The Cold War from the Margins

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The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene.
In 1975, negotiations were underway between experts from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia regarding an exhibition, *Prehistoric Art in the Bulgarian Lands*, soon to open at the Belgrade History Museum. The museum director expressed concern about the title because “there is a difference between the Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian meaning of [the word] ‘lands’” and required clarification about “which lands you refer to—the present or the past.” He worried—not without reason—that in Bulgarian scholarship, the term was used to refer to all the historical kingdoms that extended beyond the current Bulgarian borders. The Bulgarian representative, trying to defuse tensions, “answered jokingly that most probably there would be no artifacts from Macedonia,” pinpointing the exact reason for the misgivings of his Yugoslav colleague.¹ In a compromise, the exhibition premiered in Belgrade under a new title, *Prehistoric Art in Bulgaria.*²

The contested place of Macedonia in the historical repertoires of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia caused much controversy once Bulgaria launched its international cultural offensive because it triggered rival interpretations of the past in the two countries. In October 1977, the Croatian journal *Oko* published a dispatch from New York City reporting on Bulgaria’s *Thracian Treasures* exhibition that had just opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The article lambasted the exhibition catalog, which featured a map that
incorrectly showed the Balkan borders. “Based on this map, the unaware visitor may conclude that Macedonia is a separate country [and not a part of Yugoslavia],” sarcastically stated Oko, and concluded, “This must have been the intention.” The report further fumed: “Do [the Bulgarians] think they can change the borders of Yugoslavia according to their wishes? Are they not aware that Yugoslavia is a country whose citizens are free to travel, including to New York, which was the case with our indignant readers who brought the catalog to us?”

In addition to Bulgarian and Yugoslav officials zealously reporting on each other’s cultural events, Yugoslav travelers had to police Bulgaria’s cultural activities, as well. In November 1979, Bulgarian diplomats in London wrote long dispatches about the Days of Macedonian Culture that the Yugoslav embassy had organized. They even launched a complaint with the Foreign Office, insisting that featured books and talks “misrepresented Bulgarian history.” When the British hosts unequivocally responded that they would not “censor a cultural event,” to counteract “the anti-Bulgarian focus” of the Macedonian Days, Bulgarian diplomats proceeded to organize their own Days of Bulgarian Culture in 1981.

This chapter traces Bulgarian cultural efforts among its Balkan neighbors during the long 1970s to examine the intersection between political, national, and cultural factors in the conceptualization and execution of these policies. A profound tension existed between the projects of internationalism, socialism, and nationalism that shaped these programs. As officials launched their programs associated with the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 681, they encountered the rival historical interpretations of their neighbors. While the embrace of cultural nationalism had positive legitimacy-boosting effects at home, it complicated international endeavors, especially in the Balkans. Whether concerning ancient ancestry, medieval glory, the Ottoman legacy, or more recent historical dynamics, the ambitious Bulgarian projection of its allegedly unique role at the crossroads of civilizations caused annoyance and even alarm among its neighbors. In addition to defusing national tensions, Bulgarian officials also had to carefully consider the distinction between socialist and capitalist countries, which constrained their cultural repertoires further. In the end, Bulgarian officials organized 542 cultural events in the Balkans between 1977 and 1982, many of them dedicated to the 1300-year jubilee; this is a striking number given the small size of the countries and their various priorities. This investment in international cultural programs served clear reputational purposes, highlighting Bulgaria’s use of cultural diplomacy to project a new image domestically, regionally, and globally. In the Balkans, Bulgaria’s goal was to
cultivate regional cooperation and enhance its own national goals, while also dispelling Soviet mistrust in these new overtures. That proved to be a difficult balance to strike. Yet, in some cases, cultural contacts facilitated fruitful regional dialogues, demonstrating how soft power projects could lead to tangible hard power outcomes.

Bulgarian and Yugoslav officials rarely reconciled their Macedonian agendas, and that continued to be the focus of Bulgaria’s campaigns in the region. Yet, in other cases the Balkan neighbors were able to defuse their disagreements. In November 1981, the Turkish embassy in Sofia requested a meeting at the Committee for Culture (KK) to express observations about two films widely shown in Bulgaria during the 1300th-anniversary celebrations. In the opinion of the Turkish emissary, the films—*The Goat* and *Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings*—“do not create an appropriate atmosphere on the eve of the upcoming state visit of President Evren.” He noted that the films—one depicting the rape of a Bulgarian woman in Turkish hands and the other showing massacres during the 1876 April Uprising—contained “imprecisions concerning the Muslim faith.” Clearly, Bulgarian interpretations of the Ottoman period had touched a nerve. The Bulgarian official, however, insisted that *The Goat* Horn, made fifteen years prior, was an award-winning film with “humane and ethical content,” while *Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings* was based on the work of Zahari Stoianov, “an eyewitness account of our national liberation that has become a literary classic.” Importantly, the latter film distinguished between “the Turkish irregulars and the Turkish army” while it also showed “some negative sides of the Bulgarian population, including participants in the uprising.” Despite the polemical topic, this conversation, carried on in French, was conducted in a “friendly, calm tone.” Clearly, some historical disputes were better handled than others.

The Bulgarian cultural programs in the Balkans did not follow a straightforward ideological or national logic. Cultural engagements often defied the primacy of Cold War geopolitical divides and sometimes overcame the legacy of old national tensions. Perhaps surprisingly, the most successful cultural campaigns occurred in Greece, a NATO member that in the past had held a long list of national(ist) grievances against Bulgaria. Even the measured Turkish cooperation in cultural matters was striking, given the opposing geopolitical agendas of the two states and their long-standing conflicts on national issues (especially related to the Turks in Bulgaria). These breakthroughs with capitalist states make the huge obstacles Bulgaria faced in socialist Romania and especially Yugoslavia, two “brotherly” countries that actively and deliberately undermined Bulgaria’s cultural agenda, even more
remarkable. These mixed results highlight the volatile function of cultural diplomacy: while in some cases it could become the first step in charting new political visions, as it did in initiatives with Greece, in others it could prove counterproductive, as clear in the case of Yugoslavia. International cultural outreach could not please all Bulgarian partners, so officials had to carefully consider their national, regional, and global priorities.

What was the role of the 1300th anniversary in this complex situation? Similarly to all other case studies I discuss, culture became an opportunity for fleshing out or reiterating larger state priorities. In the Balkans, the goal was regional cooperation, and cultural exchange became the strategy for arriving one step closer to it. Bulgaria had established cultural relations with all Balkan states, based on cultural cooperation agreements signed on reciprocal grounds. Beginning in 1977, the country launched a clear cultural offensive connected to the 1300 Years Bulgaria celebrations. Embassies drafted detailed “jubilee plans” based on the specific country’s context, diplomats organized “complex events,” and national celebration committees strove to secure high-profile representatives for the “culmination” of the celebrations in fall 1981. These events sought to project a certain image of Bulgaria for regional and global consumption: based on their unique historical experience and current socialist reality, the Bulgarian people were proud to showcase their accomplishments, in the past and today, and fearlessly pursued an even better future for themselves, the socialist community, their Balkan neighbors, the European continent, and humanity in general. This message necessitated convoluted attempts to reconcile political, ideological, national, and cultural priorities, a tension that became a permanent feature of Bulgaria’s cultural programs not only in the Balkans but also throughout the world.

To explain the interplay between politics, nationalism, and culture in the framing and execution of Bulgaria’s cultural programs in the Balkans, I offer an overview of Balkan political developments during the long 1970s to highlight the ideological complexity and political fluidity of the region during the late Cold War. Next, I outline the nature of the national controversies between Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Turkey, and Greece to demonstrate that tensions over lands and people endured in the post–World War II period, creating cleavages between geopolitical partners. Finally, I present a series of microanalyses detailing how the Bulgarian cultural offensive unfolded in four contexts in order to reconstruct the meticulous work involved in cultural cooperation. In the end, a balance between current political agendas, long-lasting historical controversies, and the global context of the 1970s determined the parameters of Balkan cultural outreach on the eve of Bulgaria’s
1300-year jubilee, which led to some breakthroughs in Bulgaria’s regional position, notably vis-à-vis Greece.

**The Cold War in the Balkans**

Bulgaria occupied a complicated position in the Cold War Balkans, as it bordered two NATO members, Greece and Turkey, to the south, and two idiosyncratic socialist states, Yugoslavia and Romania, to the west and north. The place of the Balkans in Cold War diplomacy has produced a lively literature. In the late 1940s, the Balkan peninsula emerged as a prime area of contestation between the superpowers in the looming Cold War. Yet, in the 1970s, with international attention focused on central and east-central Europe in the context of détente, it occupied a more peripheral place in European and world diplomacy. Still, the Balkan states kept the superpowers on their toes because the variety of political systems and ideological positions complicated a neat delineation of spheres of influence among the two blocs. In their totality, the Balkan states offered a striking case of political diversity and ideological unpredictability, which made drawing geopolitical lines difficult. In this context, culture offered an additional strategy for Balkan politicians who sought to further regional cooperation and overcome their international isolation, an issue at the forefront of Balkan politics in the 1970s.

