

THE COLD WAR FROM THE MARGINS

A Small Socialist State on the
Global Cultural Scene

THEODORA K. DRAGOSTINOVA

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Ithaca and London

CHAPTER 5

Like a Grand World Civilization

In 1980, 308 delegates from 82 Bulgarian-Indian Friendship Societies—representing over 150,000 dues-paying members and an estimated 300,000 total supporters of Bulgaria—gathered at a convention in New Delhi to discuss the activities of their organizations.¹ The members of these societies tended to be affiliated with the Communist Party of India (CPI), but many were members of Indira Gandhi’s ruling Congress Party.² Typically, the organizations took part in meetings with Bulgarian diplomats and collected a small subsidy to organize events for Bulgarian holidays. From the Bulgarian perspective, these societies “fulfilled a noble task—to acquaint [the Indian population] with the history, culture, economy, life, and activities of the Bulgarian people, and their struggle and labor to build a new, happier life.”³

Many society members were excited to learn about the accomplishments of the small Balkan state. Celebrations of 9 September, the national holiday marking the socialist revolution in Bulgaria, often featured Indian officials from the state or federal levels who wanted to find out more about the transformations in the country.⁴ In 1977, at the meeting of the friendship society in the city of Hyderabad, the state minister for budget and economic planning, Narsa Redi, gave a speech about his 1973 visit to Bulgaria, declaring that “Bulgarian agriculture is the best in the world” and India had much to learn from it. The chairperson of the society, Radjesvar Rao, explained that under the new cultural exchange agreement signed between the two

countries in 1976, three Indian students had the opportunity to study in Bulgaria free of charge, an announcement that caused much enthusiasm among the fifty attendees.⁵

Excitement about cooperation between Bulgaria and India was also evident at the highest levels. In November 1981, in the midst of the Bulgarian celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the medieval Bulgarian state in 681, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Bulgaria. In her speech, she declared: "We must strengthen our bilateral relations through greater exchanges of commerce and culture. But it is even more important that we work to deepen the feelings of fellowship among our peoples."⁶ This project of creating fellowship was already underway, if we are to judge from the activities of the Bulgarian-Indian Friendship Societies, which organized numerous celebrations of the Bulgarian 1300-year jubilee in India.

Such fond exchanges were not unique to Bulgaria and India. In March 1981, a centrally located boulevard and a square in Mexico City acquired the names Bulgaria and Georgi Dimitrov, respectively, while in the city of Puebla, a street near the beloved main city park was named Sofia, after the Bulgarian capital. A Bulgarian journalist in attendance was elated: "You need to be away from your motherland to feel the true power of the word 'Sofia' written with still-wet blue paint on the otherwise short Sofia Street in the city of Puebla with its millions of residents!"⁷ The gesture was even more meaningful for the Bulgarians given the fact that the current Boulevard Bulgaria used to be called Boulevard California. These ceremonies occurred in the presence of Bulgaria's first lady, Liudmila Zhivkova, the minister of culture and daughter of the Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov, who was attending celebrations in Mexico dedicated to the 1300th anniversary. The events included the opening of the *Medieval Bulgarian Civilization* exhibition, in the presence of President López Portillo, who had just been awarded the highest Bulgarian honor, the Dimitrov Prize, in recognition of his contributions to Bulgarian-Mexican friendship.

This chapter explores Bulgarian cultural involvements in India and Mexico to demonstrate that the pursuit of global connections was at the heart of the socialist project, leading to the development of vibrant interactions between junior members of the Soviet bloc and some developing states well into the 1970s. Together with the next chapter, which explores Bulgarian notions of development in Nigeria, this analysis seeks to highlight the existence of alternative global geographies beyond the East-West and North-South contacts that dominate historical studies. My goal is to advance a "pericentric" perspective, which emphasizes the importance of the global periphery in the Cold War. In this analysis, Sofia, New Delhi, and Mexico City were important

actors that cooperated fruitfully outside of the shadows of Moscow, Washington, London, Paris, Vienna, or Bonn. India and Mexico had their own reasons for pursuing contacts with the socialist states of Eastern Europe; however, here I reverse the question to ask why a small Balkan state sought new allies outside of Europe and invested in international cultural activities in the developing world. In this sense, this is a Bulgarian-centered approach based predominantly on Bulgarian archival records. In the 1970s, Bulgaria was rather successfully cultivating relationships outside of the East-West trajectory in the Global South, and both the East and the West were noticing these attempts to chart new East-South relations. By presenting the perspective of a state on the margins—a state that was also assumed to be the Soviet flag-bearer—I show that interactions among actors on the periphery “gave the Cold War the character it came to have.”⁸ This analysis contributes to the new scholarship that emphasizes the role of East-South relations through the examination of socialist globalization, or the uniquely socialist ideas of global cooperation that functioned as an alternative to Western notions of development and global integration during the Cold War.⁹ By focusing on culture, rather than economics or politics, topics that dominate studies of the relationship between the Second and Third Worlds, I show that the Cold War interactions between “peripheral” actors did not follow a single logic.¹⁰ By extending the analysis into the early 1980s, I demonstrate that relations between Eastern Europe and the Global South remained robust longer than usually assumed; up until 1982, if not longer, India and Mexico were among the most important international partners of small Bulgaria.¹¹

There is a larger picture to this cultural extravaganza in the Global South. Between 1977 and 1981, according to official statistics, Bulgarian officials organized 15,413 cultural events in Asia, 3,442 in the Arab countries, 2,973 in Latin America, and 1,170 in Africa. Not even the 7,420 cultural events in capitalist countries, a clear priority of the prestige-making agenda of the regime, matched the scope of this cultural offensive in the developing world.¹² Why were the Bulgarians cultivating such distant and seemingly unusual cultural relations? Bulgarian international cultural outreach outside of Europe was consistent with the logic of Bulgarian cultural policies since the mid-1970s that have been examined so far: the same ideological, political, reputational, and national(ist) factors determined the decision to stage elaborate cultural programs in a variety of states in the developing world, as well. Economic objectives further shaped the choices of Bulgarian elites who sought hard currency and new markets in the fragile 1970s, so often economic and cultural cooperation went hand in hand (as is clear in the case of India). Yet, in some places in the Global South, culture played an independent role as a

key driver of relations between states (as obvious in Mexico). In this chapter I advance debates on alternative global connections during the Cold War by emphasizing the role of culture in the new partnerships emerging along an East-South axis, which allowed actors on the margins to articulate alternative cultural geographies on a global scale.¹³

Beyond the global scale, however, key domestic factors shaped events, demonstrating again the interrelationship between local and global considerations in the conception and execution of these cultural programs. A special logic distinguished the way Bulgarian officials organized events in India and Mexico from their approach to cultural exchange with their Balkan or Western partners. Most importantly, the choice of the two countries as a main destination of Bulgarian culture was the result of the priorities of Bulgarian power elites, and particularly those of Liudmila Zhivkova, whose idiosyncratic personality and personal interests in Eastern philosophies and esoteric thought determined the scope of Bulgaria's policies. Through the 1970s, Zhivkova developed her interests in theosophy, meditation, yoga, and the paranormal, and often during her official trips she traveled to historical and archaeological sites, visited with gurus, experimented with foods, and participated in informal gatherings whose scope was often clouded in mystery.¹⁴ Largely because of her influence, India and Mexico (and Japan, not discussed here) accounted for most of the Bulgarian cultural involvement outside of Europe during this time.¹⁵ In the conditions of "cultural shortages" associated with the celebrations of the 1300th jubilee, the best Bulgarian cultural products were dispatched to these faraway countries (as well as the West), as a clear sign of the two main priorities of the regime.

Traveling to distant countries presented Bulgarian officials with unexpected opportunities to craft a distinct cultural message in front of global audiences without much prior knowledge about the country, unlike their Balkan neighbors or Western partners. This situation allowed Bulgarian cultural forays in India and Mexico to acquire a peculiar flavor. Unlike the cultural events organized among neighbors where national stakes were high, or those in the West where ideological considerations were paramount, in India and Mexico Bulgarian officials promoted often extravagant civilizational claims. There were two aspects of this civilizational message. On the one hand, Bulgarian officials operated under the assumption of their own uncontested Europeanness, unlike in the West where they often had to explain or defend their European identity, yet, on the other, they continuously asserted the image of Bulgaria as an equal peer of other "grand world civilizations" such as those of ancient Mexico or India. Because the Bulgarian message was

not scrutinized in the same way as it was in the Balkans or the West, cultural activities often took on exaggerated, even pompous dimensions, in order to emphasize the unique role of small Bulgaria at the crossroads of civilizations.

