H-Diplo Roundtable XXIV-2 on Dragostinova. The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene

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H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIV-2


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Theodora Dragostinova’s compelling The Cold War from the Margins offers an invaluable opportunity to discuss how to write the history of the global Cold War from the perspective of a small state. The book discusses Todor Zhivkov’s Bulgaria, an Eastern European socialist dictatorship, and its search for international position in the 1970s, when the principle of the national state became truly global. A cultural historian of the Balkans, Dragostinova asks why national heritage became the main export product of Bulgaria and a tool of “reinvigorating” the state socialist project at home (3). Between

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1968 and 1982, the Bulgarian state attempted to cast off its role of a Soviet appendage and strengthen its international standing in the non-Communist world. The book demonstrates the global scope of this diplomatic effort, which ranged from the non-Communist Balkans (Yugoslavia, Greece), Western Europe, Mexico, India and Nigeria to the members of the Bulgarian diaspora who resided in North America. What kind of history of the global Cold War emerges “from the margins” of a small-power statehood? This question addresses a fundamental dilemma, so familiar to historians of modern Eastern Europe, of “how to unapologetically write the big history of small states,” as Dragostinova writes in her response, without perpetuating the optics of center-periphery.

Tracing Zhivkov’s Bulgaria on international stage illuminates the logic of the global 1970s in new ways. Dragostinova strongly argues that the seventies were less about decline and more about balance between contradictory secular processes of the time. Like many other non-Western countries, Bulgaria balanced between “the cynicism about the prospect of radical political change” (18) and the faith in the rejuvenating power of nationalism and socialism. Was Bulgaria indeed “representative of the wider global mood” (16)? Dragostinova argues that the 1970s paved the way to “anxious globalism of today,” but she questions historiography that sees the decade mainly as years of crisis. If an act of ‘going global’ by means of cultural pageantry is a metric of success, then Bulgaria had grounds for “measured optimism” (222-223). As one British diplomat wrote in 1977 from Sofia, cultural exchanges functioned as a way “to keep the temperature [of the Cold War] from cooling too noticeably” (130). Bulgaria heavily invested in the export and import of culture, putting in motion things and carefully selected people. For members of Bulgarian intelligentsia who traveled to the West and global South and visited international shows and exhibits that were organized at home, these events became an important, generational experience that was subsequently “forgotten in the rush to join Europe” (xvi). Dragostinova shares, for instance, that her parents worked as highly skilled professionals in Nigeria, a country that also imposed state control over national resources and cultural production to shield itself from Anglo-American dominance and civil war. The global seventies appear in Dragostinova’s book as a period of opportunities for nationalist autocracies that sought more stabilization and power.

Zhivkov’s Bulgaria certainly does not fully represent what happened in other Eastern European countries. Dragostinova argues that there was no such thing as a uniform Soviet Bloc experience. Consider the key theme of the book, a story of the national jubilee that celebrated thirteen hundred years of the Bulgarian state (which was established in 681). While several Eastern bloc countries faced mounting international debt and growing dissent, Bulgaria aggressively spent money on prestigious and lavish cultural events. Dragostinova makes plain that this state-sponsored “cultural extravaganza” (17) successfully co-opted local elites, which was not the case in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia. She aligns her book with a recent body of literature about modern and communist Eastern Europe (just to name only the research of John Connelly, Paulina Bren, Victor Petrov, Radina Vucetič, and the recent monographs of the roundtable’s members) that rejects an idea of coherent Eastern Europe as one coherent region or political bloc.[1]

What was then specific about Bulgarian cultural diplomacy? Paul Betts suggests in his review that the key to this question was Bulgaria’s status as a latecomer to the East-South exchanges. The flourishing literature on Second World’s Third World makes clear that Zhivkov’s quest for global recognition followed a path that other Communist regimes had paved since the 1950s and 1960s. What difference

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did it make that Bulgaria entered that stage, when Communism and anti-imperialism had lost its progressive edge? To answer this question, Betts argues, a comparative approach is needed. He also urges scholars to go beyond the history of what he calls “performative nationalism” to reveal the “actual impact” of Bulgarian cultural diplomacy on audiences at home and abroad, a task that would require, a dive into a much expanded and more diverse body of primary documents. Ultimately, Betts agrees with Dragostinova that the view “from the margins” is necessary to fully understand the nature of the Cold War. He also pushes this argument to a logical conclusion: if the Cold War was not just “a two-bloc affair,” then “the Cold War really had no margins.”

Rachel Applebaum also analyses Dragostinova’s books in terms of conceptual pay-offs and practical costs. She praises its “impressive geographic... and truly global scope.” Ironically enough, it is the world perspective that reveals how “Bulgaria’s international cultural offensive amounted to a form of nationalism.” For Applebaum the book is, first and foremost, about the irresistible power of nationalism. Dragostinova’s contribution invites to further study how the mix of nationalism and Communism shaped the world. At the same time, the question remains how to study the reception side of that story. In the book Dragostinova explains why her monograph includes European, British, and the US sources, but omits Mexican, Nigerian and Indian archives. Applebaum finds the problem of source selection very relevant, but notices that is should be considered in the context of gendered and social conditions of writing global history; she asks whether we reasonably demand an exhaustive intellectual performance –including multi-site research, command of innumerable languages, and time away from home - from one scholar.

Elidor Mëhilli, in turn, explores the full potential of Dragostinova’s cultural history of representations, arguing that the story of Bulgarian self-positioning reveals, from multiple entry points, “how Bulgaria had to deploy different registers when speaking to various parts of the globe.” At home, the Zhivkov regime openly imposed didacticism of “cultural-propaganda work” as proper to state socialism project. The same could not have been be done in the West, where Bulgaria felt it had to portray itself as less Sovietized and dictatorial than it actually was. These manipulations from “above” bring important insights about the arbitrary nature of power and politics in communist Bulgaria, Mëhilli stresses. A cordial relationship with India would not have been possible without the personal interest of Zhivkov’s daughter, Liudmila Zhivkov, in yoga, Eastern spirituality and her close friendship with the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. Still, it is worth exploring economic and political costs of the “astonishing” scope of the Bulgarian cultural diplomacy. After all, Bulgaria was not just a small state, but a socialist one. What were the actual limitations of this political theatre? Dragostinova’s book, as Mëhilli and other reviewers repeatedly note, leaves the category of “audiences” beyond the scope of analysis.

Laurien Crump’s review most thoroughly discusses what was special about the global 1970s. *The Cold War from the Margins* successfully portrays the 1970s as the decade of smaller powers. The perspective of a “small state” offers what Crump calls a “telescopic” view: the national perspective serves as lens to observe a wider world. What exactly the “advantages of smallness” are requires further study. Crump agrees with other reviewers that “the book covers so much ground... that it leaves an appetite for more.” This should be considered a compliment rather than a shortcoming.

In her response, Dragostinova reminds us that her main goal was to put “forgotten and oblivious” Bulgaria in the center of the conversation about globalization and Cold War. She seconds Mëhilli’s...
point that in history as much as in historiography, there exists a cultural hierarchy that decides “who gets to speak and in whose registers.” As students of Eastern Europe well know, speaking “from the margins” does require more explanatory work, which means more comparative and contextual work, and perhaps, to put it bluntly, more work hours. Following Applebaum, Dragostinova calls on scholars to be transparent about the practical aspects of writing a global history. She admits, however, that the reviewers’ emphasis on explaining Bulgaria’s national uniqueness helped clarify the historical specificity of her subject matter. Agreeing with her interlocutors, Dragostinova concludes that there is nothing inherently romantic about being a small, or a marginal national state. Zhivkov’s autocratic and fiercely patriotic campaigns made Bulgaria both quite effective and relatable in a world that became dominated by other rising, but insecure national states. Bulgaria’s eliminatory nationalism of the 1980s, which was marked by ethnic purges of the Muslim population, should be understood precisely in this context. For better or worse, as Dragostinova astutely shows, small states matter, because they have the capacity to generate politics with a global outreach and international consequences.

