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Socialism with an Occult Face:

Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Utopia in Late Socialist Bulgaria

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This article explores the unlikely infusion of state-sponsored spiritualism into the materialist ideology of Bulgarian late communism. In the 1970s, Minister of Culture and daughter of party leader Lyudmila Zhivkova initiated grandiose state programs to inject the "occult" into Bulgaria's national culture, art, science, and even political philosophy. Inspired by her Eastern religious beliefs, she sought to "breed" a nation of "all-round and harmoniously developed individuals," devoted to spiritual self-perfection, who would ultimately "work, live and create according to the laws of beauty." How are we to explain such a paradoxical lapse into state-sponsored spiritualism in a milieu dominated by materialism as a philosophy and way of life? How did Zhivkova's occultism inform and transform Bulgarian late socialism? In pursuit of these questions, the article opens with Zhivkova's intellectual and political trajectories, especially her spiritual formation, as I see her religiosity as the cornerstone of her cultural theory and praxis. The second part reconstructs Zhivkova's theoretical apparatus, while the third demonstrates how it was translated into a large-scale aesthetic-spiritual utopia, which posited art, culture, aesthetics, and spirituality as a way to revamp the entire communist project. I contend that as quixotic as Zhivkova's vision was, her policies contributed to the liberalization of art and culture in a period that has long been associated exclusively with stagnation and decay. In so doing, I demonstrate that impulses to attach "a human face" to the communist project endured even after the Prague Spring of 1968.

Keywords: *late socialism; cultural politics; religion and communism; occultism; utopia*

From Karl Marx's famous verdict "religion is the opium of the people" to the ardent atheism of the socialist regimes of the former Eastern Bloc, communism has been deemed incompatible with religiosity.[1] In communist Bulgaria, however, in the 1970s, Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of party leader Todor Zhivkov and the most powerful person in the country after her father, gave Bulgarian late communism a distinctly spiritual face. At the helm of a super-ministry combining culture, art, education, science, publishing, public radio and television, and international cultural relations, Zhivkova aspired to forge a nation of "all-round and harmoniously developed individuals," devoted to spiritual self-perfection, who would ultimately "work, live and create according to the laws of beauty." As a devotee of the

occult-mystical movement known as Agni Yoga or the Living Ethic,[2] she used official and unofficial levers to translate its religio-philosophical tenets into state policies. How are we to explain such a paradoxical lapse into state-sponsored spiritualism in a milieu dominated by materialism as a philosophy, method, and way of life? What did Zhivkova's incongruous foray into occultism[3] mean for late communist culture, and its understanding of modernity and science? In pursuit of these central questions, this article will open with a biographical sketch of Zhivkova's educational, professional, political, and intellectual itineraries. Special attention will be paid to her spiritual trajectory, as I see her religiosity as the cornerstone both of her cultural theory and praxis. The second part of the text will piece together Zhivkova's theoretical and conceptual apparatus, while the third will use the example of aesthetic education to demonstrate that her *Weltanschauung* was translated into a large-scale aesthetic-spiritual utopia, which posited art, culture, aesthetics, and spirituality not only as a core state priority in Bulgarian politics but also as a way to revamp the entire communist project.

The assessments of Lyudmila Zhivkova and her cultural politics—whether benign, eulogizing, derisive, or condemnatory—seem to agree at least on one point: that she was the most eccentric political figure not only in communist Bulgaria but also in the Eastern bloc.[4] The distinguished historian of Eastern Europe Richard Crampton has depicted her as "arguably the most extraordinary personality in the leading circles of any post-Stalinist East European state."[5] Bulgarian intellectuals from her close circle have lauded Zhivkova as the torchbearer of new thinking, permissiveness and pro-Western attitudes, who stood out in the dogmatic confines of state socialism as an "anomaly,"[6] a "strange bird in the socialist cage,"[7] as an anti-Marxist or even anti-communist.[8] Western observers would give her high marks for her intelligence, drive, and organizational aptitude. In a 1980 article emblematically titled "Bulgaria Submits to Energetic Guidance from a Woman," *The Times* succinctly captured the source of Zhivkova's idiosyncrasy:

> Miss Zhivkova, a slim, intense woman with dark hair pulled back tightly over her head, is one of the more enigmatic personalities in Eastern Europe, combining the practical and theoretical in an unusual blend. On the practical side, she has opened up Bulgaria to outside culture, including much more from the West, and has re-vamped the education system. . . . At the same time, she has thrown herself into the pursuit of the "new socialist man," an abstract ideal that appears to combine oriental mysticism, European philosophy and Marxist doctrine in a mixture that even her admirers find puzzling.[9]

Disentangling this puzzling ideological mixture, its genealogies, trajectories, as well as policy embodiments, is the key objective of this article. What are the inspirations and manifestations of Zhivkova's posited "anomaly"? What constitutes her atypicality in the context of late socialist Bulgaria and Eastern Europe? Was she so atypical, after all?

Academic, Intellectual, Political, and Spiritual Trajectories

The daughter of Bulgaria's long-time party leader and head of state appeared to be initially aspiring to an academic career. She majored in history at Sofia University in 1966, followed by successive specializations in Moscow and St. Antony's College, Oxford (1969–1970), where she collected materials for her doctoral thesis on Anglo-Turkish relations in the 1930s. In 1971 she defended her dissertation in history at Sofia University (subsequently published as a monograph in both Bulgaria and the United Kingdom) and became a researcher at the Institute for Balkan Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In the same year, however, her mother Mara Maleeva, a highly respected medical doctor who supported her daughter's scholarly endeavors and was adamantly averse to her entering politics, died of stomach cancer. Having lost the judicious and restraining influence of his wife, Todor Zhivkov propelled Lyudmila on the fast track to a dazzling political career, launched inconspicuously with an appointment as First Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. Only a month later, in December 1971, Zhivkova was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Art and Culture (CAC), the de facto Ministry of Culture. This was a clear signal she was being groomed to replace CAC Chairman, poet Pavel Matev, confirmed by her appointment as First Deputy Chairman of the CAC in 1973, a new position carved out especially for her.

In parallel with her burgeoning scholarly and political careers, Bulgaria's unofficial first lady started arranging weekly Friday soirées at her apartment, abuzz with the cream of Sofia's intellectual elite—writers, artists, journalists, actors, poets, historians, and archeologists.[10] She envisioned these get-togethers as intense brainstorming sessions—the intellectual space where diverse, sometimes conflicting, views would be articulated and debated, which the hostess could then sift through, assess, synthesize, and absorb into her policy plans for the future.[11] Though "Mila's Fridays" were eventually discontinued (reportedly for political reasons), most of the attendees were shortly catapulted to prestigious executive appointments in the administration of art, culture, and education. These trendy soirées have been the subject of much discussion as well as derision. Some of the regulars have waxed poetic about the presumed permissiveness of these "unforgettable Friday meetings," astir with creative ideas and politically daring free speech. According to one of Zhivkova's closest associates, poet Lyubomir Levchev, "This home, simple and cozy, yet full of art, would gather together over a cup of tea or coffee the most mature and prominent Bulgarian artists, abreast with very young, yet completely unknown, but inflamed with creative enthusiasm 'knights of hope.'"[12] Emil Aleksandrov, another regular attendee, likened Lyudmila's Fridays to Madame Tallien's salon evenings during Thermidor, which simultaneously served Todor Zhivkov's interests, who by proxy of his daughter lobbied the intelligentsia.[13] Less loftily, others have scorned these meetings as "the five o'clock of the red bourgeoisie," a carte blanche

towards career advancement, or an incubator for "hatching" the third generation of Bulgaria's communist elite. Bogomil Rainov, a prominent writer, art critic, professor of aesthetics, and eventually Zhivkova's spiritual guru, dismissed them as torturously dull pretentious affairs where "men and women of both sexes would drink, smoke and aspire to impress each other with remarks posing as witticisms."[14] Far from portents of her future interests in culture and the arts—as argued retrospectively by most of her protégés—Rainov saw the soirées as Zhivkova's venue to shop around for her professional plans, while still looking for her true vocation.