To explain the unique character of the Bulgarian cultural encounters with India and Mexico, I engage the historical narrative at multiple levels. First, I situate events in the context of the multipolar Cold War that saw a variety of interactions between the West, East, and “the rest.” Second, I show that Bulgaria had a variety of reasons to pursue contacts with actors outside of Europe. While political and economic considerations often prevailed, ideological, public relations, and national(ist) factors also informed those choices. Third, singling out the intense cultural relationship that developed among Bulgaria, India, and Mexico, I emphasize the importance of culture in cultivating new relationships between the Second and Third Worlds. In this case, the civilizational rhetoric portraying Bulgaria as one of the oldest European and world civilizations determined the nature of these relationships. Finally, I conclude by emphasizing that culture allowed Bulgaria to project its own civilizational ideas to a global audience, contributing to the creation of alternative cultural imaginaries along an East-South axis.

The Multipolar Cold War: A Bulgarian Perspective

There is a growing literature on the global Cold War that has insisted on the importance of the Third World in the evolution of the conflict between West and East. The emergence of the newly sovereign states and their high-profile, indigenous leaders challenged the bipolar political model of West versus East because the “rise of the rest” provided an alternative to Cold War polarization. Adopting this perspective, historians have made it clear that various configurations of power between the West, the East, and “the rest” created a complex system of global interconnections. As David Engerman argues, inserting the perspective of the postcolonial world into Cold War histories allows us to see the Cold War “as a fundamentally multipolar conflict, with the superpowers constantly responding not just to each other but to their allies and adversaries in the Third World.”¹⁶ This multipolar Cold War perspective is at the center of my analysis.

In 1952, French economist Alfred Sauvy coined the term Third World to denote the newly independent, postcolonial states in Asia and Africa. Seeking the possibility of a “third way” distinct from both American capitalism and Soviet state socialism, he contrasted the Third World to the “first world,” or the West with its traditions of imperialism and capitalism, and the “second world,” or the (rhetorically anti-imperialist) Soviet Union that was building a Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. The concept of “Third World”

took hold after the Bandung Conference of African and Asian peoples in 1955, and many newly independent states embraced it as a term of common identity.¹⁷ It is not coincidental that this conference paved the way for the Non-aligned Movement, officially launched in 1961, whose explicit goal was to create an alternative political path between the two blocs in the Cold War.¹⁸

The term Third World enjoyed wide usage in the 1960s with the growing consciousness that post-independence Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean shared a common cause and required a common action. The states of Latin America also became associated with the Third World, even though they had been independent since the early 1800s. Despite their different historical trajectory, U.S. control in the Americas helped link Latin America to the rest of the Third World through the frameworks of “dependency theory” and “structural imperialism.”¹⁹ During the 1960s and 1970s, economic issues moved to the center of discussion.²⁰ Instead of dividing states politically between East and West, the differences between the prosperous North and impoverished South—a taxonomy that used the latitude of the Mediterranean to distinguish between developed and developing nations—was emerging as a new demarcation in the global community. Various proposals were advanced for reordering the international economic system to alleviate the gap between rich and poor. By the late 1970s, the terms Third World, South, and developing countries were used as synonyms for “poorer countries.” Only in the 1980s did the power of Third World solidarity begin to wane, a process that accelerated in the aftermath of 1989.²¹

Many of these debates centered on the concept of development.²² Despite the active role of the United States, many Third World leaders did not pursue a strictly Western model of development based on free market practices. In fact, for some newly independent countries the Soviet model of development was attractive because it represented a repudiation of Western economic exploitation and political domination.²³ The Soviet Union emerged as a prominent actor in the Third World under Nikita Khrushchev (1954–1964), and this involvement continued under Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982).²⁴ Soviet leaders believed that their opposition to imperialism and track record of rapid economic development would be appealing to the newly independent states. The Soviets generously provided aid to countries whose governments had socialist credentials, such as China, Cuba, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. But many recipients of Soviet aid—including India, Indonesia, Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, and Ghana—were not Marxist but rather nonaligned states that adopted selected elements of state socialist economic development.²⁵

The multipolarity of the Cold War is especially obvious in the involvement of Eastern Europe in the Third World, which charted unique East-South connections outside of the immediate Soviet orbit. Several trends are

emerging out of the growing literature on the topic.²⁶ Soviet allies played an important role in projects of international development in the Third World, but often they pursued their own priorities over Soviet bloc solidarity. Many of them, such as Czechoslovakia and the GDR, were more developed than the Soviet Union, so Third World leaders often preferred their expertise over Soviet advice. Further, the socialist states had the appeal of not being superpowers dictating geopolitical terms, but states that acted as equal partners. The involvement of Soviet allies in the Third World—sometimes acting as Soviet proxies but sometimes pursuing their own interests—created a condition that Young-Sun Hong has aptly called a “bipolar (dis)order.”²⁷

Based on their examination of these contacts, scholars of Eastern Europe have been advancing a discussion about the existence of alternative notions of globalization, or multiple globalizations, during the Cold War. In her study of United Nations debates about the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1960s and 1970s, Johanna Bockman has demonstrated the global appeal of “socialist globalization” focused on state intervention rather than free trade. Addressing concerns specific to the postcolonial world, UN circles articulated the idea that “developed countries”—which did not necessarily mean capitalist countries—should assist developing countries in their efforts to speed up progress. This strong preference for “cooperation and solidarity” was only erased from the historical record in the late 1980s after the triumph of capitalism at the end of the Cold War.²⁸ But these new visions were not limited to economic ideas. In his work on Eastern European architects working outside of Europe, Łukasz Stanek prefers to use the term *mondialization* to point to the overlapping international projects of the Cold War, questioning the master narrative of the gradual triumph of globalization as homogenizing Americanization; socialist internationalism and the Nonaligned Movement provided a viable—and welcome—alternative to Western development projects well into the 1980s.²⁹ Finally, in their strong defense of the existence of multiple globalizations, James Mark, Steffi Marung, and Artemy M. Kalinovsky speak about “different and competing models of globalization” to emphasize “the plurality of cultural, social, political and economic projects within this ‘global condition’” that developed from the 1950s on. In this analysis, which insists that “globalization can only be thought of in the plural,” the character of socialist globalization is also seen in the major role of the state in determining those global choices.³⁰ As this chapter shows, Bulgarian diplomats and specialists also participated in networks of foreign experts who competed in providing expertise for development projects in Nigeria during the long 1970s. In the Bulgarian case, culture, in addition to economics and politics, infused those contacts.

The question remains, in what ways did Bulgarian elites think about their place in the global order of the 1970s? By pursuing this question, I am able to present the perspective of a small state on the functioning of the world, inserting nuance into the distinction between First, Second, and Third worlds that dominates current scholarship. Bulgarian officials tended to refrain from the Three Worlds model that used the designation Second World to refer to the Eastern European socialist states as second to the West. Diplomats occasionally used the categories of North and South, especially when in conversation with their new partners in Africa. Yet, the Bulgarian term of choice was “developing countries” (*razvivashti se strani*), and the objective criterion for this classification was a large agricultural population, industrial underdevelopment, and a desire for modernization. This definition allowed Bulgaria—and the Soviet bloc states in general—to assert their credentials as recently developed socialist states vis-à-vis the “developed capitalist states” (*razviti kapitalisticheski strani*), and offer an alternative model of modernization to developing states to help them avoid the evils of capitalism. This understanding of development saw the process as natural and inevitable, achieved through a stable political system, industrialization, urbanization, high literacy rates, and high levels of public involvement, all criteria that fit the socialist bill.³¹ Having adopted the identity of a recently developed state, Bulgaria was now prepared to lend a hand to friendly developing states interested in speedy socioeconomic transformation.³² A small state, in other words, had a distinct role to play in this world system, as imagined from the periphery.

To accomplish this mission, Bulgarian officials exalted a special Bulgarian cultural model, which placed their country on an equal level with other world civilizations—such as the Aztecs, Mughals, and Hindus—but also articulated an unquestionably European template of development rivaling the legacies of the ancient Greeks and Romans. This was supposed to be a subtle message: ancient and modern, Balkan, European, and of the world, Bulgaria could provide a unique example for countries that wanted to defy traditional (Western) civilizational claims and superpower (neo)imperial projects by adopting an alternative template of modernization. In the larger context of the global Cold War, Bulgaria’s ideas of development were expressed not only through economic or political cooperation, but also via practices of cultural exchange infused with civilizational rhetoric.

Discovering the Developing World

In the mid-1970s, as a part of the prestige-building endeavors of Bulgarian elites in the context of developed socialism, Bulgaria took on a new

international role by refocusing its attention regionally (on its neighbors in the Balkans), but also globally (on selected developing countries). What were the reasons for this active global overture of a small Eastern European state during the precarious 1970s? Reputational considerations were at the heart of this project: according to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), “Bulgaria is seeking a new role. It is tired of being type-cast.” Trying to defy the stereotype of the “Soviet flag-bearer,” Bulgaria was now pursuing a more independent role on the world stage.³³ Yet, unique domestic conditions facilitated these choices, as well. Unlike the heads of other socialist states (particularly Poland and Czechoslovakia) that had internal political challenges, Bulgaria’s Todor Zhivkov, wishing to be seen as a great statesman and enhance the prestige of his country, became “the most travelled East European leader.”³⁴ Zhivkov’s travel record was impressive: in 1976, he engaged in state visits to India, Libya, Tunisia, Iran, and Iraq and accepted visitors from Ethiopia, Tanzania, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique, Egypt, Vietnam, Laos, and Mexico.³⁵ Africa, in particular, was emerging as a new item on the Bulgarian agenda, prompting British diplomats to condescendingly talk about “Bulgaria’s jungle offensive.”³⁶ Reaching out to these states was part of a general Warsaw Pact campaign for involvement in the developing world; there is little doubt that Zhivkov coordinated these efforts with Soviet leader Brezhnev, who had established a ritual summer meeting of Soviet bloc heads of state in Yalta. Yet, a complicated set of motives determined the Bulgarian drive toward international contact, including ideological and political needs, economic objectives, prestige-making goals, and national(ist) aspirations, as well as the personal choices of the political leaders in charge of the country. To understand the role of cultural exchange in these endeavors, it is necessary to outline the broader context of Bulgaria’s global reach.

