The United States is only attacking the Bolsheviks when the American troops are attacked by an armed force."³

³ Carl W. Ackerman, *Trailing the Bolsheviks: Twelve Thousand Miles with the Allies in Siberia* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1919), 186–87. This incident is also summarized in Carol Willcox Melton, *Between War and Peace: Woodrow Wilson and the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia, 1918–1921* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 80–81.

In the memoir he published a few years later, Graves acknowledged that he himself had “never [been] able to determine who was a Bolshevik or why he was a Bolshevik” during his time in Siberia, an admission that only underscores the depth of the American confusion.⁴

Why, then, Bisher chose to approach his subject primarily through U.S. sources is not entirely clear. If the goal was to use foreign materials to offer a new view of the Cossack commanders, Japanese records would have been the better choice. The “cooperative expansionists” of the Taisho Democracy marched their troops into the “Siberian War” in far greater numbers, stayed longer, knew more, and came with grander intentions than any of the other “interventionists.” As Bisher makes clear, the Japanese also worked much more closely than anyone else with Semenov and his colleagues.⁵ (In fact, the relationship was so close that most observers concluded—wrongly—that Semenov was little more than a Japanese puppet.) Bisher’s U.S. sources thus offer us a range of interesting observations to add to an overall American view of “the Big Show in Bololand,” but they do not take us very far toward understanding the *atamanshchina*.⁶

Because of this, it is perhaps not surprising that Bisher’s basic explanation for the violence and failed politics of the White Cossacks seems to come down to a simple matter of bad men doing bad things in a wild place. There is little here to help us appreciate the geographical, institutional, and ethnic context of the White Terror, and there is no analysis of terror—White, Red, or otherwise—as a particular type of violence.⁷ There is not even much

⁴ William S. Graves, *America’s Siberian Adventure, 1918–1920* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931), 165.

⁵ Japanese historians refer to the Japanese intervention today as the “Siberian War” or the “Siberian Intervention.” At the time, the government used the term “Siberian Expedition.” For Japanese sources on the Civil War in Siberia and an overview of Japanese historiography, see Reiko Tanaka, “Imperial Dilemma: The Japanese Intervention in Siberia, 1918–1922” (Ph. D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2003), 5–6, 9, 16–22. On the empire-building objectives associated with planning for the expedition, see Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 180–95; and Eva-Maria Stolberg, “The Siberian Frontier between ‘White Mission’ and ‘Yellow Peril,’ 1890s–1920s,” *Nationalities Papers* 32, 1 (2004): 175–76.

⁶ “Bololand” comes from American shorthand for the Bolsheviks. On the origins of the term, see Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

⁷ On terror as “the extension of violence by a regime beyond the point at which it has seized power” and the distinction between “terror” and other kinds of instrumental violence, see “Violence, ‘Political’ Violence, and Terror in Russian History,” *Kritika* 4, 3 (2003): 488. For an analysis of the “common conceptual matrix” that shaped the way violence was used by both sides during the Civil War, see Peter Holquist, “State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism,” in *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25–26.

in the way of biographical analysis to provide a sense of the terrible commanders themselves. For example, we read repeatedly of Semenov's personal traits—his “Napoleonic ego,” “appetite for women,” and apparently incorrigible inability to “pass up an opportunity for larceny,” among others—all of which are well known to historians (104, 136, 115). But Bisher rarely links an interpretation of Semenov's actions to the particular context of Trans-Baikal Cossackdom that shaped him in his early years or to the stunning violence and institutional collapse that roared around him during his service in the war against Germany and then again during the Time of Troubles in eastern Siberia.

