

Victor Petrov. *Balkan Cyberia: Cold War Computing, Bulgarian Modernization, and the Information Age Behind the Iron Curtain.*

Cambridge, Mass.: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2023. xx, 424 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Tables. \$60.00, hard bound.

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Balkan Cyberia, Victor Petrov's excellent new book on the development of the computer industry in Bulgaria is a study of networks cutting across worlds. Here Petrov joins an impressive body of recent scholarship focusing on the place of second world socialism within a broader global context. Using an impressive array of materials, ranging from archives in Bulgaria, India, and Russia, to Bulgarian science fiction literature and women's and youth magazines, to a series of personal interviews, Petrov's work takes big swings, and invites us to reconceptualize the structure of the Cold War and the nature of late socialism in Bulgaria (and beyond). *Balkan Cyberia* is an exceptional work of scholarship.

The Bulgarian computer contained multitudes—Petrov uses the metaphor of a prism to illustrate his point. The machines themselves, for sale in markets across the world and in computer clubs and schools across the country, stood as very real symbols of socialist modernity in Bulgaria, evidence that time could be pushed forward; that party planners and scientists could marshal the resources, know-how, and creativity to overcome backwardness and catch up to the advanced countries of the west. Petrov's monograph is divided into three parts, each of which places the computer at the center of overlapping networks. A real strength of Petrov's work is how the protagonists in the story shift from chapter to chapter.

The first section details the creation of the Bulgarian computer industry within the "closed world of COMECON." Here Petrov makes the case for the Second World as an alternative modernity, with its own rules, inducements, and sensibilities. For Bulgarian party planners, creating a Bulgarian computer industry was a way to make socialist progress visible, while simultaneously cornering a niche market stretching from the inter-German border to the Soviet Pacific coast. It was a huge gamble—along with Albania, Bulgaria was the only socialist state without a domestically produced computer in 1960—and Bulgarians were competing with East German, Soviet, and Polish engineers, scientists, salesmen, and party officials as they worked to corner the market on socialist computing. Petrov describes Todor Zhivkov, head of the Bulgarian party, as a "venture capitalist" who controlled "the entire state's resources and [was] willing to bet it on ten different ideas as long as one came through" (58).

Amazingly, the bet came through, and Bulgaria became the leading producer of computer technology in the second world by the middle of the 1970s. The eastern bloc became a huge captive market for the Bulgarian computer industry (once it successfully elbowed its competitors aside) providing guaranteed, often at inflated, profits for Bulgarian computers and subsidies to the Bulgarian economy at large. Much of this was made possible by the skill of Bulgarian scientists, marketers, and engineers who reached an incredible level of sophistication in an incredibly short amount of time. Much of it was due to Zhivkov's skillful use of personal diplomacy—here Petrov recasts what has traditionally been understood to have been slavish submissiveness as adroit statesmanship.

Balkan Cyberia asks us to rethink the mechanics of COMECON and the values of second world economies. The second section of the monograph demonstrates that the second world was never a truly closed system. If western embargos limited Bulgarian access to western technologies, spies and personal connections served as conduits to the wider world. Bulgarian salesmen in India learned capitalist business techniques. Petrov makes it clear that the line between the capitalist and socialist world was porous. In his hands, this becomes a fruitful space to think about what Bulgarian socialism meant in (what turned out to be) its last decades.

Finally, the Bulgarian computer occupied important spaces of imagination: through the screen Bulgarians could envision new and improved forms of social organization made possible by advancements in cybernetics. The computer was a form of improved control and resistance: data promised the arrival of equitably distributed abundance, while truck drivers destroyed the systems meant to monitor and improve their performance, and science fiction writers bemoaned the inability of the Party to deliver on the promise of the information age. In this, the computer was a totem of Bulgarian socialism's failures . . . and successes. Contrary to the prevailing understandings of late socialism as a period of stagnation, Petrov gives us a story of innovation, creativity, and fierce debate about the nature and direction of Bulgarian society. It is an important story, well told.

Ed. Yana Hashamova, Oana Popescu-Sandu, and Sunnie Rucker-Chang. *Cultures of Mobility and Alterity: Crossing the Balkans and Beyond*.

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The Balkans have often been described as a historic crossroads between empires, states, and nations, a bustling place where heterogeneous groups of people have encountered one another for centuries. These encounters necessitated the constant coming and going of people, which is to say arrivals to and departures from the region. When it comes to the twentieth century, however, and even more so the postwar period, the Balkans have been cast as quite the opposite: a marginal place that is too volatile to sustain encounters among neighbors and too backward to be of interest to outsiders. When scholars of the region study migration, they often focus on departing émigrés, refugees, and displaced people. In other words, scholarship implicitly underlines that the modern Balkans is a place that people leave in order to get away from one another rather than one where they willingly come to connect with others. However, as *Cultures of Mobility and Alterity: Crossing the Balkans and Beyond* highlights, there are understudied trends of people moving to and through the Balkans that compliment those of people who moved from the region in recent history. In this innovative edited collection, Yana Hashamova, Oana Popescu-Sandu, and Sunnie Rucker-Chang bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to argue that the Balkans have long been—and still remain—a site of multidirectional movement and diverse interaction.

Each of the nine chapters included in the volume is premised on the question of how people have continued to encounter one another in and out of the Balkans in the postwar period, a time when the political climate across Europe has trended toward ideological forces aimed at keeping people apart. The authors show that postwar populism, xenophobia,