The large variety of political and ideological positions among the Balkan socialist states defied all Cold War assumptions about the existence of a unified socialist bloc. Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania each held a unique geopolitical position and developed their own brand of state socialism. Ever since its split with the Soviet Union in 1948, Yugoslavia had pursued a distinct path to socialism outside of the Soviet bloc’s economic and military structures, the COMECON (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) and the Warsaw Pact. Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito developed a close relationship with the United States, which ultimately led the Soviet Union to soften its position so as not to further push Yugoslavia toward the West. To advance its international standing, the country actively maneuvered on the global scene and became a founding member of the Nonaligned Movement in 1961. From the 1960s on, Romania also strove to assert its independence within the Soviet sphere of influence, which became a point of friction because its leader Nicolae Ceausescu maintained warm relations with China following its conflict with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. In 1968, the Romanian leader opposed the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring (also sharply criticized by Yugoslavia). In 1969, U.S. president Nixon visited Romania, the first such visit to a Warsaw Pact country.
Romania continued its position of independence within the socialist bloc throughout the 1970s, defying Warsaw Pact decisions while never leaving the organization. Even more independent was the course pursued by Albania, which also developed a close relationship with China in the 1960s. Unlike other Eastern European states that pursued contacts with the West, Albania remained isolationist. Its commitment to Stalinist policies put it at odds ideologically with the rest of the socialist states, so the country remained a separate phenomenon within world socialism. Despite the vast distinctions between the Balkan socialist states, the rhetoric and practice of socialist internationalism could moderate their differences; this trend was evident in the fraught but continued Soviet relations with both Yugoslavia and Romania, which in turn influenced Bulgaria’s choice of Balkan “friends.”

Bulgaria continued to be perceived internationally as the closest Soviet ally in the region. There was truth to this opinion: Todor Zhivkov regularly consulted with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev over matters of foreign policy. Yet, a closer examination of the historical record allows us to conclude that this relationship entailed much more than a blind subservience. Bulgaria carefully balanced the Soviet position, which opposed the development of a regional bloc in the Balkans that might facilitate Romanian and Yugoslav independence, with the assertion of its own interests, which entailed the gradual normalization of political relations with its neighbors and the resumption of active contacts in other spheres to overcome Bulgaria’s regional isolation. Zhivkov passionately explained to Brezhnev: “Regarding our policy in the Balkans, I would like to state that we coordinate all our steps with the Soviet Union . . . [but] we would like to be understood well. If we approach these questions with prejudice and we . . . do not to participate in any common Balkan initiatives, we shall become isolated from the other Balkan states. And this will not be in our common favor.” In the end, despite Soviet suspicion, Bulgaria pursued a lively Balkan policy, which demonstrates the ability of a small state to navigate complex geopolitical contexts to advance its own goals.

While socialist bloc solidarity remained unattainable, the two NATO states, Greece and Turkey, also showed little cohesion along ideological lines. The independence of Cyprus in 1959 added fuel to disputes in the 1960s. Greece was under a military junta between 1967 and 1974, which fueled anti-Americanism because of the popular assumption that the United States supported the colonels. This situation determined Greece’s more independent course within NATO, especially in the post-junta period. Periodically, Greek politicians threatened to remove American military bases while in 1974 the country withdrew from NATO’s military command following the Turkish
invasion of Cyprus. Trying to redefine their previously close relations to the United States, Greek politicians secured European Economic Community (EEC) membership in 1981. All these developments helped to determine the active Greek involvement in Balkan politics. Turkey, while a NATO member, sporadically turned to the Soviet Union for economic and technical assistance in the 1960s. Its 1974 invasion of Cyprus put tremendous pressure on NATO because now American officials had to confront the vocal Greek demands for sanctions (thus the United States imposed a brief arms embargo on Turkey). Further, the country experienced a number of military coups—in 1960, 1971, and 1980—that destabilized it domestically and made it a wild card internationally. In the southern Balkans a capitalist, democratic bloc was just an illusion.

This deviation from core political and economic alliances in the Balkans led to political fragmentation during the late Cold War that transcended the strict ideological parameters of both the Soviet and U.S. camps. In 1970, U.S. president Nixon visited Yugoslavia to offer support for its political independence, followed by a visit from Soviet leader Brezhnev a year later to encourage the country’s socialist direction. For Turkey, “participation in NATO was in no way an obstacle for the development of certain relations . . . beyond the pact,” and the country benefitted from economic and technical assistance by the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. Romania, finally, sought to improve its relations with the United States, and under the American “differentiated approach” to Eastern Europe, reaped economic benefits when the status of most favored nation was bestowed on the country in 1974.

This political volatility of the Balkan states complicated the positions of the superpowers. The Soviet Union carefully courted Yugoslavia and tried to limit further Romanian deviation from the socialist line; Soviet leaders opposed multilateral relations in the Balkans because they suspected that Romania and Yugoslavia might try to develop an anti-Soviet bloc. At the same time, the Soviets wished to curb Western influence in the area. Thus, they encouraged Bulgaria to develop bilateral relations with its neighbors across ideological lines because they were interested in further distancing Greece and Turkey from NATO. This Soviet strategy explains why the United States carefully cultivated the southern flank of NATO, especially after Turkish-Greek acrimony deepened following the 1974 events in Cyprus. American diplomats, similar to the Soviets, also distrusted multilateralism because they worried about the development of anti-American feelings among their allies, which was a particular concern in post-junta Greece. Both superpowers were suspicious of the real motives of the Balkan states and the development of “secret diplomacy” that they would not be able to control.
GOODWILL BETWEEN NEIGHBORS

Despite the suspicions of the superpowers, the Balkan leaders pursued various projects of regional cooperation. Bilateral cooperation between the Balkan states had already begun to intensify in the 1960s. Between 1960 and 1964, Bulgaria and Greece resolved their most contentious issues and normalized their relations, culminating with the reopening of diplomatic posts in both countries. Even during the Greek junta between 1967 and 1974, Greece and Bulgaria remarkably maintained active relations. Bulgaria and Turkey similarly signed a series of agreements in 1964–1968 that opened up the channels of communication. Romania and Yugoslavia continued their closer cooperation, especially after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, which was opposed by both states. Romania in particular appeared as the staunchest supporter of Balkan cooperation. 19

This trend became even more obvious after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which explicitly encouraged cooperation between countries from different socioeconomic and political systems. 20 From the mid-1970s on, there was systematic pursuit of multilateral initiatives, which the superpowers distrusted and opposed. In the summer of 1975, the first post-junta Greek prime minister, the conservative Konstantinos Karamanlis, visited Romania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria to urge the convening of a multilateral conference on Balkan cooperation, a step that has been described as the “Greek Ostpolitik.” While Romania and Yugoslavia were supportive of the idea, Bulgaria was more careful due to Soviet pressure against the initiative, and tried to limit the mandate of the meeting to economic cooperation. In January and February 1976, the first multilateral meeting of Balkan leaders at the level of vice ministers for economic development occurred in Athens. Regular visits of Balkan heads of state followed: in the summer of 1976, Ceausescu, Zhivkov, and Tito all visited Athens and continued conversations on regional cooperation. British diplomats observed: “the tempo of relations in the Balkans [has] quickened. . . . [including the] exchange of high visits, . . . a whole host of visits and meetings at lower, more practical levels, . . . [and the issuance of] declarations, communiqués, and statements of policy.” Taken together, these efforts had the effect of “reducing tension in the Balkans.” 21 In the mid- to late 1970s, all of these states negotiated a series of bilateral agreements pertaining to economic cooperation, customs regulations, transportation, the common use of water resources, environmental issues, tourism and travel, and other matters. 22 In 1979, a second multilateral meeting in Ankara discussed the possibility of developing a Balkan framework for cooperation in the spheres of transportation and telecommunication. Other multilateral meetings followed in Sofia (1981), Bucharest (1982), and Belgrade (1984), culminating in a meeting of foreign ministers in Belgrade in 1988. 23
In this context of expanding regional cooperation, Bulgaria pursued more robust relations with its neighbors through a “steadily proliferating number of bilateral and multilateral commissions, sub-commissions, unions, and associations.” Bulgarian leaders now spoke about their country as a “good neighbor . . . working for peace, security, and cooperation.” Cultural exchange played an important role in these initiatives, as friendship societies and cultural associations helped frame and deliver the expression of goodwill between the Balkan states. In the 1970s, under existing cultural cooperation agreements with their neighbors, Bulgarian officials began to organize a growing number of exhibitions, book fairs, conferences, performances, art shows, and folk and classical music concerts, which fit with the general spirit of expanding cooperation between countries of different political systems after Helsinki. Increasingly in the late 1970s these events were dedicated to the celebration of the 1300-year jubilee, and there was a clear increase in the cultural activities of Bulgarian diplomats who now persistently requested the active involvement of their Balkan neighbors in these initiatives. Yet, as Bulgarian officials organized these events, their visions of history clashed with the national agendas of their neighbors, underlining the tensions between political and national considerations in Bulgaria’s cultural message.

The Enduring Power of Nationalism

The complex national agendas of the Balkan neighbors, combined with the legacy of older irredentist confrontations, critically shaped the execution and reception of Bulgarian cultural events in the region. Because the programs often embraced historical topics, the 1970s saw a series of heated exchanges among Balkan politicians, cultural experts, and scholars over the meaning of history from the perspective of their respective national interpretations; these debates spanned the entirety of the historical experience, from the ancient and medieval to the Ottoman and contemporary periods. Diplomats and other state officials on all sides often acted as national guardians defending their country’s “true history.” To understand the nuance of those debates, it is necessary to explain the function of nationalism under socialism and to outline the key national controversies at play.