Zhivkova's advancement in the state and party hierarchy was forced to a halt by a car crash she sustained on 12 November 1973 en route to Sofia airport, where she was expected to officially see her father off onto a state visit to Poland. This near fatal accident constituted a watershed not only in her personal story, worldview, way of living, and public persona, but also in how she perceived her role in Bulgarian and world politics. It was during her recuperation from the accident that she adopted the belief system, tenets, and rules of living of Agni Yoga. She barely survived the crash (with a severe skull fracture, kidney rupture and internal bleeding; Slavkov, Bateto, t.2, 235). Her orthodox Marxist political adviser Kostadin Chakîrov bears witness that "after the accident she engaged in procedures of self-healing. This is how she familiarized herself with Indian and Tibetan teachings. Slowly, but surely, a wave of negation of social life swelled in her. She isolated herself. She decided to prove to the world that she must overcome the body and the material, that only the spirit and ideas are eternal. Thus around 1975 her strong attraction to asceticism began, bordering on self-torture."[15] Zhivkova's second husband Ivan Slavkov (director of the Bulgarian National Television, self-styled bon vivant and prodigious philanderer) likewise relates that after the car accident she "engaged in studies of the functioning of the brain, of the harmoniously developed personality, of these teachings about meditation—in essence about the breaking from the material and embracing the spiritual."[16] Her close associate Emil Aleksandrov attributes to the accident not only her attraction to occultism but also to a whole cluster of interests—in "history of the arts, especially of fine arts, in the philosophy of India and some Eastern philosophical systems, world religions and their historical role. She immersed herself in yogism, unorthodox healing methods, soothsaying and half-forgotten teachings and practices."[17] Writer and aesthetician Bogomil Rainov, her initiator to Agni Yoga, predictably cast the accident in a religious light as the transformative moment, which led to revelation: "As if under the blaze of a lightning, she suddenly saw her life in a new light. . . . In the illumination of the Revelation she grasped the meaning and made her choice. From this point onwards the new era of her short life begins—seven years, during which she tried with extraordinary energy and perseverance to implement some of the ideas of the Teaching, in spite of the resistance of the sclerotic party bureaucracy."[18]

Bogomil Rainov was a major formative influence on Zhivkova. A member of the pre-communist intellectual elite, art historian, and professor of aesthetics, subsequently also a popular spy novel writer, member of the CC of the BCP, and longtime

deputy chairperson of the Union of Bulgarian Painters, Bogomil Rainov was also the son of eminent Bulgarian theosophist, writer, and painter, academician Nikolay Rainov.[19] As a pioneering theosophist in interwar Bulgaria, Rainov father owned a rich library of occult literature (which included the books of Agni Yoga), that he translated into Bulgarian, and eventually bequeathed to his son. Bogomil Rainov is unanimously cited by all of Zhivkova's associates and close friends as her "teacher," "spiritual guru," *éminence grise*, "someone who exerted enormous influence on her," or alternatively (depending on how sympathetic they were to said beliefs) as "obscurantist," "the one who befogged her head with Eastern philosophies," or even a "demonic personality." As Rainov had a predilection for anonymity in his communications with Zhivkova,[20] she would visit him at his apartment, where they would reportedly engage in four- to five-hour conversations well into the night.[21] Kostadin Chakîrov relates in his recollections that after her talks with Rainov from 1973 onwards, Lyudmila Zhivkova would "receive the books of the Indian mahatmas and the great gurus" and that "She spoke of Mahatma Morya,[22] of Helena Blavatsky and of Nicholas Roerich as her teachers."[23] Another orthodox Marxist, Alexander Lilov, a very close friend of Zhivkova's and second in the party hierarchy after Todor Zhivkov, too, corroborates that Nikolay Rainov "played a big part in Mila's development, he was a sincere friend of hers and to an extent, her teacher, who introduced her to this teaching, including to Roerich. On top of that, Bogomil was an extraordinarily learned expert on Roerich's work . . . I believe that Mila's . . . enthusiasm for Roerich, her will to adhere to that teaching is part of her spiritual development, and at the same time it corresponded with her views on culture, the world, and society. Lyudmila used to study a lot of eastern literature, she used to explore Roerich and Blavatsky's legacy. She was seriously engaged, she had a very fine library of eastern thought and this is what she studied and read deeply and attentively."[24]

In his biographical memoir *Lyudmila—Dreams and Deeds*, Bogomil Rainov recounts how he introduced Zhivkova to Agni Yoga via his father's library. According to his own testimony, when he first met Zhivkova in 1971 at an official function, she expressed an interest in occultism, but her acquaintance with the theories of esotericism was "utterly vague, not to say non-existent."[25] This is how he describes his role: "One of the idiosyncrasies of the Teaching, in which Lyudmila was increasingly immersing herself [i.e. Agni Yoga or the Living Ethic], is that it has never been systematized in the neat form of a manual. The series inherited from my father were valuable insofar as they conveyed directly the words of the Teacher [i.e. Mahatma Morya]. These were not, however, a course of lectures. They were disparate dictums, elucidations of various problems."[26] Because grasping the tenets of the teaching required preliminary preparation, Bogomil Rainov's self-avowed role was that of a "supplier of occult literature," a "guide in occult terminology," and "an assistant in our talks."[27]

Having recovered from the accident and espoused the tenets of Agni Yoga, Zhivkova returned to the political arena in 1975, when she was "elected" as

Chairperson of CAC (and a member of the Council of Ministers). In 1976 at the XIth BCP Congress, she became a full member of the Central Committee without the customary practice of preceding candidate membership, and three years later she added Politburo membership to her posts. In the same year, the education and science sectors were added to the purview of the CAC. To put it in a nutshell, in a remarkably short period of time she became a member of the BCP at the age of 25, deputy minister of culture at 29, minister of culture at 33, a member of the Central Committee of the BCP at 34, and a member of the Politburo at 37. Because of a series of institutional maneuvers aiming to aid her meteoric rise through the ranks, at the tender age (by nomenklatura standards) of 38, Zhivkova was a minister of a superministry (having extraordinary powers over Bulgaria's culture, art, education, science, publishing, public television and radio, and international cultural relations), a full member of Politburo, and for practical purposes the second most powerful personality in Bulgaria.

Zhivkova's precipitous rise to the highest echelons of power doubtless owed much to her status of being Todor Zhivkov's daughter, a fact she resented as she aspired to "prove her qualities and skills" as a stateswoman and scholar in her own right. (Her personal drama is best encapsulated in a comment to her associates: "My heaviest burden is that I am a Zhivkova. . . . If I do something good, it is not acknowledged, but it is said that I can, because I am Zhivkova. If I do something bad—again the same thing, because I am Zhivkova."[28]) The glaring nepotism notwithstanding, Zhivkova, with her educational background, specializations and administrative skills, was a typical representative of the second generation of communist cadres who had had no direct experience of the pre-socialist system. While up until the 1960s the "class approach" was decisive in recruitment of party cadres (i.e., recruitment from appropriate working-class/communist background with the attendant discrimination against pre-war "bourgeois" elites), in the 1970s expertise and know-how became the preponderant criterion.[29] This gave rise to a new generation of elites who held advanced university degrees and specializations, spoke foreign languages, and traveled widely. This generational change was also reflected in the attitude towards Marxism–Leninism: for the last generation living under "really existing socialism," Marxism was emptied of content, a taxidermic remnant preserved in congress and plenum speeches which had nothing to do with the lofty ideals of the first generation of convinced builders of socialism. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak has aptly described this change in meanings toward replicated official discourse under late socialism as a "heteronymous shift," from the Greek term "heteronym"—a word of the same spelling, that is, written representation, but with different and unrelated meaning.[30]

In addition to this generational shift, from the Bulgarian vantage point, the 1970s were a decade of economic, social, and political stability. By the end of the 1960s, Todor Zhivkov had fully consolidated his power and established what in Bulgarian historiography is known as Zhivkov's "one-person rule," not without ample Soviet

economic and political support, guaranteed by his especially cordial relations with Leonid Brezhnev. On the international stage, the 1960s saw the emergence of a global communicative space, where socialist and capitalist societies enthusiastically engaged in exchange of ideas, information, culture, and technology. These cultural, scientific, and artistic exchanges intensified exponentially with the signing on 1 August 1975 of the Helsinki Final Act—the major diplomatic agreement aiming to reduce tension between the Soviet and Western blocs. The long-awaited all-European conference, also signed by the United States and Canada, gave a tremendous impetus to socialist states like Bulgaria to pursue ambitious and vigorous international cultural politics. To Zhivkova and the Bulgarian cultural elite, the Helsinki Accord meant that a small and insignificant state like Bulgaria could aspire to "contribute as an equal partner to world cultural, artistic and scientific progress."

