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• G. VALTCHINOVA, *From “Religion” to “Spirituality” in Socialist Bulgaria: Vanga, Nicholas Roerich, and the Mystique of History* • N. LACKENBY, *You are what you don’t eat – Fasting, Ethics, and Ethnography, in Serbia and Beyond* ❧

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Galia Valtchinova*

*Department of Anthropology
University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès
Toulouse, France*

From “Religion” to “Spirituality” in Socialist Bulgaria: Vanga, Nicholas Roerich, and the Mystique of History

Abstract: The article delves into processes unfolding in Bulgaria in the 1970s, centring around two figures: Vanga, known as the seer of Petrič, and the mystic painter Nicholas Roerich, to demonstrate the changes in the structure and meaning of categories related to religion that occurred in the period of “mature socialism”. The first section looks into the activities of the clairvoyant Vanga and her changing status to uncover the gradual process that transformed her from a local *vračka* (healer/witch) into the “Bulgarian Pythia”. The second and longest section is dedicated to the Nicholas Roerich Program of 1978, promoted at the highest level in the framework of the celebration of 1300 years of the Bulgarian state, and its impact on coining a peculiar concept of spirituality. The third and final part explores the links between Roerich, Vanga, the notion of spirituality, and a certain vision of history.

Keywords: Bulgaria, India, Ljudmila Zhivkova, Pythia, Roerich, Russia, Vanga, ancient civilization, clairvoyance, history, mystique, religion, spirituality, Thracology.

Introduction

For the last three decades, it has been *de bon ton* to celebrate the blossoming religious life in post-socialist Balkan countries as a “religious revival”, which allegedly occurred after decades of forced atheism or suppressed religiosity. The scarce visibility of religious life under communism cannot be questioned; however, it does not mean a “religious vacuum”. There are data and facts on religious life that, at first glance, have little to do with it; also, one can find ways of reading between the lines of a political system that exercised strict control of the standard expressions of religion.

In this paper, by looking at processes unfolding in Bulgaria in the 1970s, I defend the vision of deep changes in the structure and meaning of categories related to religion that occurred during the period of “mature socialism”.¹

* gvaltchi@univ-tlse2.fr

¹ I use of the vocabulary of the time in accordance with the anthropological principle of giving priority to the emic view [from within the studied society]. In the terminology

Its evolution is seen in two directions: discrediting “religion” by conflating acts of religiosity with “superstition”, on the one hand, and, on the other, the gradual elaboration of a new discourse favouring spirituality over religiosity. The first line is reflected in the changing place of the clairvoyant Vanga in socialist Bulgaria. The second, already observed in the case of Vanga, unfolds in the case of the celebrated Russian émigré, painter and esoteric philosopher N. K. Roerich in Bulgaria in the late 1970s. Both lines converge to show that semantic engineering became the mark of a new way of publicly speaking of about religious matters without using the vocabulary banned by Marxist ideology. Those new vocabularies and discourses influenced some trends in religious life in the post-socialist decades.

The article is split into three sections. The first discusses the activities of the clairvoyant Vanga and her changing status, uncovering the gradual process of transforming her from a local *vračka* (healer/witch) to the “Bulgarian Pythia”. The second section is dedicated to the Nicholas Roerich Program of 1978, promoted at the highest level of the Bulgarian Communist Party and State, and its impact on coining a peculiar concept of spirituality. The Roerich Program is then analysed in the context of cultural policies and preoccupations with the past and national history in Bulgaria of the 1970s and early 1980s. In the final part, I explore the links between Roerich, Vanga, spirituality, and a certain vision of history.

The clairvoyant Vanga: from “superstition” to spirituality

Vanga, or *Petričkata vračka*, the well-known Bulgarian clairvoyant of the 20th century, is a highly ambiguous figure on the margins of religion. Since her first biography appeared in 1989, a flow of publications, countless articles in the press and posts on the Internet and social media contributed to the creation of a template for presenting and speaking of her: today, Vanga is a magnet for enthusiasts of spirituality, mysticism and mysteries from the Balkans, Russia, the former Soviet countries, and beyond. Regarding the first decades of her career and a specific period, which previous research² identified as the turning point in

of the time, the keyword was “mature socialism” [*zrial socializām*], meant to be the fulfillment of “real socialism”, as opposed to “communism”, which was seen as a project. This perspective is adopted in C. Hann, “Introduction. Social Anthropology and Socialism”. In *Socialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Local Practice*, ed. C. Hann (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–26; see also K. Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 8–9.

² G. Valtchinova, «Entre religion, tourisme et politique : la naissance du pèlerinage de Rupite, Bulgarie», *Ethnologie Française* 28, 3 (1998), 396–405; Eadem, “Between Ordinary pain and Extraordinary Knowledge: The Seer Vanga in the Everyday Life of

her image, I focus on the bulk of ideas and portrayals of her origins and expertise prior to 1989, which form the body of implicit knowledge³ about Vanga shared by the society where she lived and acted. Here are its main components.