In recent scholarship there is much debate about the relationship between nationalism and communism. A number of theories explain the palpable revival of nationalism in Eastern Europe from the 1950s on. These include the need for political legitimation of the communist parties, the doctrinal similarities between communism and nationalism, the characteristics of the planned economy that required isolation from foreign influences, or
pressures from below directed against national minorities. Historian Tchavdar Marinov offers yet another convincing explanation, particularly suited for the Bulgarian case: the state-building orientation of the communist regimes led to the rehabilitation and eventual embrace of nationalism as a form of “patriotism” that allegedly had nothing to do with “bourgeois chauvinism” but embraced the main postulates of interwar policies and ideologies.27 Yannis Sygkelos illustrates the willingness of the BKP to adopt national rhetoric and symbolism and shows that even immediately after World War II, Fatherland Front politicians presented their political takeover not only as a socialist revolution but also as a “national liberation movement” that saved the country from a “national disaster.” National rhetoric became a “central factor in legitimizing [the] regime.”28 By the 1960s, this reinvented Bulgarian “socialist” nationalism had “matured” in a way that led to a series of heated confrontations with its neighbors.

The resurgence of nationalism in Bulgaria manifested itself in two ways. First, domestically, since the late 1950s but especially during the 1960s, a campaign of “patriotic education” involved the open public discussion of national topics, the celebration of patriotic holidays (such as 24 May), and the adoption of irredentist historical analyses in academia and in the education of young Bulgarians.29 The 1300th jubilee fit nicely within this trend, as it embraced the national narrative and channeled cultural nationalism among the entire population. Second, internationally, after years of restraint, the Macedonian controversy with Yugoslavia erupted again, initiating heated exchanges in the press of both countries. Bulgaria and Greece reconciled their disagreements in 1964 when Bulgaria rescinded all territorial and national claims on its southern neighbor, but Greek fears of Slavocommunism continued to color relations between the two countries. This period also saw shifts in Bulgarian and Turkish policies vis-à-vis the Turkish population in Bulgaria, a question that underpinned conversations between the two sides. At the same time, Bulgaria and Romania were obsessed with recovering “ancient ancestors” and competed over the role of indigenous ancient peoples in their history.30 Bulgarian cultural events in the Balkans were viewed with suspicion because Bulgaria’s neighbors believed that they often misrepresented history and functioned as tools of a cleverly disguised “Great Bulgarian chauvinism.” Cultural nationalism was a double-edged sword: while effective at home, it caused complications abroad. For Bulgaria’s neighbors the question was whether cultural nationalism might pave the way for more aggressive policies and demands in the future (which ultimately happened in the mid-1980s with the renewal of anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim campaigns in Bulgaria).
The most contentious issue in the 1970s remained the conflicting views on Macedonia in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. The two countries disagreed about the presence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria while they also disputed each other’s interpretations of key historical events. This dispute was based on the complex pre–World War II history of irredentist contestation between Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia (later Yugoslavia), and Romania in this formerly Ottoman province; the Macedonian question of the late nineteenth century and the way it shaped military conflicts, political coalitions, and population politics among the Balkan neighbors remains one of the most contentious questions in the historiography of each state. Immediately after World War II, in the context of discussions about a possible Balkan federation between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, the BKP recognized the existence of a Macedonian minority in the region of Pirin Macedonia within Bulgaria and guaranteed the region’s cultural autonomy. Following the Yugoslav-Soviet split of 1948, however, Bulgaria closed Yugoslav-sponsored institutions and expelled instructors sent by Skopje, causing a rift in Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations. In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union pressured Bulgaria to initiate rapprochement with Yugoslavia, a process that developed in fits and starts, as the two states pursued economic cooperation and reconciled some political disagreements. Yet, following the “patriotic” turn, Zhivkov’s position hardened in national matters, leading to polemical national discussions throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1963, at a special plenum of the Central Committee of the BKP, Zhivkov personally spelled out the main tenets of the Bulgarian position: Macedonia was “the crucible of Bulgarian history,” the Macedonian revolutionaries of the late nineteenth century had a “Bulgarian consciousness,” and the language spoken in Macedonia was a Bulgarian “dialect” based on western linguistic forms. Zhivkov emphasized that Pirin Macedonia was a part of the Bulgarian nation, therefore no Macedonian minority lived there. This proclamation led to polemical press releases over the language, history, and identity of the population in Macedonia in the past and today in both Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (especially in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, or SRM). In 1966, the Yugoslav government started advancing the opinion that a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria was being “subjected to assimilation, persecution, and internment.” As a response, in 1967, the Politburo of the BKP formulated four principles to support the argument for a centuries-long Bulgarian presence in Macedonia: (1) in the medieval and National Revival periods, Macedonia was a part of Bulgarian history, and there existed no Macedonian nation; (2) Macedonian national identity started forming with the establishment of SRM after World War II; (3) Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria
was a part of the Bulgarian nation and had no Macedonian population; and
(4) those within Yugoslav Macedonia who considered themselves Bulgarians should be allowed to do so. At the same time, Yugoslav officials and especially representatives of SRM increasingly framed their own insistence on the presence of a Macedonian minority in Pirin Macedonia as a human rights issue, accusing Bulgaria of not allowing Macedonians to express their national consciousness. They demanded that Bulgaria include a Macedonian national category in its censuses and allow cultural autonomy in Pirin Macedonia. In the 1970s heated press exchanges that centered on historical interpretations occurred regularly. This polemic escalated in 1978 when Bulgaria celebrated the centennial of the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state with the Treaty of San Stefano, which had created a Great Bulgaria that also included the territories of Ottoman Macedonia (most of it now in Yugoslavia and Greece). On this occasion, Yugoslav accusations of “Great Bulgarian chauvinism” and territorial claims on Yugoslav Macedonia proliferated, despite Bulgarian assurances that it considered the question of borders in the Balkans resolved.35

Bulgaria and Greece had been involved in similarly contentious questions over territories and populations since the late nineteenth century when the national agendas of the two states clashed in the borderlands of Macedonia and Thrace. Bulgaria and Greece were in opposing camps during the Second Balkan War and the two world wars; a contested population exchange and minority controversies after the Great War determined the strained relations in the interwar period. The Bulgarian occupation of Greece during World War II caused particular acrimony, and the two countries broke off relations in 1941. After the war they were unable to settle their territorial and financial claims, so no formal diplomatic relations existed until 1954 when consultations began for their reconstitution.36 After ten years of negotiations (the most contentious issue being the settlement of World War II reparations), a series of agreements between 1960 and 1964 led to the full resumption of diplomatic relations, marked by the opening of embassies in 1964 (consulates in Thessaloniki and Plovdiv opened in 1973). As a part of the process, Bulgaria rejected interwar and postwar revisionism and recognized the current borders between its neighbors as permanent.37 While Greek fears of Slavocommunism and “invasion from the north” remained alive and suspicion permeated policy circles, in the 1970s, in contrast to Yugoslavia, Greek and Bulgarian politicians avoided historical issues and focused on current affairs.

The conflicting Bulgarian and Greek national claims, however, were evident in subtler ways, connected to larger historical narratives considered fundamental to the identity of each state. A contested issue remained the
role of the ancient Thracians in Bulgarian ethnogenesis. As analyzed in vivid
detail by Tchavdar Marinov, in the context of Greek classical studies the
archaeology of Thrace occupied only a marginal role, while Greek scholars
tended to subsume the historical developments in the area under the assertion
of its thorough Hellenization following the arrival of Greek colonists and their intermingling with the indigenous (illiterate and thus uncultured)
populations. By contrast, in Bulgaria in the late 1960s the Thracians were
acknowledged as one of the three elements of the Bulgarian nation (the
other two being the Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs) and elevated to the status
of ancestors. With the “patriotic turn,” Bulgarian academic circles now system-
atically promoted the science of Thracology, that is, the study of the
indigenous non-Greek population of ancient Thrace. In 1972, Alexander Fol,
a professor of ancient history who would become a close associate of Liud-
mila Zhivkova, became the director of the newly established Institute of
Thracology affiliated with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Soon there-
after, the promotion of Bulgaria’s Thracian heritage became a central aspect
of the international cultural outreach pursued by the regime (as evident in
the Thracian Treasures exhibitions). As exhibitions and scientific events on
the topic proliferated in the late 1970s and early 1980, Bulgarian and Greek
(but also Romanian) scholars often found themselves at odds in debating the
scientific evidence related to the Thracians.38

For Romania and Bulgaria, the historical importance and population com-
position of the region of Dobrudja, a borderland area that had put the two
countries in opposite alliances throughout their post-Ottoman history, was
a controversial topic. Following the Romanian incorporation of Dobrudja
during the Second Balkan War in 1913 and the repeated Bulgarian accusa-
tions of minority rights violations in the interwar period, a 1941 agreement
for the cession of southern Dobrudja to Bulgaria, accompanied with a popu-
lation swap, offered the compromise solution of essentially splitting up the
region between the two states. With the revival of nationalism in the 1960s,
Bulgaria and Romania now sparred about historical truth in Dobrudja,
which was also connected to the question of the role of Slavic populations in
Romanian history.39 Bulgarian and Romanian scholars also clashed about the
presence of ancient indigenous populations—the Thracians and the Dacians
(who were a branch of the Thracians)—as the “forefathers” of the Bulgarian
or Romanian nations, respectively.40