Within the socialist realm, the 1960s and 1970s marked a period of amelioration of atheist propaganda and reversal of some of its excesses across the Eastern bloc (with the exception of Romania) and even attempts to incorporate spirituality within scientific atheism.[31] In Western Europe, the 1970s saw Christian–Marxist dialogue on the nature of "true humanism" following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) at the same time that "political theology" embodying a synthesis between Protestant theology and various strands of revisionist Marxism also developed in Germany, for instance.

Finally, this is the time astrology, prophesies, omens, clairvoyance, alternative medicine, and paranormal phenomena captured the popular imagination across the region. Intense research and scientific experiments in suggestology, parapsychology, telepathy, and telekinesis, which had started in the 1960s, peaked in the 1970s, both East and West.[32] Popular interest in psychic and occult phenomena in the 1960s and 1970s helped create a general climate of belief in and curiosity about occult and paranormal phenomena globally. In that sense, Zhivkova's occult communism is contemporaneous with New Age movement in the West, which spread through the occult and metaphysical religious communities in the 1970s and 1980s. So, this is the juncture at which Zhivkova came to the helm of Bulgaria's culture, art, science, education, and international cultural relations and imbued a stiff party program "for the building of mature socialism" with such unexpectedly occult content.

Zhivkova's *Weltanschauung*/Theory of Culture

Emboldened by her secure position in the state and party apparatus, her access to unlimited state resources, but also the international climate of détente, Zhivkova began in the mid-1970s to relentlessly propagate her unorthodox views on the centrality of culture, spirituality, and aesthetics in perfecting the individual and society as well as international relations. The "perfection of man and society, according to the laws of beauty," the "all-round harmonious development," "the awakening of the

individual's latent creative powers" and the "elevation" and "expansion of human consciousness" became not only the centerpieces of her lexicon, but the goal of her cultural politics both domestically and internationally. Consequently, a new quasi-ideology came into fashion in communist Bulgaria, characterized by a specific idiom of expression—an eclectic weaving together of Eastern religious concepts, parapsychology jargon, and Marxist–Leninist clichés. As Russian poet Valentin Sidorov aptly remarked, "in Bulgaria a paradoxical situation was created: it paid off if you passed as an occultist, if you shone on occasion with a quote not by Marx and Lenin, but by Roerich and Blavatsky."[33]

On the question of Zhivkova's attitude towards Marxism–Leninism, the post-1989 assessments overwhelmingly question the sincerity of her Marxism. According to Stoian Mikhailov, the Central Committee's Secretary for Ideology, she was not a Marxist. Bogomil Rainov claims in his recollections that she described socialism as a "dead political theory"[34] and Kostadin Chakîrov similarly attributes to her the statement that "the party is a funeral procession of people who drag themselves after the hearse of a dead political doctrine."[35] I lean towards the assessments of Elit Nikolov and Alexander Lilov, for whom Zhivkova was not a Marxist, but her "innovative practices in the cultural realm were not a counterpoint to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's credo." My findings (elaborated elsewhere) show not only that Zhivkova was not anti-Marxist and an anti-socialist, but also that Marxism and occultism are not as incompatible as they prima facie appear, since they share a number of theoretical affinities: the preoccupation with the "new age" and "the new man"; their internationalist aspirations; a communitarian vision; the call for abolition of private property; the legitimation with science; the foregrounding of all-round and harmonious development; and a holistic view of the world and life.[36]

Reconstructing Zhivkova's theory of culture from her myriad speeches, writings and pronouncements can be a daunting undertaking for the scholar unacquainted with her belief system. As her phraseology and delivery are not overburdened by perspicuity, the connections between her theoretical elaborations and the concrete tasks of cultural policy are not immediately apparent. The problem of codifying Zhivkova's worldview is complicated by the fact that for her cultural and educational theory (as well as praxis) were intertwined with cosmogony, philosophy, ethics, and religion. Moreover, owing to her public position as a high-ranking member of Politburo and government, the topic of her esoteric peregrinations was officially taboo during communism. As such, prior to publication, her advisers sanitized her speeches by expunging any obvious references to occultism, and by imparting an ostensible veneer of Marxism–Leninism.

Consequently, in order to abstract Zhivkova's theoretical thought, I had to extrapolate her belief system from hundreds of (not always lucid) speeches, pronouncements, her scholarly texts, transcripts of meetings, plenums, and congresses. In addition, I read them against the writings of the (even less translucent) thinkers she venerated and emulated, most notably Nicholas and Helena Roerich[37] and Helena

Blavatsky.[38] I pay special attention to the transcripts of the weekly meetings of the Presidium of the Committee of Culture, typically attended by fifteen to thirty of Zhivkova's associates, all of whom were distinguished intellectuals and experts in their respective fields. Assured and animated among her colleagues and friends, Zhivkova often meandered away from the item under discussion into impassioned elaborations of esoteric thought.[39] Obscurantist, irrational, and baffling as her ideas appear, they make sense if placed in the context of the religious sources of their inspiration.

A systematization of Zhivkova's cultural theory can be challenging from the very beginning—her understanding of the concept of "culture." Deviating from any standard Marxist–Leninist definitions, Lyudmila Zhivkova incessantly impresses in her speeches the need to understand "culture" in a much broader and all-encompassing sense as "the veneration of beauty and light,"[40] "the aspiration towards light, development, progress, evolution . . ."[41] "towards elevation to a higher and higher stage of existence."[42] At the Presidium meetings, she frequently chastises her deputies for failing to grasp the very essence of what "culture" signifies and relentlessly urges them to see it as one comprehensive concept that incorporates the "evolution of the whole universe and of natural phenomena," together with "the all-round formation and development of the human being as a phenomenon," as well as "the manifestation of the eternal essence that is inherent in man and is constantly in the process of evolving."[43] Since culture is the main factor in the formation and evolution of the individual, society, nation, and the universe, it "penetrates all spheres of life."

Similarly, aesthetics does not pertain simply to the realm of arts, in general, and to the faculties of art appreciation, in particular. Zhivkova repeatedly deplores the officials of the Committee of Culture for failing to eradicate the "traditional attitude towards aesthetics" as pertaining to the arts. In her understanding, aesthetics is "the science of the development of the senses," which are "the organs of consciousness."[44] Therefore, aesthetics is not the cultivation of musical, artistic, and cultural sensitivities; rather, it is the expansion of one's consciousness via "perfecting the senses and organs that could help one perceive the beautiful in life," so that through continuous self-perfection "one can become creator himself."[45] Within consciousness, she subsumes not just physical consciousness but also "emotional, psychic and mental consciousness," which cannot be based solely on the intellect, as taught by the traditional school disciplines. The goal of aesthetics thus is twofold: first, to transform oneself into an "all-round and harmoniously developed personality" through harmonizing one's physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, and psychic aspects and bringing them into equilibrium. Second, aesthetics is at the same time to bring harmony and beauty to interpersonal, as well as international, relations. On one level then, aesthetics is "the science" that "employing scientific methods" develops perception and the individual's capacity "to reflect the environment using his/her spiritual energies." Simultaneously, because aesthetics aims at the perfection of the individual, society, and humanity, it is inherently ethical in nature. This is why Zhivkova sees "the

problem of the moral-ethical foundation "as one of the most fundamental principles of aesthetics. "Take all world religions and philosophical teachings"—she instructs her subordinates, "they all begin from the moral-ethical foundation."[46] Ethics and aesthetics are intertwined as "everything in the individual must be beautiful—morality, feelings, thought, actions and aspirations."[47]

Moral-ethical edification for Zhivkova had openly religious connotations. Spirituality (*dukhovnost*), "spiritual development," "spiritual renewal," "spiritual powers," "spiritual processes," "the spiritual sphere," "spiritual needs," and "the spiritual component" are among the most frequently appearing concepts in her speeches. So preponderant is spirituality that in a complete reversal of dialectical materialism, for Zhivkova it is consciousness that determines life and the spiritual that determines the material: "How can you doubt that when we talk about awakening of man's spiritual and creative forces, and about elevating the level of his mental activity, this is not going to reflect on his biology and physiology?"[48] The emphasis on consciousness and spirituality for her was not incompatible with materialism. Indeed, during a discussion of the program for the celebration of the 110th anniversary of Lenin's birth, Zhivkova openly reprimanded the authors of the program for presenting idealism in an unflattering light. "I am against this"—she objected and subsequently urged the authors of the material to revise that part: "We don't know so many secrets of nature that according to me it is truly ignorant to make distinctions between idealism and materialism. They are not divided by a Chinese wall; this is uninterrupted evolution we are talking about, constant different aspects in the development of matter, consciousness, and the movement of various cosmic fields. . . . But this is terminology that has yet to be explicated by science, so that the ignorance of the masses can be overcome, including the ignorance of a good deal of our scientists."[49] During a different discussion, Zhivkova went even as far as comparing Lenin unfavorably to the "epochal religious regenerators and reformers like Buddha and Christ," who not only "gave birth to entire civilizations but continue to be relevant over the course of millennia."[50] During meetings of the Presidium, one of her favorite topics was comparing world religions and analyzing universal religious symbols and concepts (like the cross or the removal from the cross) that all "great ancient religions and teachings" shared in common because they "represented the universal consciousness," "the union with transcendence," and "the infinity of evolution." In her worldview, religion does not refer to "dogmatic institutions" but to "the foundation which gave birth to every big religious teaching, the essence in the name of which Buddha, or Christ or the great religious reformers and symbolists had appeared and built upon."[51]

