



The Cold War from the margins: a small socialist state on the global cultural scene

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BOOK REVIEW

The Cold War from the margins: a small socialist state on the global cultural scene, by Theodora K. Dragostinova, Ithaca, USA and London, UK, Cornell University Press, 2021, xxi & 307 pp., \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN13: 9781501755552, ISBN10: 1501755552; \$0.00 (Ebook), ISBN13: 9781501755569, ISBN10: 1501755560. Open access version is available for download from Cornell University Press web site <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501755552/the-cold-war>.

There is a voluminous literature on the 20th century Cold War between the socialist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States of America and their ideological and military allies. This developed after the Second World War and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Do we need further contributions to this literature? Two important aspects which provide opportunities are, first, the specific contribution of the respective allied states to the conduct of the Cold War in its various dimensions and, secondly, the role of cultural diplomacy and “soft power” based on a wide-ranging ideological appeal that drew upon the arts, sciences, education, cultural exchange, and intellectual life generally which has become known as the “Cultural Cold War”.

The author has identified the possibilities of Bulgaria, a small historically Christian Orthodox Slav state in south-eastern Europe, and a neighbor across the Black Sea of Russia with which it has many linguistic and cultural links. The country was liberated from the Nazis by the Soviet Red Army in 1944 and this determined its political direction for the next five decades. In January 1946, it became a socialist People’s Republic, led initially (1946–1949) by Georgi Dimitrov, the veteran Stalinist communist and president of the Communist International (1935–1943). Bulgaria continued as a compliant member of the Soviet bloc until the end of 1989 and, consequently perhaps, has been relatively neglected in studies of the Cold War.

As such, it is an interesting choice for a case study from the perspectives indicated. Dr Dragostinova, a Bulgarian academic and associate professor of History at Ohio State University, in the United States, is well placed to undertake it. Among her previous publications are *Between Two Motherlands: Nationality and Emigration among the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900–1949* (2011), a well-received scholarly account of the Greek minority in Bulgaria, also published by Cornell University Press, and the more recent essay collection co-edited (with Yana Hashkamova) *Beyond Mosque, Church, and the State: Alternative Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans* (2016) published by the Central European University Press. The present book is a further and welcome contribution to the recent history of the Balkans and the developed socialist state of Bulgaria’s relations with a global cultural scene.

The volume, which focuses on the 1970s but with some consideration of the remaining years of state socialism and after, comprises an Introduction, six core Chapters, and an Epilogue. The author also provides a helpful ‘Note on Terminology’ in which she explains her use of the terms “socialist”, “state

socialist", "developed socialism", "late socialism", "communist regime" and "communist elites". However, the reader should not overlook a revealing autobiographical Preface in which the author describes herself as "... a child of developed socialism in Bulgaria" who remembers well "... the endless barrage of propaganda during the late 1970s" that emphasized the care of the state for its citizens, especially the young who were to be the future. "Those were days", Dragostinova says "... full of hectic, state-sponsored activities, both at school and", with perhaps unconscious irony, "in our free time." (xi). The 1979 and 1981 International Assemblies for Peace which brought children "... from across the world to Sofia" are noted as examples. She remembers also Liudmila Zhivkova, daughter of the communist leader Todor Zhivkov, as a key figure behind these events. Zhivkova's sudden death in the summer of 1981 felt Dragostinova says, "... like collective shock to the developed socialist nation pursuing new global paths." (xii). The Preface also reveals the author's classical education (which explains the clarity and quality of her writing) that was combined with discussions of Marxist-Leninist principles of ethics and Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. She describes her parents, father an engineer, mother a pediatrician, as "... average members of the technical and medical intelligentsia". This enabled them to work in Nigeria which was a cultural education for their daughter who accompanied them with her younger brother Kiril. However, her parents were neither members of the Bulgarian Communist Party nor working class which disadvantaged them, for example, in housing. The Preface also gives glimpses into Dragostinova's personal experience of the post-socialist transition from November 1989 until her move to the United States on a full doctoral scholarship in 1998. She says: "In the years of extended postsocialist transition, the Eastern Europeans of my generation kept their eyes on the West." (xvi).

