

The World That Never Was
A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists and Secret Agents

Alex Butterworth

London: The Bodley Head, 2010.

Hbk. xii, 482 pp. Illus, notes, bibliography, index. RRP £25.00

ISBN 978-0-224-07807-8

Richard Alexander

As the subtitle suggests, this is a book with many stories, plots and subplots, all interwoven into a highly readable and entertaining (and occasionally thoughtful) text. It covers the period from the Paris Commune to the First World War and geographically stretches from Moscow to Chicago. Butterworth has clearly done a lot of legwork researching in various archives, as well as reading a wide range of texts, and has brought them together in this formidable book.

Some of the main characters will be well-known to those familiar with the history of the anarchist movement: Kropotkin, Malatesta, Goldman, Michel, Reclus and others. They are placed within the wider revolutionary movement that includes the likes of Morris, Lenin, Kravchinsky (Stepniak), at a time when the revolutionary movement was in deadly struggle with capital and the state, and its paid protectors. There is, inevitably, plenty of attention paid to the likes of Ravachol, Henry, Vaillant and other propaganda-by-deed dynamiters, stabbers, shooters and expropriators.

It is the anti-revolutionary forces that will be less familiar; the Okhrana chief Peter Rachkovsky, in particular being central to this tale, with infiltration of revolutionary groups; his recruiting of revolutionaries and turning them into informers; the use of his star agent Abraham Hekkelman (aka Landesén, Arkady Harting) to foment violent acts as a pretext for state repression and manipulation of interstate relationships; not to forget his use of forgeries to incite anti-semitism as a deliberate way of splitting the working class and turning it against itself. Supporting roles are played by the likes of Inspector William Melville of the English Special Branch and connections with the Russian Okhrana

To further complicate matters there are individuals such as Marquis Henri de Rochefort-Lucay, someone well-connected to the anarchist movement but

equally willing to support the dictatorial ambitions of General Georges Boulanger and to foster anti-semitism, and the freelance hoaxer 'Leo Taxil' (aka Gabriel Jogan-Pages), the author of an infamous anti-masonic diatribe, and other notable journalistic coups.

Yet another layer to the story, told in strict chronological order (apart from a prologue that introduces several key players totally out of sequence, leaving the reader puzzled why they have been included), is the cultural background to these stories. These range from the novels of the likes of Jules Verne, the paintings of the postimpressionists such as Paul Signac, Paul Seurat and Camille Pissarro, and editor Felix Feneon, among others.

Inevitably the story has to be selective, so there's no consideration of the bomb that exploded at the San Francisco Preparedness Day parade on Saturday, July 22 1916, which resulted in the finding of two labour leaders Billings and Mooney guilty of the outrage (only to be pardoned many years later when the state admitted there was no evidence of their participation in the act) – an outcome that echoed that of the Chicago martyrs (apart from the fact that some were executed before they were pardoned.) The extensive bibliography and chapter source essays show plenty of research went into the text but also some pretty obvious gaps: for example key autobiographical works by Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman and Peter Kropotkin are missing.

This will be a welcome addition to the literature of the period. Even those who have read widely will welcome Butterworth's skill at pulling all the threads together in a single volume. Alongside students of political history another constituency will be the readers of the Boris Akunin 'Erast Fandorin' series of novels. By coincidence, I was reading his *The State Counsellor*, and the Combat Group in the novel appears modelled on the Socialist Revolutionary Party combat unit, which is mentioned in the Butterworth book. And the themes of agent provocateurs, politicians manipulating revolutionaries for their own ends, and the underground world inhabited by the revolutionaries themselves, complete with sympathetic business men and chemists, not to mention highborn ladies with veiled faces, are common to both books.

Overall I can recommend this. It's not perfect, but anyone wanting an introduction to the period and the political activities of both revolutionaries and anti-revolutionaries will find this a well-researched and thoughtful book.