As central as spirituality is, it is not opposed to science. On the contrary, because of the "mutually conditioned interdependence between man as a microcosm and nature or universe as a macrocosm," Zhivkova's vision of education necessitates the synthesis of spirituality and science. This formulation seems innocuous enough to be a staple of her officially published texts and appears in multiple variations: "the

interconnectedness between the processes that take place within human consciousness and the processes in nature and the universe,"[52] "or the relationship between the emanation of man and his/her energy and the cosmic emanation and energy."[53] It is in front of her close associates, however, that this theme receives undisguised occultist elaborations. On one occasion, she explained to them that all changes in outer space are directly reflected on life on earth—not only upon "the movement of earth's strata, upon precipitation, and the formation and development of human life" but also "upon the way people think and upon the formation of new psychic and physical structures of man."[54] At a different meeting, she spoke of the link between the energy balance of man and cosmic energy balance: "Please, do bear in mind that the more energy sources are depleted on earth, the more this energy—which the majority of people have not used, they will increasingly discover within themselves."[55] Insisting on these interconnections as "universal laws," Zhivkova frequently would invoke "the new vistas" opening up in front of "modern science," posing the question of the pressing need to integrate the sciences and to study the interdisciplinary connections between cosmobiology, biochemistry, astrobiology, and astrophysics.[56]

All these overtures in cosmology, philosophy, and science bring us to the core of Zhivkova's cultural and educational theory: that culture and art can no longer be perceived as separate spheres, but must be integrated, together with science, religion, and education in order to realize Zhivkova's ultimate pet project, that of "aesthetic education" (*esteticheskо vîzpitanie*). The goal of aesthetic education is to the unfold the creative powers of every individual (which are latent and innate) and to direct these capabilities into definite channels of expression, to provide the methods of perfecting the mind and expanding the individual consciousness, so that ultimately individuals can reach all-round and harmonious development. She did not hesitate to impress these cultural imperatives in front of the most prominent party cadres of the time. At the July 1979 Plenum of the Central Committee of the BCP she defined all-round and harmonious development as "the voluntary and conscious, consistent with nature and purposeful, complex and integral development of all parts of the human organism, successive and stage-by-stage development of all sides and elements of the structure of his/her consciousness."[57]

Occult Communism in Praxis: Nationwide Program for Aesthetic Education

This quite un-Marxist conceptual and theoretical apparatus permeated all the cultural policies and initiatives of the Bulgarian late socialist state, such as the National Program for the Harmonious Development of Man,[58] the International Children's Assembly "Banner of Peace" under the patronage of UNESCO, and the extravagant program for the global commemoration of the "1300-Year Anniversary from the creation of the Bulgarian state," to name but a few.[59] For the purposes of

this article, I will focus on how Zhivkova's *Weltanschauung* was translated into one such large-scale initiative: the Long-Term National Program for Aesthetic Education.

The nationwide program for aesthetic education was ideologically and theoretically grounded in the program adopted at the Tenth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (20–25 April 1971) which stipulated as a dual goal the simultaneous development of the material infrastructure of "mature socialism"[60] and the "cultural and spiritual uplift and perfection of the individual and society." Because the new man of mature socialism was developing in the context of the scientific-technological revolution, the rational component had undue preponderance. This posed the "question for the all-round and harmonious development of the individual" and for "the right equilibrium between man's rational and emotional sides" as a most fundamental social problem.[61] To the "brute aggression of technology . . . pollution, and the destruction of the spiritual essence of the human personality," the Bulgarian Communist Party was to counterpoise the leading role of culture and spirituality.[62] Just as "the utopian predecessors of Marxism, like Tommaso Campanella, Thomas Moore, Charles Fourier, and Étienne Cabet pondered a just, humane and harmonious society and sun cities," and Renaissance architects such as Leonardo da Vinci and Filarete designed the ideal city, so too would socialist Bulgaria develop a society of all-round and harmonious personalities, pledged the ideologues of aesthetic education.[63] In addition to these precursors, the architects of late socialist cultural policy also owned the utopian aspirations behind their policies, in a context where "utopian" was a pejorative. Unlike Marx and Engels who famously criticized the French and English utopian socialists for their unattainable visions (to which scientific socialism stood in stark contrast), Zhivkova was unperturbed that her projects were scorned as "utopian." If anything, she encouraged her staff to embrace the future-orientedness of utopianism: "once we prove ourselves individually, and collectively—as a nation—before the world, then we shall no longer be derided as dreamers (*fantaziori*), stargazers, and altruists. We dream because we aspire towards the future, and at the same time we know how to work hard. We know the power of hard work, we know the power of will, of discipline and responsibility."[64]

The practical execution of the "historic national movement for aesthetic education" was launched in 1976, when a decree by the Council of Ministers stipulated the establishment of an experimental boarding school from first through eleventh grade, with a nursery and kindergarten attached to it in Gorna Banya, on the outskirts of Sofia.[65] The National Experimental School in Gorna Banya (NES) was envisioned as a "major national methodological training center" and a "big spiritual laboratory" that would "integrate all the sciences—biology, chemistry, physics, physiology, astronomy, pedagogy, philosophy, psychology, all the arts and all forms of aesthetic education."[66] Zhivkova conceived it not only as the prototype of the new Bulgarian school but also as one of the leading "laboratories in the world experimenting with the problems of aesthetic education" for the betterment of the individual and society.

The Experimental School offered instruction in all the standard disciplines but all the arts were added to the curriculum as students were expected to "unfold all their talents" and "cultivate aesthetic sensitivities and taste."[67] In addition, students were to "develop all their senses and motor functions," to "commune with nature," learn foreign languages, and as they progressed to more advanced classes, to "develop their analytical, systematizing and creative thinking."[68] The core principles behind the NES were instruction in all sciences and disciplines together with "integrated education in all the arts," all-day instruction, and "intensification of learning based on the latest Bulgarian and worldwide developments in the spheres of education, pedagogy, psychology, and medicine." Education in the arts at NES was not pursued as an end in itself but was a powerful factor in the unfolding of the latent creative potential in each student. Art instruction was utilized to develop students' abilities in critical and creative thinking, "to create the preconditions for high moral and aesthetic criteria" and to lead to "the degree of intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, and physical development characteristic of the all-round and harmoniously developed individual of tomorrow's socialist society."

The main method of instruction at the NES was suggestopedia, hailed as a revolution in Bulgarian and world pedagogy. Suggestopedia, initially applied to foreign languages instruction, was a pedagogical method for activating the "untapped reserves, powers and abilities of the human mind and memory" via the "scientific use of suggestion." It was developed by psychiatrist Dr. Georgi Lozanov, director of Bulgarian National Scientific Institute of Suggestology.[69] The instructor's conduct, the use of different artistic media, the structure of the lesson, the physical environment, and the use of yoga relaxation techniques were all combined to produce "an atmosphere of spontaneous trust, inner peace, relaxation, enhanced motivation, appropriate state of mind and joy from learning." All means of suggestion—the instructor's charisma, intonation, music, etc.—were "scientifically" combined so as to achieve the tension-free creative absorption of learning material (according to Lozanov four to five times the standard load envisioned in the Ministry of Education curriculum.) Unlike hypnosis, students taught by the suggestopedic method were at all times in a waking, fully conscious state. The method of suggestopedia was used at NES to cover large volumes of material in fewer hours, to incorporate the material from higher grades, but also to highlight the interdisciplinary connections between the various disciplines in an effort "to expand students' horizons." The results from the NES experiments were carefully recorded and analyzed in line with the main long-term goal of embedding suggestopedia as the national method of instruction in all schools.

