

Illusions of Progress

by Robert Bruce (February 2013)

One may say almost anything one likes about history except that it is rational. The very word sticks in one's throat.

– Joseph Conrad

Connoisseurs of Joseph Conrad's grimly dystopian novels will be familiar with the vivid portrayals of the anarchist revolutionaries who stalked Europe at the tail end of the Belle Époque, bringing with them the Russian fad for political assassinations which was to rock its major capitals, and create something akin to a moral panic in bourgeoisie society. If for the most part these acts of violence were perpetrated against the kind of minor public official immolated in the opening scene of *Under Western Eyes*, the disciples of Bakunin and Nechayev nevertheless managed to pull off some spectacular coups – in 1881 the Liberator Tsar Alexander II was murdered, to be followed by King Umberto of Italy (July 1900) and President McKinley (September 1901). If political power, almost by definition, evaded them, their violent enactments of propaganda by deed have nevertheless left a powerful imprint on the western mind. Modern terrorism, and its idea of refashioning the world through spectacular acts of apocalyptic violence is largely a product of these morbid nihilist speculations turned into deeds.