Vanga [Evangelia] Gušterova (1911–1996) was born in Strumica, Ottoman Macedonia, now in North Macedonia. She was seen as "Macedonian" in the sense of regional belonging, which was maintained by her lifelong use of the local dialect, but her Bulgarian national identity was generally not questioned.⁴ A central element was Vanga's loss of sight at age thirteen when she was purportedly "struck by a whirlwind" on the outskirts of her father's native village, where the family had moved after her mother's untimely death. This event is considered the beginning of a harsh period in her life but also the start of her visionary experience. The latter manifested itself the day when World War II reached Yugoslavia in April 1941: she reportedly spent the following days or even weeks in an altered state of consciousness, uttering the names of those who would return and those who would disappear before growing crowds in front of her house. The Strumica area fell under Bulgarian occupation, and the soldiers consulted the seer: one of them, Dimitar Gušterov, married and brought her to his native town Petrič in 1942. Thus, Vanga was known as *Petrickata gledarica* and became famous for finding missing people, a common preoccupation during the war. In 1943, she received a visit from the Bulgarian king Boris III, to whom she purportedly predicted his untimely death. During the war and the two post-war decades, her clientele remained largely rural and regional. It was after her husband's death in the early 1960s that she gained nationwide renown.

The shared knowledge of Bulgarians is more consensual about the facts of Vanga's biography than regarding her expertise. If local people referred to her by the terms of *vidovita žena* [woman-who-sees-the-invisible] and *gledarica* [seer], she was commonly known as *vračka*, a term with the predominant con-

Bulgarians during Socialism (1960s–1970s)", *Aspasia* 3 (2009), 106–130; Eadem, "State management of the Seer Vanga: Power, medicine, and the "remaking" of religion in Socialist Bulgaria". In *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe*, eds. Bruce R. Berglund, Brian Porter-Szűcs (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012), 245–268; Eadem, "Constructing the Bulgarian Pythia: the seer Vanga between religion, memory, and history". In *Saints, Places, and national Imagination. Historical Anthropology of Religious Life in the Balkans* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2019), 209–228.

³ Importantly for my argument, "implicit knowledge" is defined by M. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 394, as "an inarticulable [...] knowing of social relationality [...] acquired in social practice but rarely formalized or articulated in official discourses, forming the underpinning of social relations."

⁴ Here, the presentation of Vanga's case is limited to the topic of the article; I don't discuss issues of Vanga's identity, the border regime imposed on Petrič during socialism, the situation on the border, etc., all of which was covered in my previous publications.

notation of witch. Due to her capacity to “find missing people”, which was never challenged, the early attempts at defining her gift oscillate between her capacity for “seeing” the past and “predicting” the future. Starting from the early 1950s and well into the 1980s, two trends in thinking and talking about the seer emerged: in a nutshell, a negative and a positive one. According to the former, more characteristic of the first decades of socialism – Vanga was a “charlatan” who profited from the “superstitious mind” of ordinary folk. This line of thought recycles well-known discourses of the Church against “sorcerers and witches” using the argument *a contrario*, accusing people who “go to a witch” of being “superstitious” and therefore backward. Vanga’s ability to recognize her clients’ names and her “knowledge” of their personal histories and pasts were attributed to a network of spies she purportedly relied on for gathering information.

According to the latter viewpoint, which gained traction in the late 1960s, Vanga was a natural “phenomenon”, an extra-lucid human whose gift took the shape of seeing into the past and the future and thus “knowing” names and facts from peoples’ lives. Instead of blaming it on superstitions, it sought to explain her gift by sciences like physiology, psychology, and biophysics. Starting from the mid-1960s, the study of “Vanga’s gift” was entrusted to specialists in “suggestology”⁵ and parapsychology, who wrapped the interest in Vanga in scientific and medical discourses. By the 1980s, this coating was abandoned in favour of openly discussing spirituality. Reflecting this shift, nobler religious appellations for Vanga – “the Prophetess” or “Pythia”, associating her with a distant pre-Christian past – replaced the old-fashioned term *vračka*. This new vision was a result of the conscious work of various collective agencies, as we will shortly see.

In the mid-1960s, Vanga’s activities and the flows of visitors converging at her home started to be regulated by the state: a dual change took place. The visitors now paid fees, which differed for nationals and foreigners, and the tax was taken by the municipality. At the same time, she became an object of research as a “phenomenon”, and while her gift was studied by scientific tools, her séances were increasingly associated with medicine. Documents show⁶ that from 1966/67 on, people were encouraged to speak of their visits to Vanga as a form of consultation using medical terminology.

In the early 1970s, the derogatory term *vračka* gave way to that of *jasnovidka* [clairvoyant], which had a positive connotation. The same period saw another change: after rumours had been circulating for years, it became public knowledge that Vanga had a close connection with Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942–

⁵ The rich material coming from the “Institute of Suggestology,” operational from 1966 to 1984, is analysed in Valtchinova, “State management”.

⁶ Developed in Valtchinova, “Between”, 112–125.

1981)⁷, the daughter of the party and state leader Todor Zhivkov (First Secretary of the Bulgarian CP from 1956 to 1989). Zhivkova was one of the rare *heirs* (*pace* Bourdieu) of party and state leaders in the Soviet orbit whose convictions and actions exceeded the literal application of communist ideology, and it was precisely in the 1970s that her "whims" for esoteric and Eastern doctrines became evident.⁸ The open demonstration of Zhivkova's interest in and protection of Vanga's activities reinforced her image of a personality from communist orthodoxy. In parallel, a circle of Zhivkova's "friends" emerged around the clairvoyant, mostly intellectuals occupying key positions in the party and state leadership.⁹ There are reports of regular visits of university professors well-versed in history and philosophy and discussions about "energies", the cosmos, space-time and spirituality.¹⁰