Students at the NES attended classes from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Until noon they covered the standard national curriculum prescribed centrally by the Ministry of Education (which itself was also under the purview of Zhivkova's CAC). After lunch and the noon break (a nap or a walk in the park, depending on the grade), students engaged in artistic education—music, ballet, and drawing classes, as well as English

and Russian.[70] To offset the heavy study load, time was allotted daily for play outdoors or in specially equipped playrooms. In line with the Institute of Suggestology's directives, students also spent three Saturdays a month in the Vitosha mountains and one Saturday a month in establishments related to the needs of the curriculum, such as museums, art galleries, symphony orchestras, theater, etc.

On top of "innovative and progressive instruction methods," the NES also boasted a novel conception of the role of the teacher. In addition to obtaining "rigorous, continuous and multi-disciplinary training in suggestology, the arts, aesthetics, psychiatry, psychotherapy, psycho-hygiene, and physiology," the teachers at the Experimental School were expected to "act like actors, sing like singers, and cure through instruction like doctors and psychotherapists."[71] At all times they were to treat students not as subordinates but with the "necessary respect due younger collaborators" since both student and teacher pursued the same goal of "constant self-perfection through creativity and conversation" and thus "both students and teachers exude the confidence of artists-creators."[72]

For the purpose of scientifically monitoring the process and quantifying the progress of individual students over time, a special laboratory was created at NES. Its main objective was to measure the level of psychic development of the children, to record their individual characteristics, and then to trace the changes in psychic development in the course of the academic year.[73] Using "modern psycho-physiological equipment" and "a variety of testing methods," specialists at the lab measured students' "mental performance, the speed, strength and balance of the neural processes; the type of nervous system, memory, concentration, attention span, logical and creative thinking, and their perception of time and space." These tests were conducted both at the beginning and at the end of the school year. The students' individual psychic characteristics, their "type of nervous system," and the "scientific data regarding their psychic development" were made available to the teachers "to assist them in their personalized approach to students and in the preparation of their psychological profiles."[74]

The Experimental School for Talented Children was only the first building block of an educational-cultural complex, which would integrate education, the sciences, the artistic-cultural, and the spiritual spheres. The second link in the complex was the National Gymnasium for Ancient Languages and Cultures (NGDEK), which was launched on 10 October 1977 for the purpose of preparing specialists in Latin, ancient Greek, old Bulgarian and Sanskrit[75] languages and cultures.[76] The gymnasium's raison d'être, however, was not to prepare merely specialists, "say in Iranian, ancient Greek, Byzantine or Indian civilizations"; rather the emphasis was on the comparative and interdisciplinary study of these cultures. To Zhivkova, Bulgaria had always been a geographical and cultural bridge between Asia and Europe; hence the purpose of the school for ancient languages and civilizations was to establish Bulgaria "as a big cultural and spiritual center that will try again to establish the contact between Eastern and Western cultures."[77] To complete the educational–cultural complex, a third link was envisioned: "an integral scientific center for all the exact and

natural sciences" which would serve as a laboratory integrating all scientific disciplines, including the humanities and whose objects of inquiry would be the problems of outer space, nature, the human being, and society.[78]

These three educational clusters, once established, would be connected "in an open system," wherein specialists and students from one center could work at another, they would teach and at the same time educate and develop themselves. Zhivkova saw these three centers as future world methodological centers for the preparation and perfection of individuals "who will carry the seeds of holistic development, elevated consciousness, and a new attitude towards life," and who will in turn spread these virtues nation-wide and then globally.[79]

In practice, that meant that from a very early age children must be taught (in stages) "how to uncover and organize their faculties, how to purposefully direct their mental-emotional and psychic lives, how consciously to integrate them around the loftiest purpose and ideal in life." The desired outcome would be that "the encounter with beauty will become a necessity. . . . The self-perfecting individual, who will pursue his purpose unswervingly in the name of Beauty and Truth, will overcome the inevitable obstacles of development, will organize and transform into a monolithic totality the separate elements of consciousness and knowledge, will consciously sacrifice the best of what (s)he owns in the name of universal progress, in the name of the common good. In this infinite process of development, every worker will become a creator who will consciously give his creative contribution towards the transformation of reality according to the laws of beauty."[80] Because for Zhivkova the standard educational system was "anachronistic and conservative," Bulgarian artists were "crippled": for example, painters "are talented but they understand neither music, nor literature, nor theater." The new type of "integral training" Zhivkova fervently advocated, in contrast, would ensure that the new persons of the future (and not just artists) "will be people who can write music, sing, play ballet, draw. Because art is synthetic, it is integral."[81] The architect of the future, for example, will not be just an architect: he will be a creator, who will have the integral knowledge "of a sculptor and architect, engineer and poet, and above all of a person with preserved aesthetics and spirituality."[82] The term Zhivkova gave to this bright vision of the future was "integral" or "synthesized communism."[83]

The incomprehension with which the "synthesized communism" of the future was met, even among some of the artists, is aptly encapsulated in a comment by sculptor Dimitîr Ostoich during one of the plenums of the Committee of Culture. Oblivious to both the nuanced theoretical complexities Zhivkova imparted to aesthetic education, and to the integral interconnections between its various components, he bluntly stated:

> These documents talk about the all-round and harmonious development of the individual . . . of multi-faceted and versatile development. It is high time someone sat down and clarified the terms, so that we can see what tasks we are actually setting. What is the model of the all-round personality? Can you develop me all around—including musically, when I have no ear for music? . . . To set such abstract, unattainable goals

> and to tie the problematic of education to an unattainable, abstract, unspecified slogan would be wrong.[84]

Zhivkova's political adviser Kostadin Chakîrov echoed similar thoughts in his recollections of his first impressions of her when in 1975 he transferred to her team from the Central Committee of the BCP. As an old-guard Marxist, initially he found it difficult to adapt to Zhivkova's unusual and hyper-ambitious management style:

> I was torn in a reality which was full of contradictions, tension and absurdities. Whatever document or information I would prepare, she [Zhivkova] would always add to it her large-scale ideas. I was tormented by the fact that she cared very little for the economy, for the party, for social policy. . . . She elevated cultural phenomena on a pedestal and was not interested in looking at how they related to other social spheres; or in understanding that the economy and politics inevitably influence cultural life.[85]

While Minister of Culture and Politburo member Zhivkova's theory of culture might confuse any cultural historian of communism with its complexity (and perplexity), to fellow travelers the conceptual apparatus is instantly recognizable. Indeed this eclectic weaving together of insights from philosophy, religion, art, science, and parapsychology into some sort of a coherent *Weltanschauung* is a staple of all strands of modern occultism.[86] Whatever the ingredients and the proportions of Zhivkova's intellectual, philosophical, and religious influences before the accident, since 1974 she was an ardent devotee of Agni Yoga. She adapted her understanding of culture from Nicholas Roerich, who had defined culture as deriving from "Ur," which in many Eastern languages (he had given examples with the Hebraic, Phrygian, and Armenian roots of the word) meant light of fire.[87] From the spiritual definition of culture as "the reverence of Light,"[88] with Beauty and Knowledge as its foundations,[89] to culture as the synthesis of science, art, philosophy, and religion,[90] to the all-around man developed on all the planes of life, Zhivkova spoke and wrote the language of Agni Yoga. Her notion of aesthetic education is also traceable to Roerich's theory of education (derived from Eastern religions), which was predicated on the "release of latent soul forces, the unfoldment of the soul characteristics of the child, the expansion of his consciousness"[91] so that he or she can ultimately acquire "the viewpoint of a universal observer."

While her *Weltanschauung* is genealogically traceable to Agni Yoga, Zhivkova aspired to be more than an initiated adherent. A close reading of her ever more rambling esoteric elaborations reveals that Zhivkova perceived herself as theoretically enriching the teaching. Even more importantly, she saw her principal contribution in finding novel and original ways to adapt Agni Yoga to Bulgarian socio-political and cultural realities. Thus, "fascinating" and "unorthodox" as Zhivkova has been claimed to be by both her admirers and Western observers, a detailed reconstruction of her *Weltanschauung* indicates that her heralded "anomaly" derives from her injection of occultism and spirituality into Bulgaria's cultural life. This article offers a glimpse into Zhivkova's worldview, arguing that Zhivkova's religiosity both

permeated her theoretical apparatus and defined the priorities of Bulgaria's cultural policy. The obverse side of her indeed staggering activity in the cultural realm from 1974 onwards (and especially the period 1979–1981), was Zhivkova's immersion in Agni Yoga, and her adamantine sense of mission (in the religious sense of the word) to weave it into the fabric of Bulgarian society by winning over to her cause first her close collaborators, then the intelligentsia, and then "the nation" as a whole. Since every single initiative, project, and program in the cultural-artistic realm was both derived from her *Weltanschauung* and imbued with occult meanings, symbolism, and goals, Zhivkova's religio-philosophical worldview cannot be decoupled from the assessment of her cultural politics.