Ideology played an important role in the Soviet bloc’s outreach to the developing world. The Soviet turn toward internationalism occurred under Nikita Khrushchev beginning in 1956. In the 1960s the Soviet Union abandoned attempts at “revolutionary transformation” in the developing world and adopted the principle of “peaceful coexistence”: instead of working only with socialist states, the Soviet bloc now sought to create “a broad coalition of progressive forces standing in opposition to the powers of imperialism.”³⁷ In the 1970s, but especially after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, the concept of “peaceful coexistence between different socioeconomic systems” also became the cornerstone of Bulgarian foreign policy. The Bulgarian commitment to “proletarian internationalism” continued to drive contacts with countries whose governments had socialist credentials, notably Vietnam, Mozambique, and Angola. Yet, the rhetoric of “anti-imperialism”

and “anti-neocolonialism” (focused on the developing world’s rights over its economic resources) resonated with a broader group of potential allies who may not have shared the Bulgarian commitment to the Soviet political model, but were attracted by the notion of peaceful coexistence.

In 1976, on the eve of the Bulgarian Communist Party’s Eleventh Congress, a publication in the BKP’s daily, *Rabotnicheskoto delo* (Workers’ deeds), explained the parameters of Bulgarian foreign policy in the developing world after Helsinki. Condemning “racism and apartheid” and proclaiming support for the “national liberation movements” of the “peoples struggling against imperialism and colonialism,” Foreign Minister Petar Mladenov declared that Bulgaria would provide help to the young states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America “to stimulate revolutionary transformations” in their societies, framing cooperation with the developing world broadly.³⁸ Bulgarian politicians used anti-imperialism and anti-neocolonialism, in particular, as umbrella terms that appealed to a variety of postcolonial states. In 1978, during his visit to Nigeria, Zhivkov spoke of his full support for “the final eradication of colonialism in Africa and the victory of true economic independence of the free African countries.”³⁹ This ideological framing of Bulgaria’s outreach to the developing world remained a constant during this period.

Ideological and practical factors, however, went hand in hand, and economic interests infused these efforts. In the spirit of proletarian internationalism, Bulgaria had robust economic relations with a number of African states with a socialist orientation, including Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, where treaties of friendship and cooperation charted in detail the terms of Bulgarian economic involvement.⁴⁰ But elsewhere, purely economic factors shaped the contacts, as the Bulgarians tried to procure hard currency through specialist exchange, find markets for their industrial or processed food goods, or secure access to natural resources such as oil. Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria were some of the places that benefited from Bulgarian economic investment and specialist exchange in the fields of engineering, construction, and medicine. Similarly, in Nigeria, the most populous African country, Bulgaria competed for an economic niche in the construction, industrial, and agricultural sectors of the newly independent state (1960), which was astutely navigating Soviet bloc and Western military and economic aid.⁴¹ The practical inclinations of Bulgarian elites critically shaped their choice of partners in the Global South.

High-profile overseas events also served reputational strategies with the goal of “play[ing] up Bulgaria’s international role.”⁴² Leaders were sensitive to Bulgaria’s reputation as the most loyal Soviet ally and skillfully used these contacts to project an image of independence, sovereignty, and international

status. According to British diplomats, Zhivkov personally showed “considerable satisfaction to project himself as an elder statesman of the Communist world in an arena in which . . . Bulgaria seems to have a distinct role to play.”⁴³ Further, these endeavors served well the domestic legitimization purposes of communist elites in the 1970s as for ordinary Bulgarians, involvement in Third World countries came to signify “that Bulgaria carries some weight in international affairs.”⁴⁴ Both among elites and the population at large there was a new level of excitement at the prospect of a small state entering the global scene and establishing a tangible presence outside of the geopolitical parameters of the mainstream Cold War divide between East and West.

In this context, a growing number of Bulgarian officials, supported by Zhivkova, thought that culture could play a key role in Bulgaria’s involvement in the developing world. In 1977, a Bulgarian Cultural-Informational Center opened in New Delhi, and plans were underway for the opening of similar centers in Mexico City, Lagos, and Algiers. In 1979, Bulgarian friendship societies existed in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Jordan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nepal, Algeria, Nigeria, and Sudan; there were Bulgarian educational-cultural associations in Uruguay and Argentina.⁴⁵ Between 1977 and 1982, Bulgarian officials organized close to 23,000 cultural events in the developing world.⁴⁶ This extensive cultural outreach outside of Europe is striking, given the size of Bulgaria and its limited economic and cultural resources.

National(ist) motivations in line with the “patriotic turn” in Bulgaria no doubt informed these choices to invest in culture in the Global South. Interweaving domestic and international considerations in a fashion that had emerged as a defining feature of Bulgarian culture in the 1970s, officials projected Bulgaria’s unique role in the world’s cultural treasury through these campaigns. Basically, Bulgarian elites promoted the idea that cultural heritage elevated their country to the level of other civilizations such as the Aztecs, Mughals, Egyptians, ancient Greeks, or Romans. This was a message specifically molded for a global consumption: Bulgaria was a “grand nation” that provided a unique template for other nations that wished to elevate their international position while charting an independent role for their states in world affairs. In Zhivkova’s words, cultural contacts served to “display the tangible contribution of Bulgarian culture to the development of human civilization.”⁴⁷ State investment in culture paid off because it became a tool for the assertion of the prestige of a small state—one of the “cradles of European civilization”—on the world stage. Thus, the new encounters between Bulgaria and the developing states, being ideologically sound, politically beneficial, economically profitable, nationally affirming,

and culturally rich, became an opportunity to promote the special civilizational model that Bulgaria could offer to the world outside of the shadows of better-known (typically Western) civilizations. A small state on the margins used official culture to carve out its unique place in the world.

Resolving Contradictions: Bulgaria in India and Mexico

India and Mexico were Bulgaria's two most important international partners from the mid-1970s on, establishing "parallel histories" 10,000 miles and eleven time zones apart.⁴⁸ Both India and Mexico saw nearly the same string of Bulgarian political and economic delegations, agricultural experts, exhibition commissars, artists, performers, and folk troupes. In terms of cultural relations, Bulgarian leaders often combined their trips to the two countries in a desire to showcase their contacts with two states that, at first glance, shared few commonalities.⁴⁹ Bulgaria established diplomatic relations with India in 1954. In 1967, newly elected prime minister Indira Gandhi visited Bulgaria, followed by Todor Zhivkov's visit to India in 1969. In the 1960s and 1970s regular if not particularly robust communication developed along economic lines. From the mid-1970s on, culture added a new dimension to these contacts. Mexico, however, was an entirely new phenomenon in Bulgarian diplomacy. Bulgaria only established relations with Mexico in 1974 and opened an embassy in 1975. The "sudden upsurge" of Mexican-Bulgarian contacts, including a state visit by Mexican president José López Portillo in 1978, was "something of a mystery" to foreign diplomats.⁵⁰ What brought Bulgaria, India, and Mexico together in such unlikely friendships? Only the examination of Indian and Mexican archives could address the motivations of those two states in sufficient nuance, yet here, having worked exclusively with Bulgarian records, I offer a pericentric perspective. My analysis confirms other observations that socialist elites were extremely flexible with their political choices in the Global South, cultivating vibrant relationships even with oppressive political regimes.⁵¹ As seen in Bulgaria during the 1970s and 1980s, political flexibility and the search for new allies, combined with the personal choices of the power elites in each state, determined the fond relationships with authoritarian India and populist Mexico.

From a Marxist perspective, there was much to criticize in the internal affairs of Bulgaria's new partners: Bulgarian diplomats often used the term "contradictions" (*protivorechiia*) to describe both countries. A Bulgarian study from 1981 concluded: "There are numerous political struggles, social conflicts, and religious tensions," including lasting "feudal remnants" or

“atavisms” (*otzhivelitsi*) in India. Poverty rates were at 40 to 50 percent, adult illiteracy was rampant, and rapid population growth impeded improvements in the standard of living, all factors making India a risky partner from an ideological perspective.⁵² Mexico was problematic as well, as the “big bourgeoisie” connected to “American export capital” dominated political life.⁵³ To address the acute political and social problems after the economic crisis of 1973, the “ruling class” employed “traditional capitalist schemes: [appeals to] calm, national unity, sacrifice, patience, and trust.”⁵⁴ While similar dynamics would have been the basis of a sharp critique of the government’s choices elsewhere (especially in the West), in memos concerning India and Mexico these contradictions were duly noted but then carefully ignored.