The spirituality associated with Vanga is a broad and vague concept: alongside the "gift of clairvoyance" [*jasnovidstvo*], the idea of mystical "knowledge" [*poznanie*] was also underlined, a knowledge which was sometimes presented as being inherited from ancient civilisations. Vanga's gift of "seeing [the invisible]" was also attributed to the capture of "energies" or "cosmic phenomena". Thus, while introducing the vocabulary usually associated with the New Age or charismatic healing, this dual sourcing of Vanga's "gift" blurred the boundary between present and future, as well as between past and future. Comparing Vanga to famous oracles of Antiquity had the same effect: launched in the 1960s

⁷ On the personality and politics of Zhivkova, see I. N. Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova and the Paradox of Ideology and Identity in Communist Bulgaria," *East European Politics and Societies* 18 (2004), 2, 278–315; M. Gruev, "Ljudmila Zhivkova – pătiať kam Agni-Yoga" [Lyudmila Zhivkova – the path to Agni-Yoga]. In *Prelomni vremena. In honorem Prof. Ljubomir Ognyanov* (Sofia: Editions of Sofia University, 2006), 796–815, 800–807; I. Elenkov, *Kulturnijat front. Bălgarskata kultura prez epohata na komunizma – političesko upravlenie, ideologičeski osnovanija, institucionalni režimi* [The Cultural Front. Bulgarian Culture during the Communist Era – Political Management, Ideological Foundations, Institutional Regimes] (Sofia: Siela/Institute for the Study of the Recent Past, 2008), 307–311.

⁸ Western historians who have studied the period tend to view Zhivkova's "caprices" and the cultural policies she pursued (see *infra*) as the only original development in communist Bulgaria. See R. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 204–205; B. Lory, *L'Europe balkanique* (Paris: Ellipses, 1996), 81.

⁹ This is especially true of the historian Alexandăr Fol (1936–2007), a multifaceted figure holding multiple positions: professor at the Department of Ancient Greek History at Sofia University (the most prestigious in Bulgaria), Director of the Institute of Thracology (a historical discipline which he founded: see below) at the Academy of Sciences, first deputy to and successor of L. Zhivkova as the head of the Ministry of Culture.

¹⁰ Developed in Valtchinova, « Entre religion », 387–399 ; "Constructing", 222–225.

and disseminated by a popular book,¹¹ the association of Vanga and the Delphic Pythia was officialised in 1990, when the seer was celebrated as the “Bulgarian Pythia”.¹²

By the late 1960s, Vanga and Rupite—a place near Petrič where she reportedly found inspiration for practicing her gift—became destinations for high-ranking guests from the Committee for Culture, the Party, and the government. The officialisation of Vanga’s activities was not yet complete, but there was genuine interest among foreigners residing in Bulgaria. Some data suggest that enthusiasm for a “visit to Rupite,” seen as a form of entertainment, was high among diplomats and high-ranking representatives of foreign (Western) enterprises. In all such cases, the name of the place was used as a metonymy for the person and activities that unfolded there.¹³ This practice was in full swing in the 1970s: alongside Zhivkova’s friends, most guests of the Party and state who visited Bulgaria for various celebrations (see *infra*) were taken there under the guise of visiting “cultural-historical heritage”. In the series of visits “to Rupite” made by personalities from the domains of culture and the arts, as well as by political figures from abroad, people linked in some way to Russia and the (former) Soviet Union held a special place. Some, like the journalist and amateur of esoterism Valentin Sidorov, became part of Zhivkova’s “inner circle” and took on the role of mediators in organising these visits.¹⁴ Others – such as the famous actor Vyacheslav Tikhonov (the lead in the Soviet-time TV series *Seventeen Moments of the Spring*), filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov, writers and poets (Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Leonid Leonov) – are reported as being disturbed by the truths Vanga revealed to them during their visits. In 1978, she received Sviatoslav, Nicholas Rorich’s son. Retrospectively, the event was reported as the meeting of two sages.

This brief overview shows that behind the interest in the peasant clairvoyant living in a sensitive border area, there was a complex intertwining of old and new trends in politics and ideology. No doubt, the process by which Vanga

¹¹ Sh. Ostrander & L. Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 263–285 (the book had four reprints within two years). Interviewed in 1967, the director of the Institute of Suggestology, who was entrusted with “exploring Vanga’s brain,” emphasised the similarities between the seer and the most famous prophetess of antiquity. The book never circulated openly in socialist Bulgaria, but a copy of its second edition is preserved in the archives as evidence of “the international recognition of Vanga’s abilities”.

¹² The new turn coincided with the change of regime and the publication of the seer’s first biography, with a foreword by Professor Fol. See G. Valtchinova, « Vanga, la ‘Pythie bulgare’: idées et usages de l’Antiquité en Bulgarie socialiste », *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* 31, 1 (2005), 93–127.

¹³ Valtchinova, « Entre religion », 398–401; « Vanga », 101 note 16, 103 note 18.

¹⁴ See V. Sidorov, *Ljudmila i Vanga [Ljudmila and Vanga]* (Sofia: “Reporter”, 1995).

the *vračka* ended up as "the Bulgarian Pythia" and a quasi-saint overlapped with a broader logic of abandoning religion for spirituality – a logic in which esoteric doctrines played a role alongside knowledge of a remote past and near future.

