
Reviews

Jack Hepworth, *Preparing for Power: The Revolutionary Communist Party and its Curious Afterlives, 1976-2020*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2023, xii + 273pp; ISBN 9781350242371, £85.00, hbk; ISBN 9781350242395, £76.50, ebk

The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) is undoubtedly a curious organization that has embarked on a strange and singular journey since its formation in 1976 (and it should not be confused with the new party of that name, formerly Socialist Appeal, led by Allan Woods). In the 1980s it was a small and rather idiosyncratic Trotskyist organization; in 2000 its magazine *Living Marxism* (LM) lost a libel suit brought by ITN after falsely alleging the broadcaster had faked photographs of a Serbian concentration camp; in 2019 the Conservative election victory was welcomed in the pages of *spiked online*, a website created and managed by former RCP luminaries such as Frank Furedi, Mick Hume and Brendan O'Neill. The principal aim of Jack Hepworth's excellent monograph is to explore and explain the evolution of the RCP from intransigent Trotskyism to its current orientation, variously described as 'radical humanism' or as 'right-wing libertarianism'. Based on extensive documentary and archival research as well as detailed interviews with key activists, the book is a compelling account of one of the far left's most unusual organizations.

The origins of the RCP can be traced to a 1973 split in the International Socialists (precursor of the Socialist Workers Party) when a small group of members became increasingly sceptical of the IS belief that political class consciousness would rapidly develop from workers' involvement in strikes. For David Yaffe and Frank Furedi, this orientation seriously downplayed the importance of Marxist ideas and the role of a vanguard party in their transmission to militant workers. A few years later Yaffe and Furedi parted company and Furedi's new group began to develop a distinct and radical orientation towards the building of a revolutionary party. The Revolutionary Communist Tendency (Party from 1981) firmly rejected both social democracy and communism, as did all Trotskyist groups, but was even more scathing about the 'radical left' milieu from which it had emerged. The radical (or Trotskyist) left, it claimed, was insufficiently critical of the Labour Party, of the British state and of trade union

militancy but was *too* critical of anti-imperialist organizations such as the Provisional IRA. For these reasons they had all failed to build a Leninist vanguard party, a task which now fell to the hundred or so cadres of the RCP. Central to the development of political class consciousness was an ideological struggle to disseminate Marxist theory, particularly around the key issues of anti-racism and anti-imperialism. Once workers came to see the racist and imperialist character of the British state and their intimate connections to British capitalism, their reformist illusions would be shattered: hence the creation of the RCP front organizations Workers Against Racism (WAR) and the Irish Freedom Movement (IFM).

Hepworth states that by the late 1980s RCP membership had reached approximately 300 whilst its front organizations, WAR and IFM, counted several dozen branches, but it had very little presence in the trade union movement. Its membership showed a heavy concentration of students and graduates, attracted by the group's emphasis on ideas and debate. This period also revealed two of the longstanding hallmarks of the RCP and its successors, namely its iconoclasm and its hubris. During the early months of the 1984-85 miners' strike the RCP argued that sectional divisions were jeopardizing the strike and could only be overcome by a national ballot. The unpopularity of this demand amongst NUM members and their radical left supporters only emboldened RCP cadres, for whom it was clear evidence of the group's distinctiveness. In the realm of electoral politics, the RCP not only refused to call for a Labour vote but seriously harboured ambitions of supplanting the Labour Party as the main political expression of the working class. Hepworth shows that its dismal electoral results, with less than one per cent of the vote in 1983 and 1987, left the RCP leadership undeterred and convinced them even more work was needed to achieve what they still imagined to be a feasible and realistic goal.

It was the collapse of the Soviet and East European economies that eventually drove the RCP leadership to a radical reappraisal of their political project. The events in Eastern Europe, coupled with the decline of industrial militancy and the rightward shift of the Labour Party signified the working class was no longer a significant political actor, with a sense of collective agency, and consequently the project of building a revolutionary, anti-capitalist vanguard party was off the agenda: hence the dissolution of the RCP in 1996. The new political priority was therefore to rebuild a sense of political agency that would in turn help with the recomposition of the working class. How was this to be done? According to Furedi and Hume, a growing volume of state regulation and surveillance in areas as diverse as health, education, childcare and media, was emasculating people's sense of their own capacity to change the world. The need to

help people recover a sense of agency, or what Hepworth calls a 'radical humanism', therefore led the former cadres of the RCP increasingly to challenge almost all forms of state intervention, a theme that first emerged in public debate around the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s. Government advice in response to AIDS centred on the importance of safe sex or abstinence, a sensible policy in the absence of any cure for the illness, but the RCP read this measure as a form of 'moral and repressive authoritarianism' designed to create a 'culture of fear' that would suppress people's own capacity to reflect and act for themselves.

