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Baron Ungern: Toxic Cosmopolitan

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Abstract

The trial of the White commander Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg in the Siberian town of Novonikolaevsk on September 15th, 1921, was a showdown of cosmopolitans. The distinguishing characteristic of these and most of the other cosmopolitans of the Russian Revolution is that they were decidedly non-pluralist. They were what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has called "toxic cosmopolitans" – at once "staunchly supranational" and "staunchly illiberal." Cosmopolitans on the left saw "empire" as a pejorative and once in power did their best to define their intentions and their state as "anti-imperial." By contrast, cosmopolitans on the right embraced empire in word and deed and hoped to resurrect both. Yet regardless of their contrasting camps, all the cosmopolitans agreed that the best solutions to the problems of the modern age were to be found in the widest possible combinations, of peoples as well as territories.

This paper addresses the imperial production of toxic cosmopolitanism by examining the case of Baron Ungern. Ungern was not a typical toxic cosmopolitan – the class was too varied to have a typical representative. But he is a useful guide to the empire world that produced the form. While undeniably a loyalist of the tsarist type, Ungern ultimately became something more. He turned to what this paper terms Ungerism – a combination of Asianism, militarism, monarchism, anti-Semitism, mystical Christianity, and imperial ambition that was uniquely his own. The first part of the essay traces Ungern's life within tsarism. The second treats his journey into Ungernism. The argument of the essay is that neither part existed outside the influences of Russian imperialism.