The 1978 Nicholas Roerich Program in Bulgaria and Beyond

In March 1978, the Central Committee of the BCP established a long-term *Program to Enhance the Role of Art and Culture for the Harmonious Development of the Individual and Society in the Construction of a Mature Socialist Society*, commonly known as the *Program for the Harmonious Development of the Person* (hereafter *PHDP*). Its management was entrusted to the Committee for the Culture led by Lyudmila Zhivkova. The *PHDP* was to be implemented in several phases, each focusing on a prominent figure from the sciences, arts, and letters, or a political figure: Leonardo da Vinci, Rabindranath Tagore, Avicenna, Mikhail Lomonosov, Goethe, Einstein, Lenin. However, Nicholas Roerich was chosen to be the first. The Roerich Program (hereafter *NRP*) was launched in the spring of 1978, proclaimed the Year of Roerich's Memory in Bulgaria.¹⁵

Why choose Nicholas K. Roerich (1874–1947) – a painter and mystical thinker steeped in theosophy who developed his own esoteric system known as *Agni-Yoga* or *Living Ethics*,¹⁶ to defend a project aiming at "the construction of the harmoniously developed individual" in a communist country? And how should we understand this unprecedented rhetoric launched at the highest levels of the state and party of Moscow's closest ally?¹⁷

The draft of the *NRP* by historian Alexandăr Fol holds the key to explaining the choice of a person unknown to the Bulgarian public and so sharply

¹⁵ The facts about these programs, including the Roerich Program, and the analyses that follow are based on excerpts from documents published by Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, especially 311, 317–336, 337–356; I. Baeva (ed.), *Kulturnoto otvarjane na Bălgarija kăm sveta* [The Cultural Opening of Bulgaria to the World], (Sofia: Editions of the University 'St. Kliment Ohridski, 2013), 107–124 and 125–139.

¹⁶ These characteristics were highlighted in the public image of N. Roerich that prevailed in Bulgaria during the *PNR*: see Gruev, "Pătiat", 807–811. On the trajectory of Nicholas Roerich, see M. Osterrieder "From Synarchy to Shambhala: The Role of Political Occultism and Social Messianism in the Activities of Nicholas Roerich". In *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, eds. B. Menzel, M. Hagemeister, B. Glatzer Rosenthal (Munich: Sagner, 2012), 101–134; A. Znamenski, *Red Shambhala: Magic, Prophecy, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2011).

¹⁷ Several works addressing this question consider the *PNR* an act of rebellion against "sclerotic Marxism–Leninism" imposed by Moscow or the search for a new "third way" between the USSR and the West: see Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova", 312–314.

at odds with Party orthodoxy.¹⁸ Officially, priority was given to N. K. Roerich because he was a “Russian and Slav”, two reasons deemed sufficient to hope for Moscow’s support¹⁹ and, at the same time, a cosmopolitan figure. The emphasis was on this latter element: his facets as a “painter, poet, thinker, researcher, philosopher, and fighter for peace” made him an exemplary figure from the perspective of the *PDHP*. The historian described Roerich as a “disciple of Leonardo [da Vinci], deeply influenced” by him and a “continuator of his universal work.”²⁰ Beyond his art, it was Roerich’s agency on the international stage – his capacity to speak to political decision-makers, transcending political divides – that fascinated the author of the *NRP*. He praised Roerich’s “humanistic and universalistic impact”, a reference to his “Pact for the Protection of Cultural Monuments” (also called Banner of Peace), signed in 1935 at the League of Nations under the patronage of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.²¹

According to the *NRP*, the Pact was to spearhead a “new cultural offensive for the preservation of the heritage of all countries”, which forty years later led to “the deployment of a peaceful cultural offensive in the Balkans, in Europe, and worldwide.” In the same vein, Roerich’s Institute of Arts in New York was referred to as the “first attempt, at the beginning of our century, at the synthesis of the arts – an institution [like those] that countries such as France, the United States, Iran, and Bulgaria are establishing today.” Roerich’s activities, especially those in India and Central Asia, are described as the “first attempt on a global scale in contemporary times to overcome Eurocentrism in science for the mutual fertilization of different cultures and for the exchange of true values worthy of a harmoniously developed person”.²² Combining art, spirituality, attachment to culture as the supreme value, and the will to act to defend or promote the condition of its realization, peace, Nicholas Roerich appears as the template of the “harmoniously developed person” posed as the ultimate goal of the *PDHP*.

¹⁸ Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 317, who sometimes quotes entire documents; if no other indication is provided, the quotes cited in this paragraph come from this source. See also V. Mihajlova, “Golemijat startov vzriv”. In *Kulturnoto otvarjane na Bălgarija kăm sveta*, ed. I. Baeva (Sofia, 2013), 125–139.

¹⁹ This hope did not correspond to reality. Moscow’s reluctance to have Roerich celebrated in Bulgaria has been noted: B. Trencsényi, “Relocating Ithaca: Alternative Antiquities in Modern Bulgarian Political Discourse”. In *Multiple Antiquities, Multiple Modernities. Ancient Histories in Nineteenth-Century European Cultures*, ed. G. Klaniczay, M. Werner, O. Gelser (Frankfurt: Campus, 2011), 247–277, here 271.

²⁰ Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 336; Mihajlova, “Golemijat”, 138.

²¹ The author failed to mention that its recognition was limited to the United States of America. The impact of the Roerich Pact at the time of its signing was exaggerated: Ostermeier, “From Synarchy”, 113.

²² See Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 319–320, for the two latter quotations.

The document thus highlights three elements to emphasise the exemplarity of Nicholas Roerich: 1) an emphasis on the "synthesis" of scientific and artistic work, 2) his Russian roots and his belonging to a culture of the modern West, two determinisms that he overcame to refocus on the timeless and mystical East; 3) the will to act for the common good globally, beyond "nationalistic selfishness" – and does so through persuasive words, addressing reason as much as the spirit.