Political compromise was the basis of the successful global romance between the three states. As far as India was concerned, Bulgarian officials maintained contacts and often praised the Communist Party of India (CPI), whose members periodically visited Bulgaria, but ideological commitment was never a priority in expanding contacts in the country.⁵⁵ In fact, the Bulgarian leadership had extremely good relations with Indira Gandhi’s Congress Party; despite the “bourgeois” credentials of the congress and Gandhi’s imposition of a “draconian” state of emergency in 1975–1977, Zhivkov and his daughter visited India in 1976. In the opinion of Bulgarian diplomats, Gandhi was a better, “less right-wing” alternative to other political parties, even though she was likely to continue using “authoritarian” methods to maintain her rule (which ultimately cost her the election in 1977). When Gandhi returned to power in 1980, the growing dynamism and enthusiasm of expanding economic and cultural contacts were paramount.⁵⁶ In Mexico Bulgarian diplomats also worked with the party of “financial oligarchy,” the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had held power since 1929 and had a “practical monopoly” on political life.⁵⁷ The same party had overseen the Tlatelolco Massacre during the 1968 student protests in Mexico City and the suppression of left-wing insurgents in the state of Guerrero in the early 1970s. Bulgarian diplomats, however, found the PRI’s populist program focused on the rural and urban poor acceptable, and decided that the progressive if bourgeois agenda of the party made it a solid political partner.⁵⁸ In both India and Mexico, following a tortuous logic, Bulgarian officials sought to erase or downplay politically and socially inconvenient internal developments to justify growing relations. The new global entanglement between the three states was undeniably based, first and foremost, on their elites’ willingness to resolve contradictions.

Although the expansion of contacts was rapid, their extent should not be overstated. Given the distance between the countries, they were limited



FIGURE 28. Meeting between Liudmila Zhivkova and Indira Gandhi in New Delhi, 1976. Source: Elena Savova, Zdravka Micheva, and Kiril Avramov, eds., *Liudmila Zhivkova: Zhivot i delo (1942–1981); Letopis* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bălgarskata akademiia na naukite, 1987).

to highly ranked political leaders, party functionaries, diplomats, and their families, plus a growing number of exchange specialists, scholars, artists, and performers. The strong personal relations that developed between political leaders at the highest level was instrumental.⁵⁹ A close friendship flourished between Gandhi and Zhivkova, both daughters of leaders who had taken their countries in radically new directions. Their personal patronage played an important part in the intense, cordial relations between the two countries that developed from 1976 on. The two female politicians often made comparisons between the post-1944 socialist period in Bulgaria and the post-1947 independence period in India whose common goals were modernizing their countries and lifting their peoples out of poverty. In the words of Gandhi, “we have pursued different paths but the goal is the betterment of our people’s lives.”⁶⁰ In addition, both Zhivkova and Gandhi had an affinity for the use of history in their narratives of political success: while Zhivkova visited museums and historical sites and spoke about the mysterious Thracians and tenacious Slavs, Gandhi visited Hindu temples and used rituals and symbols, including those of Durga, the Hindu mother goddess, to mobilize national(ist) sentiment as a strategy of legitimization.⁶¹ Their view of the transformational role of their families’ political choices and the common use

of historical rhetoric bound the two women together in their determination to pursue the “betterment” of their respective nations, both heirs of ancient civilizations.

In Mexico, the personal engagement of two presidents, Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) and his political ally and successor, José López Portillo (1976–1982), both of the populist and authoritarian PRI, were indispensable. The two actively facilitated contacts with small Bulgaria as described in the memoirs of the Bulgarian ambassador who was dispatched to cultivate those relations. Highly placed women played an important role, too. In 1975, Zhivkova visited Mexico in her capacity as chairperson of the Committee for Culture, the same year the new Bulgarian embassy first opened. In 1976, she attended the inauguration of President López Portillo, in a highly symbolic gesture, and visited again in 1978 and 1981. During those visits, First Lady Carmen Romano de López Portillo hosted receptions, museum openings, and ceremonies honoring Zhivkova; she also paid a visit to Sofia in 1977 and met with a host of Bulgarian officials.⁶² The growing fondness between the two women paved the way for the state visits of President López Portillo in 1978 and of General Secretary Zhivkov in 1979.⁶³ While rhetorically portrayed as the rapprochement between the Mexican and Bulgarian people, the relationship had



FIGURE 29. President José López Portillo honoring Liudmila Zhivkova, 1978. Source: Elena Savova, Zdravka Micheva, and Kiril Avramov, eds., *Liudmila Zhivkova: Zhivot i delo (1942–1981); Letopis* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bălgarskata akademiia na naukite, 1987).

a certain royal flavor because it was so obviously based on the personal connections between the political families in charge of the two countries.

The closeness between Zhivkova, Gandhi, and Romano attracted international attention, prompting the press to speculate about the characteristics of Bulgaria's "red dynasty" in comparison to those in the GDR, Albania, and Romania.⁶⁴ Zhivkova was often referred to as the "Bulgarian princess," the protégé of a regime that enjoyed "a high degree of family management."⁶⁵ But through these unexpected and somewhat exotic foreign contacts, Zhivkova was thought to be bringing something fresh to the international scene. Western observers were fascinated by the fact that "few men, let alone women, are able to . . . effortlessly sprinkle their press conferences with references to ancient Sanskrit philosophy."⁶⁶ In Bulgaria, many shared the opinion that the spectacular expansion of Bulgarian cultural contacts with India and Mexico was due to Zhivkova's personal interests in Eastern philosophy, meditation, and yoga, which made these new contacts unique and exciting.⁶⁷ Ironically, these idiosyncrasies gave Zhivkova some legitimacy internationally because she was seen as introducing new approaches to a sphere previously dominated by ideology. In the late 1970s the foreign press overwhelmingly evaluated her efforts as a "brilliant success as an exercise of international public relations [that put] this small, obscure Balkan country on the western world's cultural map."⁶⁸ From the perspective of Bulgarian elites, the decision to invest in culture in faraway places paid off in terms of prestige-making.

Political and Economic Cooperation: An East-South Perspective

To explain these contacts solely as the wishes of the "Bulgarian princess," however, does not take into consideration the wider Bulgarian interests in the developing world. Furthermore, India and Mexico pursued contacts with the socialist countries for their own reasons.⁶⁹ In the 1970s both India and Mexico had emerged as important voices in support of the newly independent postcolonial states, making them key players in the global Cold War. At different times and for different reasons, their governments sought to assert their political neutrality and disentangle their economic infrastructure from former colonial masters (India) or diversify political and economic contacts beyond their immediate powerful neighbor to the north (Mexico). Looking for alternatives, both countries turned their attention to the socialist states, including smaller states like Bulgaria. Taken together, the political and economic cooperation that developed between the three states serves

as an example of the alternative models of global interconnectivity that accelerated in the 1970s. This East-South axis highlights the limits of theories that explain globalization as a process of westernization only, as in this case, dynamic global contacts in the political, economic, and cultural spheres developed outside of the East-West and North-South frameworks well into the 1980s. Here, again, I offer an analysis of those contacts mainly from the perspective of small Bulgaria.

Since its independence in 1947, India had actively navigated the realities of the Cold War under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–1964). Once its regional adversary Pakistan entered into an alliance with the U.S. military in the mid-1950, the country initiated contacts with the Soviet Union (whose rapid industrialization Nehru admired) and sought advice from a range of international players (including experts from socialist Poland).⁷⁰ A former anticolonial leader and a moderate socialist with an Eton education and Cambridge law degree, Nehru sought the middle way. Domestically, the country was a parliamentary democracy, winning U.S. admiration, yet to modernize its economy it implemented economic planning, including five-year plans on the Soviet model. Internationally, India's neutrality was most evident in its key role in the Nonaligned Movement established in 1961. Indian relations with the United States were necessary yet cautious because the Kennedy administration provided substantial economic aid in the 1960s, yet Nehru despised U.S. racism, which he saw as a legacy of colonialism, and criticized American ideas of development as one-sided. Indian relations with the Soviet Union were selective and self-serving: Nehru secured the building of a Soviet steel plant in 1955 and sought further technical and economic expertise in the 1950s and 1960s, but he criticized the Soviet political system and was suspicious of Soviet support for the CPI.⁷¹

Once in power in 1966, Indira Gandhi was also determined to pursue an independent role for India vis-à-vis the main Cold War players. In the 1970s, to counterbalance U.S. economic and military aid, she increased Indian economic ties with the Soviet Union and other socialist states, not least in the context of the "green revolution" through which she sought to secure agricultural self-sufficiency. Gandhi also asserted India's international role through a successful war against East Pakistan in 1971 (which led to the creation of Bangladesh) and through the testing of a nuclear weapon in 1974. In the mid-1970s, in the context of détente and discussions of peaceful coexistence after Helsinki, India saw its role as expressing the interests of countries that did not commit to the Western or Eastern blocs. In the aftermath of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Gandhi did not unequivocally condemn the Soviets in an attempt to counterbalance U.S. influence in the region, as

evident in U.S. support for Pakistan. Domestically, she paid a heavy price for a state of emergency she imposed between 1975 and 1977 by losing the 1977 elections, so when back in power in 1980, Gandhi continued to proclaim commitment to neutrality and nonalignment to boost her legitimacy.⁷² In this context, reinvigorated contacts with the smaller Eastern European states were a safe choice.