Lyudmila Zhivkova passed away prematurely at the pinnacle of her political career and popularity in 1981.[92] By the mid-1980s, most of her large-scale programs and ideas were gradually abandoned. Besides Zhivkova's material legacy (most prominently the National Palace of Culture, the National Museum of History, the National Gallery of Foreign Art and a number of monumental compositions), few traces of Zhivkova's aesthetico-spiritual utopianism remained. However, the Experimental School for Talented Children and the Gymnasium for Ancient Languages and Cultures (known in Bulgarian as NGDEK) continued to operate after Zhivkova's demise, and to provide consistently high-quality education to its students. Both of the schools survived the end of state socialism and exist in different modifications to the present day as elite and highly competitive high schools. (The Experimental School became the Italian Lyceum in 1991.)

Conclusions

In her cultural politics, Lyudmila Zhivkova sought to reimagine "mature socialism" and transform the ideal of all-round and harmonious individual and society into a plausible future. That is, she practiced a radical aesthetic utopianism imbued with fanatical optimism that art, culture, and spirituality would illuminate the way toward what she conceived as "synthesized, integrated communism." The wholesale revamping of Bulgarian education, culture, and art via the exceedingly ambitious, extravagant, and often chimerical policies were all concrete expressions of this utopian impulse. As quixotic as Zhivkova's aesthetic utopianism was, however, during her tenure cultural policy was generated, debated, formulated, and implemented by intellectuals, artists, and specialists at the Committee of Culture, and not by the party organs. Her emphasis on "universal" and "timeless" (as opposed to communist) values, reduced the primacy of socialist realism and the "party-class approach" to art, and contributed towards a liberalization of the cultural and artistic sphere. Even the premier anti-communist platform in the West Radio Free Europe acknowledged Zhivkova's impact: "Zhivkova's close relations with the artistic community proved to be beneficial for both sides. Today Bulgarian artists are allowed to carry out the boldest experiments, and modern Bulgarian fine arts can be qualified as avant-garde, in the Western sense of the term."[93]

While it was occultism (and not Marxism) that provided Zhivkova with the framework in which she could link ontology, aesthetics, and utopia under late socialism, her esotericism was not antithetical to state socialism. In other words, it was not a utopia that, to use Mannheim's phrase, had a "claim to shatter" the existing order. Rather than viewing her occult cultural politics as incompatible with communism (or in the exaggerated assessments of her associates as anti-Soviet, anti-Marxist and anti-communist), I situate her religio-spiritual utopia as an attempt to ennoble the communist project via occultism. Her occult communism is ultimately a manifestation of the pursuit of the ideal of the "new socialist man," even if the "socialist" was subsumed under the "new man" of esotericism.

The attempt to revamp communism via esotericism is not a phenomenon specific to late socialist Bulgaria. From the very birth of state socialism, the 1920s Soviet Russia saw a proliferation of occult-inspired social experiments, alternative communes, and informal clubs. In the 1920s, Gleb Bokii—the chief Bolshevik cryptographer, master of codes, ciphers, and electronic surveillance—and his friend Alexander Barchenko, an occult writer from St. Petersburg, explored Kabala, Sufi wisdom, Kalachakra, shamanism, and other esoteric traditions, simultaneously preparing an expedition to Tibet to search for the legendary Shambhala.[94] From Nicholas Roerich's original plans to theoretically fuse Tibetan Buddhism and Marxism, to the early Bolshevik political flirtation with Tibetan Buddhism in the 1920s in an effort to win Inner Asia over to the communist cause, communism and esotericism were not mutually exclusive. Historian Mikhail Agursky has argued that even socialist realism itself had occult sources as Maxim Gorky incorporated Vladimir Bekhterev's "thought transfer" research and made it the core of socialist realism, elevating it to the sacral status of official ideology.[95] Like the early short-lived Soviet utopias, Zhivkova's attempt to inject Bulgarian communism with occultism was a social engineering project aiming at creating a community of well-rounded individuals who would live in harmony, perfecting their minds and bodies. At the same time, Zhivkova's spiritual utopian politics was distinctive: given her roles as Zhivkov's daughter, as a Politburo member, and as a hyperactive minister of a super-ministry, she had virtually unlimited resources and venues at her disposal to attempt to realize her aesthetico- spiritual utopia at the national level. Although Zhivkova's ideas often verged on the absurd, her aesthetic utopianism ultimately demonstrates that, contrary to common assertion, attempts to attach a "human face" to the communist project continued even after the Prague Spring of 1968.

In demonstrating that the idea of utopia had not actually disappeared from the conception of socialism, I join the burgeoning critiques of the long-reigning misrepresentation of late socialism as an era of stagnation, starkly contrasting with the vitality of both the preceding thaw and of subsequent glasnost and perestroika. In his magisterial study of late socialism in the Soviet Union, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak first made the case for the ethical and aesthetic complexities of late socialist life by showing the creative, imaginative, ambivalent, and often paradoxical cultural forms it took.[96] The literature on late socialist consumption and everyday life has further

fruitfully eroded this perception.[97] Yet, even though the stagnation paradigm has been robustly critiqued, the main view still prevails that in the aftermath of the crushing of Prague Spring in 1968, any ideas of reform socialism were abandoned and intellectuals were resigned to the "normalizing" policies of the regime (with the exception of famous dissidents). According to this view, the crushing of the Prague Spring delineated the bounds of reform for East Europeans for two more decades before Mikhail Gorbachev initiated an audacious reformist course from 1985, so much so that a historian of late socialism dubbed the period "the nothingness of the 1970s and 1980."[98] In narrating Zhivkova's aesthetic utopianism, I document the curious phenomenon whereby a late socialist regime, in affinity with a segment of its intelligentsia, conducted a vigorous cultural policy in a country that was perceived as the Soviet Union's most pliant satellite. Rather than seeing late socialism as an era of normalization, nothingness, and partial re-Stalinizaion, the Bulgarian case study reveals that late socialist society was culturally, intellectually, spiritually, and artistically dynamic.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use the term *religiosity* to distinguish it from traditional religion, which is anchored in institutionalized spiritual loci, such as the church, the mosque, the temple, the chapel, the monastery. I employ *religiosity* to refer more loosely to forms of religious belief that are "relatively inchoate, indeterminate, or formless rather than being spelled out by way of authoritative belief systems" (Paul Heelas, "Religiosity: Modern," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences [IESBS]*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Bates [Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 2001], 13112–15). As religious feeling or sentiment, religiosity has more to do with the realm of consciousness, subjectivity, and experience rather than dogma and authoritative religious traditions. Religiosity also tends to be eclectic—drawing on a variety of spiritual outlets, such the mystical, the occult, the magical, or esoteric teachings and practices, New Age themes, etc. I employ *spirituality* interchangeably with *religiosity* so as to reduce repetitiveness.

2. Agni Yoga, alternatively known as the Living Ethic, is a religio-philosophical teaching, transmitted by Nicholas Roerich and Helena Roerich in the early 1920s. Helena Roerich wrote the foundational corpus of what became known as Agni Yoga, claiming to channel Master Morya, one of the spiritual gurus first brought forth by founder of theosophy Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). The teaching, as an

offshoot of theosophy, combines different aspects: philosophy, cosmogony, ethics, religion, as well as a practical guide to living.

3. I use the term *occultism* in its broadest meaning as the study or quest of "hidden wisdom" and a deeper spiritual reality that extends beyond pure reason, the senses, and the physical sciences, which could be presumably accessed by a gifted few. Throughout the text, I employ the term *esotericism* as synonymous with *occultism* to reflect Lyudmila Zhivkova's own usage. She defines *esotericism* as the "hidden or esoteric teachings that contain the truth about phenomena and processes of evolution—of the human being, nature and the universe, which are hidden from the masses." TsDA, F. 288B, op.1, a.e. 93

4. For scholarly assessments of Zhivkova's cultural politics in English, see Ivanka Nedeva Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova and the Paradox of Ideology and Identity in Communist Bulgaria," *East European Politics and Societies* 18 (2004): 278–315. In Bulgarian, see Evgeniia Kalinova, *Bîlgarskata kultura i politicheskiiat imperativ 1944-1989* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2001); Mikhail Gruev, "Lyudmila Zhivkova—pîtiat kîm Agni Yoga," in *Prelomni vremena: yubileen sbornik v chest na 65-godishninata na professor Lyubomir Ognianov*, ed. Evgenia Kalinova, Mihail Gruev, and Lyudmila Zidarova (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Okhridski," 2006), 796–816; Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturniiat front: Bîlgarskata kultura prez epokhata na komunizma—politichesko upravlenie, ideologicheski osnovaniia, institutsionalni rezhimi* (Sofia: IIBM, 2008).