Roerich's exemplarity is declined in two ways constitutive of the construction of the New Man that the Party called for. On the one hand, Professor Fol, an expert in ancient Greek history, emphasised the need to promote a modern *paideia*²³ – an education suitable for the "harmoniously developed person". On the other hand, the politician and "daughter of the Premier," Zhivkova, also a historian, loudly proclaimed the imperative to act for peace, here and now, by transcending the borders of blocs, countries, and generations. Inspired by the Roerich Pact, she promoted a form of political action for the youth called the "Banner of Peace Assembly".²⁴ Under the slogan "Unity, creativity, beauty", borrowed from Roerich's *Living Ethics*, her initiative materialised in an International Children's Assembly held in 1979. It brought together children from Eastern and Western countries, regardless of the political regimes of their countries, involving them in a collective bell-ringing ritual to proclaim their willingness to live together.²⁵

The NR Program filled the year 1978 with numerous cultural events, especially exhibitions, and a few international conferences in Sofia and major cities in Bulgaria.²⁶ Some of these events were attended by Nicholas Roerich's son Sviatoslav (1904–1993), a painter and mystic with a charismatic outlook like his father who carried "the message" of the latter. He was introduced to his Bulgarian hosts at the highest level, purportedly by Indira Gandhi, who allegedly connected him with Lyudmila Zhivkova.²⁷ The son's connection with India was further emphasised as he was accompanied by his wife, the Indian actress Devika Rani (who also happened to be the great-niece of Rabindranath

²³ Bringing together the notions of education, training, and personal development, *paideia* is a central concept in ancient Greek education. The concept was popularized in Bulgarian academic circles in the 1970s and early 1980s by Professor Al. Fol in his teachings on ancient Greece, which contained more than one parallel to the current context of socialist Bulgaria.

²⁴ See Gruev, "Pätiat", 807; Mihajlova, "Golemijat", 127–128, 132.

²⁵ See Yu. Ghencheva, "The International Children's Assembly 'Banner of Peace': A Case Study of Childhood under Socialism," *Red Feather Journal* 3, 1 (2012), 11–23; Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova," 297.

²⁶ A detailed account of these celebrations is given by Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 325–327.

²⁷ Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova", 312.

Tagore).²⁸ The paintings of the Roerichs, father and son, were displayed at the grand Roerich Exhibition, the climax of the celebration, where the son spoke *for* his father and *about* him. Introduced to the highest circles of power in Bulgaria, Sviatoslav Roerich met with party elites, artists, historians and archaeologists; the peak of his stay was a visit to Vanga.

Sviatoslav Roerich's presence in Bulgaria was given visibility through the national media: an interview he gave to the first national cultural newspaper marked the peak of his public appearances. In it, Sviatoslav Roerich underlined the compatibility between Marxism-Leninism and the *Living Ethics*, drawing parallels between efforts to establish a "new socialist society," which was to replace the "vestiges of the old society", and the ideal of *Living Ethics* for a new humanity based on beauty and human perfection.²⁹ This interview illustrates the convergence between Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and the rhetoric inspired by theosophy that characterised Zhivkova's writings.³⁰

The *NR Program* was also exported abroad.³¹ In Austria, most activities took place in the former house of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in Vienna, acquired in 1975 by the Bulgarian government, and converted into a museum. The promotion of the Roerich Program was the first major action of the Bulgarian Cultural Centre located there.³² Unfolding in academic-artistic circles but also appealing to a broader educated audience, the events related to N. Roerich at the Centre became a rallying point for a diverse and bourgeois public interested in philosophy, Eastern mysticism, and even occultism. In Germany, initiatives related to the *NRP* were carried out mainly in university circles. They took place in Bochum and Saarbrücken, where pre-existing university partnerships in ancient history and archaeology helped promote the initiative. Last but not least, it is worth noting that Bulgaria's representative at the 20th UNESCO Conference, held in Paris in the fall of 1978, was a spokesperson for the ideas of the Roerich Pact presented under the title "Banner of Peace" [*Zname na mira*].³³

²⁸ Mihajlova, "Golemijat", 136. Cf. <http://irmtkullu.com/the-roerich-family/devika-rani-roerich/>.

²⁹ *Narodna Kultura* № 7 / 28.04.1978.

³⁰ See Gruev, "Pătiat", 802; Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova", 311–313.

³¹ Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 328–331.

³² The acquisition of the Wittgenstein House was part of the policy of gaining influence in the West pursued by the elites of the countries in the communist bloc; it is a rare case that remains a success. Here, the role of the renowned Bulgarian historian Vassil Gyuzelev, an expert in medieval Balkan and Byzantine history, should be noted: he was instrumental in the acquisition of this 'cultural monument' which hosted the Bulgarian Cultural Center.

³³ Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 331; V. Mihajlova, "Golemijat", 134–135.

The PNR and "ancient civilisations"

It is widely accepted that, apart from the central exhibition and the publications in the press (heavily controlled by the Party), the *NRP* had almost no real impact on Bulgarian society at the time: the elitist nature of the Roerich Year celebrations prevented them from gaining widespread popularity among the population.³⁴ However, *NRP* had lasting effects on the public discourses involving the categories of culture, spirituality, and civilisation.