Mexico similarly held the position of a “middle power” in the context of the Latin American Cold War due to its ability to balance the superpowers. The country maintained its international reputation through neutrality, nonintervention, and non-participation in international organizations such as OPEC and the Nonaligned Movement.⁷³ While courting their powerful northern neighbor economically, Mexican governing elites were ambiguous political partners, as they committed to “Third Worldism” and maintained active (and generally supportive) relations with Cuba. Mexican relations with the Soviet Union were cautious yet generally tolerant: the PRI allowed the existence of a Communist Party at home (even if it harassed and disappeared its members) while in 1980 Mexico refused to participate in the U.S. boycott of the Moscow Olympics.⁷⁴

What Gilbert Joseph calls “the Janus-faced policies of Cold War Mexico” were also obvious in its internal affairs. While Mexico was one of the few states to preserve its civilian government during the era of military dictatorships in Central and Latin America in the 1970s, the PRI, consistently in power since 1929, experimented with a range of authoritarian, repressive, and populist policies. In the 1970s, presidents Echeverría and López Portillo presented themselves as technocrats able to deal with the political and social instability after the 1973 crisis that had erased the success of the Mexican miracle from the previous decade, so they expanded the role of the state in the economy (especially agriculture), increased spending for school construction and housing projects, and made peace with young people by investing in education. The discovery of oil in the mid-1970s funded this state investment in social policies. Yet, at the same time, Mexico led quiet dirty wars against revolutionary groups and indigenous populations, while the social polarization between the middle class and the poor remained sharp.⁷⁵ For Mexico too, maintaining relations with a range of international actors, including the small socialist states, was a useful exercise.

In following a pericentric perspective it is important to analyze the logic of the Bulgarian officials pursuing connections with India and Mexico, despite their problematic political allegiances and dubious social credentials. In a global context, when Bulgaria chose international partners far from home, the bar was rather low: close contacts with India and Mexico were possible

because their internal and foreign policy agendas were “not objectionable.” Given Bulgaria’s distance from these countries and general lack of knowledge about them, Todor Zhivkov’s overtures in these two far-off states presented little political risk while potentially increasing his legitimacy at home and his reputation as an international player abroad. Thus, small Bulgaria actively cultivated East-South relationships, boldly advancing novel global contacts in the context of the 1970s.

There was a systematic expansion of contacts with India, in particular. Under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, who followed her father’s principles of peaceful coexistence, India embraced *détente*, supported disarmament, proposed more contacts along North-South lines, and encouraged cooperation with the socialist states. The two countries avoided discussions of their political disagreements and focused on what bound them together. Further, despite its capitalist economy, Indian modernization projects provided opportunities for cooperation with the socialist states because Indian political elites experimented with forms of state planning and agricultural development.⁷⁶ Bulgarian diplomats believed that their presence in India served to undermine the traditional Western role in the postcolonial world while it gave substance to the official position that “the socialist states are the natural ally of all nonaligned states.”⁷⁷

With its population of 320 million and vast natural resources, Latin America also emerged as a region of interest for Bulgaria in the 1970s. Bulgarian diplomats were willing to work with all “democratic, progressive, and revolutionary forces” that would pursue cooperation outside of U.S. influence.⁷⁸ Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico were the focus of Bulgarian diplomatic efforts because the three countries had preserved their civilian governments in the 1970s. In Mexico, the ruling PRI party followed “progressive” policies: it maintained close contacts with the social-democratic parties of Latin America and Western Europe and severed relations with Chile after the junta in 1973.⁷⁹ Together with Venezuela, Mexico established the Latin American Economic System (SELA) in 1975 to promote economic cooperation in the entire region, including with Cuba. Mexico was also willing to expand its relations with other socialist states, such as Hungary and the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ Establishing a presence in the region through involvement in Mexico suited the interests of Bulgarian policymakers.

Economic considerations were also an important motivation in fostering contacts with the two states, especially India. According to Bulgarian estimates, in the late 1970s, about 20 percent of the Indian economy (including 40 percent of industry) was under state control and Indian elites were still interested in pursuing alternative methods of modernization.⁸¹ In 1973, an Indo-Bulgarian Joint Commission was established to coordinate matters of

economic interest, and Bulgarian correspondence suggests the Bulgarian representatives made systematic efforts to be perceived as a “desired economic partner.”⁸² By 1976, Bulgaria had built eight food, pharmaceutical, and chemical factories in India and expanded its reach in the spheres of agriculture, electronics, machine building, metallurgy, and light industry. By 1981, four more Bulgarian plants had opened in the country.⁸³ During the same period the Bulgarians established their presence in Indian electronics by winning contracts for the import of computers and computer software.⁸⁴ Bulgarian specialists also extended help in setting up agricultural-industrial complexes: in 1976, when Zhivkov visited India, he inaugurated a Bulgarian complex in Bangalore. In 1980, when Gandhi came to power again, trade turnout between Bulgaria and India was double what it had been in 1970.⁸⁵

In the late 1970s, Bulgarian leaders also pursued economic cooperation with Mexico. The PRI was particularly interested in the Bulgarian agricultural experience, and especially in setting up agricultural-industrial complexes similar to the projects already underway in India.⁸⁶ President López Portillo had come to power promising “efficiency and productivity” in agriculture.⁸⁷ After his visit to Bulgaria in 1978, upon his request, Bulgarian specialists established two agricultural-industrial complexes and food processing plants in the state of Guerrero that employed 2,100 peasants.⁸⁸ The Bulgarians also investigated the possibility of opening refineries and petrochemical plants with Mexican help.⁸⁹ But negotiations proceeded slowly, and besides the Guerrero complex, overall economic relations between Bulgaria and Mexico remained “unsatisfactory” from Bulgarian perspective.⁹⁰

As is clear, despite the questionable political and social records of the ruling elites in India and Mexico in the long 1970s, the Bulgarian regime readily cultivated relations with two countries whose policies were characterized as no more than “not objectionable.” Socialist elites were rather comfortable pursuing cooperation with authoritarian capitalist states. These dynamics highlight the fact that while East-South relations might have served to counterbalance the competition between the superpowers and to provide examples for alternative global possibilities, they were riddled with unresolved tensions that should not be ignored. Yet, in addition to politics and economics, culture played a role in charting these new ideas of cooperation and friendship between the Second and the Third Worlds.

From Technical-Scientific to Cultural-Educational Cooperation

Along with architects, engineers, chemists, textile and agricultural specialists, and technical personnel, Bulgaria also dispatched to India and Mexico

scholars, artists, writers, folk and jazz musicians, archaeologists, and mountaineers. The close connection between hard power and soft power is clear here: “technical-scientific cooperation” went hand in hand with “cultural-educational propaganda,” emphasizing the role of culture, alongside economics, in the projection of Bulgaria abroad. In February 1981, All India Radio broadcast a program titled “Growing Relations between India and Bulgaria,” which intertwined economic and cultural themes. The broadcast noted that “Bulgaria is a small country. . . . [It] also has now highly developed modern industry and large-scale mechanized agriculture.” But it was “the field of knowledge, culture and science” that “may open new vistas of understanding between two of the most ancient civilizations.”⁹¹ As Zhivkov put it, culture was “the trailblazer on the way toward broad and productive political and economic cooperation.”⁹² Confirming this opinion, in 1981 observers commented that “the name Bulgaria, which six years ago was almost unfamiliar in the land of the Aztecs, today is well known as a country . . . with rich culture and ancient history [as well as] an advanced and modern economy.”⁹³ It is striking that culture played such an important role in contacts between Bulgaria and its two new partners: while in the case of India, the longer history of political relations and parallel development of economic cooperation might explain the role of culture, in Mexico, virtually identical cultural programs happened despite the rather rudimentary state of political and economic contacts, pointing to the ability of culture to support new global entanglements.