5. R. J. Crampton, *The Balkans: Since the Second World War* (London: Pearson Education, 2002), 174.

6. Bogomil Rainov, *Lyudmila: mechti i dela* (Sofia: Kameia, 2003), 174–75.

7. Pavel Pisarev, *Podir izgubenoto vreme: spomeni* (Sofia: Zhanet, 2011), 45.

8. For assessments by her contemporaries and associates in the memoir literature, see Emil Aleksandrov, *Az rabotikh s Lyudmila Zhivkova* (Sofia: Slîntse, 1991); Kostadin Chakîrov, *Vtoriia Etazh* (Sofia: Biblioteka "Plamîk," 1990); Bogomil Gerasimov, *Diplomatsiia v zonata na kaktusa* (Sofia: Khristo Botev, 2008); Todor Zhivkov, *Memoari* (Sofia: IK "Trud i pravo," 1997); Lyubomir Levchev, *Ti si sledvashtiiat! Roman ot spomeni* (Sofia: Ea, 1998); Lyubomir Levchev, *Panikhida za mîrtvoto vreme* (Sofia: Enthusiast, 2011); Dimitîr Murdzhiev, *Taka gi vidiah* (Sofia: **XXXX**, 1992); Elit Nikolov, *Dîshteriata na nadezhdite* (Sofia: Propeler, 2008); Pavel Pisarev, *Podir izgubenoto vreme: Spomeni* (Sofia: Zhanet, 2011), 45; Bogomil Rainov, *Lyudmila: Mechti i dela* (Sofia: IK "Kameia," 2008). Valentin Sidorov, *Lyudmila i Vanga* (Sofia: Izadatelstvo "Reporter," 1998). For a negative appraisal of her legacy as in an attempt to reject the communist past altogether, see Nikola Georgiev, *Nova kniga za bîlgarskiia narod* (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Okhriski," 1991).

9. "Bulgaria Submits to Energetic Guidance from a Woman," *The Times* (London, England), 11 November 1980, issue 60773, p. 6.

10. The high-profile guests included history professors like Alexander Fol, Ivan Venedikov, and Nikolai Genchev; artists like Dechko Uzunov and Svetlin Rusev; writers like Bogomil Rainov and Lyubomir Levchev and journalist Pavel Pisarev. They were referred to as "the Zhivkova circle."

11. Lyubomir Levchev, *Ti si sledvashtiiat! Roman ot spomeni* (Sofia: Ea, 1998), 531.

12. Lyubomir Levchev, "Lyudmila Zhivkova ili plamîkît na vîrkha," in *Mislete za men kato za ogîn* (Sofia: Narodna Mladezh, 1982).

13. Emil Aleksandrov, "Zhivkov si pravi intelektualno lobi chrez Lyudmila," *24 chasa*, 25 September 1997.

14. Rainov, *Lyudmila*, 17.

15. Chakîrov, *Vtoriiat etazh* (Sofia: Izdatelskakomaniia K&M, 1990), 154.

16. Slavkov, *Bateto, t.2.*, 236.

17. Emil Aleksandrov, *Az rabotikh s Lyudmila Zhivkova* (Sofia: Slîntse, 1991), 19.

18. Rainov, *Lyudmila*, 56–57.

19. A prominent interwar intellectual with eclectic research interests and oeuvre, he first graduated from the Seminary, went on to pursue a degree in philosophy at Sofia University, and then enrolled and graduated from the Art Academy. He was a prolific writer in a wide variety of genres ranging from poetry,

fiction, children's fairy tales, to philosophical treatises, and ethnographic studies; a painter; philosopher; and professor in art history and aesthetics. At the end of the 1920s, Nikolai Rainov and a number of his friends established the first theosophical lodge in Bulgaria, *Orpheus*, which functioned as a circle for the discussion, distribution, and translation of occult knowledge. The theosophical lodge dealt with "compilation and publication of series of lectures for people, determined to take the path of self-perfection, as well with the translation and popularization of Helena Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*." Bogomil Rainov, *Tainoto uchenie* (Sofia: Khristo Botev, 2003).

20. Elit Nikolov, *Dîshteriata na nadezhdite* (Sofia: Propeler, 2008), 20.

21. Rainov, *Lyudmila*; Kostadin Chakîrov, *Vtoriiat etazh* (Sofia **XXXX**, 1999); Dimitîr Murdzhiev, *Taka* gi vidiakh.

22. One of the three most important "Masters of the Ancient Wisdom" (or mahatmas) within modern Theosophical beliefs, Helena Blavatsky claimed to have been contacted by. According to theosophical beliefs, the mahatmas represent a spiritual hierarchy composed of individuals who have finished their round of earthly reincarnations and have evolved to the spiritual planes, from which they guide the affairs of humanity.

23. Chakîrov, *Vtoriiat etazh*, 154.

24. Dobrin Dobrev, *Lyudmila—kulturniiat vek na Bîlgariia* (forthcoming). Interview with Alexander Lilov.

25. Rainov, *Lyudmila*, 16.

26. Ibid., 39.

27. Ibid.

28. Lyudmila Zhivkova, quoted in Evgeniia Kalinova, *Bîlgarskata kultura i politicheskiiat imperativ 1944-1989* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2001), 379.

29. Vasil Prodanov, "Lyudmila Zhivkova v konteksta na kulturnite i ideologicheski promeni v Bîlgariia prez 70-te godini," in *Kulturnoto otvariane na Bîlgariia kîm sveta*, ed. Iskra Baeva (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sveti Kliment Okhridski," 2013), 31.

30. Aleksei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 481–82.

31. For late socialist atheists' attempts to develop a "positive atheism," a set of beliefs and practices imbued with spirituality, see Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Zsuzsanna Magdo, "The Socialist Sacred: Atheism, Religion and Culture in Communist Romania, 1948-1989" (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urban-Champaign, 2015).

32. See Veneta Ivanova, "Suggestology and Parapsychology under Communism," in *Occult Communism: Culture, Science and Spirituality in Late Socialist Bulgaria* (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urban-Champaign, 2017), chap. 3.

33. Valentin Sidorov, *Lyudmila i Vanga* [Lyudmila and Vanga] (Sofia: Izadatelstvo "Reporter," 1998), 20.

34. Rainov, *Lyudmila*.

35. Chakîrov, *Vtoriiat etazh*, 157.

36. Ivanova, *Occult Communism*

37. Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947)—Émigré Russian painter, poet, writer, explorer, adventurer, archeologist, theosophist, and founder of the Agni Yoga Society. After the Russian Revolution, he and his wife Helena Roerich emigrated to the United States under the auspices of the Art Institute of Chicago. In New York, he established himself as a mystic sage, while Helena Roerich became a channel for Master Morya, one of the spiritual gurus first brought forth by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). Helena Roerich's channeled materials became the foundational corpus of what became known as Agni Yoga, an offshoot of theosophy. In the 1920s, allegedly upon a call from his spiritual master Mahatma Morya, Roerich visited India, then together with his family completed a mammoth trek through Ladakh, Chinese Turkestan, the Altai Mountains, the Gobi Desert, and Tibet. He aimed to establish a Buddhist–Communist theocracy in Tibet, Mongolia, and the Altai, posing as a reincarnation of the fifth Dalai Lama, who allegedly came to

cleanse Tibetan Buddhism from modern evils. Eventually, Roerich established a research facility in the Himalayan village of Naggar, India, and lobbied for the passage of an international treaty to protect art in times of war (which became known as the Roerich Pact or the Banner of Peace). This effort gained him two nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize.