First of all, the *Program* generated interest in India and the Indian civilisation. The Roerichs' message—the father's and the son's³⁵—was associated with the "eternal wisdom" of India, specifically the Himalayan region. It was under the *NRP* that an image of the Mystic Mountain began to take shape. This was related to another part of the *NRP*, unknown to the general public: the ambition to revive the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, founded by the Roerichs in 1928 in the Kullu Valley in Punjab.³⁶ The author of the *NRP* project described Kullu as the "epicentre of universal wisdom" and "the possible location of the mythical kingdom of Shambhala".³⁷ Clearly, Fol was familiar with the Agni Yoga doctrine and the central role that the belief in "Shambhala" occupies there—an ideal spiritual and physical space, even a specific territory, a "well of wisdom," and a real place inhabited by the mahatmas.³⁸ This new "N. Roerich-Urusvati Institute", to be placed under the high patronage of UNESCO and managed jointly by the USSR, India, Bulgaria, and Mongolia, was portrayed as a significant step forward in the effort to eliminate eurocentrism in science.³⁹ This project did not materialise, but rumours about its implementation circulated even after the end of the Zhivkov regime in 1989.

³⁴ A point raised by Elenkov, *Ibid.*, 332 sq.

³⁵ In the literature on N. Roerich, the expression "the Roerichs" is typically reserved for the mystic painter and his wife, Elena Shaposhnikova, allegedly the true driving force behind the establishment of the Agni Yoga doctrine. Very little about her was said during the celebrations, which instead focused on the father-son relationship.

³⁶ The project is presented *in extenso* by Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 335; also see V. Mihajlova, "Golemijat", 135–136.

³⁷ Elenkov, *ibid.*

³⁸ The passages in quotation marks are from the same document. N. K. Roerich conceived "Shambhala" both as an ideal locus and as a real place—a place revealed only to rare initiates but one that physically exists. It is even considered a territory to establish, serving as the earthly projection of the spiritual Shambhala. For details, see Znamenski, *Red Shambhala*; Osterrieder, "From Synarchy", 101.

³⁹ For details, see Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 333–336; 334 for the quote. It is important to note the significance given to socialist Mongolia, where Roerich attempted to locate Shambhala: cf. J. Boyd, "In Search of Shambhala? Nicholas Roerich's 1934–5 Inner Mongolian Expedition," *Inner Asia* 14, 2 (2012), 257–277.

Alongside interest in India and its ancient civilisation, the PNR generated interest in Asia in general. While the language used to articulate its grand objectives was evasive, the fantasised Orient itself aroused interest. This Orient corresponded to a concept of Asia whose heart was in India. India and Asia become interchangeable entities in the new way of speaking about “culture” during mature Bulgarian socialism. When mentioned in the press, the qualification of “cradle of ancient civilisations” was usually attached to either of them. A scholarly discourse emerged – a discourse championed by academics but swiftly taken up by the press – which stimulated and nurtured interest in the “civilisations of the East”: “ancient”, “timeless”, or “vanished”.

By this time, the interest in the East and its “ancient civilisations” was already intense in Bulgarian educational and research institutions established shortly before the launching of the NRP. In 1975, the Centre for the Study of the Ancient East [*Centār za Drevnija Iztok*] was established at Sofia University. Led by a historian specialising in the Hittites, the Centre became the first Bulgarian research unit to conduct research on the antiquities and archaeology of ancient Egypt, Anatolia (Eastern Turkey) and Mesopotamia. In 1977, an elite school whose admission was based on competitive exams, the National High School of Ancient Languages and Cultures, opened in Sofia. Under the supervision of the Committee for Culture and University⁴⁰, its alumni were propelled into the spheres of higher education, research, and cultural management.

Another reflection of the same interest was seen in the press and the popularisation of science. The number of publications about “vanished” civilizations in Asia as well as in Central and South America increased significantly in magazines such as *Naouka i tehnika* [Science and Technology] and *Kosmos* [Cosmos]⁴¹, which primarily targeted young readers. Presented like discoveries and “enigmas”, the distant worlds of Asia and pre-Columbian America (whose knowledge was prioritised over the real Americas) were all the more attractive to young minds encouraged to explore the past. The openness of these magazines, designed to popularise world advances in technology and the enigmas of “ancient civilisations”, also marked a convergence of interest in the future, the “cosmos” and space exploration, with that of the distant past.⁴²

⁴⁰ For the history of this high school, see <https://ngdek.com/bg/istoriya-na-gimnaziyata> (accessed on 8th July 2022); the website highlights the decisive role of L. Zhivkova and A. Fol in its establishment.

⁴¹ *Kosmos*, a scientific-artistic magazine published from 1962 to 1994, has already attracted scholarly attention: see N. Ragaru, “Beyond the Stars: Star Wars and the Cultural History of Late Socialism in Bulgaria,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, 1–2 (2013), 353–381, especially 369–372.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 371.

Some activities related to the *PNR* suggest a genuine desire to explore the countries of Asia. For instance, a report on the progress of the Roerich Year in the provinces notes that a youth organization in Plovdiv, the second-largest Bulgarian city, organised a trip retracing "the footsteps of Roerich in Central Asia".⁴³ It is worth noting that Central Asia was understood very broadly and included Mongolia, parts of China, and Tibet. The fantasised Orient sparked a genuine curiosity that extended to a range of countries located between the Himalayas, Tibet, and Soviet Central Asia. Similarly, there was mass interest in yoga at this time, encompassing various systems of "breathing" exercises and dietary regimes (especially Hatha yoga). The enthusiasm for "yoga exercises" among intellectual circles went hand in hand with an interest in vegetarianism and an entire philosophy of life incompatible with communist ideology.⁴⁴