How can culture’s important role be explained? These new international visions nicely supplemented the domestic agendas of the three states, demonstrating once more the inextricable link between local and global considerations in cultural exchange. Mexican and Indian ideas of solidarity and national unity as articulated by elites bore a striking resemblance to the BKP’s own reinvigorated use of class and national rhetoric in the 1970s. President Echeverría’s reforms, supported by “progressive intellectuals,” involved more state investment in education and support for indigenous cultures in order to “transform education and culture from the monopoly of a minority to an achievement for the entire people.”⁹⁴ His successor López Portillo, too, in his attempts to “manage abundance” after the new oil discoveries of the mid-1970s, attracted intellectuals by investing in museums and universities and used cultural outreach to the countryside, in addition to the building of schools and clinics, as a key channel for political legitimization.⁹⁵ Ever since Indian independence in 1947, the projection of a national past through museums and art exhibitions had been a preoccupation of Nehru’s in his nation-building projects. Through its cultural role, the state “staked claim to history-making . . . and reaffirmed modern India’s connections to the first civilizations in South Asia.”⁹⁶ Under Indira Gandhi Indian cultural policies

similarly sought to preserve the country's cultural heritage, yet they also acquired a social character, as Gandhi wanted to end illiteracy, raise the cultural level of the masses, and support the development of local artistic production to counter Western influences, while at the same time promoting Hinduism as the essence of Indian national identity.⁹⁷ From the perspective of Bulgarian power elites, these were progressive agendas oriented toward the people and the nation that showed appreciation for both past and future, akin to Liudmila Zhivkova's vision of Bulgarian culture in the 1970s. Domestic agendas and international priorities reinforced each other, allowing small Bulgaria to seamlessly connect its own visions of the nation to those of India and Mexico.

In diplomatic correspondence frequently mentioned commonalities between the three countries involved references to culture and history, emphasizing the importance of the civilizational rhetoric in this new rapprochement between the three countries. The ancient cultural heritage of the three states and their desire to preserve the legacies of Aztec warriors, Thracian kings, Mughal princes, and Hindu sages was a recurring theme. In the words of All India Radio, "Like India, Bulgaria has a hoary past and a chequered history. Both believe they have a cultural mission to fulfill and they kept up the fighting spirit even when they were down and under."⁹⁸ Mexican president López Portillo, too, pointed out that his first and most memorable impression of Bulgaria was the fact that "Bulgaria is truly a country with a rich ancient culture."⁹⁹ During the Bulgarian exhibitions, Mexican newspapers profusely praised "the glorious history of the Bulgarian nation."¹⁰⁰ Bulgarian and Indian leaders mentioned as a point of comparison their relatively recent independence: 1947 for postcolonial India and 1944 for socialist Bulgaria. Bulgarian and Mexican leaders spoke about the shared social justice agendas of the Mexican revolution of 1910 and Bulgaria's "socialist revolution" of 1944. This desire to establish historical connections—and use the past to justify current political choices—explains the importance of culture in the contacts between the three states. In the context of profound anxieties about domestic and global stability during the 1970s, historical and cultural arguments provided reassurance that, as grand civilizations of the past, the three countries would persevere in the face of adversity and succeed in their future goals. Ultimately, these ideas allowed a "peripheral" actor, Bulgaria, to chart new global imaginaries and project an active role from the periphery of the global Cold War.

Opening New Vistas of Understating: Bulgarian Culture in India

What was the scope of the cultural exchange between Bulgaria and India? The history of cultural relations between Bulgaria and India dated from the

interwar years when Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian artist, novelist, and first non-European Nobel Prize winner, visited Bulgaria. During this time, thirty-four Indian authors were published in Bulgarian translation. After 1944, the communist regime resumed these contacts: book publications, exhibitions, and academic exchanges continued at the state level. In 1955, the first Indian films were shown in Bulgaria, and became a popular entertainment throughout the socialist period. In 1956, Vice President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Sofia during his visit to Bulgaria. The Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam wrote a travelogue about her visit to Bulgaria and translated Bulgarian prose, poetry, and folk songs.¹⁰¹ This solid basis for Indian-Bulgarian cultural relations led to the signing of the first cultural cooperation agreement between Bulgaria and India in 1963, which recognized higher education diplomas and set up frameworks for language education in addition to other already established forms of cultural exchange.¹⁰²

However, a new, dynamic expansion of cultural contact with India began after Liudmila Zhivkova became the chairperson of the Committee for Culture (KK) in 1975 and pursued systematic cultural cooperation with South and East Asia that mirrored her personal interests. In February–March 1976, Zhivkova toured North Korea, Vietnam, Burma, and India.¹⁰³ After her return, the KK discussed the possibilities for expanding relations with India. Despite the anti-neocolonial orientation of Bulgarian international outreach, official evaluations of Indian cultural life bore a condescending tone: “It will be difficult for us to reach the many millions of Indian people at this stage of their development through culture and arts, due to their misery and illiteracy and the lack of exposure to any culture whatsoever.” Therefore, cultural exchange with India would be a middle-class endeavor targeting the educated, progressive bourgeois strata: “Our cultural events are aimed at the more or less educated circles in cities, which vary from those who simply have the habit of going to the movies to the upper classes with a taste for fine arts. India also has a large army of intellectuals, highly specialized technical personnel, and active university youth, a powerful element, which should become the main object of our cultural activities.”¹⁰⁴ Such statements reveal Bulgaria’s belief in the superiority of their cultural model in relation to postcolonial India, ironically echoing attitudes that the country otherwise criticized.

During the cultural agreement talks in 1976, the Bulgarian experts learned firsthand about the key Indian priorities in cultural exchange. Specialists from the Indian Ministry of Education, Social Policy, and Culture inquired about the Bulgarian experience with mass culture, illiteracy, and especially the Bulgarian “reading clubs” (*chitalishta*). The Indians were also interested



FIGURE 30. A meeting of the Indo-Bulgarian Friendship Society in the state of Andhra Pradesh, most likely in 1978 on the occasion of the Bulgarian centennial. Source: TsDA, f. 405, op. 9, a.e. 620, l. 116.

in collaborating with Bulgarian specialists in the arts and folklore and sought help with the preservation of ancient archaeological sites.¹⁰⁵

In May 1977, a Bulgarian Cultural-Informational Center opened in New Delhi, in the middle-class neighborhood of Golf Link, to “popularize the achievements of building new life in our country.”¹⁰⁶ The center published a glossy monthly magazine, *News from Bulgaria*, to present snapshots of Bulgaria’s political, economic, and cultural way of life and emphasize common endeavors between Indian and Bulgarian specialists.¹⁰⁷ Diplomats worked to establish Indian-Bulgarian friendship societies, which were supposed to function as hubs of Bulgarian activity in India.¹⁰⁸

Given that few Indians were familiar with Bulgaria, scholarly cooperation was another way of pursuing cultural contacts. Delhi University established a Bulgarian language professorship in 1977, enrolling seventeen majors for the study of Bulgarian language, history, and culture. These students became the vanguard of the Bulgarian presence in New Delhi: they performed at the Bulgarian Cultural-Informational Center and at the embassy, moving their (mostly Bulgarian) audience with recitals of Bulgarian literature on the occasion of the Bulgarian centennial celebrations in March 1978 or International Women’s Day.¹⁰⁹ Indian and Bulgarian scholars discussed common



FIGURE 31. Reading of Bulgarian poetry by students at Delhi University. Source: *Bulgaria Today*, no. 5, 1980.

strategies in the study and preservation of ancient cultures, proposing joint research projects focused on ancient civilizations, and especially cooperation between Bulgarian specialists in Thracology and Indian specialists in ancient Indian cultures.¹¹⁰ Civilizational agendas were at the core of this cultural partnership.

The number of Bulgarian events in India grew. By December 1980, Bulgarian diplomats had held 76 exhibitions, organized 242 film showings and 56 celebratory meetings, and distributed 628,000 copies of books and magazines; there were altogether 420 visits of a cultural character between Bulgaria and India. Fifty-two Indian students pursued a Bulgarian language degree. Indian children participated in the International Banner of Peace Assembly in 1979. Throughout the early 1980s, Bulgarian artists, jazz musicians, folk dance performers, and writers visited India regularly.¹¹¹

In the spirit of reciprocity, the number of Indian cultural events in Bulgaria also grew, featuring visits of Indian scholars, translations of Indian literature, the showing of Bollywood films, and performances of classic Indian dance. In 1979, author Amrita Pritam, who translated Bulgarian literature, was awarded the Vaptsarov Prize for her contribution to the dissemination of Bulgarian culture in India; her works were in turn translated into

Bulgarian.¹¹² Two exhibitions showcased India on the Bulgarian scene: *Contemporary Indian Art* opened in Sofia in March 1979, followed by a showing of the paintings of Rabindranath Tagore in June 1981.¹¹³ In the meantime, Bulgarian curators were tasked with the acquisition of Indian art: when the Gallery of International Art opened in Sofia in 1985, it featured a large collection of ancient Indian artifacts that Bulgarian publics could now admire.¹¹⁴

Despite the discrepancy in size, tiny Bulgaria exported far more cultural products than did much larger India; the reason lies in Zhivkova's influence. Even when the country experienced cultural shortages in the midst of the 1300th jubilee she was willing to commit huge state resources to this ideologically justified cultural extravaganza that also fulfilled her personal interests. During her official visits, she typically took free time to explore archaeological sites and meet with Indian gurus. Official reports claimed that her visits were the best possible propaganda for real socialism, but the Bulgarian cultural presence in India looked like the fulfillment of the personal aspirations of the daughter of the communist dictator.