38. One of the most influential occult thinkers of the nineteenth century, Blavatsky left behind conflicting images of adventuress, author, mystic, guru, occultist, and charlatan. In 1875 she founded the Theosophical Society in New York with the aid of Col. Henry Steel Olcott and William Q. Judge. The Theosophical Society professed to expound the esoteric tradition of Buddhism and aimed at forming a universal brotherhood; studying and making known the ancient religions, philosophies, and sciences; investigating the laws of nature; and developing the divine powers latent in man. It was claimed to be directed by secret Mahatmas, or Masters of Wisdom. In order to gain converts to Theosophy, Blavatsky felt obliged to appear to perform miracles, which were subsequently proven to be fraudulent. Her magnum opus, The *Secret Doctrine*, which she claimed to have been written in a supernormal condition, became the foundational text of Theosophy, which itself is the fountainhead of modern Western esotericism. Gordon J. Melton, ed., *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Vol. 1. 5th ed. (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001).

39. For their part, some of her first deputies were initiated adherents to her belief system (like artist Svetlin Rusev and poet Lyubomir Levchev); others were sympathizers just to her permissive cultural politics, and still others were mostly interested in career advancement and Zhivkova's sponsorship.

40. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 114, p. 24.

41. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 86, pp. 14–15.

42. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 90.

43. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 78, p. 4.

44. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 108, 16. See also TsDA, F. 288B, op.1, a.e. 113; Lyudmila Zhivkova, *S aprilsko vdîhnovenie v borbata za mir i sotsializîm, za edinstvo, tvorchestvo, krasota* (Sofia: Partizdat, 1982), 120–26.

45. Ibid.

46. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 1, p. 6.

47. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 124, pp. 8–9.

48. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 1, p. 6.

49. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 114, p. 23.

50. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 112, pp. 21–22.

51. F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 97, pp. 50–51.

52. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 93, p. 17.

53. TsDA, F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 231.

54. TsDA, F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 207.

55. TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 93, p. 17.

56. TsDA, F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 231; TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 93; TsDA, F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 214.

57. Zhivkova, *S aprilsko vdîhnovenie*, 204. Speech at the Plenum of CC of BCP, 17 July 1979.

58. The goal of the program was the popularization of the life and work of world examples of "all-round and harmoniously developed personalities." Each year was to be dedicated to "an exemplary individual creative personality who contributed to civilization" (each year was a successive "phase" in the long-term program). Through various nationwide initiatives—exhibitions, lectures, seminars, public readings, and commemorations—the Bulgarian nation was supposed to become acquainted with the polymaths' achievements in all the fields of their activity. The program was launched in 1978 with the Nicolas Roerich phase, followed by the Leonardo da Vinci phase in 1979, with the year of Lenin coming only third in 1980.

59. For how occult communism in praxis looked on the ground and detailed treatment of the content, impact and legacies of each of these programs, see Veneta Ivanova, "Occult Communism in Praxis," in *Occult Communism*, 54–107.

60. “Mature socialism” (also encountered as “developed socialism,” “developed socialist society,” or “actually existing socialism”) was the second stage in the transition from socialism to communism. The term was introduced by Khrushchev at the XXII CPSU Congress but it was Brezhnev who popularized it in his 1967 speech on the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution and made it an official component of Soviet ideology at the XXIV CPSU Congress of 1971. The ideological formula was an attempt to salvage the party ideologues from the embarrassment of unfulfilled party promises and prognoses and to lower popular expectations for staggering economic accomplishments.

61. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 93, p. 13.

62. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 48, p. 6.

63. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 48, p. 6.

64. F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 142, pp. 8–9.

65. Reshenie No 198 ot 19.11.1976 za sîzdavaneto kîm KIK na Edinno sredno politekhnichesko uchilishte-internat s eksperimentalna tsel. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 17.

66. F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 50, p. 1.; F. 288B., op. 1, a.e. 76.

67. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 205, pp. 12–13.

68. Ibid.,

69. The Institute of Suggestology started as a “scientific group in suggestology” at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1966, was elevated into a “scientific center” in the same year, ultimately reaching the highest scientific status in Bulgaria as a National Scientific Research Institute of Suggestology (SRIS) in 1971. It was created to “conduct scientific studies in the psychology and physiology of suggestion,” to “develop the method of suggestopedia” as a major instructional method in Bulgarian schools; and to conduct scientific experiments in telepathy, clairvoyance, and parapsychology. For scholarship on SRIS, see Galia Valtchinova, “State Management of the Seer Vanga,” in *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bruce R. Berglund and Brian Porter-Szűcs (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 253–54; Veneta Ivanova, “Suggestology and Parapsychology under Communism.”

70. Ibid., 21.

71. F. 904, op. 1, a.e. 11, p. 133.

72. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 205.

73. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 244, p. 18.

74. Ibid.

75. Zhivkova saw India as “the only nation which has kept the key to all philosophical and religious teachings from ancient times” and Sanskrit as the source of all modern languages. F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 77, p. 9.

76. Ninety-nine students were admitted for the first year of NGDEK’s operation (sixty-two female, twenty-seven male; seventy-three from Sofia, twenty-six from the rest of the country) on the basis of their scores from two exams: written in Bulgarian and oral in Russian. F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 206.

77. F. 288B, op. 1, a.e. 77, p. 2.

78. Ibid., p. 5.

79. Ibid., 6.

80. Zhivkova, *S aprilsko vdîhnovenie*, 168.

81. TsDA, F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 118, pp. 79–80.

82. TsDA, F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 118, p. 40.

83. TsDA, F. 405, op. 9, a.e. 140.

84. TsDA, F. 404, op. 10, a.e. 276, pp. 54–55.

85. Chakîrov, *Vtoriiat etazh*, 152.

86. For a magisterial overview of the history of modern Western occultism, see James Webb’s pioneering studies *The Occult Underground* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974) and *The Occult Establishment* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1976).

87. Nicholas Roerich, *Fiery Stronghold*; Nicholas Roerich, *Realm of Light*.

88. Roerich, *Fiery Stronghold*, 337. To highlight the centrality of spirituality to his definition of culture Roerich explicitly made a distinction between culture and civilization: “Up to now many people

consider it fit to replace the word 'culture' by 'civilization,' forgetting completely that the very Latin root *Cult* has a very deep spiritual significance, whereas civilization has as its root a civic social structure of life. It seems quite clear that every country passes through certain social steps, viz., civilization, which in its highest synthesis forms the eternal and indestructible conception of culture. As we see from many examples, civilization may perish, may be altogether annihilated, but culture creates its great heritage upon indestructible spiritual tablets, which sustain the future generation." Roerich, *Fiery Stronghold*, 45–46.

89. "Culture is the emulation of highest Bliss, of highest Beauty, of highest knowledge. After ignorance we reach civilization; then gradually we acquire education, then comes intelligence; then follows refinement and the synthesis opens the gates to high culture." Nicholas Roerich, *Himavat*, 292.

90. "Religion and science must not differ in their essences. . . . Science cannot destroy the concept of the divinity of Fire, just as religion cannot hinder the fine analyses, employed by science. . . . All great discoveries for the benefit of mankind will not come from huge laboratories, but will be made by the spirit of the scientists who possess synthesis." Agni Yoga (Helena Roerich, *Fiery World*, III, 60).

91. "The seat of the soul, or consciousness, is the center of the universal circle, and its development or expansion takes place from the center towards the circumference, from the inside, outward." In Paelian, *Nicholas Roerich*, 86.

92. Zhivkova died at age thirty-nine years in the midst of the lavishly prepared international celebrations to commemorate the "1300-Year Anniversary from the Creation of the Bulgarian State"—another of her large-scale initiatives. She was found dead in the bathtub by the maid. The official announcement stated that she died as a result of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage. Her premature demise and the contested circumstances of her death gave rise to endless speculations about the cause of her death continuing unabated up until today. I agree with historian Evgenia Kalinova that the disappointments in her associates, "coupled with her intense and stressful work tempos and her fanatical adherence to extreme asceticism in eating, derived from the way she understood the balance between material and spiritual, inevitably led to extreme fatigue and exhaustion of her physical and psychological energy" (in Evgenia Kalinova, *Bîlgarskata kultura i politicheskiiat imperativ 1944-1989* [Sofia: Paradigma, 2011], 329).

93. Yordan Kerov, "Lyudmila Zhivkova-Fragments of a Portrait," RAD Background Report, *Radio Free Europe*, October 27, 1980.

94. See Andrei Znamenski, *Red Shambhala: Magic, Prophecy, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books Theosophical Publishing House, 2011).

95. Michael Agursky, "An Occult Source of Socialist Realism: Gorky and Theories of Thought Transference," in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. B. G. Rosenthal (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

96. Aleksei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever.*

97. Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Patrick Patterson, *Bought and Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). Sergei I. Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dniepropetrovsk, 1960-1985* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2004).

98. Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

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