Participants:


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**Review by Rachel Applebaum, Tufts University**

Bulgaria has often been viewed as a peripheral actor in the Cold War, but in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it emerged as a major player on the global cultural scene. Between 1977 and 1981, this small country of fewer than 9 million people organized nearly 39,000 cultural events around the world, in cities as far-flung as Bucharest, New York, and New Delhi. Bulgaria’s cultural offensive involved foreign and domestic theaters. Bulgarian cultural officials sent museum exhibitions, films, photo exhibits, and folk-dance ensembles to countries around the world, while they hosted reciprocal demonstrations of foreign culture at home and oversaw the construction of new cultural monuments in Sofia. This ambitious global cultural campaign culminated in 1981 with lavish celebrations marking the 1300th “anniversary” of the founding of the medieval Bulgarian state and the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP). As these two anniversaries reveal, Bulgaria’s foreign cultural offensive was at once a product of nationalism and socialist internationalism: it was designed to promote the country’s national profile on the global stage, while bolstering the socialist system at home.
Theodora K. Dragostinova deftly tells the surprising story of Bulgaria’s multifaceted global cultural offensive in *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene*. The book explores several important topics, including cultural diplomacy, Cold War divisions, global development, socialist globalization, and the unexpected optimism of the 1970s. One of the book’s most important contributions to the existing literature on late socialism and the Cold War is its impressive geographic scope. As far as I know, it is the first book-length study to examine a socialist country’s cultural diplomacy during the Cold War from a truly global perspective. While the field of East European and Soviet international relations and cultural contacts has expanded rapidly over the past fifteen years, existing studies tend to focus exclusively on contacts with the capitalist west, interrelations among the socialist bloc countries, or ties with postcolonial states in the Global South. Yet as Dragostinova skillfully shows, even a “small socialist state” like Bulgaria, on the “margins” of the superpowers’ systemic competition had global aspirations that transcended standard geographic and ideological boundaries. Bulgarian officials directed their cultural offensive at their Balkan neighbors, their capitalist competitors in the West, and their would-be allies in both the socialist-leaning and non-aligned countries in the Global South. *The Cold War from the Margins* includes rich coverage of Bulgarian cultural diplomacy around the world, from the British museum in London to traveling photo exhibitions in rural Nigeria to events put on by Bulgarian emigres in the tiny town of New Lexington, Ohio (population: 5,000).

The book’s overarching premise is that cultural diplomacy provides a means for “small states” to make their mark on international relations. In this interpretation, Cold War cultural competition between the superpowers provided the unique opportunity for Bulgaria to gain international recognition and to reap tangible benefits at home. As Dragostinova observes, in Bulgaria the soft power of cultural diplomacy often provided a steppingstone to more traditional forms of hard power, like economic contacts. This was especially true with regards to the country’s relations with the Global South; cultural outreach led to economic benefits in the form of new markets for Bulgarian goods and hard currency payments for cultural projects such as the construction of the National Theater in Lagos.

A central part of Dragostinova’s argument is that Bulgaria’s international cultural offensive amounted to a form of nationalism. Here a paradox emerges: in its global cultural campaigns, Bulgaria sought to transcend the confines of the international socialist system by emphasizing its unique, national attributes. Yet it was precisely Bulgaria’s identity as a socialist country that triggered international interest in the first place. The country’s cultural exports around the world helped it achieve an important degree of autonomy in international affairs from its ‘big brother,’ the Soviet Union. Bulgarian officials used cultural diplomacy to establish independent relations with their Balkan neighbors, including Romania, Yugoslavia, and Greece. In their cultural overtures to the West, Bulgarian “power elites,” as Dragostinova calls them, touted their country as “the first Slavic nation to convert to Christianity and create a literature in the Cyrillic alphabet” (6)—claims that seem to have been designed to irk the Soviets by conjuring a national golden age that predated the establishment of socialism by more than a millennium. In the Global South, by creating close cultural contacts with countries like Mexico, which was not an important Soviet ally, Bulgarian officials were able to carve out unique foreign policy avenues that distinguished them from other Eastern Bloc countries. But while Bulgarian officials marshalled Thracian artifacts and medieval relics as a means
of distinguishing their country from its socialist neighbors, it was precisely Bulgaria’s membership in
the socialist camp that made it a model for many countries in the developing world and that helped
spark interest in Bulgarian cultural exports in the capitalist West, where the public seems to have
been intrigued to learn about a less well-known country from behind the Iron Curtain.

Dragostinova maintains that if cultural diplomacy augmented Bulgarian nationalism by helping the
country craft a unique profile on the global stage, it also boosted national belonging at home. One of
the major questions westerners posed about Bulgaria in the 1970s was why there was no real
dissident movement in the country, unlike in the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Dragostinova
argues that the Bulgarian state’s ambitious cultural offensive succeeded in revitalizing socialist
society and creating loyalty to the state. In her portrayal, Bulgaria’s Communist leader, Todor
Zhivkov, became skilled at co-opting potential opponents into the country’s burgeoning cultural
bureaucracy. Many of the Bulgarian cultural campaigns of late 1970s and early 1980s were the
brainchild of Zhivkov’s daughter, Liudmila Zhivkova, who served as de-facto First Lady and as the
head of the country’s Committee for Culture. Zhivkova’s extensive travels as a cultural ambassador
for Bulgaria around the world, as well as her advocacy for ambitious (some would charge grandiose)
cultural projects at home, such as the construction of a new art museum in Sofia and several new
national monuments, imparted an aura of glamor and prestige in the eyes of the country’s political
and cultural elites that seems to have helped kept dissent at bay.

Bulgarian nationalism was also augmented through cultural and economic contacts with countries in
the Global South, including India, Mexico, and Nigeria. Like other scholars working on “socialist
globalization,” Dragostinova argues East-South contacts served as a form of national “self-fashioning”
(100) for the European socialist countries. She skillfully compares Bulgarian officials’ use of the
term “developed socialism” to refer to their own industrialized and allegedly ideologically mature
society with their appellation of the states in the Global South as “developing countries.” Bulgarian
discourse around relations with the Global South, which was based on condescending and racist
assumptions about Bulgarian cultural and economic superiority, ultimately reveals as much about
domestic values as it does about foreign policy. “Most importantly,” she writes at the end of the book,
“the entire interaction between Bulgaria and the developing states was based on the assumption that
Bulgaria actually constituted a developed state.” (220) In this sense, contacts with the Global South
further augmented Bulgarian citizens’ pride in their country’s cultural heritage and socialist system.

Dragostinova’s emphasis on how socialism in Bulgaria provided a foundation for cultural nationalism
points to the need for other scholars of socialist countries to take a broader view of nationalism.
Scholars should approach nationalism not simply as a destructive force that threatened the stability
of countries like Hungary in 1956 or Poland in 1980, and that would ultimately undermine the
regimes in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, but as a constructive influence that
helped socialist systems survive for as long as they did. Paying more attention to how nationalism
augmented socialism in the Eastern Bloc would also provide a bridge to the broader history of global
socialism, since in countries like Cuba, China, and Cambodia, support for Communism and
nationalism were closely entwined.

The research Dragostinova conducted for The Cold War from the Margins is highly impressive,
embracing state and private archives in Bulgaria, Hungary, England, and the United States. The
background information she supplies for each of the roughly dozen country case studies she employs—including Yugoslavia, Austria, and Mexico—is similarly remarkable, comprising local politics and details about each country’s broader relations with Bulgaria. At the same time, however, she provides little insight into the reception of Bulgaria’s cultural campaigns abroad or at home. She repeatedly notes throughout the book that to fully understand foreign countries’ motivations for entering into cultural exchange agreements with Bulgaria, she would need to mine their archives. But she does not explain her methodological decision not to do this. I hesitated to critique Dragostinova’s methodology, since scholars of international and global history can face impossibly high bars for research—the more countries involved, the more languages and funding are needed, not to mention time away from family. In our current Covid times, the expectation that scholars should be jetting off to a half dozen or more countries to conduct research for a single book has become unfeasible. But since Dragostinova did conduct research outside of Bulgaria, it seems fair to ask why she chose to work in Hungary and England, but not in Mexico, India, or Nigeria (her three main case studies in the Global South). Furthermore, her reliance on analyses of Bulgaria’s cultural campaigns by Radio Free Europe (held at the Open Society Archives in Hungary) and British diplomats (held at the British National Archives at Kew) at times makes it sound like she is conjuring strawmen—why should a contemporary scholar argue with these anachronistic Cold War voices? Ultimately, the addition of, for example, three case studies examining the reception of Bulgarian cultural exports in each of the main geopolitical categories for Bulgarian exports the book examines (Balkan neighbors, western Europe/the United States, and the Global South) would have enriched it by shedding light on why the receiving countries were drawn to establish relations with Bulgaria in the first place and on how local officials and “ordinary people” interpreted Bulgarian cultural exports.