These questions became particularly contested when Ceausescu trans-
formed nationalism into a permanent feature of Romanian life in the 1970s.
Scholars have shown the link between the revival of nationalism in Romania
and its appeal to national self-reliance in the context of its more autonomous
political position in the Soviet bloc in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1973, Ceausescu promulgated a number of theses, which introduced a nativist agenda that rejected foreign influences. This development led to the articulation of the idea of protochronism, which claimed that Romanian literary and historical developments anticipated foreign and especially Western ones. This view denied any foreign influences in Romanian history and resurrected interwar theories of the Dacian origins of the Romanian nation; the Romans, the foreigners, were now demoted while the indigenous population, the Dacians, were promoted in Romanian ethnogenesis. According to Lucian Boia, with this “shift from the contemporary towards origins,” in the end “ancient history became even more politicized than contemporary history.” Throughout the 1970s, Romanian scholars were promoting theories associated with an “independent, centralized Dacian state of Burebista,” which they interpreted as the precursor of contemporary Romania. Boia suggests that “Burebista offered Ceausescu the supreme legitimization” as a symbolic affirmation of the uninterrupted existence of the Romanian state since antiquity. The independent state of Burebista anticipated the Great Romania of 1918, but also Ceausescu’s current independent position in world politics. Yet, the state of Burebista included current Bulgarian territories, causing tension between the two neighbors. Distrust escalated in the late 1970s when Ceausescu’s regime decided to celebrate the 2050th anniversary of the establishment of the state of Burebista in 1980, a year before Bulgaria’s 1300th anniversary. Anniversary wars now became an aspect of Bulgarian-Romanian relations.

Finally, relations between Bulgaria and Turkey were shaped by the policies the Bulgarian state followed in regard to the Turkish minority in Bulgarian territory. The period after World War II saw systematic attempts to assimilate the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, the Pomaks, including an assimilation campaign in 1973–1974 to change their names and other “patriotic” activities to distance the Pomak minority from the Turkish minority and incorporate them into the unitary socialist nation. Yet, it was mainly Bulgarian policies vis-à-vis its Turkish minority that caused tension with Turkey. After the emigration of some 155,000 Turks from Bulgaria between 1948 and 1951 under the provisions of an emigration convention, Bulgaria and Turkey pursued their own priorities. Turkey wanted the Bulgarian Turks to reunite with their “true motherland,” but created logistical problems that hindered their integration. Bulgaria needed agricultural labor and opposed mass emigration. Bulgarian policies toward its Turkish population fluctuated from restrictions on cultural autonomy and language in the early 1960s (to facilitate building the unitary socialist nation) to their relaxation in the late 1960s and the 1970s (when the focus shifted to the Pomaks). In this context, the emigration
of the Turks was constantly on the agenda. Between 1968 and 1978, some 115,000 Turks emigrated from Bulgaria, based on a family reunification convention between Sofia and Ankara. By this point, Turkey did not want emigration, but prioritized the creation of Turkish national minority communities abroad, which required the active role of the Turkish motherland to help maintain their culture, language, religion, and traditions. Following the Cyprus invasion in 1974, Bulgarian officials were on alert: they worried about “troublesome demographic realities” among the Bulgarian Turks, discussed perceived dangers to the territorial integrity of their country, and proposed ideas of renaming the Turks on the Pomak model or encouraging their mass emigration. After another military coup in Turkey in 1980, relations between the two states came to a standstill as each side carefully watched developments across the border. Bulgarian-Turkish relations broke down in the mid-1980s, when Bulgarian officials began an uncompromising renaming campaign against 800,000 Bulgarian Turks in 1984, which was often accompanied by violence, and orchestrated the expulsion of 350,000 people in 1989.

The national agendas and overarching historical narratives of each Balkan state critically informed the parameters of their interactions. The shared past became a subject of claims and counterclaims as each side maintained the validity of its national agenda. The conflicting historical interpretations, often manifested in cultural events that engaged historical topics, regularly triggered intense debates about “historical truth” between representatives of the Balkan states. Foreign officers, cultural experts, and performers often acted as “professional patriots” with the mission of defending their country’s “true history,” straddling the fine line between defending national priorities and promoting nationalist visions. These national(ist) dynamics, combined with the Cold War political priorities of each country, determined the dimensions of the cultural relations between Bulgaria and each of its neighbors. A microanalysis of the exchanges in each country reveals the multilayered interplay between politics, nationalism, and culture in the execution of Bulgaria’s cultural program in each state.

**Romania: How to Fight Historical Revisionism**

Relations between Bulgaria and Romania in the long 1970s were volatile: the leadership of the two states strove to highlight the shared goals of socialist internationalism, yet each side unapologetically acknowledged and maintained ideological and national differences. During this time, both Ceausescu and Zhivkov were at their peak, and both used national ideology to enhance their domestic and international legitimacy. Thus, rival anniversary
celebrations—the 1300th jubilee in Bulgaria and the 2050th anniversary in Romania—and accusations of “historical revisionism” rendered relations between the two states even more colorful.

The two countries based their contacts on clearly defined positions: despite the recognition of differences in foreign policy and ideology, socialist internationalism dictated the continued dialogue between all socialist states. Zhivkov and Ceausescu met regularly after 1965; by 1980, they had exchanged more than twenty visits. But ever since 1968, Bulgarian leaders had been wary of “the peculiar line of the Romanian leadership,” as evident in its refusal to coordinate action with the Warsaw Pact and its warm relations with China. In fact, Zhivkov openly aired his frustration with Ceausescu to foreign dignitaries. Despite these differences, the leadership of both states meticulously cultivated a public image embracing “the principles of Marxism-Leninism, international solidarity, equality, independence, national sovereignty, non-intervention in internal affairs, friendly cooperation, and the common good.” The two countries signed a declaration in June 1980 to develop political, economic, scientific-technical, and cultural relations because “despite their differences. . . . the policies of Bulgaria and Romania remain policies of . . . cooperation in all spheres.” Yet, with the adoption of a national line in Romanian history that contradicted key Bulgarian historical assumptions, one more layer of suspicion was added between the two states, which influenced the development of cultural relations.

Bilateral plans for cultural cooperation formed the basis of the two countries’ cultural exchange along the lines of socialist internationalism, with a focus on the rather flexible notion of “friendship.” In 1975, the two countries established Romanian-Bulgarian and Bulgarian-Romanian associations of friendship to oversee and coordinate cultural activities. According to the official vision for these associations, “The traditional friendship of our two neighboring peoples has deep roots in history—Bulgarians and Romanians have fought together for freedom, independence, and a just social system. . . . Especially after our liberation [from fascism], friendship between the two people developed further.” Based on the Plan for Cultural Cooperation for 1978–1980, for example, the two countries coordinated the celebrations of their centennials in 1978 (Bulgarian statehood and Romanian independence were both declared that year) and marked the thirty-fifth anniversaries of their respective socialist revolutions in 1979. Despite the reassuring public rhetoric and the five-year plan for cultural and scientific cooperation signed in 1980, when the Bulgarians proposed a series of events associated with the 1300-year jubilee in the late 1970s, the Romanian response was negative: on national matters, friendship had its limits.
Following instructions from the highest levels of the Romanian Communist Party (Partidul Comunist Român, PCR), Romanian officials adopted a categorical position: they declined participation in Bulgarian commemorative activities and refused to form a 1300-year national celebration committee. This decision was connected to the parallel attempts of the Ceausescu regime to celebrate the 2050th anniversary of the establishment of the “independent and centralized Dacian state,” which the Romanians considered to be the forerunner of their modern state.  

Bulgarian diplomats meticulously reported that publications in the Romanian press offered historical interpretations that the Bulgarian side saw as wrong and provocative, such as the lack of Slavic presence in Romanian history or the national composition of Dobrudja. In the Bulgarian opinion, Romania had emerged as a state in the fourteenth century, but the Ceausescu regime “charged Romanian scholars . . . with correcting this historical truth by proving the Getho-Dacian origins of the Romanians two thousand years ago.” In the words of one ambassador, “It is obvious that the PCR wants to change Romanian history in line with Romanian nationalism. . . . The Romanian arguments do not have a scientific but only a propagandistic character.”  

The Bulgarian opinion held that Romanian historical interpretations were “dominated by a spirit of nationalism and attempts at historical revisionism.” When responding to Bulgarian requests to celebrate the 1300th anniversary, Romanian officials demanded the reciprocal celebration of their 2050th anniversary in Bulgaria. Bulgarian officials, however, felt that such an agreement would “give credence to the Romanian historical falsifications and Romanian nationalism, . . . and deliver a blow to historical truth.” The language of truth used here is striking. Despite obvious parallels between the two anniversaries, the Bulgarians saw the 2050-year jubilee as a “made-up anniversary” (izmislena godishnina). They insisted that their own 1300-year jubilee, by contrast, “encapsulates the complexity of growth, resilience, and struggle for progress that Bulgaria has experienced during its 1300 years.”