Designed to continue for five years (until 1984) after the "Roerich Year", the *NRP* never materialised on the initial scale. However, it continued with the organisation of a few Bulgarian research expeditions inspired by the Roerichs' grand expedition to Central Asia in the 1920s. Primary destinations included the Indian Himalayas and Chinese Tibet, as well as Mongolia and the mountain ranges adjacent to these countries. Indeed, the Pamir, Altai, and Tian Shan had the advantage of being accessible via the USSR while representing materialisations of the Mystic Mountain.⁴⁵ In these expeditions, scientists, journalists, and members of the country's intelligentsia sought and documented ruins and artefacts of "ancient civilisations of the East," as well as customs and beliefs. While the focus was on ancient history, archaeology, ethnography, and folklore, interest in geology, physical phenomena, and local flora was also present. Limited as they may have been – some under the seal of state secrecy – these experiences were reconfigured in different ways until the late 1990s, sustaining a lasting interest in these countries. They contributed to creating an alternative knowledge about the Other and Elsewhere, which was initially spread by word of mouth within closed circles of university intelligentsia. However, via rumours and the press, it gradually seeped into the implicit knowledge of Bulgarians in the 1980s.

⁴³ Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*, 327.

⁴⁴ See I. Raduychev, "Managing Social Relations in a Bulgarian Yoga Group". In *Living and Working in Sofia: Ethnographies of Agency, social relations and livelihood strategies in the capital of Bulgaria*, ed. Waltraud Kokot (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 57–79 (especially 69–70).

⁴⁵ See D. Savelli, « L'Altai comme champ de transferts religieux selon Nicolas Roerich. Du Shambhala au royaume des Eaux blanches, du bouddhisme à la théosophie ». In *La Sibérie comme champ de transferts culturels: De L'Altai à la Iakoutie* (Paris: Demopolis, 2018), 183–201.

Culture, history, and the “New Golden Age of Bulgarian Culture”

The *NRP* was part of a broader project of promoting pride in Bulgarian history and cultural treasures that deeply marked the 1970s. The period from 1975 to 1981 was particularly abundant in commemorations of historical events and figures, the proliferation of books and public debates on history. Once again, Lyudmila Zhivkova and the Party-sponsored elite around her, especially historians, held the central position in this large-scale process.

It is well known that Zhivkova was a historian by profession. In the 1960s, history was seen as a noble discipline and a patriotic cause; being a historian was a social asset, opening horizons both in space (trips abroad) and in time. In parallel to her interest in history and art history, Zhivkova became familiar with Theosophy and developed a taste for mystical and occult doctrines, which were thought of as part of “Eastern spirituality” rather than “religion.” This inclination was confirmed in the 1970s when she publicly spoke of her friendship with Vanga, showed an interest in Tolstoism, and took members of the White Brotherhood or *dānovists* under her protective wing.⁴⁶ Throughout the 1970s, Zhivkova navigated between history and esotericism, which marked her ideas on the role of history and culture.

Although a trained historian, Zhivkova was to pursue a political career, and it was in this field that she made a real breakthrough. Having spent several years as the “first deputy” of the Director of the Committee for Culture and Art – a structure transformed into a supra-ministerial committee in 1975 when Zhivkova took over – she transformed this neglected sector into a dynamic project of socialist construction. At this point, she was already initiated into Roerich’s *Living Ethics*⁴⁷ and made her first statements regarding the “synthesis of the arts” and other forms of life, as well as the integration of culture into social life. While managing the cultural sector of socialist Bulgaria, she climbed the party ranks, rising, in less than five years, from a member of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party to a member of the Politburo (1979). Thus, the institutional foundations were laid to materialise the ideas of the *Living Ethics*. In this crossing of general (state) interests and particular wills,

⁴⁶ *White Brotherhood (Bialo Bratstvo)* was the official name of the religious movement created in the aftermath of World War I by Petar Dānov (1882–1944), whose followers were known as “Dānovists.” Influenced by Protestant Methodism and Theosophy—especially its interest in the mystical East—during the interwar period, Dānov became a powerful “spiritual master” with international influence. His movement was viewed as dangerous, stigmatized by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and prohibited in 1945. See Gruev, “Pātiat”, 803 sq.

⁴⁷ The term “initiation” is used here by default; testimonies suggest a gradual introduction to esoteric teachings within her inner circle of Bulgarian intellectuals introduced to Theosophy: Gruev, “Pātiat”, 805–807.

a new trend of thinking of the relation between the past and future, religion and spirituality, took the form of a cultural "Golden Age".

The "Golden Age of Bulgarian culture" was paired with the celebration of the 1300 years of the establishment of the Bulgarian state (with 681 taken as the year of its formation), aimed at emphasising the cultural contributions of "little Bulgaria" to the "universal treasure of cultures" [*svetovna kulturna šakrovištnica*].⁴⁸ This desire was formulated in the slogan "i nij sme dali neshto na sveta" ["We too have brought something to the world"], understood as contributing to a universal civilisation.⁴⁹ The second half of the 1970s was entirely devoted to preparing this celebration in a string of smaller and larger commemorations. The year 1976 marked the official entry into the "new Golden Age" of Bulgarian culture – a Golden Age conceived as reproducing in the context of "class humanism" moments of the greatest political and cultural glory of medieval Bulgaria.⁵⁰ The Program for the 1300th anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state announced this new Golden Age, concretising it in a plethora of cultural initiatives revolving around the "Grand Jubilee" (a common term at the time).