As I read Bisher's book, I wondered: How did the Russian–Mongolian–Manchurian frontier “work” in ethnic and social terms? What was it about the way the frontier disintegrated in the revolutionary era that allowed for the emergence of Cossack warlordism? And what exactly was this warlord style in the first place? Was it the same as the warlord ways of the Chinese potentates of Xinjiang or Manchuria (the Northeast)? Were Semenov and Co. borrowing from a common Russo-Asian register of frontier practices and presumptions; or were they true originals, warlords of improvisation, making it up as they went along?⁸ Bisher never quite addresses these issues, despite the fact that they appear crucial to a deeper understanding of the story. Though outrageous, Semenov had an intimate knowledge of his imperial backyard; and for a time, he proved as adept at using this “art of locality” as any White leader, east or west.⁹ This aspect of the “Battle Ataman's” power deserves more attention because it is the least understood part of the story. Semenov and his followers were the products of a collapsing imperial frontier, so the frontier is what needs to be examined.



The works by Evgenii Belov and Sergei Kuz'min on Baron Ungern are more helpful in this respect. Semenov and the baron were close friends and successful collaborators. As the ataman noted, recalling the heady debut of his

⁸ For suggestions of comparisons between Cossack and Chinese warlords, see N. G. O. Pereira, “Siberian *Atamanshchina*: Warlordism in the Russian Civil War,” in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society*, ed. Brovkin, 124, 129; and Paul du Quenoy, “Warlordism *à la russe*: Baron von Ungern-Sternberg's Anti-Bolshevik Crusade, 1917–1921,” *Revolutionary Russia* 16, 2 (2003): 21. For a helpful analysis of warlordism in the Chinese context, see Arthur Waldron, “The Warlord: Twentieth-Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism,” *American Historical Review* 96, 4 (1991): 1073–1100. A recent broadly comparative treatment is Kimberley Martin, “Warlordism in Comparative Perspective,” *International Security* 31, 3 (2006–7): 41–73.

⁹ On the power of practical, non-deductive knowledge and local expertise in specific contexts, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 309–41.

rule in late 1917, “the unimaginable successes we experienced in those days ... could never have been accomplished without the deep mutual respect and close ideological bond that existed between myself and Baron Ungern.”¹⁰ This closeness existed despite the fact that the two men came from almost diametrically opposed backgrounds. Semenov was a Russo-Buriat Cossack born to a middling family who climbed his way into the officer corps and then took advantage of the Revolution to vault himself into authority. Ungern, by contrast, was the scion of one of the oldest aristocratic clans of the Russian Baltic, who grew up in grand manors and attended the empire’s most prestigious military schools. When the Revolution came, Ungern took command because he belonged to the class of people who were supposed to do that sort of thing. Semenov was a plebeian of mixed descent from the Asian frontier. Ungern was a European blueblood of the bluest sort imaginable.

What brought the two men together was the Great War. They both served in the same Cossack regiment and were both appalled at the breakdown that engulfed the army in 1917. But they were also connected by a common attachment to the Trans-Baikal. Ungern had served in the region as a young officer with the Trans-Baikal Cossacks in the years after the Russo-Japanese War; and he knew the Amur lands, Manchuria, and Outer Mongolia. Like many Baltic Germans—and many Russians of his generation—he seems to have felt the pull of service in Asia to the point of developing a deep and abiding identification with the eastern frontier. This identification undoubtedly grew all the more intense during the war with Germany, which only tended to confirm to European “Easterners” that their continent—and Western Civilization in general—was indeed “an old bitch gone in the teeth.”¹¹ Asia, by contrast, appeared poised to spring. Or that, at least, was the theory.

Over the course of the Civil War, the baron was one of Semenov’s most reliable lieutenants. By late 1920, however, as the ataman’s domain began to crumble, their paths diverged. Semenov fled to the Russian Far East and eventually left Russia for good. Ungern by contrast gathered his cavalry force—a mixed army group of mostly Buriats, Mongols, and Russian Cossacks known as the Asiatic Division—and headed instead for Mongolia. He conquered the Mongolian capital of Urga (Da Hüre, later Ulaanbaatar) in February 1921, flushing out the Chinese republican troops then occupying the city, and for the next six months ruled as the *de facto* power in the country. During his time in Urga, Ungern wore Mongolian cloaks, consulted with shamans, whipped his men whenever they fell out of line, and hunted down and executed Bolsheviks and Jews wherever he could find them. He also worked hard to assemble a great Turko-Mongol and White Russian

¹⁰ G. M. Semenov, *O sebe: Vospominaniia, mysli i vyvody* (Moscow: AST, 2002), 139.