The Cold War from the Margins could also benefit from more emphasis on how Bulgaria’s ambitious cultural campaigns abroad were perceived in Bulgaria itself. Here, I would have been interested in reception at two levels: among elites in the cultural apparatus and party, and among the broader public. Dragostinova begins the book by noting that in the 1970s, Liudmila Zhivkova and other Bulgarian officials promoted the idea that the country’s cultural campaigns would be instrumental in shaping the subjectivity of its citizens, who were supposed to have “multifaceted personalities” (xii). She does not explain in detail, however, how Bulgarians were in fact impacted by their government’s ambitious global cultural diplomacy, or the reciprocal foreign cultural events they hosted at home. Sources such as comment books from museum exhibitions, secret police files, and oral history interviews with former cultural officials and attendees at foreign cultural events held in Bulgaria could have helped to answer these questions. On the elite level, while it is clear that Zhivkov’s regime was skilled at incorporating potential critics into the field of cultural diplomacy, I wondered if his daughter’s central role in these grandiose campaigns triggered resentment or backlash among cultural bureaucrats and the diplomatic corps. Dragostinova does note that while the cultural campaigns were generally popular, some in the cultural intelligentsia found them stultifying, but she does not go into further detail. Were cultural elites embarrassed by the nepotism involved in Zhivkova’s appointment as the de-facto Minister of Culture? Did Bulgarian diplomats resent the fact that their country’s cultural relations seem to have been determined by the personal proclivities and eccentricities of the leader’s daughter? On a more popular level, in her preface to the book, Dragostinova explains that she became interested in examining the global reach of Bulgarian policy in the 1970s based on her own childhood experience of living for a year in Nigeria, where her parents worked as an engineer and a doctor. She notes intriguingly that “unlike the highly controlled opening
to the west, contact with the developing world allowed a larger, more diverse group of state socialist citizens to pursue international contacts across multiple geographies and chart new global visions of East-South cooperation” (14). I wish there were more voices in the book of ordinary people like Dragostinova’s parents, whose lives became entwined with the Bulgarian state’s ambitious global cultural campaigns.

These critiques and questions aside, Dragostinova has written a compelling book that will be of great interest to scholars and students in diverse fields, ranging from late socialism to the cultural Cold War to the history of globalization.

Review by Paul Betts, University of Oxford

The history of Cold War cultural relations has long been viewed through the lens of superpower antagonism for global supremacy. However, this long-serving interpretative framework has obscured the ways in which cultural diplomacy has been used by smaller states across the world as a key dimension of foreign policy and alliance building. In part this was because the Cold War brought new areas of the world in dramatic contact for the first time, both physically and virtually, and Eastern European countries played a vital role in forging new bonds of political fellowship with countries in the developing world. Most of the scholarly attention on the region’s interface with what we now call the Global South from the 1950s onward has focused on various political, economic and military engagements, yet cultural relations — even remote ones - were no less decisive in imagining alternative political geographies at the time.

Theodora K. Dragostinova’s Cold War from the Margins is a fresh and original contribution to this growing literature. Above all she sets her sights on the cultural diplomacy of 1970s Bulgaria, showing how the small socialist republic tirelessly promoted its history and culture in an orchestrated soft power campaign to build diplomatic bridges to Western Europe, the US, and the wider world, including India, Mexico and Nigeria. In so doing she directly challenges established notions of a crude two-camp model of world affairs, and opens up new perspectives for studying the fusion of culture and state socialism in Eastern Europe. What she offers is a “pericentric” approach to Cold War cultural relations that puts the periphery in the center.

Bulgaria’s foreign cultural policy was part and parcel of Eastern Europe’s exploration of new forms of international diplomacy in the Age of Détente. In this period Bulgarians crisscrossed the world in myriad ways, dispatching thousands of economic, scientific, technical, and educational experts to South America, Africa and the Middle East. While many were engaged in building industrial plants, agricultural enterprises, hospitals, and homes, a surprisingly high number were involved in cultural activities. The scale of this activity is impressive: according to Dragostinova, the Bulgarian state organized over 38,000 cultural events across the globe between 1977 and 1981, showcasing the political aspirations of a new generation of communist elites, spearheaded by Liudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of the regime’s ruling patriarch, Todor Zhivkov. The Bulgarian Communist Party was keen to show the world that it was not just a colorless “obedient satellite” of Moscow, but rather enjoyed substantial latitude and independence, and this feverish export of Bulgarian culture was designed to make this point. As such, culture was enlisted to promote Bulgaria’s own foreign policy and national identity at the time. Tellingly, socialism itself was less the headline ideology on display; instead, the emphasis fell on national pride and patriotism toward Bulgaria’s rich cultural past.
In six chapters Dragostinova traces Bulgaria’s cultural outreach in various ways, though much of the attention is dedicated to the regime’s massive ‘1300 Years Bulgaria’ jubilee, a lavish traveling exhibition celebrating the 1300th anniversary of the founding of the medieval Bulgarian state in 681. This extravaganza was an explicit effort to fuse the history of Bulgaria with the history of the Bulgarian Communist Party. While Poland’s 1966 ‘Millennium of the Polish State’ show served as inspiration and guidance, the Bulgarian show went further in broadcasting Bulgaria’s cultural heritage for a domestic and international audience, supported by a panoply of exhibitions on the country’s ancient treasures and medieval icons. The central figure behind these state-choreographed cultural events was the quirky and charismatic figure of Zhivkova, who is the main subject of the book. In 1975 Zhivkova took charge of the country’s cultural affairs and created a Department of Cultural Heritage, after which she served as a peripatetic celebrity ambassador for the regime. Under her direction, Bulgaria’s cultural world shed its old Marxist vocabulary of development and class conflict in favor of international solidarity and national unity; she also effectively exploited the language and iconography of romantic nationalism to reach out to Bulgaria’s émigré community in the US and West Germany for appeal and support. The regime promoted the region’s ancient past – in particular medieval Thracian culture – as an alternative to and even superior version of Greco-Roman civilization, and also sponsored high-profile exhibitions and archaeological excavations to unearth Bulgaria’s glorious past as part of the nationalist fervor to “demonstrate the prominence of Bulgaria as a representative of one of Europe’s and the world’s leading civilizations” (9). Zhivkova ably used this idea of ancient civilizations to forge links with international partners abroad, especially India, Mexico, and Nigeria. An Institute of Thracology was founded in 1972 and the decade saw numerous television series on historical themes. Dragostinova also makes the interesting point that the championing of cultural heritage became an effective means to disarm the dissident movement by co-opting potential detractors into this cultural boosterism. That said, there are several issues that might have been developed in more depth and detail. Dragostinova makes a good case about how culture smoothed over domestic conflict and built bridges to international partners in the name of political legitimacy and prestige abroad, especially insofar as cultural diplomacy was a “good strategy for smaller states to articulate and project their global visions” (7). But it is not so evident what this “advantage of smallness” was in the end; in other words, what was the actual payoff -- diplomatic or otherwise -- resulting from this massive state investment in cultural promotion? Did it lead to more trade contracts and other material benefits, or was it mostly seen as signalling some independence from Moscow? By the mid-1980s, did the regime look back on this cultural diplomacy abroad as successful, and if so, in what way? And how was this late socialist venture in romantic nationalism viewed by Bulgarians after 1989? The issue of what difference this cultural diplomacy made in the end (including in popular memory later) could have been explicated more directly.

