

**Review of Theodora Dragostinova's *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene*, Cornell University Press, 2021, pp.330., \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN13: 9781501755552, ISBN10: 1501755552; \$0.00 (Ebook) Open access version is available for download from Cornell University Press web site: <https://www/cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501755552/the-cold-war>.**

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What can the small country of Bulgaria tell us about the inner political and social dynamics of the global world order during the Cold War? The history of the Cold war has been studied from multiple perspectives; however, it has been rarely explored from the margins of the former superpowers. Historian Theodora Dragostinova takes up this challenge in her latest book *The Cold War from The*

*Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene.* Dragostinova uses a “pericentric” approach, a method that puts the periphery at the center of analysis to investigate how the small state of Bulgaria traversed the intricate dynamics of the late Cold War. The pericentric method resembles postcolonial methodology, bringing the voices of marginalized groups at the forefront of academic research. Nevertheless, Dragastinova does not use the term ‘postcolonial’ in relation to Bulgaria since Bulgarian experiences of Soviet domination is not like European model of colonization.

Similarities between postsocialism and postcolonialism have been widely debated (Tlostanova 2015). Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (2009) have closely analyzed connections between two ‘posts’ and have eloquently summarized that “Post-Cold War ethnography could build upon work by “natives,” as analysts of their own condition, in their own terms” (p.29), which Bulgarian born Dragostinova does excellently in her book. Postsocialist Bulgaria is a space where postsocialist, post-colonial, and other post-dependance factors are closely intertwined (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009). This under-explored situatedness is at the forefront of Dragostinova’s book. Her work complicates the dichotomous scheme of west versus east, or north versus south, and demonstrates the agency that is hidden underneath the notions of ‘coloniality’ and ‘smallness.’ Similar to Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova, who argues that post-

colonial theory cannot be applied to Balkan states such as Bulgaria, Dragostinova demonstrates that despite certain similar experiences (Moore 2001), postsocialism cannot be equalized with postcolonialism.

In Chapter one, Dragostinova offers background information on the internal situation in Bulgaria during the 1970s. Combining Bulgarian and international perspectives, the chapter investigates long-lasting stereotypes associated with Bulgaria's image of an obedient Soviet ally and "the master satellite." (24). With a rich detailed analysis of Bulgaria's 1300th anniversary celebration, Dragostinova depicts a more complex picture of late socialism in Eastern Europe and demonstrates the role of official culture in upholding state socialist regimes. She argues that Bulgarian cultural policies revived Bulgarian "patriotism" and helped Todor Zhivkov's "benevolent dictatorship" (25) to reestablish relations with its citizens and undercut dissident movements.

In chapter two, Dragostinova explores cultural relationships between Bulgaria and its Balkan neighbors. She argues that while cultural nationalism provided more legitimacy on the domestic front, it complicated Bulgarian international affairs, especially in the Balkans. Bulgarian officials encountered complications in their attempt to promote Bulgarian cultural repertoire in the Balkans because Bulgaria's neighbors had different interpretations of their mutual past. However, Bulgaria's successful

encounters with Greece demonstrated that ideological alignment was not the necessary component for successful relationships between neighbors during the late Cold War.

Chapter three demonstrates how Bulgaria used the ‘master’s/Western tools’ to promote its image. Through harnessing their closeness to Europe and imitation of European image and values, Bulgaria was able to develop relations with the capitalist West, particularly Western Europe and the United States. Dragostinova also underlines that, from the Eastern European perspective, the official culture represented an ideological tool that could be used to spread socialist ideas and underline the superiority of the socialist state. Bulgarian diplomats had to walk a fine line between culture, ideology, and propaganda. Depending on their location, they utilized different languages: at home, Bulgarian cultural exchanges with the West were presented as propaganda of the socialist ideals, while abroad the emphasis was primarily on the Bulgarian historical and cultural contributions.

Chapter four continues the theme of Bulgarian cultural interactions with the West; however, it focuses specifically on the interactions between Bulgarian officials and Bulgarian immigrants to the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Dragostinova’s analysis of the Bulgarian diaspora in the West complicates the simplistic picture of an unambiguously oppressive state

of Bulgaria that was portrayed by sources such as Radio Free Europe (RFE) and the Voice of America (VOA). The chapter concludes that Bulgarian officials were able to connect with Bulgarian emigres through the promotion of cultural nationalism, which once again underscored the role of national ideology under late socialism. However, it would have been interesting to see how Bulgarians were perceived in the US and FRG and whether their position as representatives of the Second World led to feelings of Otherness in the First World.

The fifth chapter takes the reader away from the European continent and explores unusual examples of East-South communication and adds to the scholarship of alternative global connections established during the Cold War. These connections between Bulgaria, Mexico, and India demonstrate how actors on the margins were able to create unconventional cultural geographies on a global scale. Throughout their trips to India and Mexico, Bulgarian officials frequently used the categories of North and South instead of the predominant Three Worlds model, underlining the importance of South-South communication. Bulgaria presented itself as a newly developed socialist country and argued that the Bulgarian model could serve as a successful alternative to capitalist modernization. Dragostinova concludes that Bulgarian engagement in the Global South demonstrates the ability of a small state to use unusual ways of communication to affect the cultural and political

imaginations. These dynamics further demonstrate the challenging position Bulgaria had in the Cold War. On the one hand, Bulgaria associated itself with the Global South, however, it did not see or treat all members of Global South equally, which is demonstrated in the fifth chapter.

The final chapter continues the discussion of the multiple geographies of global contacts and exchanges. Dragostinova analyzes Bulgarian involvement in Nigeria and argues that its interest was twofold: access to a booming petro-state and the promotion of Bulgarian culture. The Soviet-backed policy of peaceful coexistence between different socioeconomic systems became the foundation of Bulgarian policy in Africa. Bulgarian official rhetoric in Nigeria used the language of anti-imperialism and condemned western neo-imperial practices. However, despite anti-colonial sentiments, Bulgarian officials often showed a paternalistic and condescending approach toward the Nigerian population, which is not surprising considering the phenomenon of postcolonial mimicry (Bhabha 1984). Bulgarian officials mimicked the Eurocentric approach and spoke of Nigeria as a developing state in need and offered the Bulgarian experience as a model for a successful transformation.

In the epilogue, Dragostinova summarizes that from the perspective of a small Bulgarian state, the 1970s presented a time of opportunity for small countries from

the margins to enter the global stage. She underlines one more time that cultural nationalism played a crucial role in promoting Bulgaria's image both domestically and abroad. Unfortunately, it also contributed to a growing pressure on Muslims to assimilate, especially the Turkish communities. Dragostinova concludes that our knowledge of the 1970s is much broader if we include the experiences of so-called peripheral actors, while our perception of late socialism is fuller when we analyze it in a global context.

The historical narratives of the Cold War continue to shape our perception of the past, present, and future. Thus, it is crucial to have more complex and nuanced studies of Cold War realities. Dragostinova's account of Bulgarian cultural politics in the 1970s represents a brilliant analysis of the history of socialism from the pericentric perspective. *The Cold War from the Margins* is a book for anyone who is interested in alternative ways of studying history and culture. The book also identifies future research sites such as the Global South perception of small socialist states like Bulgaria and the racial dynamics of their encounters, thus, this work can be particularly beneficial for emerging scholars and graduate students.

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