Following the demise of *Living Marxism* in 2000, the leading figures of the RCP created a number of outlets for the promotion of their anti-statist agenda, most notably the website *spiked online* and the Institute (now the Academy) of Ideas. The website mostly comprises highly polemical attacks on state intervention and regulation, particularly in areas such as diversity and identity politics where it derides 'cosmopolitan elites' in the name of an authentic people's sensibility.

Hepworth notes the suggestion of a radical shift to the right by the RCP but is keen to rebut this claim, stressing the continuities in their 'core ideas', the capacity of people to change the world and the iniquities of capitalism, whilst noting the changed circumstances that led to the reworking of class agency into popular agency. However it could be argued that 'radical humanism' can manifest in different ways under different conditions and be articulated within substantially different political programmes. Populist, right wing libertarians who have railed against the state in many parts of Europe and Marxist radicals who promote trade union militancy and anti-imperialist demonstrations can both claim to be 'radical humanists' but surely the substantive differences in their policies are more striking than the common theme of people's capacity to act. Most, though not all, of the key contributors to *spiked online* may claim a continuity in their views from 1980s Trotskyism to contemporary libertarianism, but their polemics and positions on contemporary issues almost invariably align them with the political right. They may also claim to have transcended the left-right dichotomy but that is because their current world view is structured around the authoritarian-liberal axis, which crosscuts, but does not negate, the existence or significance of the left-right axis. Whatever one's view of the continuity thesis, Hepworth's monograph is a fascinating, rigorous and comprehensive study of an intriguing organization.

John Kelly

Paul Preston, *'Perfidious Albion': Britain and the Spanish Civil War* The Clapton Press, London 2024; 280 pp.; ISBN 9781913693350, £14.99 pbk.

The Spanish Civil War – or just ‘Spain’ for so many on the left – continues to fascinate. Hot on the heels of Richard Baxell’s *Forged in Spain* (featuring biographies of ten ‘ordinary’ International Brigaders), the Clapton Press (which has a big interest in ‘Spain’) has released a related volume by Paul Preston. The production is simple, with no illustrations, but the typeface is easy on the eye, the proofing is near meticulous, and the cover is colourful and well-designed. Preston is a distinguished historian of Spain. His sympathy with the Second Spanish Republic is evident most obviously in *We Saw Spain Die* (2009), an analysis of foreign correspondents and their reportage of the war, and *Spanish Holocaust* (2012), a prize-winning account of right-wing terror in Spain from 1931 to the 1950s. *Perfidious Albion* is a collection of essays in seven chapters and three parts. Some have been published already in academic journals and there is a little repetition, an occupational hazard for the ‘proliferati’. The first part examines the hypocrisy of British foreign policy on Spain in the 1930s, the second, by way of contrast, discusses the role of international humanitarian aid in the war, and the third assesses four leading ‘writer-historians’ (George Orwell, Herbert Southworth, Burnett Bolloten, and Gerald Brenan) and their influence on British perceptions of the Spanish Civil War.

Part one of the book comprises three chapters. Preston explains his title in the eponymous chapter 1, arguing that if the Nationalists began the war with various advantages – such as greater unity and a more professional army – the Non-Intervention Pact was critical to Franco’s victory. Given the steady advance of fascism, the collapse of democracy in Italy (1922), Germany (1933), and Austria (1934), and the German militarisation of the Rhineland, it was indeed extraordinary that Britain and France stood by while Germany, Italy, and Portugal sent substantial military aid to Franco. Like Spain, France had a Popular Front government and Prime Minister Léon Blum favoured the despatch of France’s woeful warplanes initially. But the French were soon deterred by fear of a backlash in France and the lack of British support. Having spent millions on the Maginot line to reduce their dependency on Britain in squaring up to Germany, Hitler caused the French to conclude that British backing was vital. Preston emphasises London’s responsibility in persuading Blum to believe that if intervention in Spain led to war with Germany, France would be on its ‘Tod’. As a fig-leaf for inaction, Blum proposed a Non-Intervention Pact. His Majesty’s government warmed to the idea and would promote it more enthusiastically. Twenty-seven countries eventually endorsed the London-based Non-