¹¹ Ezra Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” *Selected Poems*, 8th ed. (New York: New Directions, 1957), 64.

coalition that he hoped would come together to smash the Bolsheviks as well as the equally despicable Chinese republicans, with the ultimate goal of marching on Moscow and Beijing to reinstall the fallen dynasties of Eurasia. The coalition never materialized, but Ungern decided to invade Red Siberia anyway. He was captured in August 1921 when his attack sputtered out. A month later, wearing a Mongolian cloak and his bushy walrus-style moustache, he was tried and shot as an enemy of the people in Novonikolaevsk (now Novosibirsk).

Belov's book is a short but detailed account of Ungern's Mongolian campaign, with a brief initial section devoted to Ungern's life before the Civil War. (This presumably is the "biography" [*biografiia*] mentioned in the subtitle.) Kuz'min's two-volume document collection breaks down in roughly the same way. Ninety percent of the material included in the volumes is devoted to Ungern's Mongolian campaign—a rich and eclectic assortment of military service records and intelligence reports, political correspondence, contemporary newspaper articles describing the Mongolian events, memoirs of Ungern's officers and foreign observers, decrees from Ungern's period in power, and the records of the interrogations and the trial that followed his capture. The remaining materials open a window on Ungern's pre-Mongolian career, as does Kuz'min's informative essay at the start of *Baron Ungern v dokumentakh i memuarakh* (hereafter volume 1).

Reading Belov and Kuz'min together, one gets far and away the fullest portrait of Ungern to date in the scholarly literature. Prior to the appearance of these works, serious scholarship on Ungern was limited. Soviet writers—both during the Civil War and later—portrayed him as a vicious Semenovite "bandit" and turned his name into convenient shorthand to describe the darkness of an entire period—the *Ungernovshchina*. To Mongolians, he became the predictably sinister bogeyman of their socialist revolution. In the West he was quickly transformed into the "Bloody Baron," the "Mad Baron," "the White Heir to Genghis Khan," "the Last of the White Mohicans," and numerous other sobriquets besides. Because of all this, the "real" Ungern disappeared behind the epithets. The best thing about these two works is that they cut through the myths and caricatures and present the baron instead as a historical figure.

Belov's main point seems to be to correct some of the distortions and errors of prior Russian scholarship on Ungern.¹² He carefully points out that Ungern was not "condemned to three years in prison" during a court-martial for insubordination in 1916 but in fact received a much lighter sentence and was recognized as a war hero (21). He disagrees with Baron Wrangel, who

¹² Ironically, however, Belov commits a number of factual errors of his own, beginning with Ungern's dates. Belov indicates that the baron was born in 1887. He was in fact born in January 1886 (n.s.). See Belov, *Baron Ungern fon Shternberg*, 5.

described Ungern as a man “with an extremely limited worldview” (29). He argues, contrary to Soviet historiography, that Ungern did not “force” Mongolians to join him on his campaign—they signed up willingly because they saw Ungern as the best way to run the Chinese out of their country. The baron took Urga on 3, not 4, February 1921. Finally, and probably most significantly, Belov argues that Ungern was not a Japanese agent. He claims that there is nothing to suggest a meaningful link to the Japanese in the materials the Bolsheviks seized from Ungern’s headquarters, and cooperation with the Japanese would in any case have run counter to the baron’s “character” (76). Instead, the Reds came up with the “collaborationist charge” because it was politically convenient.

