Ely, Christopher. Underground Petersburg. Radical Populism, urban space, and the tactics of subversion in reform-era Russia. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016. 325 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £27.50 (paperback)

REVOLUTIONARY populism of the mid-nineteenth century has been well served by historical writing. Soviet historiography saw the seeds of Bolshevik Marxism in the tactics of insurgency used by radicals in the nineteenth century. Magisterial studies by Franco Venturi and Avraham Yarmolinsky provided thorough accounts of the ideology, strategy and tactics of populist and socialist movements in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. The number of chroniclers is unsurprising, as the story of the populists was a dramatic one that illuminates diverse fields including radical politics, public spectacle and the use of terrorism. Significant acts included the ‘going to the people’ movement in 1874 and the successful use of regicide by the People’s Will in 1881. Christopher Ely’s new work seeks to combine this well-worn narrative of insurgent struggle against tsarist autocracy with an exploration of the dynamics of the developing urban environment. His contribution is to challenge analyses of populism that see the struggle as primarily ideological – instead, Ely focuses on environmental and strategic factors as key to understanding the populists; particularly, he focuses much attention on the development of the revolutionary underground as a space for populist mobilization. Drawing on Foucault, Ely conceptualizes St. Petersburg as a battleground where power could be won or lost; he considers the urban environment to be a ‘heterotopia’ where the legitimacy of the state could be successfully challenged by insurgency due to the layout of the city. In Ely’s words, ‘by similarly isolating radical populism from any all-embracing justification, or lack thereof, we can more easily see it as rooted both in a specific time and place and in the development of a discrete set of practices that did not require coherent ideological scaffolding’ (p. 17). The transition from a rural to urban setting during the 1870s transformed the tactics of the populists as they sought to use the city space to aid their cause. Ely convincingly argues that public space gave opponents of the autocracy a new space in which they could refine their arguments and techniques of resistance. The novelty and emotional attraction of the populist message led to a number of supporters being recruited to the cause. Ely assesses the development of revolutionary populism from 1855-1881 across eight tightly focused chapters. To demonstrate his arguments, Ely draws on a wide variety of source materials, including archival documents and, usefully, voluminous quotations from the populists themselves, and engages widely with the secondary literature on the subject.

In an interesting chapter, Ely examines how revolutionary insurgency was in effect performed through a series of public events. The first was the emergence of mass demonstrations. The demonstrations that accompanied the Balkan Crisis of 1875-1876, in spite of their support for autocracy, showed the potential for public disorder. More crucial to this story was the appearance of a number of ‘red funerals’ held for deceased populists during 1876. Following these funerals was the infamous trial of Vera Zasulich in 1878, which allowed for a public articulation of the populist message (p. 164). Realizing its mistake in allowing these non-autocratic voices to be aired, the government sought to drive the populist movement underground. Close monitoring in the following decade meant populists were largely restricted to a revolutionary underground, using the passport system, fake identities and communal housing to evade capture. The populists, not without debate, shifted their tactics from public demonstrations and popular engagement to terrorism: the development of violent methods of revolutionary struggle is recounted in a detailed final chapter.

Ely is good on the emotional and psychological attraction of the populists’ struggle against the autocracy. He is right to focus on the appeal of populist politics for the disaffected young, and to note the divergent opinions within the populist movement. It is surely sensible to conclude that populism was as much a response to local circumstances and particular factors as it was a coherent ideological doctrine. The current author diverges somewhat from Ely on the position of ideology within the populist movement. The categories of ideology, strategy and society – the rich variety of factors that Ely draws upon for his study – were surely subject to more cross-pollination than is sometimes suggested. Indeed, ideas of the necessity of struggle against the political project of autocracy were central to populist mentalities. Indeed, in the words of revolutionary activist Nikolai Shelgunov, quoted in the book, ‘the idea of freedom gripped everybody’ at the outset of the reform era in the late 1850s and early 1860s (p. 43). Even when ideology was not well understood by its exponents, it played a significant role in encouraging populist practice. That said this is a book that greatly increases our knowledge of the populist movement and radical politics. It should interest not only those with an interest in the history of late imperial Russia, but those researching urban history and the history of terrorism.

GEORGE GILBERT

Department of History

University of Southampton

**©** 2017, George Gilbert