

The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene. Theodora K. Dragostinova. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. xxiii + 307 pp. \$19.95. Paperback ISBN: 9781501755552.

In a remarkable new book, Theodora Dragostinova offers a thought-provoking account of the efforts of a small state to attain global cultural stature during the final decades of the Cold War. The study of communist Bulgaria produces empirical and theoretical insights that will be of great interest to historians but will also appeal to a wider group of scholars who approach the state socialist systems from a variety of humanistic and social scientific perspectives.

At first glance, *The Cold War from the Margins* is an account of the efforts of socialist Bulgaria to stage cultural spectacles domestically (such as the 1981 celebration of the 1300th anniversary of the founding of the Bulgarian state) and internationally. Through careful research in archives in Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Dragostinova traces the global diplomatic initiative that was undertaken in the 1970s to promote Bulgarian culture in the Balkans, in Western Europe, in Latin America, in India, and in Africa. Although the general contours of this project executed under the tutelage of Liudmila Zhivkova (1942-1981), the daughter of the leader of the country, are familiar to specialists on Bulgaria, this book-length treatment adds rich details that help paint a more systematic picture of the scope of the Bulgarian cultural diplomacy effort in the 1970s.

As valuable as the empirical contributions are, what I found most remarkable about this book are its theoretical insights. A central purpose of the study is to showcase the value of adopting a “pericentric” perspective in historical analysis (17). The advantages of putting a marginal country like Bulgaria at the center are manifold. Perhaps most important is that this perspective disrupts standard hierarchical understandings of the role of small states in the flow of ideas and cultural production. Dragostinova’s study convincingly shows that a marginal country like Bulgaria was able to become a global cultural player in the 1970s thanks to substantial financial largesse of the government. Bulgarian cultural centers were opened around the world and exhibits of ancient Bulgarian treasures and religious artefacts toured the Met, the British Museum, and the Louvre, among others. Bulgaria’s cultural diplomacy in the 1970s, especially in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, gave it standing that was substantially higher than what we might expect given the size of the country. This provocative argument forces us to rethink our standard conceptualizations of power hierarchies during the Cold War.

A further contribution of the study is to theorize the political logic of cultural diplomacy. By pursuing high international status, the Bulgarian regime was targeting primarily a domestic audience. As Dragostinova shows, cultural nationalism helped foster patriotic feelings among the population and thus bound citizens closer to the regime (23-25). Apart from boosting the morale of the masses, the patriotic turn also coopted would-be dissidents into the state-sponsored cultural production process (33). The implications of this argument are extraordinary. Most consequentially, it provides us with an important corrective to the dominant understandings of the survival formulae of communist regimes. Longevity was not simply a function of repression and redis-

tribution. Dragostinova shows that an additional factor, which is usually missing from analyses of the Cold War, is of central importance. Future research on state socialism will have to take seriously the domestic implications of cultural diplomacy, especially for small states like Bulgaria, which presumably did not have access to the larger reservoirs for building patriotism that were available to the world powers. A history from the margins can produce important insights about a period that still evades the full grasp of humanists and social scientists alike.

Martin K. Dimitrov, Tulane University