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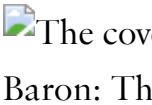
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Death Trips

The disastrous sagas of two european adventurers

GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

THE BLOODY WHITE BARON: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF THE RUSSIAN NOBLEMAN WHO BECAME THE LAST KHAN OF MONGOLIA BY JAMES PALMER. BASIC BOOKS. HARDCOVER, 288 PAGES. $26.


The cover of The Bloody White Baron: The Extraordinary Story of the Russian Nobleman Who Became the Last Khan of Mongolia

Baron Roman Nikolai Maximilian von Ungern-Sternberg and Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett were men of the odd fringes of softening empires; each would, in his own way, champion a fantasized primitivism as the antidote to a civilization in decay. David Grann's *The Lost City of Z* describes Fawcett's obsession with the fabled Amazonian city, a spiritual El Dorado and "the cradle of all civilizations." In 1925, Fawcett set out, on foot and with only his son and a sidekick, into the jungle in search of Z. At the time, he was probably the most famous anthropologist-explorer since Livingstone; he did not return, and his disappearance inspired decades of fruitless inquest. James Palmer's *The Bloody White Baron* chronicles the murderous reign of Ungern, whose loyalty to Russia's deposed Czar Nicholas II found expression in a brutal pan-Mongolism. In 1921, Ungern descended from Siberia with his truant brigade of White Russians, Japanese officers, Buriat Mongols, and Cossacks to siege Urga (now Ulaanbaatar), driving out the Chinese occupation and laying claim to power. For almost six months, he became the last khan of Mongolia.

The early lives of these two adventurers ran parallel. Both were of high birth—Fawcett (1867) the son of a dissolute Victorian aristocrat, Ungern (1886) of Russified Baltic-Russian gentry in Estonia—and both trained in military academies. Fawcett served as an officer in Ceylon, and Ungern joined a company in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War. Both were influenced, during their stays in the East, by the loose syncretism of imperial borderlands. They shared a fascination with theosophy, a slapdash esotericism based on Buddhist texts that offered an exotic alternative to royal ceremony without challenging colonial ambition.

Their stories diverged as the men matured. Fawcett returned to England and signed up for a one-year training course at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), sort of an MFA program for aspiring explorers. He learned about sextants and how to make mud pillows. Mostly, though, he was trained in what the Greeks called *autopsis*, a rigorous program of environmental perception and classification. This practice extended not only to plants and rocks but to humans as well, and Fawcett was schooled in eugenics. The turning point in his career came in 1906, when the RGS sent him to Bolivia to help settle a border dispute. Over the next two decades, he mounted several expeditions into the Amazon, returning each time with the sorts of artifacts and adventure stories that would make him legendary. Between trips, he repaired to his family, but he found life in the English countryside enervating.

Fawcett developed a reputation for being an unrelenting leader; if he wasn't quite an English version of the obsessive explorer played by Klaus Kinski in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, he wasn't far off. As Grann writes, "To those who could keep up with him, he showed tremendous loyalty. To those who couldn't—well, Fawcett came to believe that their sickness, even their death, only confirmed their underlying cowardice." He allowed them very little food or sleep and pressed on through mean thickets at a clip that seemed superhuman. Grann has an extraordinary sense of pacing, and his scenes of forest adventure are dispatched in passages of swift, arresting simplicity.

If Fawcett had little patience for weakness among his men, he had a respect for the inhabitants of the forest that was well ahead of his time. Almost alone among his generation of Western explorers, he refused to shoot at Indians and had great success in

developing relationships with supposedly hostile tribes. The Indians taught him techniques for survival in the forest, which despite its swarm of life was stingy in its sustenance. His RGS training had taught him above all else to listen to the natives, and it was from their stories that he became convinced that the Amazon had once supported a large, advanced civilization, which he named Z. His vision, as Grann explains, combined a respect for the savagery of the jungle, a faith in the strength and resourcefulness of the natives, and a distaste for the decadence of the West as it played out in fantasies of metaphysical purity in the wilderness.