Intervention Committee, which aimed to discourage all external involvement in Spain. Brazenly, Germany, Italy, and Portugal signed up to Non-Intervention while continuing to arm Franco. In practice the pact provided an alibi for the democracies to ignore Madrid's pleas for help and made it more difficult for the Republic to acquire weapons on the international markets. Pandit Nehru called it 'the supreme farce of our time'. A second British-inspired blow came with the Munich Agreement. By August 1938 Juan Negrín knew that his regime's only hope was to stay in the fight long enough to be able to side with Britain and France when the expected European war broke out over Hitler's claim to the Sudetenland. Chamberlain's concessions at Munich signalled the end for the dying Republic.

British establishment mentalities are interrogated in greater depth in Chapter 2 on 'Anglo-Saxon' views of Lluís Companys. As president of Catalonia during the Civil War, Companys had his work cut managing riots, revolts, strikes, and the pressures generated by thousands of refugees flooding into Barcelona. For some, he was a trimmer or an opportunist, bending with the wind; for others he was an astute ringmaster holding the fort in near-impossible circumstances. Preston is sympathetic, and one suspects his intention in reviewing the comments of British and American diplomats and correspondents is to reveal the mindsets of Anglo-American elites rather than assess Companys. Companys fled to France and was handed over by the Gestapo to Franco, who had him shot.

More perfidy is uncovered in Chapter 3 on Britain's role in Franco's naval blockade of the Basque country. The chapter provides further detail on how Britain and France denied military aid to Spain, even when they might have turned a blind eye. Most Royal Navy officers supported the Spanish insurgents but were more sympathetic to the Basques, who were seen as Catholic and anti-Communist as well as anti-fascist. In 1937 British merchantmen, under Royal Navy protection, evacuated some 50,000 Basque refugees. In celebrated instances, British ships also defied Franco's patrol boats to bring food to Bilbao. Still, it was embarrassing that the mighty Royal Navy seemed reluctant to confront Franco's ramshackle flotillas and papers like the *Daily Herald* made the most of it, invoking the ghosts of Queen Elizabeth I and Francis Drake. Philip Noel-Baker, no less, told the House of Commons: 'I believe this is the first time since 1588 that British ships have been menaced by the Spanish fleet'. Does no one in England know of the counter-armada? Or is it only the Irish who remember England's defeats?

After so much stupidity and cowardice, it's refreshing to read of the selfless heroism of Len Crome and Reginald Saxton. Crome hailed from a Russian Jewish family in what became Latvia, and was working as a junior doctor in

Blackburn in July 1936. Pushed left by anti-Semitism, he joined the Scottish Ambulance Unit commanded by the formidable Fernanda Jacobsen. Freddie and her unit had a controversial career in the war, and Preston enhances the legend with intriguing details. Saxton was one of many inspired by Crome. South African born and Cambridge educated, he was, as Preston puts it, an example of the 'dedication and sacrifice that characterised the men and women of the International Brigades medical services'. Part two of the book concludes with a graphic description of an atrocity near Malaga. Preston has already written in extenso on atrocities in *Spanish Holocaust*, arguing that there was no equivalence between the systematic terror of the Nationalists and the incidental criminality on the Republican side. After failing to win a quick victory, Franco settled on a war of attrition, pursued not so much to conquer territory as to eliminate his enemies.

According to Preston, understanding 'Spain' from *Homage to Catalonia* is like learning about World War II from Spike Milligan's *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*. Here is no critique but a straightforward denunciation of Orwell as one who knew nothing of the macro and deliberately distorted the micro. While he concedes that Orwell's 'rich eye-witness observations' are a valuable historical source, he feels that *Homage to Catalonia*, and 'its film version', Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*, have done enormous damage by propagating the myth that the Republic was destroyed by internal counter-revolution rather than by Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini.

Perfidious Albion is rounded off with a historiographical valediction on Orwell, Southworth, Bolloten, and Brenan; the four most influential British/American writers of the Spanish Civil War up to the 1970s, as far as public history was concerned at any rate. Curiously, none were professional historians and all were inordinately affected by the Cold War in Preston's opinion. It's Preston's supreme achievement that he has come to displace them and shaped perceptions of twentieth century Spain in the anglo-sphere. Those who want to know why might begin with these concise, incisive, and entertaining essays.

