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Review by **Marietta Stankova**, London School of Economics and Political Science

Vasil Paraskevov's article on relations between Great Britain and Bulgaria in the early Cold War catches the eye of East European and Balkan scholars by virtue of its subject, period and thesis. Although the policies of the major powers to Bulgaria and the Balkans have consistently attracted the attention of Bulgarian historiography for the last two decades, among the countries of the Soviet bloc Bulgaria has seldom appeared in the title of English-language research publications. It is also noteworthy that the years under consideration extend beyond the usual cut-off dates of 1947-1949, as the majority of available works concentrate on the immediate post-WWII period when the Cold War assumed its shape and meaning and when both international and bilateral developments moved at a fast pace.¹ The author rightly points out that as the intensity of these first years of global conflict receded, the attitudes and events unfolding in the first half of the 1950s are no less illuminating of the nature of the Cold War in Eastern Europe. He also makes the excellent point that the understudied interaction between Western and Eastern European governments adds a meaningful dimension to the understanding of the Cold War.(243) Most intriguing, though, is the juxtaposition in the title of 'conflict' and 'necessity' suggesting that the controversy in which Bulgaria and Britain were engaged as respective allies to the clashing superpowers did not prevent them from also forging a different type of relationship. Indeed, it is one of the author's major claims that there was more to the dealings between Britain and Bulgaria than the political confrontation that emerged after the Communist takeover in the latter in September 1944 and that in due time, there was a visible effort on both sides

¹ V. Dimitrov, *Stalin's Cold War. Soviet Foreign Policy, Democracy and Communism in Bulgaria, 1941-48* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Marietta Stankova, "Communism and Cold war: the Absence of Europe?" in S.Katsikas (ed.) *Shifting Identities: Bulgaria and Europe* (Anthem Press, May 2010): 43-62 .

to take a more positive mutual approach. He evokes a conceptual framework in which under the shadow of major international issues, these secondary participants “wanted to explore” other areas of contact beyond ideology, politics and strategy.(242) Accordingly, economic and other interests are highlighted as significant motives after 1947 and into the 1950s.

Such a proposition is relatively novel in that the exploration of what could be tentatively termed non-political exchanges has been far from thorough. It is also not implausible to search for common interests outside the parameters of the main dispute – which links with existing interpretations that once the new division lines appeared at the end of WWII, neither of the two protagonists of the article saw a benefit in escalating the tension.² In assessing the extent to which the author’s objectives are supported through his overview of the bilateral relationship during the first decade of the Cold War, it is noticeable that he is sufficiently cautious so as not to posit ‘conflict’ *versus* ‘necessity’. These categories are not explored within each of the different areas of activity but are employed to distinguish the political sphere, where conflict prevailed, from the economic and cultural ones where some rapprochement was evident.

The first part of the article focuses mostly on the deteriorating political dialogue between London and Sofia as a result of the advancing communisation of Bulgaria. The narrative spans from the end of WWII to the first post-Stalinist years and mostly dwells on familiar key events such as the first post-war elections in Bulgaria in late 1945, the conclusion of the Peace Treaty in 1947 and the subsequent elimination of the democratic political Opposition. It emphasizes on several occasions that Britain had limited influence and no specific plan of action regarding internal developments in Bulgaria.(247–250). These assertions would have benefitted from some more historical depth in relation to British post-war planning and the unhappy war-time experience of seeking lasting partnerships in Bulgaria. Such an approach would reveal more about the continuities of the Cold-war relationship than the somewhat standard mention of the percentages agreement, for instance.(245) As the analysis touches upon the difficult and uneven process of British policy formulation, it would have been worthwhile to explore further the different perspectives of the diplomats at the centre and those in the field - of which only some glimpses are provided. Most importantly, to fully comprehend British decisions and conduct, it is imperative to consider in more detail the dilemmas and frustrations that faced British policy-makers, for instance how far to support the non-Communists, whether to recognise the Bulgarian government, how to insist effectively on Bulgaria’s compliance with the Peace Treaty and whether indeed to continue to maintain a diplomatic presence in Bulgaria. Without this, the analysis of goals and results remains incomplete, all the more so since an abundance of relevant sources document not only the eventual outcomes but the perceived alternatives.