The second issue follows from the first. While this is a rich case study of Cold War cultural relations, it raises the question of Bulgaria’s uniqueness. Recent scholarship has shown that this frenzied East-South cultural diplomacy was quite typical across the region, featuring the same blend of anti-imperialism, missionary modernization and the promotion of traditional indigenous cultures. After the Tito-Soviet split in 1948, Yugoslavia took the lead in forging non-Soviet diplomatic connections with the rest of the world, in the name of security, non-alignment, and cultural prestige. Other East Bloc states developed similar diplomatic links with the developing world, usually in the form of
bilateral relations with designated counterparts abroad in various areas of cooperation. One cannot help but wonder about the special characteristics in the Bulgarian case. Perhaps the relative delay in Bulgaria’s cultural outreach is the key difference, to the extent that economic, political and cultural networks with Asian and African partners had been developed by Bulgaria’s East Bloc neighbors a decade or two earlier, sometimes building on previous interwar connections. Another way of addressing the question is with reference to one of Dragostinova’s most interesting arguments, namely that the Golden Age of this Bulgarian heritage industry occurred during a period (1968-1982) “characterized by cynicism about the prospect for radical political change” (18). Even if the 1970s was a decade of political and economic stability for Bulgaria, it was also one of stagnation and flagging faith in Zhivkov’s version of state socialism. For this reason, so she argues, the politics of détente and the new stress on cultural heritage were embraced by the country’s conservative political elites as a means of reinforcing - not challenging - the status quo. At one point Dragostinova suggests that this cultural diplomacy was partly designed to offset growing Western anti-Communism in the wake of the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975, especially regarding human rights abuses. But this is quite different from the excitement and more optimistic attitude in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania during the late 1950s and 1960s toward exporting a regenerative Eastern European socialist project to decolonizing African and Asia. In these other socialist countries, anti-imperial progressive culture was an integral part of the broader package of Eastern European socialism on offer, and was less singled out as a separate element as it was in Bulgaria. The broader point is that some comparative analysis on this question would help to highlight what was unique - or not - about the Bulgarian story.

Third, as Dragostinova notes, the book is based almost exclusively on Bulgarian state sources. She certainly provides a thorough reading of these archival materials, but one would like to learn more about the reception of this Bulgarian cultural project by others. We are treated to revealing official releases and press coverage in India, Mexico and Nigeria about these Bulgarian exhibitions abroad, which are no doubt important, but it’s hard to know how these partner countries weighed their cultural relations with Bulgaria in comparison with those from other countries, socialist or not. In these other countries, Bulgarian exhibitions and cultural venues were presumably part of a larger set of trade fairs and cultural events organised by the US, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, other Eastern European countries as well as China and others, to say nothing of international organisations like the UN and UNESCO. Thus to what extent these receiver countries viewed their relations with Bulgaria - cultural or otherwise - as distinctive and enduring is an open question.

The last issue concerns the darker sides of this celebratory inclusive patriotism that Dragostinova so vividly chronicles in her book. At various points, she acknowledges that Bulgaria’s performative official nationalism eventually curdled into exclusionary Christian ethno-nationalism, culminating with the expulsion of 300,000 Turkish Muslims from Bulgaria in the summer of 1989. The socialist dream of multi-ethnic solidarity was falling apart by the early 1980s, if not earlier, punctuated by the release of two films during the 1981 Jubilee Year that peddled negative stereotypes of Turks and Muslims as the violent historical enemies of ethnic Bulgarians. It would have been worthwhile to hear more about how the rejection of multiculturalism evolved from the 1970s onward, and to what extent Bulgarian developments were typical - or not - in the region. Worth considering too is to what extent - and in what way - the state’s romantic heritage-making is remembered today, given that it invoked three elements of regional identity that socialist states found difficult to deal with, namely religion, nation and race.
In any case, these observations are not meant in any way to detract from what is a very stimulating and welcome rereading of Cold War internationalism. Dragostinova offers a fresh perspective on a comparatively understudied area and decade of European history, and makes a strong case that the Cold War may be best understood from the margins, or put differently, that the Cold War really had no margins at all.

Review by Laurien Crump, Utrecht University

In writing *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene* Theodora Dragostinova has done more than rescue Bulgaria from oblivion and shed a new light on a small Eastern European state that is usually considered Moscow’s most loyal ally. Twenty years after Tony Smith’s landmark article on *New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War*, Dragostinova has taken up the challenge in exemplary fashion for a country that has largely been overlooked in this debate.[7] She has also uses the pericentric perspective of Bulgaria in the 1970s to shed a new light on globalisation, and on an era that is usually considered one of stagnation. Moreover, her approach enriches our view of both East-West as well as North-South relations and especially those that transcend the usual divisions, such as East-South relations. Written with both flair and an excellent command of the sources, this book takes the reader at record speed through the Bulgarian political and cultural scene, its cultural diplomacy within the Balkans and surprising alliance with Greece, its cultural relations with the United States and Western Europe, and Bulgarian nationalism and its global entanglements in the third world with *inter alia* India, Mexico and Nigeria. Emphasising lesser-known bonds, such as those between party leader’s Todor Zhivkov’s daughter, Liudmila Zhivkova, and the prime minister of India, Indira Ghandi, and adopting a novel perspective both thematically, conceptually and regionally, Dragostinova’s book is a breathtaking account of a country that is usually considered dull, but that appears to be very vibrant.

As such, the monograph is not merely an asset to new Cold War history and new diplomatic history studies, in viewing the Cold War from the Eastern European side of the Iron curtain through the lens of a small country’s cultural diplomacy and soft power. By analysing what Dragostinova calls “the advantages of smallness” (224), the book also offers an important contribution to the literature on small states. This is an interesting concept, and for example explains Bulgaria’s surprising success in its public relations campaign in Nigeria, which also served economic purposes. Exactly because it was so small and little known, Bulgarian diplomats could portray an exaggerated picture of Bulgaria as the cradle of Western Civilisation to so-called third world countries. The concept could, however, have been fleshed out still more and be linked to other recent literature on small states in the Cold War, such as the volume edited by Susanna Erlandsson and myself, on *Margins for Manoeuvre in Cold War Europe: The Influence of Smaller Powers*. [8] Although the volume is mentioned in a footnote, the concept of the “advantage of smallness” would have lent itself to a more elaborate analysis at meta-level as to what that the advantage entailed and how it could have been extrapolated to other cases. As such, the conceptual contribution to small state literature could have been still greater.

In its breadth, the book does however contribute – albeit often implicitly – to various historiographic
debates in a thought-provoking fashion. It provides a new angle to the burgeoning literature on the 1970s, in which the concept of that decade as one of “stagnation” is increasingly redressed, by showing that from the Bulgarian perspective stagnation was out of the question anyhow and the decade was instead one of unforeseen opportunities. It complements the recent thought-provoking volume edited by Federico Romero and Angela Romano on European Socialist Regimes’ Fateful Engagement with the West. Challenging “interpretations of the 1970s as the prelude to the collapse of the Eastern European regimes,” Dragostinova offers a fascinating narrative instead which compels the reader to reconsider the role of the Bulgaria on the global scene, as well as to appreciate the effect of détente and the impact of decolonisation on a small Eastern European country such as Bulgaria, whose political elites seized the opportunity to legitimate “a political system that needed reinvention” (17). In the book’s epilogue, Dragostinova convincingly shows what this approach yields: “As experienced from the margins of Europe, the 1970s was a decade of measured optimism, accompanied by persistent efforts to resolve the contradictions of the new ‘global condition’” (222-223). Dragostinova convincingly argues that viewing the 1970s from the margins “captures the contradictory spirit of the 1970s better than the view from the center, which privileges the experience of select actors (usually big states) at the expense of more ‘peripheral’ players whose reality might be more representative of the wider global mood (...) when small states dominated discussion of the new global order” (17). This is one of the most compelling arguments of the book, but at the same time a potential pitfall. Although the subtitle “A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene” suggests that the Bulgarian experience can to some extent be representative of other smaller Eastern European powers, since the book lacks a comparative framework it is hard to gauge to what extent the case of Bulgaria is representative for other smaller countries on the margins of Europe.

The same applies to Dragostinova’s archival approach, which is based on state and institutional archives from Bulgaria, Hungary, and the United States and focuses “on what we might call official culture to chart the decisions made by the leaders of a small state as they sought to insert themselves into the global scene” (8). The book reveals that Bulgaria was an integral and increasingly important player in the Global Cold War, rather than a Soviet appendix. Instead, Todor Zhivkov’s cultural diplomacy went hand-in-hand with a new foreign policy that he often had to justify to the Kremlin. However thorough this approach is, in archival terms, it leaves some room for further questions. Was Bulgaria an exception in the Eastern bloc in the 1970s or was its newly found vibrancy representative of an Eastern European reaction to globalisation, decolonisation, and détente? And how do the decisions in the higher political echelons relate to the experience of the Bulgarian people? Dragostinova is transparent about the choices in her archival selection, but the scope of her archival research could have been broadened still further in order to contextualise Bulgaria’s experience in a more comparative framework.