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Mikhail S. Rekun, *How Russia Lost Bulgaria, 1878-1886. Empire Unguided*, Lexington Books, Lanham MD, 2019; 240 pp.; ISBN 9781498559638, £85.00, hbk.

Some books acquire a contemporary relevance that their authors might not have fully anticipated when they wrote them. Mikhail Rekun's volume, based on his doctoral thesis about an episode in late nineteenth-century international relations, and published five years ago, may be a case in point. The story Rekun tells is a vignette of the 'Eastern Question' and the inter-imperialist rivalry between the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the other European so-called 'Great Powers'. In April 1876, a rebellion of Bulgarian nationalists against Ottoman rule had been brutally suppressed. The Russian press raised a clamour against Turkish atrocities, and by April 1877 Russia was at war with the Ottoman Empire (pp.10-13). Victory for Russia, the Bulgarian nationalists and their allies in 1878 resulted in a very expansive new Bulgarian state, which the other European powers soon truncated in the Treaty of Berlin, redividing the Balkans among the rival imperialisms. But a new Principality of Bulgaria remained. It was a client state of Russia, in which Russian troops, advisors and even government ministers played a central role, with enthusiastic consent from both the Bulgarian political caste and the wider public – at first. Rekun's book is a painstaking account and analysis of how, largely through its own insensitivity and ineptitude, the Russian state managed in just eight years to squander its influence in Bulgaria and alienate the entire Bulgarian political spectrum. The estrangement was so complete that all relations were severed for a decade after 1886, and come World War I, as Rekun observes, Bulgaria and Russia fought on different sides (p.198).

The most resonant aspect of this story, though, concerns what would now be termed 'soft power' – the ability of a state to attract other states and peoples to align themselves with its interests through ideas, example or other non-coercive methods. It is very much a product of the modern era of mass politics. In one way or another, the Russian state in its various guises has tried to do this for well over a century and a half. And time and again, the effectiveness of these attempts has been sabotaged by the behaviour of the Russian state itself.

Late nineteenth-century Russia, as Rekun shows, tried to use the big idea of 'Pan-Slavism', which proclaimed the affinity of all Slav peoples, in its foreign policy. This was not originally a Russian idea – modern Pan-Slavism was founded in 1848 at a congress in Prague. But Russians gave the idea their own twist – that the one independent Slavic state (Russia) was the natural leader of the Slavic world. This variant, with its promise of Russian assistance, had some resonance among nationalistic Orthodox Slavs chafing under Ottoman rule (pp.13-15) and seeking a patron for their national liberation struggle. In the case of Bulgaria, the pretext of defending the rights and interests of Orthodox Christians meshed almost perfectly with Russia's imperialist designs on the Ottoman

Empire, including control of Constantinople. Having carved a client Principality of Bulgaria out of Ottoman territory in 1878, Russia had every incentive to make it work. But although the arrogant German princeling Alexander von Battenberg (a nephew of Tsar Alexander II), whom the European powers had jointly foisted on Bulgaria as monarch, played his part in wrecking the relationship, the main responsibility lay with the Russian side. Rekun lays out the bureaucratic chaos in St Petersburg which led to Russian agents in Bulgaria acting largely as they pleased, boorishly meddling in domestic politics and pursuing their own interests, but he also shows how the Russians' understanding of Pan-Slavism led them to expect 'more obedience and gratitude from the Balkan peoples than was reasonable' (p.192). Moreover, Russia's perceived state interests could override the principles of Pan-Slavism. Thus in 1885 when Battenberg annoyed the Tsar by successfully annexing another Bulgarian province, Eastern Rumelia, from the Ottomans, Russia responded by withdrawing its troops from Bulgarian service, and organising a coup d'état against him. The estrangement was complete.

It is interesting to compare Russian Pan-Slavism with later versions of Russian 'soft power'. After the October revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks fundamentally reoriented Russia's foreign policy to become a revolutionary factor in world politics, actively working to undermine the imperialist status quo everywhere. Again, they used an idea developed outside Russia – Marxist socialism – but with a distinctly Russian twist. They universalised the experience and ideas of Lenin's Bolshevism to create what became 'Marxism-Leninism', and fostered the development of communist parties around the world, all of which unconditionally supported the Soviet state. Large parts of the labour and socialist movements of Europe adopted the ideology, as did many anti-imperialist movements in the colonies. Even in states whose official policy was anti-Soviet, the pro-Soviet sentiments of a significant part of the population became a powerful political factor.