Belov’s book is not intended as a whitewash, however. Neither is Kuz’min’s. Both of the works speak directly to Ungern’s justified reputation for personal cruelty (though Belov, strangely, attributes it in part to “genetics”—the baron’s “ancestors were all fierce warriors” [193]). Belov also underscores Ungern’s seething antisemitism and agrees with the common Soviet charge that the baron was a “precursor to the German Fascists” (194). Most important, neither author misses the central irony of Ungern’s geopolitical trajectory. Though the baron established himself in Mongolia in order to work toward building a steppe-based Central State (*sredinnoe gosudarstvo*) that would bring together the Turks and Mongols to defeat “international socialism,” the net result of his plan was Mongolia’s transformation into the first Soviet satellite. Following Ungern’s use of Mongolia as a base for attacking Siberia, the Bolsheviks responded by using Ungern as a good reason for intervening in Mongolia. By July 1921, the Red Army had arrived in Urga. They then stayed there—and in the country in general—for the next 70 years.

Yet even as Belov and Kuz’min point out Ungern’s shortcomings and failed ambitions, both of the authors, Kuz’min especially, seem concerned to give him a new position of respect. Belov returns on a number of occasions to Ungern’s profile as a “complicated and contradictory” figure, an “unusual, distinctive personality” (5, 192). Kuz’min goes farther. While rejecting Ungern’s methods, he appears to admire the baron’s central objective, whose essence was also shared by his communist enemies—the goal of establishing a “centralized, unified, multinational great power [*derzhava*] that would follow its own path, based on its own historical traditions of statehood” (1: 42). For Kuz’min, Ungern was not a harbinger of the Fascists but rather an early fighter against the “Western model of social development—that is, the rough equivalent of what we refer to today as globalization” (1: 42). “Practically speaking, Ungern was fighting for the idea of empire” (1: 35).

Of course, the Fascists of yesteryear would readily agree with many of the complaints of today’s anti-globalizationists. They certainly had no problem

fighting “for the idea of empire.” So it is not clear if this is the best way to separate Ungern from the pack. But Kuz’min is undoubtedly right to identify the baron as a man of the imperial mold, and this is surely what accounts for a new fascination with Ungern in Russia today. Like the émigré Eurasianists and especially the “scientizer” Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev, Ungern has emerged as an attractive bearer of the “imperial idea” for conservative intellectuals and politicians. Though admittedly brutal and authoritarian, the baron’s supporters rarely hold these traits against him. Instead, he receives kudos for his supposedly distinctive “Eurasian spirit.” Where else but on Planet Eurasia, one wonders, would one find a Baltic German who fights like a Cossack, dresses like a Mongol, seeks God like a true Christian, rejects Western materialism as all good Russians should, and dreams of uniting one-seventh of the world’s land mass under the banner of absolute monarchy? To today’s “neo-Eurasianists,” the baron must seem like a Christmas gift.¹³ Kuz’min is a serious historian rather than a mystical geopolitical publicist, but we can be certain that the mystical geopolitical publicists are reading his book.



Compared to his fellow White eastern commanders, General Bakich looks somewhat out of place. He was not an oversized personality like Semenov or Ungern. Nor was he a product of the eastern frontier, nor even much of a warlord, since, with the exception of a very brief period in Mongolia in late 1921, he never ruled anywhere as a political leader. In fact, his only real claim to being an eastern commander stems from the fact that he was forced by defeats in the west to move in more easterly directions. Yet in other ways, Bakich fits well with the imperial subculture of the Semenovites. He was a military man who believed in hierarchy, tradition, order, and the rod rather than rights, the dialectic, and revolutionary permissiveness. He hated socialism and Jews, and he loved his own self-image as a savior of the fatherland. Like the Semenovites, he also suffered—in his time and now—from a largely negative reputation. Andrei Ganin’s biography of Bakich is designed to set the story straight, though for Ganin, this seems to mean acknowledging the