Having said that, the book is already breathtaking in its current scope, and clearly illustrates its main argument that “our understanding of the 1970s is richer if we include the experiences of “peripheral” actors while our knowledge of late socialism is fuller if we place it in a global context” (224). The narrative of a peripheral actor in a global context certainly enriches the reader’s interpretation of the Cold War, the 1970s as a decade, and the role of smaller powers, which has so often been overlooked. Moreover, the book’s telescopic structure, which leads the reader from the Bulgarian margins to the rest of the world, convincingly shows how Dragostinova’s pericentric approach opens up new areas
for research altogether. In her first chapter on “The Contradictions of Developed Socialism,” Dragostinova compellingly argues that “the promotion of [cultural] nationalism, both at home and abroad, provided a safety valve for the regime,” since patriotism worked as a panacea against apathy and disappointment (61). Taking the staging of the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state in 1981 as its culmination, Dragostinova argues how Bulgarian cultural policies of the long 1970s “rejuvenated the social contract between the regime and its citizens, and undercut dissent” (23).

The second chapter, “Goodwill between Neighbors,” takes the reader on a surprising journey through the Balkans, which on the one hand shows the constrains of “rival historical interpretations” (80) and on the other hand the “opportunities to test regional cooperation beyond the ideological standing of the Balkan neighbors” (95). Thus the fraught relations between NATO member Greece and its Warsaw Pact adversary Bulgaria improved dramatically through cultural diplomacy, with Greece becoming “a model for celebrating the 1300th anniversary outside of Bulgaria” (94). The traditional bipolar Cold War order was thus significantly complicated through small-state cultural diplomacy. In the third chapter, on “Culture as a Way of Life,” deals with Bulgarian relations with Western Europe and the United States, culture also proves a “universal method of communication across ideological divides” (130). Stressing Bulgaria’s common European historical heritage and promoting universal ideas, “cultural cooperation remained a steady channel of communication between East and West that allowed political rapprochement to survive in the 1980s” (106). This reflected both the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the tensions in its wake, namely the “different understandings of the role of culture, which the East saw as a state directed project of cultural exchange, and the West understood as a more spontaneous process of cultural interaction” (98-99). The 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state serves as a leitmotiv throughout the book, and also runs as a recurrent theme through the fourth chapter, “Forging a Diaspora,” which revolves around the way in which culture was used as a means to unite the emigré Bulgarians – both dissident and loyal ones – around a common patriotic purpose.

Reflecting the telescopic nature of the book, the fifth chapter, “Like a Grand World Civilization,” shows how the pericentric approach clearly pays off. Focusing on “alternative global geographies beyond the East-West and North-South contract that dominate historical studies’, this chapter shows how the ‘pursuit of global connections was at the heart of the socialist project” (163). It does so through the surprising cases of relations with Mexico and India, both of which reflect the preference and interests of Liudmila Zhivkova, Todor Zhivkov’s daughter and minister of culture. Analysing how “the ‘rise of the rest’ provided an alternative to Cold War polarization” (166), Dragostinova follows David Engerman’s interpretation of the Cold War “as a fundamentally multipolar conflict” (185). Projecting Bulgaria as “equal peer of other “grand world civilizations” and expressing other “extravagant claims” (165), the “advantages of smallness” allow Bulgaria to forge unlikely connections, transcend East-West divides, and “project its own civilizational self-definition to the world” (194).

The same applies to the sixth chapter on “Culture under Special Conditions,” which traces Bulgarian bonds with Nigeria in its “commitment to the struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and racism,” which also served to seize “economic opportunities in the booming petro-state” (196). Merging history and culture with modernization and development, the Bulgarians went into a civilizing mission (which had racial overtones in itself) to forge yet another unlikely bond with
an authoritarian regime; through developing another country it could project an image of being developed itself. Here, too, Dragostinova honestly addresses the limits of the book’s archival research, by stating that “[o]nly research in Nigerian archives could fully illuminate the motivations of Nigerian elites for becoming involved in these cultural events” (197). This, however, again points at an archival lacuna: this book leaves many questions about other perceptions than those of the Bulgarian state unanswered. It does, however, address issues beyond its actual scope, mainly in the epilogue, which shows how the “uneasy compromise” that “was achieved between the Eastern European regimes and their citizens” (222) through the events narrated in the book still resonates today in building “a social consensus on the unique historical destiny of small Bulgaria at the crossroads of civilizations” (232). As such, this monograph also serves as an instrument to understand the complex current position of Bulgaria.

This book has accordingly covered so much new ground both thematically, regionally, and conceptually that the fact that it leaves an appetite for more should be considered a compliment rather than a shortcoming. Viewing the Cold War through the new prism of the cultural diplomacy of a small state at the margins of Eastern Europe within a global context, The Cold War from the Margins raises numerous interesting questions, while also answering many of them. Despite the centrality of the Bulgarian perspective, the book is certainly also a contribution to the task of globalising the Cold War by focusing on the hitherto hardly studied angle of East-South relations and introducing fascinating angles such as Bulgarian relations with India, Mexico, and Nigeria. Although the rather upbeat perspective from the Bulgarian state institutions can doubtless be modified and nuanced with other sources, this monograph has already uncovered a lot of surprising evidence, radically reconfigured our image of Cold War Bulgaria, and paved the way for a new area of research on other states on the margins of the Global Cold War. The book is a real must-read for those who are interested in the Cold War, small states, East-South relations, and the long 1970s. I read it with great interest as well as pleasure, and I consider it an important and innovative contribution to New Cold War history, which compellingly shows the advantages of a pericentric approach. Both Bulgaria and the long 1970s appear much more exciting than they seem on the surface.

Review by Elidor Mëhilli, City University of New York

At the center of The Cold War from the Margins is the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state, which involved tens of thousands of events planned and held over a few years culminating in 1981. The socialist state sought to showcase Bulgaria as both ancient and modern, full of ancient treasures and present achievements. Dragostinova sees this as an apt opportunity to capture international contacts across ideological blocs through the lens of cultural work.

“Culture allowed the Bulgarian leaders to project a degree of independence and change opinions of their role in the Soviet bloc,” she writes of a country that many in the West dismissed as a Soviet lackey (6). Bulgarian officials insisted that “in the field of culture there are neither big nor small nations, and the dynamism of modern Bulgaria is firmly rooted in a cultural heritage spanning thirteen centuries” (2).

More broadly, the anniversary and the various activities planned around it reveal how a relatively
small state tried to make a place for itself in a globalizing world. The Cold War from the Margins tells this remarkable story on the basis of research spanning the diplomatic and government archives of Bulgaria, collections in the United Kingdom and in the United States, along with the Bulgarian émigré press, and a now-extensive secondary literature on Eastern Europe’s global engagements. The result is a fascinating and layered picture of cultural ambitions, projections, tactical openings, conflicts, and rhetorical tricks.

There is plenty here for regional specialists—from the socialist uses of ancient Thracian tribes to travelling religious iconography across national borders—but the subject also lends itself to questions of how states deploy cultural diplomacy, how the past is made relevant for present foreign policy goals, and how cultural contacts, even when tightly choreographed from above, can have unexpected outcomes.

It can also be useful to read the book alongside a now-extensive body of work on the cultural dimensions of the Cold War. As in the more successful examples of this literature, The Cold War from the Margins is situated in multiple places, giving a sense of the push-and-pull of various actors and their interests. Admittedly, this presents a narrative challenge. Each chapter has to set a different stage and trace a web of players across different contexts since socialist Bulgaria directed its cultural offensive not only towards its neighbors in the Balkans, but also towards the capitalist West, and countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The benefit, however, is that readers get multiple entry points into the story. This wider geographic scope reveals how Bulgaria had to deploy different registers when speaking to various parts of the globe. It was an exercise, in short, in constant editing as well as in curating. Rediscovering socialist Bulgaria within the region and in the wider world—and there is more to come ahead with the innovative work of Victor Petrov—seems to me like a superb opportunity not merely to expand the frame, but to challenge stubborn disciplinary structures, to make apparent assumptions about the value and hierarchy of places and pasts.