Anniversary wars and debates about “historical truth” thus framed cultural relations between the two countries in the 1970s, creating a series of uncomfortable encounters that are striking in their bluntness.

With the categorical Romanian position in mind, Bulgarian diplomats in Bucharest proposed alternative ways to celebrate the 1300th anniversary: based on the already ratified Plan for Cultural Cooperation, they would organize cultural activities on historical topics that would only indirectly address the jubilee. The embassy focused on “high-profile, effective activities that contribute to the brotherly relations between our two countries more generally,” often described as “indirect propaganda.”
“indirect” activities connected to the 1300-year jubilee included, first, the organization of an exhibition of Thracian art and culture (clearly designed to counter the Dacian theories) and visits of the Bulgarian National Theater and Opera to maintain active cultural connections. Second, the celebration of Bulgarian national holidays already ratified in the cultural plan provided an opportunity to showcase Bulgarian contributions to world civilization. Third, the publication of materials on historical topics in the Romanian press sought to clarify the Bulgarian position on key events. The idea was to use every opportunity for public engagement to promote the 1300th anniversary message.

What is remarkable is the open hostility in these exchanges between supposed friends. There were verbal wars about truth between diplomats, academics, and cultural figures over the issue of competing anniversaries. Because of “big differences in historiography that our country cannot accept,” historians engaged in highly dramatic encounters over scholarly interpretations. History thus became an unambiguously political weapon. Take, for example, the Fifteenth International Historical Congress, held in Bucharest between 10 and 17 August 1980. In Bulgarian reports, the Romanian hosts took the presence of attendees from the United States, West Germany, France, Great Britain, Spain, Japan, South Korea, and Sweden as an opportunity to showcase the Romanian anniversary. Bulgarian delegates at the congress described an “overly nationalistic spirit and pompous celebration of the 2050-year pseudo-jubilee,” which allegedly put off “Western scholars [who] either showed irony toward Romanian attempts to promote their non-scientific views on the origins of the Romanian state, or delicately stayed silent.” Further, the Romanian organizers created logistical problems for the Bulgarian panel, which was scheduled at 7:00 a.m. in an uninviting faraway room. Still, according to diplomats, the Bulgarian presentation, appropriately dedicated to the 1300th anniversary, “positively impressed the participants with its modesty and strictly academic focus . . . in contrast to [Romanian] pomp.” There was a vast difference, in the minds of the Bulgarians, between the “non-scientific” Romanian interpretations of their “pseudo-jubilee,” on the one hand, and the “measured information” supported by objective, scientific interpretations of historical facts related to the “real” Bulgarian jubilee, on the other. Excessive nationalism, in other words, would backfire, a warning that Bulgarian scholars also heeded during their international engagements elsewhere.

Romanian officials obstructed the Bulgarian cultural efforts, refusing to allow any 1300-year activities in 1981 while multiple publications in the press “twisted Bulgarian history.” The Bulgarian embassy continued to use the
strategy of indirect propaganda, organizing “events with good propaganda effect” even if they were not directly related to the 1300th anniversary. There was a conscious attempt to have a concentration of events in September 1981, the month that Bulgarian officials had chosen for the jubilee’s “culmination” internationally. The ninetieth anniversary of the establishment of the BKP (2 August), the seventieth anniversary of Todor Zhivkov’s birth (7 September), and the thirty-seventh anniversary of the socialist revolution (9 September) all became occasions for celebrating the 1300th anniversary. As promised in the jubilee plan, the Bulgarian presence in Romania was “intensely felt” during that month. Yet, the celebration of 1300 Years Bulgaria in Romania remained an indirect affair. To sum up its contradictory logic, the Bulgarian embassy concluded: “the execution [of commemorative activities in Romania] was significant, even if it did not necessarily involve commemorative events in all cases.”

The question remains, what were the consequences of Romanian officials’ steadfast refusal to participate in Bulgaria’s 1300-year celebration? Trying to avoid fallout from this boycott of the Bulgarian anniversary and its own international isolation, the Ceausescu regime carefully straddled the line between socialist internationalism and historical revisionism. In the end, the Romanian government sent a delegation to Sofia during the celebrations on 20 October 1981 when more than one hundred heads of state were present for the “all-people’s celebration” of the 1300-year jubilee in the Bulgarian capital. Despite the public appearance of friendship, disputes over “historical truth” created layers of suspicion between the two neighbors that continued to color their relations throughout the socialist period.

Yugoslavia: Culture as Counterpropaganda

Rival historical interpretations similarly constrained the execution of Bulgarian cultural policies in Yugoslavia, but while Ceausescu and Zhivkov skillfully downplayed their disagreements, Bulgarian and Yugoslav officials often publicly challenged each other on the irreconcilable question of Macedonia. As a result, the encounters between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia on the occasion of the 1300th jubilee were unambiguously contentious and frequently dramatic. In this context, Bulgarian officials understood their cultural events to function as “counterpropaganda” to Yugoslavia’s “hostile disinformation” about their country’s history. Only occasionally were considerations of socialist internationalism able to defuse the notably confrontational tone of Bulgarian and Yugoslav representatives in cultural and historical matters.
In the 1960s, the Soviet Union urged Bulgaria to pursue constructive contacts with Yugoslavia and to adopt a compromise position on Macedonia, yet it did not take a strong position on the latter question, which the Soviets considered a bilateral issue. Thus, tensions between the two countries reemerged after 1966 when Yugoslavia insisted on the presence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria and Bulgaria unequivocally expressed its position on the place of Macedonia in Bulgarian history. In this context, cultural relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in the 1970s developed in fits and starts, despite the fact that the two countries signed a Plan for Cultural Cooperation in 1974.  

As in the relationship with Romania, debates focused on history and its relationship to politics, with each side maintaining that it held the monopoly over truth. Tensions grew in 1978 when Bulgaria celebrated the centennial of its modern statehood. Of particular concern to Yugoslav leaders was the elevation of 3 March, the date of the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano, to a Bulgarian national holiday, because the Bulgarian state created by San Stefano included the parts of Macedonia now in Yugoslavia. For the Yugoslavs, this anniversary was a sign of Bulgarian territorial claims vis-à-vis Yugoslavia and an expression of “Great Bulgarian nationalism.” The Bulgarians insisted that they had renounced all territorial claims, but this did not placate their neighbors. The fact that several months later BKP Politburo member Tsole Dragoicheva published her World War II memoir did not help either because from the perspective of Yugoslavia, her take on the anti-fascist resistance in Vardar Macedonia constituted “the darkest anti-Yugoslav and anti-Macedonian slander written in Bulgaria in the last twenty years.” The ensuing heated exchanges between the two countries engaged other touchy topics, notably the 1903 Ilinden Uprising and the nineteenth-century revolutionaries and national awakeners, with each side accusing the other in “twisting historical science.”

These passionate debates were not limited to cultural events in the Balkans because Yugoslav diplomats intervened in Bulgarian events organized outside of Yugoslavia, trying to correct Bulgarian historical interpretations about Macedonia. In the United States in 1979, Yugoslav diplomats attended a Bulgarian panel organized at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) on the occasion of the 1300th anniversary, questioned the Bulgarian presentations, and distributed literature “compliments of the Yugoslav embassy.” They visited foreign embassies, pleading with diplomats to boycott the 1300-year jubilee celebrations in their respective countries, as the Bulgarians learned from their Cuban friends. Yugoslav vigilance even led to the forced removal of books on historical topics from the Bulgarian stand at the Belgrade International Book Fair in 1979.
Bulgarian historian Hristo Hristov delivered a lecture on the historical development of Bulgaria at Columbia University in November 1980, the Bulgarian ambassador in Yugoslavia was summoned to explain attempts to “falsify history” and “undermine the existence of a Macedonian nation.”

These tensions over “open questions” continued around the 1300-year jubilee. The Yugoslavs directly refused to celebrate the 1300th anniversary and created obstructions when Bulgarian officials organized events on historical topics. During the negotiations regarding the Plan of Cultural Cooperation in 1980–1982, Yugoslav representatives declined to accept a provision obliging each country to celebrate historical anniversaries. Throughout 1981, the Yugoslav side refused to participate in cultural events because of its “negative attitude to the 1300-year jubilee.” In the Bulgarian opinion, their neighbors were engaged in “anti-Bulgarian propaganda” to sabotage the celebration of the 1300-year jubilee: for example, the Yugoslav government declined to form a national celebration committee. Considering all these complications, Bulgarian experts talked about the organization of cultural events in Yugoslavia as “counterpropaganda work.” Their explicit goal was to prove the veracity of Bulgarian historical claims while questioning the logic of Yugoslav assertions.