¹³ One of the leading lights of contemporary Eurasianism, Aleksandr Dugin, has already weighed in with an admiring view of Ungern. See his *Misterii Evrazii* (Moscow: Arktogetia, 1996), 93–96. The baron has been the subject of a number of Russian newspaper and magazine articles and at least one documentary in the popular media in recent years. Viktor Pelevin casts him in his novel *Chapaev i pustota* (translated as *Buddha’s Little Finger*). On the Russian “neo-Eurasianists,” see Marlène Laruelle, *In Search of an Imperial Identity: Eurasianism in Contemporary Russia* (forthcoming). Interest in Ungern is not limited to Russia alone. For some recent works, see Ronny Rönqvist, *Baron Ungern: Mongoliets härskare* (Helsinki: Litorale, 2006) [in Swedish]; Erik Sablé, *Ungern* (Paris: Pardes, 2006); Julius Evola, comp. and ed., *Baron Ungern von Sternberg, der letzte Kriegsgott* (Straelen: Regin-Verlag, 2007); and James Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

general's less attractive sides without letting them get in the way of an overall fawning portrait.

Ganin begins with a short overview of Bakich's life up to the Revolution, going over his early years in Montenegro, officer training in Odessa, somewhat lackluster service as a junior officer in the Amur region between 1905 and 1913, and then his transformation during the Great War into an infantry officer "of outstanding qualities" (21). These qualities were not appreciated by his men, however, and Bakich found himself expelled from his regiment by the newly powerful soldier committees in April 1917. By the spring of 1918, he was fighting against the Bolsheviks on the Samara front, and the rest of Ganin's book—over 80 percent—focuses on Bakich's Civil War career, which can be fairly summarized as a relentless cascade of military disasters that forced him to withdraw one agonizing step at a time across almost the entire inhospitable bottom of Central Eurasia.

The first retreat was to Orenburg, where Bakich moved following White defeats on the Volga. Then, following new setbacks, Bakich withdrew from Orenburg on the so-called "Hungry March" (*golodnyi pokhod*) to Semirech'e in far eastern Russian Turkestan. Then, by the early spring of 1920, squeezed there by the approaching Reds, he moved his force of over 9,000 mostly Orenburg and Siberian Cossacks together with some 5,000 civilian refugees across the border to Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang), the domain of the warlord Yang Zengxin, a master politician who had a habit of "incorporating former enemies within the government, posting them faraway from their allies and power bases, and then quietly arresting and executing them."¹⁴ (Yang is best known for an incident in 1915 when he invited a group of unsuspecting opponents to a new year's banquet and had them beheaded at the dinner table.) With each of Bakich's successive lurches to the east, soldiers, refugees, and horses died or fled in droves. Locals were conniving or hostile (or both). Supplies and hope dribbled away. Easily the best part of Ganin's book is simply the story itself. Bakich's doomed odyssey makes for gripping reading.

The final chapter in the general's sufferings played out in the district of Shara Sume in far western Mongolia, where his dwindling contingent had arrived in the early spring of 1921 after Yang decided to flush him out of Xinjiang by inviting in Red troops.¹⁵ In Shara Sume, the general's prospects initially improved. He politicked successfully with Kazakh and Mongol tribes, who requested his protection as the *de facto* military power in the region. He also made contact with Ungern in Urga and pledged to follow

¹⁴ James A. Millward and Nabijan Tursun, "Political History and Strategies of Control, 1884–1978," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 68.

¹⁵ Yang also maneuvered to get rid of Boris Annenkov, the White commander of the Semirech'e Cossacks. See James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 185.

the baron's plan to take the war back to the fatherland, which he did a few months later in August 1921 when he launched an "invasion" of the Russian Altai. The attack did not go well, however. Within a few months, Bakich was forced to lead his now all-but-ruined force back across the border to Mongolia where they were shortly cornered and captured.

In May 1922, Bakich was put on trial (along with 16 other defendants) in Novonikolaevsk and shot. As fate would have it, his trial took place in the same cavernous vaudeville theater that had been used to stage Ungern's comeuppance just a few months before, and facing Bakich was the same unforgiving prosecutor—Emel'ian Iaroslavskii, the future sage of Soviet atheism. Like Ungern, Bakich also went down in his facial hair.