An uneven Eastern Europe has emerged over time in the general literature of the twentieth century, a frustration that drove me when writing From Stalin to Mao. A few of the bigger countries get some attention (if Eastern Europe gets any at all), and the rest get a footnote, if that. I worry that the problem gets even worse; with the extinction of academic jobs and research opportunities, there are precious few avenues for fresh perspectives from a younger cohort for work that challenges the hierarchy of existing specialties and topics. What may seem like peripheral cases to Western readers can actually offer essential insights into how Western biases and blind spots have been packaged and sold as globalization.

I was drawn in especially by the preface, which shows socialism and international movement to be generational stories. “Eastern Europe had nurtured other contacts in the world, which we forgot in the rush to join Europe,” Dragostinova observes. The preface explains how beginning in 1977, the author’s parents spent two years working in Nigeria, “with the hope that hard currency would allow them to purchase the desired home” (xii). And then: “Considering all these historical forces that have shaped my life—the reality of late socialism, the pursuit of East-West contact, and the desire to know
the world—I hope to make sense of the long 1970s, the time of my childhood but also the time of uneasy, shifting, difficult to define global transformations, much like the anxious transformations of today” (xvi).

Muscular “big thinking” approaches to the twentieth century are good at capturing an overall picture but can also have the effect of detaching narratives from lived lives. Yet people often make sense of the world in reference to their environment: village, city, family, school, work, and literature. Opening the book in this personal and family key, *The Cold War from the Margins* reads as a gentle reminder of this fact. It is also a point that seems pertinent about the analysis of cultural traffic: Do people make sense of it through local references and lived experience, and not necessarily through the statistics and the big numbers that obsess government officials?

*The Cold War from the Margins* is intentionally a view from above. I found the decision to center on cultural elites, their interests and their worldview, convincing. Dragostinova shows the cultural campaign to be an elite-driven affair. Still, she acknowledges the importance of “bottom-up reactions to state policies, local variations in the implementation of these decisions, and countercultural practices articulated outside of the state framework” (8). That there is undeniable value in getting up close to the upper powerbrokers can be seen in the person of Liudmila Zhivkova. The daughter of the party boss, she nurtured her own idiosyncratic cultural visions, promoting a cadre of people to put them into practice. To call her eccentric would be a gross understatement, and it would also be insufficient.[14]

It is easy to mistake this kind of state-driven cultural opening to the wider world as a political softening, but the book makes clear that the officials involved were hardly interested in reform. On the contrary, they sought to maintain stability and power. The peeling of the layers here is fascinating; these Zhivkov years alert us to the kinds of silent compromises that can easily fall out of view if culture and ideology are seen as entirely interchangeable.

There was, too, a dark side to the state-approved patriotism and the high cultural spirits of the 1970s. Dragostinova mentions how “the 1971 constitution did not include provisions on minority autonomy or protection. In the mid-1970s there were name-changing campaigns against the Pomaks and the Roma to bring them into the national fold” (29). In the 1980s, the regime’s blunt authoritarian power would turn against the Bulgarian Turks. There are hints of this darkness in the book, though they are overshadowed by the cultural pageantry.

The study of the 1970s has tended to focus on the oil shock and the various economic crises. The story in *The Cold War from the Margins*, however, is not one of doom and gloom (though this has something to do with the fact that economics is not at the center of the story). The author does not romanticize détente. “In the 1970s, as a precursor to the anxious globalism of today,” she writes, “the world experienced the convergence of peacetime extremes: this was the time of oil shortages, energy rationing, rising unemployment, and an upsurge in anti-immigrant moods, but also the era of human rights, the international women’s movement, environmental and antinuclear activism, and Third World solidarity” (15).

Pursuing some of these threads around the world—in India, Mexico, and Nigeria, as well as around the Balkans—the book shows how cultural contact could serve as a kind of testing ground for possibly...
deeper and wider cooperation. There was, to be sure, no guarantee that this would work. For example, Bulgarian efforts with “friendly” Romania and Yugoslavia were met with hostility and pushback, whereas Sofia found more success in Greece and Turkey (79). (I read the staunch Yugoslav reactions mentioned in the book as a necessary corrective to rose-tinted views of Yugoslavia as progressive and internationalist.)

Relations with India picked up in the 1970s, “as a personal friendship developed between Liudmila Zhivkova and Indira Gandhi” (13). By mid-decade, Bulgarian-Mexican cultural relations also intensified. While one can find quite a bit of Cold War in these dynamics, Dragostinova notes that some of the connections outlasted that conflict. For example, she points to “the role of foreign students and workers in the country; the impact of Japanese economic investment during and after socialism; the influence of Indian, Mexican, and African art in Bulgarian cultural life; and the continued Bulgarian involvement in large infrastructure projects in North Africa and the Middle East." (14).

Dragostinova is evenhanded in her treatment of Bulgarian state officials, which is understandable given the tendency to see socialist officialdom as pathological. But I wonder if it would be worthwhile to make the Bulgarian effort stranger than the book allows it to be. The scale of the cultural effort is astonishing. Sofia organized 7,420 events in capitalist countries in five years, in addition to 15,413 events in Asia, and thousands more in Latin America and Africa. The book refers to these, repeatedly, as an “extravaganza.” What about logistics, competitions for budgets, and things that might have gone unfunded to make this expensive extravaganza possible?

The book convincingly shows that the cultural campaign made “civilizational claims” (113) though it also argues that exhibitions avoided a “nationalist overdose” (133), seeking instead to advance “universal human values” (100). This seems like a tough balance to strike. A relentless fixation with ancient glory is a familiar one in the region and beyond it. But we also learn that outside of Europe “Bulgarian elites emphasized their country’s role as a grand world civilization and paired their stories of courageous Thracian kings and intrepid Slavic scholars with Indian and Mexican narratives of Mughal princes, Hindu sages, Aztec warriors, and Mayan priests.” (20). The book left me wanting to hear more about non-Western interlocutors, participants, and the ordinary people that make up the category of “audiences.”

Was the overall effort to showcase Bulgaria still operating along a colonial mode of thinking in terms of superior and inferior civilizations? Or, is it more accurate to think of the overall project as a sprawling endeavor serving multiple purposes, and it is therefore pointless to try and find some sort of coherence in the entirety?

A takeaway, for me, was the fact that Bulgaria’s challenge was not merely that of any small state, but one of a socialist state in the 1970s. To put it another way, it seems to me that Bulgaria was faced with a specifically fractured world, in which it was necessary to speak in different socialist registers. This is evident, for example, in how officials toned down some of their propagandistic tones when speaking to Western audiences.

Socialist Bulgaria had a guiding ideology. It had a one-party-state. It was the second largest recipient

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of Soviet aid in the 1970s. It also wanted to play a regional act. To appreciate the combination of these factors is to appreciate the specificity of Bulgaria’s challenge, and the skill it took to pull it off, since the difficulty went beyond the issue of scale.

I wonder, too, if the price for analytically embracing the margin is continued participation on the terms of a system that embraces the margin rhetorically but insists that it stays marginal. The Bulgarian state actors themselves struggled with this problem. They kept insisting that culture was not about big and small countries, that socialism blurred some of these distinctions. But they were forced to behave like skilled realists in the unforgiving international system. The utterly fascinating specifics of *The Cold War from the Margins* may seem remote to our era, of an increasingly forgotten past. But this question of who gets to speak—and in whose registers—is very much alive and of our present.

**Response by Theodora Dragostinova, The Ohio State University**

When you write a book on an unspecified, at least in the title, small state, you signal desire to engage with multiple audiences and standpoints. This is exactly what transpires in this rigorous and thought-provoking reading of my book by four specialists on international, transnational, and global perspectives on the Cold War and Eastern Europe, more generally. Collectively, they bring to this discussion expertise in the multiple dimensions of socialist internationalism (Rachel Applebaum); cultural politics, human rights, and international justice (Paul Betts); the New Cold War history and especially the viewpoint of small states (Laurien Crump); and the place of southeastern Europe in world socialism (Elidor Mëhilli)—with a geographical focus on Albania, the two non-existent countries of Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and the multilateral relations of Cold War Eastern Europe. I am grateful to Frank Gerits for assembling such an outstanding panel and to Małgorzata Mazurek for writing the introduction—her work on how Poland shaped post-imperial and postcolonial thought on economic development couldn’t be a better fit.[17] Such breathtaking perspectives guarantee a productive dialogue how to best write the history of the global Cold War from an Eastern European viewpoint, but even more importantly, how to write history from a truly global perspective.