As they did in Romania, Bulgarian officials engaged in indirect strategies to celebrate the “big event” in Yugoslavia. For example, the KK issued instructions to the unions of Bulgarian writers, musicians, translators, and filmmakers, as well as Bulgarian radio, television, and the major newspapers, to establish contact with their respective counterparts in Yugoslavia. As Bulgarian experts prepared for the Belgrade and Zagreb trade-industrial fairs in April and May 1981, they showcased Bulgaria’s economic development “in the context of the 1300-year jubilee,” including historical photographs and posters. Some of the attempts to plan jubilee events bordered on the comical: when Circus Globus launched its Yugoslav tours, it included 1300-year themes in its program. Yet, the Yugoslav side was vigilant. When the Bulgarian National Theater visited Belgrade in July 1981, only 2,000 out of the projected 3,500 tickets sold, ostensibly because of anti-Bulgarian propaganda in the press. As they did in Romania, Bulgarian experts implemented indirect strategies, but in Yugoslavia they faced open anti-Bulgarian hostility in the press and outright refusal to participate in the jubilee. Thus, “complex events” organized in Yugoslavia focused on less contentious matters, such as the centennial of the establishment of the BKP or the celebration of the 1923 “anti-fascist uprising.” Socialist internationalism was the best way to disguise the rift between the two countries on national and historical topics.
Yet, unlike Romania where Bulgarian officials treaded carefully, the Yugoslav refusal to participate in the 1300-year jubilee reached the highest diplomatic circles, demonstrating the potent charge of the Macedonian question. In September 1980, Bulgarian diplomats, frustrated with the obstructions, suggested an official inquiry from MVnR regarding Yugoslav participation in the 1300th anniversary. On 22 September, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mariï Ivanov summoned the Yugoslav ambassador in Sofia, Danilo Purić, and explained the importance of the 1300th anniversary for the Bulgarian people, informing him of the international resonance of the event and expressing hope that the anniversary would be welcomed in Yugoslavia, a country with “similar historical developments and shared contemporary objectives.” Ambassador Purić responded that “each people has the right to celebrate its anniversaries” and suggested that, if the Bulgarian media refrained from using the jubilee to advertise open questions, the celebration would find a good reception in Yugoslavia.

In January 1981, Ambassador Purić informed MVnR that the Yugoslav government would not participate in the 1300-year jubilee. He explained that Bulgarian officials had “appropriated the Macedonian people’s history [and] voiced territorial aspirations” by characterizing the 1903 Ilinden Uprising as a Bulgarian revolutionary movement (the culprit was Liudmila Zhivkova herself). The “Great Bulgarian conceptions” that dominated the celebrations and denied the existence of a Macedonian nation breached prior Bulgarian assurances that the anniversary events would not touch upon open questions but focus on common issues, such as the struggle against the Ottoman Empire or fascism. In his response, Deputy Minister Ivanov tried to distinguish between political and historical arguments. He insisted that Bulgaria had no territorial aspirations toward its neighbors, however, “history remains history. It cannot be appropriated, twisted, or erased.” The conflicting uses of history and the open questions between the two countries remained insurmountable impediments.

On 24 February 1981, MVnR summoned Ambassador Purić yet again. Ambassador Ivan Ganev expressed concerns regarding publications in the Yugoslav media and events sponsored by Yugoslav institutions, which disseminated “numerous materials with anti-Bulgarian character.” Specifically, the Bulgarian diplomat referred to the World War II memoirs of Svetozar Vukmanovic-Tempo, a member of the Central Committee of the League of Yugoslav Communists (SKJ) and a leader of the resistance movement in Vardar Macedonia in 1943–1944, which in the Bulgarian interpretation were full of “rude attacks against the BKP and its leaders [and] crude falsifications of historical truth.” Ganev remarked, “Bulgaria has existed for 1300
years, and we do not ask for anyone’s condescending admission to recognize this historical fact.” Asking why the Yugoslav government tolerated this anti-Bulgarian campaign, Ganev concluded that “if the goal is to silence Bulgarian science, this has no future.”  

History had moved to the center of the Yugoslav-Bulgarian controversy.

The following day, at a meeting with the minister of foreign affairs, Petar Mladenov, Ambassador Puric explained why the Yugoslav government was refraining from participation in the 1300th anniversary: he cited specific articles and lectures by Bulgarian scholars, which he qualified as “not historical but political [writings] that contain various strange statements.” Mladenov emphasized that the two countries should follow the prior agreement between Zhivkov and Tito “to seek what unites us while our disagreements should not be an impediment to good neighborly relations.” He also commented on the relationship between history and politics, stating, “I am not a historian and study the facts from a political perspective.” He insisted that historians should engage in the “conscientious study of facts,” but “what historians write, whether true or not, is their personal opinion.” Mladenov further charged members of the Central Committee of the SKJ with publishing polemical works, raising the question of “how to separate the historian from the politician.” This was an insincere attempt to mask the fact that many Bulgarian historians tended to be in service of the “patriotic turn,” while accusing Yugoslav scholars of the same sin. In the end, Mladenov concluded that the decision to participate in the 1300-year celebrations was “your sovereign right. We do not ask you, do not insist.” But he warned that Bulgaria would resolutely counter any attempt by Yugoslav diplomats to sabotage its 1300th anniversary by visiting embassies and contacting international jubilee committees.

The Yugoslav government ultimately reached a compromise decision: Yugoslav representatives would participate in the Twelfth Congress of the BKP in April 1981 but abstain from the 1300-year jubilee celebration in October. Yet, Zhivkov “arranged to have the last word: At the concert at the Congress on 2 April, the second item on the program was a symbolic poem entitled ‘Vardar’ [an important river in Yugoslav Macedonia].” The Yugoslav ambassador made a formal protest. The Bulgarians answered that the Vardar Rhapsody, by composer Pancho Vladigerov, was written in 1922, at a time when a Macedonian nation (or state) did not exist.

Despite these tensions, after Tito’s death in May 1980, the Bulgarian side observed changes in the Yugoslav position regarding Bulgaria, which led to the expansion of economic relations as a first step toward the resolution of the “open questions.” With the mounting internal problems in Yugoslavia,
its leadership softened its position, despite repeated attempts throughout 1981 to minimize the effect of Bulgarian events dedicated to the 1300th anniversary.87 Ultimately, on 17 October 1981, three days before the official celebration of 1300 Years Bulgaria on 20 October, Ambassador Puric´ contacted Bulgarian diplomats “on short notice” with the statement that, following a meeting between the foreign ministers Mladenov and Vrhovec in New York, he would be present at the 1300-year jubilee, although he asked for assurances that the celebration “would not be targeting any Balkan state.”88 Following the emotionally charged controversies surrounding the interrelationship between politics and history, in which each side had categorically spelled out its position, socialist internationalism came to the rescue. Yet, debates over the place of Macedonia in the historical interpretations of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia continued to trigger heated political tensions and historical debates between the two countries.

Turkey: The Importance of Reciprocity

In contrast to these dramatic exchanges, Bulgarian officials maintained a measured tone in their encounters with their Turkish partners. Turkish politics during this time—including the 1974 Cyprus invasion and a 1980 military coup—was a constantly shifting terrain, and Bulgarian diplomats adopted an anticipatory position. In this context, cultural cooperation agreements presented little risk as they dutifully followed the rules of reciprocity. Thus, regular if not particularly robust or novel cultural programs managed to navigate the political and national priorities of each state without causing major problems. The early 1980s marked a short period of relaxation between the two countries, which the resumption of nationalist pressures on the Bulgarian Turks in 1984 put to an end, reviving the sharp nationalist rhetoric on both sides.

In the 1970s, Turkey found itself at the center of Cold War debates because of two major international crises: its invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus in 1974 and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (the two countries share an extensive border).89 During this time, attempting to undermine the southern flank of NATO, the Soviet Union was also cultivating good relations with Turkey. The Soviet position shaped relations between Bulgaria and Turkey, as “big brother” requested that Bulgaria temper its controversies with its southern neighbor. In 1975, reflecting the Helsinki spirit, the two countries signed a Declaration for Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation, which framed their interactions for the rest of the decade. Yet, the status of the Turks in Bulgaria and their emigration to Turkey remained an unresolved
After the invasion of Cyprus of 1974, Bulgarian politicians watched their southern neighbor closely as they feared “Cypriot scenarios,” especially after Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit spoke during his visit to Sofia in 1978 about the presence of a Turkish national minority in Bulgaria.

Despite the enormous political and economic ramifications of the latter question, the two countries maintained a surprisingly measured tone in their encounters, in direct opposition to the emotionally charged exchanges Bulgaria had with Romania and Yugoslavia. The late 1970s and early 1980s were a time when Bulgaria had tempered its pressures on its Turkish population domestically, so that it was not a burning issue in the same way Macedonia and the Dacian question were for Yugoslavia and Romania. Once in a while there were disputes between Bulgarian and Turkish officials involving historical interpretations. Bulgarian diplomats continued to review and compile instances of “anti-Bulgarian propaganda” originating in “former Bulgarian citizens” of Turkish origin who had emigrated and now in Turkey spoke of the “miserable existence” of the Bulgarian Turks. When negotiations were underway in 1979 about the future of cultural relations, the Turkish side declined to include provisions about visits by historians because Turkish archives were not open to foreign researchers. The preferred Bulgarian historiographical term “Ottoman yoke” also caused periodic reactions from the Turkish embassy in Sofia because of its “political nuance.” Yet, in contrast to Romania and Yugoslavia, these disagreement were handled calmly and diplomatically.