Of course, the international communist movement was *much* more than just another Russian soft-power project. Radical socialists around the world from 1917 onwards embraced it because it seemed to offer a viable way forward, and communism's heyday in the decades after World War II coincided with a loosening of the CPSU's ideological monopoly. But the soft power the USSR wielded as the centrepiece of the world socialist system had a genuinely global reach and appeal. And, just as in the Tsarist period, its effectiveness was periodically undermined by Moscow's short-term state interests – most notoriously in August 1939, when a powerful movement for anti-fascist unity was destroyed overnight by the Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact, or in February 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev unilaterally renounced a large part of the ideology for his own domestic political advantage.

Nonetheless, even in the 1980s, the USSR still enjoyed considerable international prestige among revolutionary and national liberation movements in the

developing world and elsewhere. The last vestiges of Soviet-era soft power were destroyed by Mikhail Gorbachev's renunciation of the entire socialist and revolutionary heritage in his quixotic pursuit of acceptance by the major capitalist states. Since 2000, under Vladimir Putin, post-Soviet Russia has been trying to reclaim the status of a 'great power'. But it has not really found a formula to *attract* friends and allies comparable either to Pan-Slavism or Marxism-Leninism. The Putin regime's main positive soft-power project appears strikingly parochial, based around the cultural notion of a 'Russian world' centred on the Russian Federation. And even here, as so often before, since February 2022 Russia's rulers have been wrecking what they had been painstakingly trying to build, as they shower the formerly mainly Russian-speaking east of Ukraine with artillery shells...

How Russia Lost Bulgaria is a useful, entertaining and scholarly historical study which, unfortunately, is unlikely to circulate far beyond an academic readership of international relations specialists. This is a pity, because the story contains much food for thought when viewed from the perspective of 2024.

Francis King

Mike Tyldesley, *Liberate and Federate: Three Proudhonian socialists in an age of fascism, Stalinism and war*, Irene Publishing (www.lulu.com/spotlight/irene), 2024; 194 pp.; ISBN 9789188061652; £22.94 pbk.

This book offers an introduction to three European socialists who fled their homelands and took refuge in France: Georges Gurvitch (1894-1965), who fled the Soviet Union, Charles Trentin (1885-1944) and Andrea Caffi (1887-1955), who both arrived from Fascist Italy. At what Victor Serge called 'midnight in the century', these Proudhonian thinkers developed a libertarian socialism that stood out from prevailing Stalinism and Fascism. By drawing on their work, which has rarely been translated into English, and tracing their peripatetic and often tragic existences, Mike Tyldesley offers insights into an oft-neglected current of socialism which continues to generate interest.

In their respective manifestoes, all three thinkers conceive of an anti-totalitarian socialism that both liberates and federates. Gurvitch, who eventually became the 'Pope' of sociology at the Sorbonne, theorised a 'social law' which analysed how social relationships and dynamics are distorted by hierarchical organisation. He sought to reconcile socialist planning with industrial democracy, and promoted the idea of *autogestion*, or self-management. Like Gurvitch, Caffi, who had also been born in Russia, had a negative view of the reality of Bolshevik rule, and was in favour of a new society based on associations, cooperatives and

trades union movements. Trentin critiqued the centralising tendencies of the national state and was in favour of peasant control of agriculture.

During the Second World War, these three Proudhonians were stoutly anti-fascist, but also opposed to the post-war reconstitution of the old French political parties which, for some, had led to the debacle of 1940. However, the Resistance would be unified in a way which marginalised them, the old parties of the left would re-emerge in France and Italy, and Trentin's Action Party would swiftly collapse soon after his premature death in 1944. Their hopes of the Soviet Union evolving towards a more decentralised, council-based socialism were also dashed. What's more, a federal Europe seemed to create a new, supra-national bureaucracy.

But if these thinkers could be seen to be the losers of history, they do have legacies, as Tyldesley demonstrates. Gurvitch's notion of *autogestion* was taken up by the French new left, especially after May 1968, although it was cynically instrumentalised then abandoned by François Mitterrand. Trentin is primarily remembered as a Resistance hero in both France and Italy, but there exist two research and study centres inspired by him, while Norberto Bobbio and the far-right Northern League have both chosen him as reference points. Caffi's work still resonates among both democratic socialists and anarchists. Intriguingly, despite his dogged efforts, Tyldesley cannot find clear evidence of these contemporary thinkers ever meeting, although they did cite each other's work.