In the ten years of its making, this book has always been an exercise in global history while it also embraced the pericentric approach that all four reviewers find worthwhile. I wanted to speak, specifically, to the place of small states in the global Cold War order, with the appreciation that some of them—Albania, North Korea, GDR, Romania—have appeared in existing literature as more “outlandish” while others—Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Cuba—as more “interesting” in their dealings with the world. I was also driven by the personal commitment to write a book in English about Bulgaria, which would restore it from oblivion and condescension given its long-standing reputation as the most loyal Soviet satellite. I am pleased to know that the story I tell makes Bulgaria look “more exciting” and even “vibrant.”

Given a sizeable and lively literature in Bulgarian on many of these issues, I tried to strike a balance between connecting to the rich local scholarship and popularizing it in English-language academia, on the one hand, and providing novel empirical information that would be appreciated by regional
specialists, on the other. At the same time, I had to think about the larger contexts, both global and national, which are necessary to provide when one embarks on a “telescopic” project, as Laurien Crump so aptly characterizes it. “Speaking in multiple registers” in the various global settings is a “narrative challenge” that Elidor Mëhilli has similarly faced and ingenuously dealt with in his own work on Albania.  

This predicament—the need to strike the balance between providing enough context while also including fresh information—remains one of the challenges of global history.  

I also wished to center cultural perspectives, rather than economic, political, military, or humanitarian ones, to stay true to my training as a cultural historian. This motivation explains my choice of cultural diplomacy as the entryway into my analysis of how small states shape their international dealings. I am delighted to know that the four readers find this choice convincing. I read extensively in international and transnational history but also media and cultural studies to gain a better understanding how cultural messages get transmitted, received, and transformed. I carefully navigated between international and cultural history as well. Cultural diplomacy allowed me to engage with issues of power and representation, whether in foreign-policy articulation, alliance-building, or the construction of national identity. But as I was reconstructing the role of cultural diplomacy in the Bulgarian case, some of its larger implications also struck me. Cultural diplomacy is always ridden with contradictions, and both democratic and authoritarian regimes use cultural means to advance their agendas. For policy makers, the key question emerges: how to make sure that state-sponsored cultural activities do not become aspects of crude propaganda. Thus, cultural diplomacy provides a good window into broader, if not universal, historical issues related to the global Cold War: how to make your agenda appealing to the world.  

I also wanted to reevaluate the broader context, both of the 1970s as a decade and of late socialism as a distinct phase in the state socialist project. While inevitably having to situate my work in the context of détente, I was more interested to figure out how my book fits in the long seventies, roughly 1968-1982. Not only did I wish to challenge the doom-and-gloom focus on stagnation, which is now emerging as the scholarship consensus in the evolving literature. I also wished to question the interpretation of the late 1970s-early 1980s as the beginning of the end of state socialist regimes, correcting views of late socialism as a period of universal crisis as well. As Mëhilli eloquently argues, the literature on Eastern Europe already privileges the experiences of select states, notably Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia. But as we know, since Eastern Europe was never uniform, whether during Stalinism or de-Stalinization, we should not assume a representative experience of late socialism, either. What Bulgaria shows is that in some places in Eastern Europe, even though political and economic crisis would eventually arrive, there was normalization and acceptance of socialism almost to the end. Thus, from the perspective of some late-socialism era societies, the long-1970s were indeed “a decade of measured optimism,” as I claim in the book, when people had to reconcile “peacetime extremes” while wrestling with the intensification of global contact.  

In the end, I attempted to merge global and local perspectives on the cultural diplomacy of a small state, as executed in select countries spanning five continents, to show how studying cultural diplomacy from the margins allows us fresh insight into the seventies as a decade, late socialism as a political system, the Cold War order as a geopolitical reality, and globalism as a universal condition.
I decided to engage these questions through a focus on elites and official culture for both methodological (see more below) and intellectual reasons. For the first book in English on this aspect of Bulgarian history, I thought that a focus on policy was a must. Yet, I also researched and wrote this book in the 2010s, when disillusionment with the uneven effects of globalization in Europe following the 2008 economic recession began to fine-tune previously overly optimistic studies of transnational contact in Cold War Eastern Europe that had emphasized agency and empowerment. That is very much a line of analysis worth pursuing. Yet, in authoritarian states, it is important to recognize the sources and limits of power, which rested in state elites. It is also important to recognize the limits of reforms that served rhetorical, i.e. propaganda, functions. In this vein of analysis, the Bulgarian “cultural opening” was indeed a state-sponsored affair orchestrated by self-selected elites that rewarded carefully chosen individuals to advance a more liberal image of the regime. This may be a disquieting view of globalization as elite-driven, yet it also fits the experiences of many (Eastern) Europeans from 2008 on.

This choice to focus on elites means that I did not systematically pursue the question of reception. All four reviewers mention this issue, and I will offer an imperfect answer. I was already doing too much in this book, trying to cover five continents (I abandoned Australia early in the project) while also putting to the side my archival materials on Cuba, Tanzania, and Japan (which I hope to revisit). If one is serious about audiences, one should pursue the right methodologies to study them. Some of the literature on the cultural and/or transnational Cold War leaves much to be desired because it focuses on representations, mostly in the media. Only recently have scholars of Eastern Europe engaged with memoirs, letters, and other ego-sources, but those remain problematic for the state-socialist period; the history of emotions is helping us figure them out, but this is still a nascent subfield in Eastern European scholarship. Anthropological or architectural work—for example, Kristen Ghodsee and Łukasz Stanek— has provided another angle on reception, but those scholars ask different questions specific to their fields. In the end, I consciously decided to focus on elites and official culture, or cultural policy, not because matters of reception are not important, but because I wanted to center the role of elites and consider the importance of official culture in late socialism, while also providing the foundation for other scholars of Bulgaria to engage with these topics. There is room for more research on Bulgaria in a global perspective, as evident in the publications of Raia Apostolova, Mariya Ivancheva, Elitza Stanoeva, Zhivka Valyavicharska, and Miglena Todorova. I also eagerly anticipate the books of Veneta Ivanova and Victor Petrov who analyze reception more thoroughly.

The issue of whose perspective I cover in this book is also connected to research methodologies and archival choices. I specifically framed my research to encompass multiple geographical perspectives and archival collections. In Bulgaria, I consulted extensive domestic institutional archives (the Politburo, Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) as well as international records on Argentina, Austria, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, India, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Tanzania, the United States, and Yugoslavia. To balance the Bulgarian perspective, I sought foreign archives. I decided early on that I would not be going to Russia, knowing well the difficulties scholars encounter there (and not wanting to focus on this aspect, as well). What The National Archives of the United Kingdom (Kew, England), NARA (College Park, Maryland), and Radio Free Europe records (Open Society Archive, Budapest, Budapest,
Hungary) gave me was the outside perspective in a language I can read. RFE records were immensely useful to show that “propaganda” also existed in the West; as Melissa Feinberg has shown, such channels perpetuated a Cold War mentality at the policy and media levels. This is a reality that the Bulgarian officials constantly encountered (Mëhilli’s characterization of them as “skilled realists in the unforgiving international system” is spot on). What the Hoover Institution, Library of Congress, and the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies-Regensburg gave me was the émigré perspectives. I considered, but remained unconvinced that spending my limited research budget on trips to India or Nigeria would pay off, given my choice to privilege the official Bulgarian perspective—while my lack of Spanish as a research language similarly made me skeptical how much I could rely on research assistants.

Early in the project, I recorded oral history interviews, but I had to prioritize how to spend my limited research time in the various settings. I did some fieldwork in various sites of Bulgarian cultural diplomacy (Regensburg, New Lexington, Pittsburgh, Chicago, various museums and cultural institutions in Paris, Munich, and London). I also engaged with anthropological questions related to monuments built in Bulgaria—I discuss that issue in the book’s epilogue. I did try to get my hands on museum comment books, but that turned out to be nearly impossible (one important institution flatly refused). Ultimately, I had to make choices based on expedience and rooted in my expertise with archives rather than other research methodologies. Thus, I chose to work in Bulgaria (where I also had free or cheap childcare), Hungary and the UK (whose efficient archival management allowed me to copy the needed materials quickly), and the United States (where I could do several short trips at a time). In the pandemic context that has made us more open about family life and unequal access to research resources, transparency of my research limitations is all I have.