Ganin's assessment of his subject is clear: "For me, Bakich stands first and foremost as a courageous, model officer of the tsarist army, a man of duty who, like hundreds of thousands of Russian officers [sic], found themselves hurled into the abyss of the Revolution" (174). A page later, Ganin adds that he certainly does not condone all the general's actions or statements (which include multiple antisemitic fulminations and orders during the Great War to shoot his own retreating soldiers [see, for example, 24 and 83]). Yet at the same time Ganin does little to explain or contextualize or even conjecture at alternate positions. Mao was right to say that the revolution is not a dinner party. And neither, of course, is the counterrevolution. But the violence and extremism of revolutions deserve to be explained by historians rather than merely described and passed over as simply the "spirit of the times." Ganin's book offers a narrative of Bakich's trajectory through the Civil War, but even after almost 200 pages and proof of exhaustive research, the book does not do much to explain where men like Bakich came from, how they were shaped by imperial institutions, transformed by catastrophic imperial war, and undone within the whirlpools of the empire's collapsing frontiers.



Beyond their impressive moustaches and their hatred for the Bolsheviks, perhaps the most important trait that unites the eastern commanders discussed here is their common profile as multicultural military products of the late tsarist empire. All of them were officers who came from mixed ethnic backgrounds or crossed cultures to identify with Russia. Semenov and Ungern were especially at home in the fluid border worlds of Asian Russia, yet even Bakich devoted many hours to sitting in smoky yurts in Xinjiang and western Mongolia parlaying with local tribal leaders. As such, each in his own way, the commanders serve as vivid reminders of the complicated presence of the empire in Russia's revolutionary crisis.

One of Russia's great misfortunes during the revolutionary era was to find itself convulsed simultaneously not just by one imperial "shatter zone"

but by two. While total war, economic collapse, and ethnic and social hatred were undoing and redoing the lines of states between the Baltic Sea and the Caucasus, a similar yet different mix of pressures was transforming the border zones between the Russian and Chinese empires in the vast territory demarcated by eastern Turkestan, Lake Baikal, and the Pacific. The White commanders of the East lived and worked within these disintegrating environments. In fact, as veterans of the carnage in the West who then fought in the East, they were deeply marked by the experience of both shatter zones, just like the empire they embraced and hoped to save.

The full implications of the Revolution's imperial *habitus* are still unclear. That is, we still lack a comprehensive picture of the many ways in which the complexities of imperial life affected the promises and limitations of the revolutionary process. But the experience of the White commanders seems as good a place to start as any. While the books reviewed here offer interesting facts and make their own contributions to the broader history of the Civil War, they leave the imperial dimensions of life in the "world-island" largely unexamined.¹⁶ Empire is treated as the objective platform for events rather than the all-entangling tissue that shaped social and mental practices. The challenge to restore, transform, or throw out the empire was one of the great questions of the day. The Bolsheviks ultimately rose to the occasion by rescuing Russia's imperial state with a radical new form, considerable new content, and some help from the Red Army, all the while denying that they were doing anything imperialist in the process. The Whites were more candid about their imperialism, but not all of them were the retrograde restorationists that the Reds made them out to be. Ungern, for example, was no less ambitious—and to a degree, innovative—than the Bolsheviks in his view of how to transform the empire. Semenov, for his part, was just as sensitive as the Reds to the politics of ethnicity in his domain.

Yet it was the Reds who won the East, while the Whites lost everything, including their moustaches. Why was empire (relatively speaking) so kind to the Leninists and yet so cruel to the atamans? Baron Ungern wants to know.

Dept. of History
University of Cincinnati
P.O. Box 210373
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0373 USA
Willard.Sunderland@uc.edu

¹⁶ The term "world-island" was one of Halford Mackinder's shorthands for Eurasia. See his *Democratic Ideals and Reality: With Additional Papers*, ed. Anthony J. Pearce (1919; repr. New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 150.