Culture as the Main Element of International Relations: Bulgaria in Mexico

Given that Bulgaria and Mexico's political and economic relations were in a nascent stage, culture gave substance to the fresh political romance between the two countries. Bulgarian diplomats spoke of culture as the "obligatory and main element of international relations," because "political and economic relations are not enough to address the larger framework of our future peaceful mutual development."¹¹⁵ The two Mexican presidents of these years, Echeverría and López Portillo, seemed to agree that international cultural exposure could only enhance their reputation as great statesmen. Culture thus became the cornerstone of relations between Bulgaria and Mexico, and not simply a side effect of political and economic priorities—an expression of the distinct shape of global connections outside of a North-South or East-West trajectory.

Conditions in Mexico impeded Bulgarian cultural expansion among the Mexican people due to "the high percentage of illiteracy among the population, the chaotic migratory processes, the distance of the largest ethnic groups from general progress, [and] the broad masses' lack of access to professional culture." Their impeccable Marxist credentials notwithstanding, Bulgarian diplomats found commonality with the Mexican elites on national(ist) and civilizational grounds. After all, Mexican cultural elites had the "ambition to rebuild the reputation of the country that had given humanity the culture of the Maya,

Aztecs, [and] Toltecs [and] created the geniuses of [José Clemente] Orozco, [David Alfaro] Siqueiros, [and Diego] Rivera.”¹¹⁶ Given the fact that Bulgaria also wished to promote its ancient roots while displaying its contemporary progress, Bulgarian and Mexican cultural aspirations converged. Much like in India, the Bulgarians’ main conversation partners and audiences were the “progressive intelligentsia” from the “bourgeois class” such as university students, professors, and the directors of state cultural agencies and museums.¹¹⁷

Bulgarian cultural efforts in Mexico were not as wide-ranging as in India, given the fact that they began practically from scratch in 1976. To impress their hosts, the Bulgarians relied on the “prestigious” exhibitions that had

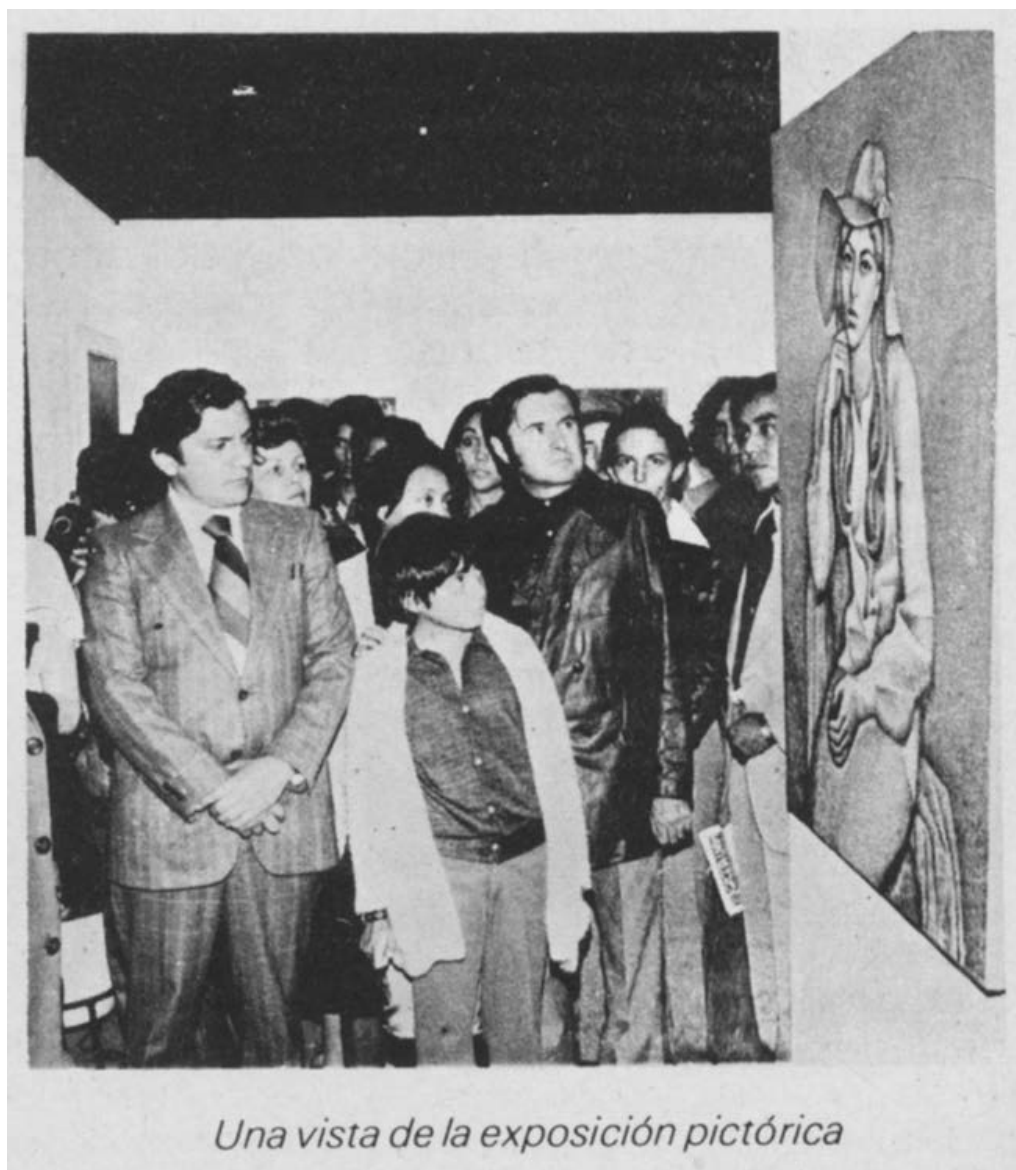


FIGURE 32. Audiences at the *Contemporary Bulgarian Art* exhibition held in Mexico City, 1977. Source: TsDA, f. 405, op. 9, a.e. 676, l. 22.

already successfully toured the world. In March–April 1977, the *Thracian Treasures from Bulgaria* exhibition came to Mexico City after it had concluded its visit to the British Museum and before it headed to the United States.¹¹⁸ Another exhibition that had become a worldwide sensation, *1000 Years of Bulgarian Icons*, came from Paris in March 1978 to commemorate the centennial of Bulgarian statehood.¹¹⁹ In 1979, *Contemporary Bulgarian Art* opened on the eve of Zhivkov's visit to Mexico City.¹²⁰ As they were new to Mexico, the Bulgarians were relying on quality rather than quantity, displaying their “representative” cultural products that had already attracted significant international attention.

Mexican culture came to Bulgaria, too. The opening of a Mexican embassy in November 1976 was accompanied by the *3000 Years of Mexican Art* exhibition, which Todor Zhivkov visited “with all the attendant publicity.”¹²¹ When President López Portillo came to Sofia in 1978, an exhibition of the folk artist and cartoonist José Guadalupe Posada opened in the prestigious Shipka 6 Gallery. Other events that year included the *Art of the Aztecs* exhibition and a week of Mexican film.¹²²

To put these cultural contacts in perspective, during this time Bulgaria was preparing to celebrate its 1300-year jubilee throughout the world, while experiencing severe shortages of cultural products that it could use for the anniversary celebrations abroad. Access to cultural resources became a part of the power struggles within the state bureaucracy and especially the diplomatic corps. In these conditions of cultural shortage, practically every Bulgarian ambassador was requesting the same exhibitions and performers, but not every country was prioritized when the state bureaucracy decided where to send the Bulgarian folk ensembles, classical musicians, and archaeological treasures. Still, during 1977–1981, the best of Bulgarian culture came to Bulgaria's newest ally, Mexico. This fact demonstrates the new priority given to Mexico at the highest levels of the cultural and state bureaucracy.