In Ungern, however, a similar longing for celestial order—borne out as a fetish for the bloody heroism of Genghis Khan's people—served as an inquisition not merely in the generic sense of "discovery" but in the murderous medieval sense. Peasants had torched his family's estates in 1905; that experience and his service in the First World War made him a devoted czarist. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Ungern, convinced that Communism was a three-thousand-year-old Jewish plot, fought in a guerrilla war against the Red Army in Siberia.

By the summer of 1920, the czarist White Russians in Siberia had been mostly defeated. Ungern decided this was his opportunity to invade Mongolia, which after a brief interregnum of independence had been occupied by China. Though his forces were far smaller than those of the Chinese, Ungern was an erratically brilliant strategist. After his initial attempts were repulsed, he was able to take Urga and liberate the Bogd Khan, the spiritual leader of Mongolian Buddhism. These battle scenes have a biblical intensity—Ungern suggested he had far more men than he did by setting three fires for every soldier on the surrounding hills before he invaded—and Palmer effectively evokes both the enormous scope and the small absurdities of war. Ungern reinstated the Bogd Khan and had himself declared dictator, but his rule ended in a reinvasion and subsequent mutiny less than six months later—and his execution before a Red firing squad.

What Palmer aptly calls Ungern's "formalised sadism" was staggering. From the lurid "hell galleries, annexes of Buddhist monasteries that contained realistic sculptures of demons gleefully torturing sinners," Ungern learned the techniques of "exposure on the ice, burning alive, rending by wild beasts." These punishments were meted out to dissenters

and insolents, but they were just as often the arbitrary exercise of terror. The worst were reserved for Jews, whom Ungern blamed for the world's degradation.

As Grann and Palmer explain how these two rough contemporaries projected their ideas about empire and redemption onto distant and half-mapped lands—for Fawcett, the unforgiving vitality of the jungle; for Ungern, the fiery, huge soul of the ghosted Mongolian steppe—the two authors also reveal their own motivations and their own mechanisms of writerly projection. Grann, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* who's proved himself capable of writing about anything, from Sherlock Holmes aficionados to New York City's underground water system, makes his investment in the Fawcett saga explicit. He writes that he's always been drawn to stories that "typically have one common thread: obsession." He goes on to say that he, too, while in "the grip" of a story, is prone to disregard bill paying and personal safety. Though his appearances in his own narrative are mostly self-deprecating, it's clear that he sees Fawcett's obsession with Z as of a piece with his own obsession with obsession. But just as Fawcett was able to conduct an open, expansive *autopsis* en route to Z, Grann adopts the same perceptual methodology; he never reduces Fawcett to a metaphor, a placeholder for the idea of a lost high-imperial single-mindedness.

Palmer, in contrast, never really makes a case for why he, or we, ought to be interested in Ungern, whose exploits have already been well chronicled. Palmer consistently adopts a wry what-a-wacko attitude toward his subject. Ungern's career is so steeped in incredible cruelties that such a reaction seems altogether natural—once or twice. But Palmer never dispenses with the flippant, knowing tone, even when his material is strewn with carnage. "Ungern," we learn, "had other hobbies beside planning genocide." After fighting the Red Army, "Ungern lined up the four hundred prisoners taken during the battle and, using his magic-communist-detecting powers, ran his eyes over them and picked out a hundred as either commissars or Jews. They were killed; their comrades were reluctantly mobilised into Ungern's army."

It's a shame that Palmer has exhumed the Mad Baron seemingly just to shrug and suggest we get a load of this guy. Revisiting Ungern's fervid convictions could have furnished an opportunity to defend, for example, the "intentionalist" model of history, which insists

that horrors such as the Holocaust emerge from the coherent visions of individual and state actors. But Palmer is clearly more at ease in a dismissive posture. “Of all the great vanished ideologies,” he writes, “monarchism, especially religious monarchism, often seems to be the most ridiculous. It is hard to imagine that anybody could regard the deeply stupid Nikolas II or the drooling, retarded Taisho emperor, for example, as the representative of God’s will on earth.” But that’s precisely the historian’s task: to resist the impulse to write off such beliefs as ridiculous. Palmer carefully elucidates the origins of Ungern’s czarist pan-Mongolism, but he never manages to understand how one might have taken such ideas seriously.