The Introduction to the book itself considers "Bulgaria's place on the Global Cultural Scene of the 1970s." This is very difficult to do cogently such are the antinomies of the decade economically, politically, socially, and culturally. Dragostinova's analysis focuses on a small socialist state on the margins of each. Her interpretation is that the 1970s decade "... was the time of tortuous attempts to balance the contradictory agendas of the First, Second, and Third Worlds." (17). The Bulgarian international cultural, scientific, and technical programmes she considers in detail were shaped by three factors: "... The dynamics of East- West reconciliation during détente, the competition between the First and Second Worlds in the Third World, and the expanding forces of global interconnectivity" (17). The last is still a relatively neglected aspect of the Cultural Cold War. They are considered from what she calls a "pericentric" approach which considers the evolution of "... historical processes that from the perspectives of margins were both liberating and intimidating." (17). The core time frame is 1968 to 1982 during which the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan renewed Cold War suspicions and hostilities.

Six detailed chapters follow. Chapter 1 provides an account of the Bulgarian domestic and cultural scene that "... emphasizes the contradictions of developed socialism" and "... the dynamic interrelationship between national and international considerations in the conception of Bulgaria's cultural agenda" (19). Chapter 2 considers Bulgaria's cultural diplomacy toward its Balkan neighbors (Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey) with the aim of regional co-operation,

shown to have cut across superpower agendas, especially in the case of Greece. Chapter 3 considers Bulgaria's cultural diplomacy toward the West, especially in Europe and the United States. It is explained that it softened ideological language through an emphasis on universal values. The tensions of culture, ideology, and propaganda which led to different interpretations of the value and purpose of such cultural diplomacy by the respective political and cultural élites are analyzed.

Chapter 4, as Dragostinova justifiably claims, provides a further perspective on the Cultural Cold War through its analysis of the reactions of émigrés in the United States and West Germany. The Bulgarian communist regime aimed to cultivate a cultural diaspora in recognition of the potential role of nationalism in legitimizing its rule. Chapters 5 and 6 extends the analysis of Bulgaria's contribution to the Cultural Cold War considering its role in the developing world or, as the author puts it " ... in the wider context of the Second World in the Third", (20). The first considers India and Mexico and the second Nigeria, of which the author had personal knowledge. These two chapters, very interesting in themselves, demonstrate state socialism's development ideology which attempted to integrate economics and culture or, one might suggest, "base and superstructure". They also show cultural diplomacy to have been an important tool of foreign policy and communist legitimization domestically. The Epilogue considers the continuing influence of Cold War cultural politics on contemporary Bulgaria, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 2004 and the European Union since 2007, concluding that cultural nationalism remains important and for much the same reasons as previously. It is noted that " ... the international contacts developed under socialism have shaped Bulgaria's current standing in the world. One example comes from the reinvention of political elites, some of whom pursued spectacular international careers, such as Irina Bokova-the daughter of a prominent Politburo member-who served as the head of UNESCO between 2009 and 2017." (225).

The book conveys graphically the antinomies of political and cultural life in a small socialist state under the authoritarian control of a communist party elite that looked to legitimize its rule. It " ... calls attention to the role of activities that straddle the murky line between culture, public relations, and propaganda for the perpetuation of the late socialist regimes." (21). This included the careful management of the opening of the Bulgarian cultural scene to the West as Cold War cultural exchange was based on reciprocity. It also considers Bulgaria's relations with international cultural organizations, notably the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which are credited to the initiative of Liudmila Zhivkova (36). In 1981, the year of Zhivkova's premature death, UNESCO passed a resolution " ... recognizing the contribution of one of the oldest states of Europe ... to the development of world historical processes." (113). Indeed, it is said that " ... these cultural programs also promoted original humanist ideas, spurred popular excitement, and led to new global contacts and partnerships." (21).

It is not possible to do justice to such a rich book in a review of this length. Theodosia K. Dragostinova has written an excellent book, full of concrete examples and pertinent comments, which is a valuable contribution to the comparative history of the Cultural Cold War. It is sophisticated, theoretically aware, and

scholarly, drawing upon archive material from Bulgaria, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and on an extensive range of secondary material. However, there is a lack of material from Soviet archives and secondary sources which is a gap. The book's interest is enhanced by 40 black and white illustrations and a list of abbreviations. The paperback edition by Cornell University Press is of good quality and attractively produced at a bargain price. Thanks to the generosity of the publisher, the book is also available as an Open Access PDF. I recommend it wholeheartedly.

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