A Momentous Year: 1981

As 1981 approached, more demands were put on embassies worldwide to organize events commemorating the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian state. This “jubilee fever” was also apparent in India where the Indian-Bulgarian friendship societies, for example, started to celebrate the anniversary at their meetings. Bulgarian diplomats in India similarly engaged in numerous activities to fulfill their “jubilee plans” through “complex events” and the establishment of national celebration committees. The Bulgarian Cultural-Informational Center organized celebratory talks,

roundtables, symposia, exhibitions, and public discussions in New Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, Hyderabad, Guntur, Vijayawada, and other cities. Bulgarian mountaineers held a meeting dedicated to the 1300th anniversary at the end of their Himalayan expedition. In early 1981, at Indira Gandhi's urging (no doubt after intervention by Zhivkova), Satyanarayana Rao, general secretary of the Congress Party and member of parliament, inaugurated a national celebration committee for the 1300-year jubilee to coordinate celebratory events between the two governments.¹²³

Despite the lack of any prior cultural connections, Mexico became the first foreign country ever to establish a national celebration committee for the 1300-year jubilee. In January 1978, at Zhivkova's request, First Lady Carmen Romano agreed to chair the committee, which also included ministers and mayors.¹²⁴ A Week of Bulgarian Culture on the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) campus, dedicated to the 1300th anniversary, featured film screenings, readings of Bulgarian translations, and theatrical performances. Photo exhibitions toured Sahagun, Cuautla, and Mexico City.¹²⁵ In a grand gesture, Mexico gifted 1300 art works by 280 Mexican graphic artists to commemorate Bulgaria's jubilee in 1980.¹²⁶

But the culmination of both celebratory programs was the parallel opening of two of the most prestigious Bulgarian exhibitions in New Delhi and Mexico City. In February 1981, Zhivkova arrived in India to open the world-renowned exhibition *Thracian Treasures from Bulgaria* at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi.¹²⁷ Zhivkova spoke about the strong links between India and Bulgaria in historical, cultural, and civilizational terms:

Here, on Indian land, Thracian art feels more at home than anywhere else outside of Bulgaria. Here one can tangibly feel the parallels, the similarity, and the organic closeness in the symbolic nature of Thracian and Indian art . . .

There is no doubt that the Indian and Bulgarian people, heirs of rich culture and civilization, bearers of centuries-old life experience, having survived the tests of life and fate, . . . and having preserved intact their quest for perfection, will work and cooperate even more closely and conscientiously towards . . . Fraternity and Beauty.¹²⁸

Indira Gandhi paid a visit to the exhibition. Following a complex event—an academic symposium and literary meetings in New Delhi—celebrations dedicated to the 1300th anniversary were held in Lucknow, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Madras, and Aurovil. At these events, Zhivkova met with governors and mayors, impressing her hosts with her intimate knowledge of Indian philosophy and history.¹²⁹



FIGURE 33. Liudmila Zhivkova at the opening of the *Thracian Treasures* exhibition at the National Museum in New Delhi, 1981. Source: Elena Savova, Zdravka Micheva, and Kiril Avramov, eds., *Liudmila Zhivkova: Zhivot i delo (1942–1981)*; *Letopis* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bălgarskata akademiia na naukite, 1987).

Following a twelve-hour stay in Sofia to visit with her children, Zhivkova flew to Mexico to open the *Medieval Bulgarian Civilization* exhibition at the National Anthropological Museum in Mexico City.¹³⁰ At the ceremony, President López Portillo remarked that “this is one of the most beautiful exhibitions ever shown in Mexico.” Presenting the president with a high state honor, the Dimitrov Prize, Zhivkova spoke about the remarkable development of Bulgarian-Mexican relations, again using a civilizational and spiritual vocabulary to reflect on the common historical heritage and future choices of the two states:

Our two peoples are peoples with ancient history and rich culture, heirs of important and rich civilizations. Overcoming the challenges of time, they have preserved alive the flame and fire of their freedom-loving and strong spirit, or if we are to express this symbolically, the flame of Quetzalcoatl and the light of Orpheus. This is why there is a strong desire among our peoples to travel upward, toward light, to move forward, toward progress, and to perfect themselves.¹³¹

Zhivkova then participated in a number of celebrations honoring the jubilee in Mexico City and Puebla.¹³² First Lady Carmen Romano hosted a concert

at the Mexico City Philharmonic and a private dinner for Zhivkova.¹³³ In essence, the 1300-year jubilee in Mexico became a celebration of the two families in power.

In July 1981, Liudmila Zhivkova died in the midst of the jubilee celebrations in Bulgaria that had been her brainchild. Rumor had it that the two long, exhausting trips to India and Mexico, which included meetings with gurus and clairvoyants in addition to high officials, precipitated her death.¹³⁴ Her unexpected death generated wide international media coverage that ranged from praise of her international impact to condemnation of her use of culture for the purposes of the communist regime. Because of the unclear circumstances of her death, there was even talk of KGB involvement. Yet, many ordinary Bulgarians and international observers also sympathized with the visibly grief-stricken Todor Zhivkov while others speculated about the future of Bulgaria and its opening to the world after her death.¹³⁵

Both Indira Gandhi and Carmen Romano honored Zhivkova in their countries. In Mexico City on 4 September 1981, elementary school 229 was given Zhivkova's name to celebrate her personal role in the development of Bulgarian-Mexican contacts.¹³⁶ In November 1981, Indira Gandhi, honoring her close associate, visited Bulgaria in the midst of the 1300-year jubilee celebrations, in a highly symbolic gesture.¹³⁷ Gandhi spoke passionately at a state dinner: "I came to your land of roses from my land of the lotus," she said, and congratulated Zhivkov for the "remarkable progress [of Bulgaria] under your dynamic leadership." Gandhi then announced the establishment of the Liudmila Zhivkova Professorship in Bulgarian Studies at Delhi University.¹³⁸

Alternative Geographies of Global Contact

The intensity of the cultural encounters between Bulgaria, India, and Mexico stands out in the context of the already extravagant international cultural program that Bulgarian officials initiated in the late 1970s. Despite the cultural shortages that the bureaucracy experienced, the best Bulgarian cultural products were dispatched to those two states, in addition to the West. The Bulgarian presence in Japan, where Bulgarian officials organized many of the same "representative events," closely parallels that in India and Mexico, and like in India, the relationship also fulfilled ambitious economic objectives.¹³⁹ In all of these cases, the focus on cultural convergences and civilizational commonalities made possible the articulation of new global imaginaries, which linked a small country on the margins of Europe with some of the most prominent world civilizations. Ultimately, these linkages, as seen

in the rhetoric and practice of official cultural exchange, charted alternative cultural geographies that challenged dominant narratives centered on Western civilization while inscribing the importance of Bulgaria's ancestors, the Thracians and the Slavs, into a global, rather than just European, civilizational context. In effect, Bulgarian power elites were pursuing several global models at once: in the West, they claimed to be European, while in the Global South, they belonged to the whole of humanity. These endeavors were no doubt rooted in national(ist) aspirations, yet this national agenda had an impact because it followed universal models and pursued global partnerships. While domestic and international factors consistently intersected in the articulation of Bulgarian cultural projects, in India and Mexico the pursuit of alternative global connections was at the core of the cultural programs envisioned by Zhivkova and her associates. In the end, many of the newly forged connections outlived Zhivkova, as apparent in the continued economic and cultural cooperation between Bulgaria and India (as well as Japan) throughout the 1980s and after the end of the Cold War.¹⁴⁰ Soft power could become the launchpad for hard power projects as well.

Ultimately, this analysis highlights the importance of the "peripheral" Eastern European players during the Cold War, demonstrating why the pericentric approach advocated earlier is necessary. Importantly, the Bulgarian cultural overtures underlined the ability of a small socialist state to make some independent international choices. The patriotic and civilizational message of Bulgarian cultural outreach often clashed with Soviet expectations: increasingly, Moscow seemed annoyed with the apparent unorthodoxy of its most loyal ally portraying itself as the first Slavic civilization in direct contradiction to foundational Soviet historical narratives of the role of Rus' in the development of the Slavic peoples. As far as the 1300th anniversary, which was the cornerstone of these cultural efforts, Western observers heard "rumours . . . that Moscow expressed a wish to see the anniversary played down because of fears, which turned out to be justified, that it would magnify the role of Bulgaria's pre-1944 heroes at the expense of the Party."¹⁴¹ As a result of these cultural involvements, foreign representatives came to question whether the Bulgarians were acting purely as a Soviet proxy or were pursuing a level of independence through culture. For British diplomats, these projects demonstrated that "little brother is growing up and is sometimes resentful of big brother's [Soviet] air of superiority." A manifestation of this attitude was the "disproportionate use of [state] resources" to sponsor "an active program of cultural events . . . making the world conscious of Bulgarian heritage."¹⁴² In the end, Bulgarian cultural contacts with the developing world make clear that, while political agendas and economic decisions might

have followed a predetermined role in the Soviet bloc, culture allowed more autonomy to the smaller Eastern European states.

It is perhaps striking that small Bulgaria felt that it could participate in these conversations on an equal—if not superior—footing in relation to these two much larger states because of their imagined shared values and historical similarities as grand world civilizations, which bound them together in a past-present-future continuum. Here, the “advantages of smallness” are clearly visible: Bulgarian cultural efforts in the Global South highlight the ability of a small state to influence the cultural imagination of the 1970s by pursuing unlikely channels of communication and contacts beyond the East-West competition for the global order. Such alternative global connections actively shaped the world from the margins, creating mental geographies outside of East-West or North-South considerations, to craft new global visions along an East-South axis instead.

Cultural engagement with India and Mexico allowed Bulgaria to project its own civilizational self-definition to the world, highlighting the existence of multiple geographies of global cultural contact in the context of the 1970s. Yet, there were also uniquely state socialist notions of development—emphatically merging economic and cultural objectives—that determined the scope of the relationship between Bulgaria and the developing world, which is the focus of the next chapter, centered on Nigeria.