I now want to engage several of the key (critical) comments of each reader, which constructively push me to re-articulate, expand, or clarify my conclusions.

Applebaum spends much of her insightful review fleshing out the paradoxes of nationalism in the Bulgarian cultural extravaganza—the uneasy balancing act between domestic and international uses of the national(ist) narrative and imagery permeating the celebrations, but also the internal legitimizing functions of “patriotism” for the regime. Bulgarian officials constantly strove to balance ideological, cultural, and national/political needs in their cultural events, while they were aware of the dangers of being seen as producers of “nationalist propaganda”—or Communist, for that matter. At the same time, claims of civilizational status worked in some cases, both in the West and Global South, if they were articulated in a careful, refined, universal language (Mëhilli also notes this conflict). Domestically, “patriotism” successfully masked discontent and directed enthusiasm behind state-sponsored public projects; at the same time, cultural production undermined the appeal of dissent, both among cultural elites and “the masses,” as the state provided generous opportunities for public expression, albeit within clear state-socialist confines.

It is true that, as Crump mentions, my archival choices may have shaped this overly optimistic evaluation from the viewpoint of the state. I do want to emphasize that, as a native of Bulgaria, I consciously tried to think about any “patriotic” bias that I might have. My analysis is consistent with the findings of a growing literature that shows how the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe never abandoned nationalism in their state-building projects. In the case of Bulgaria, the revival of

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nationalism in the 1970s and early 1980s served to revitalize socialism (unlike Yugoslavia or Poland, for example)—and here I also appeal to the needed corrective to not assume that nationalism always leads to civil war, as in Yugoslavia, or to decay, as in Romania.

Yet, as Betts and Mëhilli also note, this nationalism had a darker undercurrent on which I touch only occasionally, largely because it falls outside of the chronological confines of the book. By the mid-1980s, what was mostly cultural nationalism in the 1970s and early 1980s morphed into a virulent, state-orchestrated nationalist campaign of disempowering and cleansing ethnic and religious minorities, most prominently the Turks. I do want to stress for the sake of clarity: the 1300 anniversary events and the global cultural extravaganza associated with them turned many Bulgarians into “patriots” who stayed silent when the authoritarian state persecuted “national traitors.” Here, I join the appeal of many colleagues, including Roumen Avramov and Tomasz Kamusella, to insert this narrative in the mainstream historical record.[24]

Another key question, raised by both Betts and Crump, is that of Bulgarian uniqueness. I wholeheartedly agree that the comparative perspective of this book could have been expanded, drawing parallels with other Eastern European states, but also other small states. I am not necessarily claiming that Bulgaria was representative of the Eastern European or global Cold War experiences, yet I insist that, if we think that indeed small states matter, we actually might not privilege the question of representativeness. But yes, there are also the peculiarities of the Bulgarian international presence that I should have better highlighted, and the two points mentioned by Betts are excellent. The relative lateness of the country in its “opening” explains why it went so fast and furiously, and why there was such a vast investment in cultural resources from 1975 on when “first daughter” Liudmila Zhivkova took over culture. This observation points to, again, the importance of elites, and I do firmly believe that without Zhivkova, the Bulgarian international cultural extravaganza would not have acquired this flavor—so this is one notable uniqueness, which is tied, again, to the importance of elites. This observation then also leads to the second Bulgarian peculiarity, namely the cynicism of the international projects described here, as they sought to solidify and not reform the system. I admit that a bottom-up examination might very well uncover a more optimistic side of these events among ordinary Bulgarian representatives in the world. Yet, my sources show that “measured optimism” combined with cynic acknowledgement that one needed to play within the system shaped the Bulgarian experiences. In this sense, we are dealing not with a “bloc” but with an “uneven Eastern Europe,” as Mëhilli alerts us, where some countries—Bulgaria, Albania, parts of Yugoslavia—were in fact more isolated. Importantly, though, we also need to acknowledge that Eastern European socialism on a global scene is more than Yugoslav Nonalignment and Polish openness to the world.

Related to this comparative question, I also agree that the concept of “the advantages of smallness” could be better developed, as both Betts and Crump explain. The literature on small states provides a wonderful opportunity to flesh out this premise, and I could have chosen to pursue it more systematically.[25] Yet, I decided to tell the Bulgarian story, or the story of a small state, through its interactions with a number of “big states” spanning the United States, Federal Republic of Germany, France, Great Britain, India, Mexico, and Nigeria, among others. All the same, it is absolutely true that some of the more successful Bulgarian international endeavors were with other small states, notably Greece and Austria—so the “advantages of smallness” is one way to think about the pursuit of
regional or bilateral cooperation outside of ideological blocs, as Crump’s work also shows.[26] To connect here to Betts’s questions—indeed, I do believe that “smallness” allowed Bulgaria to be successful in its cultural campaigns while carefully challenging Soviet cultural and historical supremacy. And yes, the regime viewed cultural diplomacy as the first step in developing other avenues of cooperation in places such as Mexico and Nigeria, most notably. The “advantages of smallness” had reputational outcomes, as the cultural endeavors of small Bulgaria appealed to and fascinated multiple audiences while they also gradually started to change the international image of the country; yet, economic and political interests led to the parallel signing of trade and technical cooperation agreements with numerous global actors (likely arms deals, too). Finally, within Bulgaria, the notion that “and we have also given something to the world” served important purposes of morale that, again, tangibly benefitted the regime, but also provided a buffer for ordinary Bulgarians who were disillusioned with other aspects of their existence.[27] As someone writing on a small state, I may have taken for granted my assumption that small states are important if we want to fully understand how the world works.

Ultimately, the key question is this: how do we unapologetically write the big history of small states, without constantly explaining ourselves, citing more literature, going to more archives, and making comparative claims? This dilemma is absolutely brilliantly summarized by Mëhilli, who raises two issues: “who gets to speak—and in whose registers,” and how do we continue working in “a system that embraces the margins rhetorically but it insists that it stays marginal.” I am much encouraged by Betts’s conclusion that “the Cold War may be best understood from the margins, or to put it differently, ... the Cold War really had no margins at all.” I am thrilled to hear Crump say that my book has “paved the way for a new area of research on other states on the margins of the Global Cold War.” I also believe, similarly to Applebaum, that we need more books on global Eastern Europe showcasing “the voices ... of ordinary people.” Overall, recent work on Eastern Europe has moved in the direction of empowering the “peripheral” European states, if we judge from the new or upcoming books of Maria Todorova, Emily Greble, James Mark, Paul Betts, or Victor Petrov, to mention just a few fellow travelers in this quest to restore the centrality of the margins.[28]

I hope my book can help advance our understanding of the importance of the small(er) states of Europe and provide an entry point into debates on how to write about the margins without perpetuating their marginal status in the literature. Whose voices get heard is not a new question in the historical profession, but its urgency has been renewed in the current global moment, which, like the seventies, is full of contradictions, anxieties, and—from the perspective of the margins, at least—measured optimism.

Notes


[11] Already too broad and sprawling to capture in a single footnote, the scope of this literature is evident in some of the volumes published in the last two decades. For example: Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild, eds., Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk, and Thomas Lindenberger, eds., Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014); Rana Mitter and Patrick Major, eds., Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History (London: Frank Cass, 2004).


[14] “Although the glint of megalomania was indistinguishable from the messianic aura,” writes Kapka Kassabova in reference to the powerful woman who planned the Children of the World Assembly of Peace in Sofia, “there was something about her - perhaps the simple fact that she was a woman in power, and she dared raise a different voice of madness among the zombie chorus of brown suits.” Kapka Kassabova, Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe (London: Granta, 2018).

[15] The fourth chapter’s crucial excavation of the role of Bulgarian émigrés and their mixed reaction to the socialist state’s cultural efforts in the United States and in West Germany is insightful in this regard.

[16] Smallness, too, is a relative thing, depending on the perspective and definition one adopts. Like others in Europe, Bulgaria has seen a dramatic demographic loss in recent decades, from a population around...


[27] This phrase comes from a popular poem by the Bulgarian poet, Ivan Vazov, Paisii, written in the 1880s, which is widely used colloquially by many Bulgarians.