In talks between Bulgaria and Turkey, political factors related to the new spirit of regional cooperation seemed to be paramount, easing Bulgarian fears of “pan-Turkish, anti-Slavic, and anticommunist” tendencies in Turkey. From the Bulgarian perspective, “maybe for the first time since the death of Ataturk, Turkey [was] seeking contacts with the socialist states, and especially its Balkan neighbors,” because it wished to overcome its isolation after the Cyprus crisis. In this context, Bulgarian diplomats believed that “cultural exchange and relations” were “the most fruitful way” to advance cooperation. When Zhivkov visited Turkey in June 1976, Bulgarian functionaries organized a series of events in Turkey whose goal was to showcase Bulgarian socialist culture: these included opera and ballet performances, pop music concerts, and the Contemporary Bulgarian Art exhibition. The years between 1975 and 1979 marked a period of growing cultural contacts between the two countries that, adopting the language of Helsinki, used cultural exchange “to strengthen good neighborly relations” in the spirit of peaceful coexistence. The two governments signed a two-year Agreement for Scientific and Cultural Cooperation in 1976, which was renewed every two years, including...
1980–1981 cycle that was critical for the Bulgarians as it included provisions related to the 1300th anniversary. 98

Yet, in the late 1970s Turkey experienced growing political instability. When Bülent Ecevit became prime minister in 1978, a series of new administrative appointments across ministries complicated the execution of existing agreements. 99 Following an increase in political assassinations and confrontations between left- and right-wing youth groups, early 1979 saw the imposition of a state of emergency in nineteen provinces of the country. This situation complicated cultural programs; in the opinion of the Bulgarians, “under the mask of goodwill, the Turkish side used every possible means to slow down or cancel our initiatives” while Turkish politicians systematically “utilized Turkish culture . . . [as] an instrument of political means.” 100 In September 1980, a military coup put an end to civilian rule and placed severe limitations on freedom of the press, further frustrating Bulgarian efforts in Turkey. 101 A series of shifts in the administrative structures by General Kenan Evren created “an atmosphere of instability and even fear” and complicated Bulgarian plans on the eve of the approaching anniversary. Bulgarian officials continued to insist on the execution of existing cultural plans for 1980–1981 and especially the reciprocal celebration of anniversaries. 102

The two countries had traditionally celebrated their anniversaries under conditions of “strict reciprocity.” In 1973 and 1974, state delegations participated in the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Turkish Republic (1923) and the thirtieth anniversary of the socialist revolution in Bulgaria (1944). 103 In the late 1970s, sensing the reserved attitude of the Turkish side toward the 1300th anniversary (Turkish diplomats were unsure whether a national celebration committee was appropriate), the Bulgarian side promoted the possibility of coordinating the centennial of Ataturk’s birth (1881) with the celebration of the 1300-year jubilee. 104 Bulgarian diplomats resorted to (highly selective) historical arguments to convince their Turkish counterparts, pointing out that “the two countries should seek out those moments and events in their past that would be the basis for . . . cooperation today and in the future.” Ataturk, for one, had had “a friendly attitude toward . . . Bulgaria, contributed greatly to progress in Turkey, and had a clear desire for all people to live in peace and understanding.” 105 When the Turkish embassy in Sofia moved to a new building, which occupied a site where Ataturk had rented a room in 1913, Bulgarian officials offered to place a plaque as “a sign of the respect of the Bulgarian people for the great son of the Turkish people.” 106 These plans were included in the Plan for Scientific and Cultural Cooperation between the two countries for the period 1980–1981, in which the 1300-year jubilee and the centennial of Ataturk were linked. 107
After the military coup in September 1980, however, the paralysis in the country severely limited the execution of the 1300-year jubilee. The Turkish side, for example, insisted that jubilee events “be spread out throughout the year,” undermining the Bulgarian plan for a clear culmination. The celebration of the 1300th anniversary in Turkey was thus a subdued affair due to the complicated internal situation and lack of cooperation from Turkish authorities. Due to its political and economic instability, the country never formed a national celebration committee for the 1300-year jubilee. In June, diplomats opened a Week of Bulgarian Film in Ankara while in September they hosted a reception at the embassy dedicated to the 1300th anniversary. Yet, irregularities limited the scope of the most high-profile event, the Contemporary Bulgarian Art exhibition in December. In the end, the Turkish side reluctantly sent a delegation to the celebrations in Sofia in October and issued a modest state gift for the jubilee, “to match the spirit of relations between the two states.” In December 1981, as a sign of appreciation, Bulgaria organized a photo exhibit on Atatürk to mark the centennial of his birth, fulfilling its reciprocal cultural obligations. Diplomatic formalities and insistence on reciprocity dominated the two anniversary celebrations. Even though those events were hardly groundbreaking, the fact that they took place at all is remarkable, and they marked a relatively high point in Bulgarian-Turkish relations before the tense encounters of the mid- to late 1980s related to the escalating persecution of the Bulgarian Turks by the communist regime.

Greece: How to Stage a Successful Jubilee

Given Bulgaria’s tensions with its other neighbors, the dialogue that developed between Bulgaria and Greece in the 1970s was perhaps unexpected. Yet, Zhivkov meticulously cultivated friendship with both conservative and socialist Greek partners while Greek policy circles warmed up to their northern neighbors despite ideological and national differences. The Bulgarian cultural program in Greece presents an eloquent example of the interconnection between soft and hard power. Cultural links between the two countries steadily grew in the 1970s, and Bulgaria organized a 1300th-anniversary celebration in Greece that served as a model for international cultural events elsewhere; importantly, official culture facilitated the rapprochement that paved the road for the “Athens-Sofia axis” of the mid-1980s.

Opposing political orientations and a long history of national(ist) tensions should have prevented this rapprochement. As historian Nikolai Todorov, who served as the Bulgarian ambassador in Athens in the early 1980s, notes, “history . . . has left a contradictory legacy in the relations between the
two states. The moments of tensions between the two peoples have been more than the moments of common struggle, friendship, and cooperation. The vast majority of Greeks up until today consider . . . that Bulgaria was created through the violent capture of sacred Hellenic land. Events in our century also did not contribute to the neutralization of anti-Bulgarian and anti-Slavic moods, but exacerbated the existing hostility. Yet, the second half of the 1970s saw accelerated improvement in the relations between the two countries, including cultural contacts. Factors included the realism of both states’ leaders and their willingness to work “across different economic and military-political formations” in the spirit of Helsinki, transforming “relations between Bulgaria and Greece [into] an axis of stability in the Balkans.” For Bulgarian diplomats, the improvement of relations between the two countries “exerted a huge influence on the general political climate in the Balkans where the political picture remained multidimensional and relations between various parties complicated.”

Bulgaria and Greece only fully resumed diplomatic relations in 1964. The two countries continued contacts during the military junta (1967–1974), but the late 1970s offered new possibilities for rapprochement because both countries adopted the Helsinki spirit of cooperation across political and socioeconomic lines. In July 1975, when Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis, a conservative and pro-European politician, visited Bulgaria as a part of Greek Ostpolitik, Todor Zhivkov referred to him as “a very strong and brave man” because with his visit, he had demolished years of distrust and hostility between the two countries.

This goodwill at the highest level percolated down to other sectors, too. In late 1975, the Greek-Bulgarian and Bulgarian-Greek associations for friendship emerged in Athens and Sofia. From 1976 on, cultural exchanges provided, in the Bulgarian view, “unlimited opportunities for mutual acquaintance . . . of the two neighborly peoples.” When Zhivkov visited Greece in April 1976, the leadership of the Greek-Bulgarian Association hung several hundred Bulgarian flags in the Greek capital and provided photographs of both leaders to passersby. In July 1976, when Liudmila Zhivkova embarked on an official state visit (followed by a reciprocal visit of the Greek minister of culture Konstantinos Tripanis in October), she provided a positive view of post-junta Greece. She pointed out the “general goodwill” of the cultural intelligentsia, despite the politicians’ “partial restraint” and “attempts to avoid concrete commitments.” Cultural contact thus played an important role in building mutual trust between political elites. In 1978, Bulgarian experts declared, “The period of accidental exchange of specialists is over,” and characterized cultural exchange between Bulgaria and Greece as
“dynamic [and] well-organized.” In the late 1970s, film festivals, cooperation between Greek and Bulgarian radio and television, and visits of librarians and classical musicians created a lively exchange of cultural events.121

In the late 1970s, the Bulgarian embassy in Athens embarked on planning the 1300-year jubilee events in Greece. Diplomats maintained that “conditions in Greece are peculiar” because of the “conflicting legacies” and disagreements between the two countries on many historical questions. Based on their experiences with Romania and Yugoslavia, diplomats proceeded carefully. Yet, unlike Romania and Yugoslavia, Greek politicians and public figures tactfully refrained from any discussion of controversial topics, such as their conflicting views on Macedonia and Thrace, but focused on recent developments between the two countries. The overarching logic was “to avoid as much as possible references to the past and to focus on events that bring us together, especially in our contemporary history—the building of socialism, which is also the period of normalization and development of Bulgarian-Greek relations.”122

In late 1979, Zhivkov appointed a new Bulgarian ambassador to Greece—the historian Nikolai Todorov—whose mandate, among other aspects of
reinvigorating relations between the two countries, was to organize the 1300-year jubilee celebrations in Greece.\textsuperscript{123} Once in charge of this mission, Todorov put scholars and experts at the center of the commemorations because he believed that only by enlisting the support of the Greek academic and artistic community could he cultivate a “benevolent climate” for the celebrations.\textsuperscript{124} In defiance of the consistently ambitious and top-down jubilee agenda of the NKK in Sofia, Todorov adopted a “realistic” approach without “maximalist tendencies” by deciding to organize “only a handful [of] effective jubilee events.”\textsuperscript{125} A first step was the establishment of a national celebration committee, an attempt that had failed elsewhere in the Balkans. Todorov’s choice of a chairperson was unusual if not controversial: Panaiotis Kanelopoulos was a former Greek prime minister who had opposed the junta, but politically stood on the right. Under his leadership, the Greek committee organized a number of high-profile events that served as a public breakthrough in Greek-Bulgarian relations.

