Because existing society was governed by force, Élisée Reclus claimed in 1878, dissenters could legitimately resort to violence. Every young man had a choice to make: "Either you are a robber, assassin and firebrand with the oppressors — the happy and pot-bellied — or you are a robber, an assassin and a firebrand with the oppressed, the exploited, the suffering and the underfed."

Frustrated at their inability to usher in a just world that ignored national borders and divisions based on class or religion, many anarchists agreed. In "The World That Never Was," freelance writer Alex Butterworth traverses three continents to follow the rise and fall of these radicals and the activities of the anti-terrorist agents who orchestrated a series of “black operations” to wipe them out.

Butterworth is a gifted, if ungrammatical, storyteller. At his best, he brings to life the social and intellectual ferment of the late 19th century and a cast of characters, ranging from Peter Kropotkin, the Russian scientist-cum-revolutionary, to Peter Rachkovsky, the head of the Okhrana, the czar's sinister secret police.

Butterworth thinks that as a tactic, terrorism was self-defeating, alienating the very people it sought to attract. Easily misinterpreted, he writes, "propaganda by deed" came to mean no more than "arbitrary retribution; the last resort of the hopeless, the damaged, and the dispossessed." Anarchists became perceived not as utopians but as maligned figures with bombs beneath their coats.

And yet, he argues, with an eye on our own "war on terror," they did have someone other than themselves to blame. Compared to the nefarious activities of the Okhrana and Britain's Special Branch, Butterworth says, anarchist explosions amounted to “at most surface turbulence.” In the name of law and order, he demonstrates in mesmerizing detail, those in authority carried out bombings and assassinations in England, France, Russia and the United States.

Butterworth's indictment of the secret police is, as they say, a slam dunk. Nonetheless, he doesn't always connect the dots.

Since fraud and forgery were part of Okhrana's "repertoire of intrigue," Butterworth, who admits to inventing a few scenes in "The World That Never Was," allows himself to speculate without evidence that Russian agents framed French Army officer Alfred Dreyfus. And to opine that the roots of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which depicts anarchists, socialists and liberals as dupes of a diabolical Jewish conspiracy, "clearly lie in the world over which Rachkovsky presided."

But even though, on occasion, “The World That Never Was” is more drama than “true story,” it serves as a timely tale of a vicious cycle in which violence begets violence — and innocence, idealism and justice are the victims.

The World That Never Was: A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists, and Secret Agents, by Alex Butterworth (480 pages; Pantheon; $30)