A couple of questions arise from this valuable study. Firstly, there is the link between this libertarian current and French philosopher and writer Albert Camus. Caffi's writings in Dwight Macdonald's New York-based journal *Politics* on attempts to carry through revolution and their failure, his rejection of violence, and the distinction made between 'the people' and 'mass politics', strongly echo Camus's criticism of Jacobinism and Communism in *The Rebel* (Tyldesley points out that, on his way to New York, Caffi's fellow Proudhonian, Nicola Chiaromonte, met Camus in Algeria in 1941). Another issue is the role of freemasonry, to which all three thinkers belonged. Apart from the secrecy and mutual aid that the Lodges offered during this 'midnight of the century', to what extent did the ideas and organisation of freemasonry chime with their libertarian and federalist outlook?

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Andrew Whitehead, *A Devilish Kind of Courage: Anarchists, Aliens and the Siege of Sidney Street*, Reaktion Books, London, 2024; 1 March 2024; 320 pp., 41 illustrations; ISBN 9781789148442, £15.99, hbk.

Growing up in East London in the 1950s, we were still regaled with tales of *The Siege of Sidney Street* by our grandparents, who remembered the event from their youth. Like all urban myths, the story had been embellished, particularly the role of Peter the Painter until, with a mixture of fascinated horror and a certain admiration, he became the larger than life character who managed to escape from the surrounding police blockade in an almost magical disappearance. I next came across the incident in *A Death Out Of Season* by Emanuel Litvinoff – a finely written novel, very exciting and evocative, but a novel for all that.

So Andrew Whitehead's *A Devilish Kind of Courage* stirred my interest as a research-based account of the famous siege. It does not disappoint, as the true story, while quite different from my Nan's romance, is just as exciting. His depiction of the Anarchist political scene in the early years of the twentieth century is as interesting as the siege itself and provides valuable background to the dramatic events. East End Yiddish life centred on the Jubilee Street Club, run by Rudolf Rocker. This was a centre for Jewish Anarchist exiles from Russia and Latvia, a space for both sociability, social assistance and political discussion. There were two main strands of the Anarchist movement, on the one hand, those who believed in 'Propaganda by the Deed' and 'Armed Expropriation', activities that today would be described as terrorism, and on the other hand, those who advocated a mass-based collectivist approach. Three important figures in the latter faction who appear in the book are Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta and Rudolf Rocker himself. There is a glimpse of the kind of debates that took place in the account given of Rocker's heated discussion with some Latvian Anarchists, which finally convinces them not to bomb the Lord Mayor's Parade in 1909.

Of course, some of the expropriators, while claiming to rob banks to fund the movement back in Russia, were just gangsters using Anarchism as an excuse for self-enrichment. But there is little doubt that the men and women involved in the Houndsditch bank robbery and the subsequent siege were genuine revolutionaries, as well as being incredibly brave. It is perhaps an indication of the level of antisemitism and political oppression in the Russian Empire, that intelligent, courageous men and women felt driven to take such desperate measures.

The book itself concentrates on the siege itself and the individuals concerned, of whom a remarkably complete picture emerges from a variety of sources. Their individual motivation begins to emerge and we see real human beings with hopes and fears, loves and hatreds. At a time today when Islamic

terrorists are painted by the bourgeois press as cardboard cut-out madmen, it is interesting to have such an analysis of an earlier generation of terrorist, who were subject to the same kind of sensationalist media coverage. One does not have to agree with a person's politics to understand their motivation.

Another parallel with today is the bigoted, lazy, racist opinions expressed by senior police officers in their internal reports. The attempt by the senior Metropolitan Police detective, Harold Brust, to implicate Errico Malatesta in the plot is a case in point. Despite admitting that there is no evidence against him, Brust still refers to Malatesta's 'career of wholesale villainy'.

No spoilers, what exactly happened to Peter the Painter is more prosaic than the East End mythology of my youth, but read the book to find out. If I may finish on another personal note, the book brought back memories of sitting in the Hackney Labour Club in the 1970s talking to an elderly comrade about the working class movement at the turn of the century. She suddenly smiled and said: 'In those days, the East End was full of Russian Anarchists, all of them ever so handsome'. Then she chuckled and changed the subject.

The book has certainly renewed my interest in East End Jewish Radicals before the First World War and brings a human side to an important period in working-class politics in East London. I would thoroughly recommend it.

Steve Cushion