The intersection between culture, history, and politics in these efforts was paramount. In spring 1980, Bulgarian exhibitions of ethnographic and artistic objects opened in Athens and Piraeus in the presence of the mayors of the two cities; the printed invitations specifically stated that they were dedicated to the 1300th anniversary. As a historian, Todorov did not shy away from engaging the contested history of the two countries. Two joint symposia in Thessaloniki gathered scholars from both countries to debate Bulgarian-Greek cultural relations during the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period. The goal was to initiate dialogue on topics that Greek and Bulgarian scholars could agree on and stay away from more contentious recent disputes.\textsuperscript{126} In Todorov’s mind these symposia “promised the failure of all efforts to undermine [the 1300th anniversary] because the group that we may expect to attack the jubilee [i.e., Greek historians] has been implicated so thoroughly in its celebration.” Todorov was still alert: “Let’s not be naïve, we will face many difficulties because the Greek side creates many obstacles.”\textsuperscript{127} Yet, he believed that the only way to overcome obstacles to the celebration of a historical anniversary was scholarly professionalism. Once the positive tone of the Bulgaria-Greek cultural encounter was set, Todorov took political steps: he initiated contacts with members of the Greek cabinet, seeking official involvement in the anniversary celebrations as instructed by Sofia. In response to the Bulgarian requests for a Greek parliamentary resolution, diplomats bluntly stated, “some things are impossible.”\textsuperscript{128} Yet, the Greek government officially recognized the jubilee, unlike Yugoslavia and initially Romania. Positive reviews of Bulgarian events emerged in the press, again unlike the rest of the neighbors, including a major article in the popular daily
Vima (Step) from February 1981 under the title “The Bulgarians Value Their Past.” A variety of cultural events were celebrated in Athens in spring 1981, always under the aegis of the 1300th anniversary. There was an undeniable and clear momentum in the development of Greek-Bulgarian cultural contacts.

This is not to say that everything went smoothly. The Bulgarian general consul in Thessaloniki, for example, had suggested with nationalist pathos that the 1300-year events in Greece should “disseminate information about the contributions of our country to the international world cultural treasury, countering Greek insinuations that Bulgaria had only consumed Greek values without lending anything to it.” Greek nationalist organizations similarly “accused Kanelopoulos [and others Greek public figures] of selling themselves to the Bulgarians.” When the Greek ambassador in Sofia proposed the organization of an Aegean Civilization exhibition in 1981, “as a greeting to the Bulgarian people for their jubilee,” there were suspicions that the goal was to overshadow Bulgarian contributions to ancient civilization, demonstrated in the blockbuster Thracian Treasures exhibition that toured the world at the same time. Yet, these disagreements were handled
carefully, unlike the case of Romania and Yugoslavia where exchanges were blunt. Kanelopoulos, for example, urged the parties to “look to the past and seek not so much these elements that pitted us against each other, but those that united us during the difficult centuries of common obstacles.”

The mostly academic focus of the 1300th anniversary that Todorov initiated did not please the overseers of the jubilee celebrations at home. In a January 1980 meeting, MVnR officials recommended “limiting the unsystematic and frequently private contacts of Bulgarian scientists with Greek ones working on issues related to Bulgarian history and culture.” While the publicly expressed apprehension was that “our hyperactivity could cause the suspicion and restraint of Greek authorities and could have undesired consequences,” diplomats were clearly annoyed with the growing professional contacts between historians from both countries. The NKK, noting that “the jubilee activities in Greece have a predominantly scientific and cultural character,” recommended the “broadening of the [audiences of the] jubilee celebrations” and the inclusion of Greek Communist Party members. But Todorov lashed out at bureaucrats who showed little regard for local conditions and stuck with his plans.

From the Bulgarian perspective, the jubilee celebrations in Greece received a boost in May 1981 from the visit of Zhivkov and his meeting with Prime Minister Karamanlis, which was covered well in the press and created a sense of continuity between cultural and political agendas. Yet, with their parliamentary elections coming up, the Greek side “categorically” requested that Bulgaria avoid any 1300th anniversary events during the preelection period that began in September. For that reason, Todorov moved the “culmination” of the anniversary celebrations in Greece, as mandated in the jubilee plans required by the NKK in Sofia, to February 1982. Even though the Greek government declined to offer an official statement on the 1300th anniversary on the eve of the elections, at the 9th September reception celebrating the national holiday of Bulgaria a telegram from Karamanlis “included one sentence about 1300,” a victory for Bulgarian public relations efforts. The Greek government also decided to offer a state gift—a replica of an ancient sculpture—that would be delivered after the elections. Ultimately, as a result of Bulgarian flexibility, the 1300-year celebrations in Greece were a success. The Greek leaders Konstantinos Karamanlis and Andreas Papandreou, the latter newly elected in late 1981, each delivered official greetings to the Bulgarian people for the 1300th anniversary, despite earlier indications that an official Greek declaration would be impossible. Then in February 1982, Ambassador Todorov dazzled Greek audiences with two of Bulgaria’s most coveted public relations resources, now available after the end of the
CHAPTER 2

jubilee frenzy: the Pirin Folk Ensemble and the Bulgarian astronaut Georgi Ivanov. Greece, an ideological adversary and national enemy, had become a model for celebrating the 1300th anniversary outside of Bulgaria.

From Cultural Cooperation to Political Breakthrough

Bulgaria’s neighbors had conflicting views on a number of historical interpretations that Bulgaria used as a part of its international cultural repertoire, which complicated the execution of its 1300-year jubilee in the Balkans. This observation shines a light on the double-edged function of cultural nationalism, which helped domestically but complicated matters internationally, especially among the country’s neighbors. But cultural exchange could also create goodwill, or the conditions for fruitful cooperation that might bridge the ideological and national differences among the Balkan states. Soft power projects went hand in hand with hard power objectives, facilitating a number of regional initiatives with lasting effects. In April 1981, during the Twelfth Congress of the BKP, Zhivkov spoke about the need to establish “a code of good neighborly relations,” and for some Balkan states, culture became the way to test this proposition. This breakthrough potential of cultural diplomacy was obvious in the dynamics between Bulgaria and Greece, where cultural cooperation provided an opportunity to advance political dialogue and regional cooperation in a variety of practical ways.

The complex relationship between culture and politics, and the role of the 1300th anniversary in bringing them together, was evident during the highly publicized “all-people’s celebration” of the 1300-year jubilee in Sofia in October 1981. In attendance were heads of state and international figures from more than one hundred countries, including most Balkan neighbors (with the exception of Albania). Zhivkov spoke about the need for regional cooperation: “only a policy of peace and understanding, of friendship and cooperation corresponds to the interests of the Balkans’ people.” He then announced Bulgaria’s new major international initiative: to secure “the gradual transformation of Europe into a continent free of nuclear arms” by creating a nuclear-weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Balkans together with all willing neighbors. The proclaimed goal was to make the Balkans “an area of peace and security.”

Having built goodwill among its neighbors during the past decade, including through culture, Bulgaria was now ready to deliver tangible political results with the help of its Greek friends. In late 1981, with the new Greek prime minister, the socialist Andreas Papandreou, in office, Greece and Bulgaria began consultations related to the possibility of establishing the
NWFZ. This prospect, in turn, caused trouble for NATO because of its political implications concerning the cohesiveness of the organization and the increasingly sensitive question of U.S. deployment of missiles in Germany.\textsuperscript{146} For Papandreou, this was a strategy to renegotiate the future of U.S. military bases on Greek territory, but the very fact that Bulgaria and Greece were involved in talks related to nuclear arms was indicative of how far their relationship had come.\textsuperscript{147} Despite NATO reservations and pressures associated with EEC membership, cooperation between Bulgaria and Greece expanded further during the years of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) (1981–1989). In 1986, the two countries signed a Declaration of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation. Soft power projects had paved the road for tangible hard power achievements.

This dynamic suggests that in the late Cold War, official culture provided a set of opportunities to test regional cooperation beyond the ideological standing of the Balkan neighbors. The fact that Bulgaria achieved the most successful regional rapprochement with Greece, its ideological and national enemy to the south, while it could not coordinate its agenda with its socialist “friends” Romania and Yugoslavia, is telling. This development is especially striking if one contrasts this situation with the initial stages of the Cold War in the Balkans in the late 1940s, which was characterized by sharp ideological confrontation between the socialist and capitalist camps. By the 1970s, however, it was not the ideological commitment within the two blocs, but the ability to enter political dialogue and moderate historical controversies that determined the framework for regional cooperation in the Balkans. This shift, in turn, complicated the policies of both superpowers who could not rely on the consistency of their allies. Culture had served as an important tool in this process of regional realignment.