Grann *does* take Fawcett seriously and is richly rewarded: Harrowed by his own (considerably more comfortable and entertaining) trip into the remote Amazon, he manages mostly to clear up the mystery surrounding Fawcett’s 1925 disappearance. More than that, however, he discovers—and it would be unfair to a splendid, suspenseful book to say just how—what a few jungle anthropologists have come to believe is the surprising truth about Z. By his own journalistic *autopsis*, he vindicates not only Fawcett’s obsession with Z but his own obsession with Fawcett.

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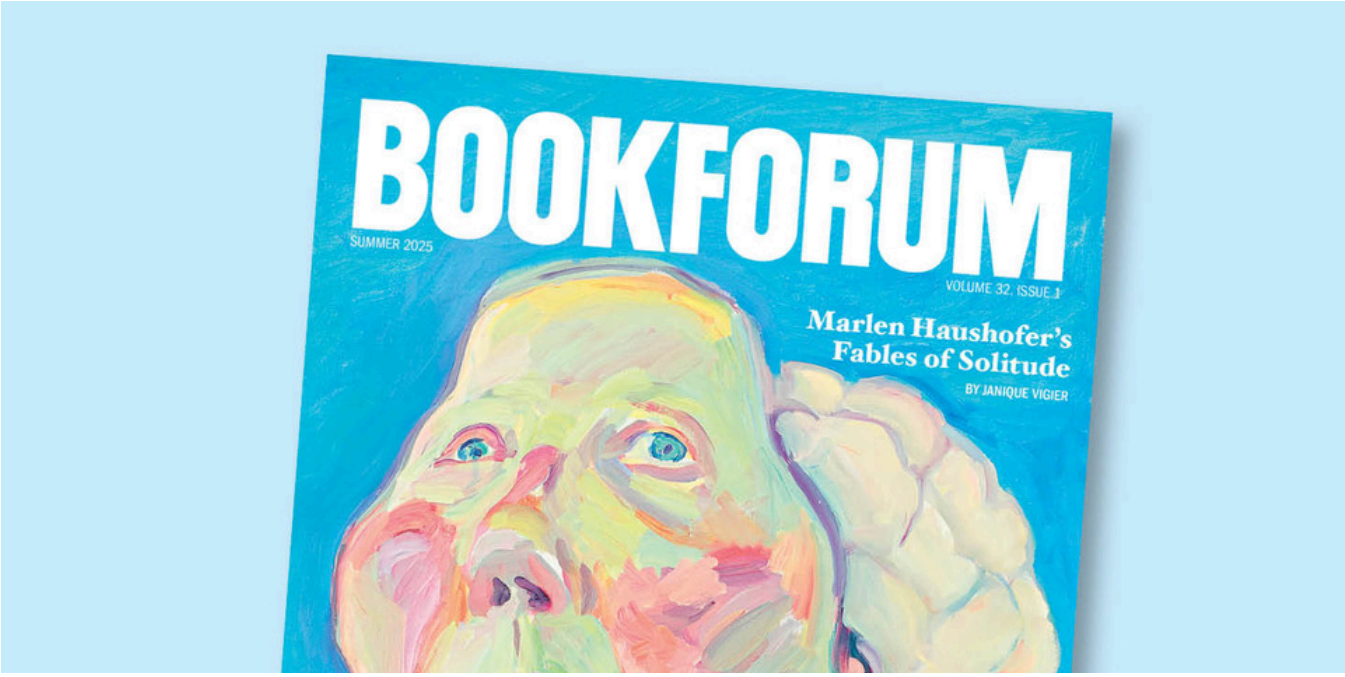
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