²Marietta Stankova, “Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy, 1943–1949,” unpublished Ph.D. thesis (London School of Economics, 1999); Dimitrov, *Stalin’s Cold War*, 104–180.

As to the Bulgarian side, the mechanism of decision-making is even less illuminated despite the availability of a good deal of interesting archival materials such as the correspondence between the top Communists in Sofia and their leader Georgi Dimitrov in Moscow and records of conversations between the latter and Stalin.³ A distinct asymmetry is discerned in the analysis as it deals with British foreign policy on the one hand but with Bulgarian domestic developments, on the other. It is true that the internal political situation in Bulgaria was the predominant subject of the dispute and contributed extensively to the origin and advance of the Cold War in South-East Europe; the article only sporadically refers to Bulgarian perceptions of and responses to British actions.

The text reiterates the fact that British-Bulgarian relations evolved within a complex set of regional and global concerns. Yet, it provides little substance to such a conspicuous aspect, confirming often enough the strategic priority of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Straits for Britain (248–250) but not elaborating on Bulgaria's ongoing frictions with its southern neighbours and its intricate dealings with Yugoslavia. It is these that engendered apprehension in Britain as to the possibility of Bulgaria's Balkan ambitions serving also a potential wider Soviet project. Moreover, the superpower dimension is all but missing from the text even though the U.S. is frequently cited in tandem with Britain and Soviet behaviour is commented upon. If the omission is deliberate, it should be justified. Admittedly, it is hard to disentangle the conduct of the Bulgarian Communists from the Soviet dominance to which they were willingly subjected. The article touches upon this when discussing the postponed parliamentary elections in August 1945. Significantly, Britain was aware of this and strove to calibrate its policies to the hegemonic power and the satellite accordingly. The existing scholarship is unequivocal that in the period up to 1949, the high-priority of the long-term relationship with the Soviet Union was the overriding determinant for the Western Allies' attitudes and approaches towards Bulgaria. Paraskevov himself acknowledges that even as Britain's position in the country was later reduced to little more than that of an observer, it considered its options in relation to the Soviets and the Soviet bloc as a whole. Conversely, there existed serious differences in the treatment of Bulgaria between Britain and the United States which deserve attention and would enrich the interpretation of British foreign policy choices and constraints. It is perhaps the deceptive amalgamation of British and U.S. attitudes and actions that leads to rather stark statements such as that "Domestic tensions between the communists and the opposition fully reflected the frictions within the Big Three." (247)

The effort to demonstrate "how political conflict, economic necessity and cultural propaganda were interwoven in a complex net of interdependence" sheds valuable light on British-Bulgarian relations between 1944 and 1956. (243) Developments that had been

³A. Dallin, and F.I. Firsov, (eds.) *Dimitrov and Stalin 1934-1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives* (Yale University Press, 2000); I. Banac, (ed.) *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov* (Yale, 2003).

overlooked in earlier historiography are rightly brought to the fore here and this is the greatest merit of the piece. The Bulgarian sources briefly used here are fascinating.(256) Precisely because of this, it would have been interesting to emphasize commercial and cultural relations even further, at the expense of the better-known diplomatic and political trends. But even so, the conclusions about the primacy of politics and the overwhelming nature of the Cold war would have barely changed. Paraskevov leaves little doubt that the slow and feeble regeneration of trade was always secondary to diplomatic and strategic issues.(255, 260) Yet, the suggestion that trade could be viewed as “an opportunity to reconcile” (242) is hardly precise as Bulgaria’s “necessity” to deal with the developed Western nations sprang from its project for fast Socialist modernisation and was conditioned by its economic links with the Soviets. Britain, in turn, saw trade as an area of contact where the fact of the contact was more important than the substance, therefore evidently subjecting it to political long-term considerations. Similarly, any cultural exchanges were never meant to negate the clash of ideology, quite the contrary. The author’s recognition that Bulgaria, struggling to find ways of projecting a more positive image was forced to fall back on pro-Communists is as revealing of the nature of these exchanges as is the timing of their intensification.(257-258)

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