In fact, the 1300th Anniversary of Bulgarian statehood did not correspond to a specific date: its celebration lasted from 1976 to 1981, a period that saw numerous commemorations of events or prominent figures in history and culture.⁵¹ The most significant included the Hundred Years of the "Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule" (March 3, 1878), Thirty-Five Years of the "Bulgarian socialist revolution" (September 9, 1979), and Ninety Years since the founding of the first Bulgarian Communist Party (the "narrow" social-democratic party founded in July 1891). Note the coincidence of the Roerich Year with the centenary of the liberation, which occurred in the context of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 and is at the heart of the grand national narrative focused on "our liberator Russia." Marking the centenary of the start of this war (April

⁴⁸ The rhetoric of "treasure," specifically the "repository of cultural treasures" [*svetovna kulturna šakrovištnica*], was developed in sumptuous works offering an overview of Bulgarian history and culture.

⁴⁹ A formula taken from a verse by the national poet Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), the "Bulgarian Victor Hugo's poem "Paisij" from the cycle "Epic of the Forgotten" [*Epopeja na zabravenite*, 1888]. Dedicated to one of the prominent figures of the Bulgarian National Revival, Paisij of Hilendar, the author of the "Slavo-Bulgarian History" (1762), the poem is central to the rhetoric of romantic nationalism. The verse alludes to the invention of the Slavic alphabet by Cyril and Methodius as a source of national pride.

⁵⁰ See Elenkov, *Kulturnijat*. The "summits" in Bulgarian history assimilated to a Golden Age were: the reigns of Tsar Simeon (893–927), Tsar Ivan Assen II (1218–1231) and Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331–1371). If the first two reflected political influence and territorial expansion, the latter's reign was a political disaster.

⁵¹ These "warm-up commemorations" are documented by Elenkov, *ibid.*, 364–365, 370–371.

1877) and the major battles that took place in the Balkan theatre of the war⁵², 1977 was dominated by celebrations of the “Liberation War”, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution. This was not the case with the end of the war and the date of the “Liberation”: opening shortly after March 3rd, the Roerich Year moved away from discourses emphasising “eternal gratitude to our Russian brothers.” The coincidence was exploited to award Sviatoslav Roerich and his wife the “100 Years of the Liberation of Bulgaria” order.⁵³ However, the highlighting of the cosmopolitan Russian-born mystic blurred the image of Bulgaria as a faithful ally of Soviet Russia.

Those commemorative activities emphasised the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet, insisting on Bulgaria’s central role in preserving Slavic culture. The celebration in 1982 of the 1120th Anniversary of the invention of the Slavic alphabet by Cyril and Methodius (reference year: 862) allowed linking the achievement of the “Thessalonian brothers” [*Solunskite bratja*] to the strengthening of the Bulgarian state and emphasised the role of Knyaz Boris I (852–889) the Baptistiser in transmitting their work. Bulgaria was the first country in the Orthodox world to celebrate Cyril and Methodius as ‘Slavic apostles’, and this was underscored from the 1970s onward when Bulgaria claimed its role as the primary protector of Slavic letters against Russia, commonly associated with the Cyrillic alphabet in the West. Even if Bulgaria was weak and its uneven history interrupted by long periods of statelessness and political dependence, the claim to assert itself through the Slavic alphabet aimed to recognise the “little brother’s” role as a cultural mediator or, more generally, Bulgaria’s cultural exemplarity.

Spirituality and the mystique of History

The connection between culture and spirituality [*duhovnost*] in Nicholas Roerich’s image was the most appreciated element, which influenced the choice to focus the *PDHP* on him and to place Roerich’s Year at the heart of the New Golden Age celebrations. The same term was used when discussing Vanga to describe attitudes that were not identifiable with either “religion” as defined by the Church and, more generally, institutional religiosity, or with “superstition”, as Vanga’s activities were previously classed. Increasingly associated with medicine and extraordinary abilities in the field of biology and psychology from the late 1960s onward, Vanga’s image was transformed by a double recourse to history: her ability to “see into the past” was paralleled by the value of the places she in-

⁵² The existence of the Caucasian theatre of war during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 was generally neglected and absent from the grand narrative of the “Liberation of Bulgaria”.

⁵³ Mihajlova, “Golemijat”, 134.

habited as "cultural-historical heritage". This transformation of the seer's expertise, now reframed to align with Roerich's, was the tip of the iceberg of broader social processes unfolding in 1970s Bulgaria. Both exemplify the two ways in which the culture-spirituality continuum was promoted at the highest level of the state and party: *duhovnost* and cultural-historical heritage.

The facts and trends presented above invite us to consider the intertwining of past and future as a peculiar form of thinking and acting we call the "mystique of history". We find it, albeit in different ways, in Roerich's Agni Yoga, concerned with cosmic eras and the flows of time, and in Vanga's gift of seeing both into the past and the future. In both cases, the reversibility between past and future goes hand in hand with the impact of History (with a capital H) on the present.

A somewhat similar vision emerged in a new trend in Bulgarian historical scholarship, which blossomed in the 1970s: Thracology, promoted by the historian and classicist Alexander Fol. "Thracology" or Thracian studies aimed at studying ancient Thrace—a definition that included a large part of the Balkan Peninsula north of the Greek city-states—and the populations that inhabited it, the Thracians.⁵⁴ As Ilia Iliev (1998) has shown, it resulted in imaginary Thracian ancestors who purportedly contributed to the synthesis, the outcome of which was the Bulgarian nation. That most ancient ethnic and cultural stratum, combined with the Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians, formed a triad of ancestors recalling the Dumézilian three-functional model, where Thracians were given the noble priestly function or esoteric knowledge. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Vanga was called "priestess" in some of the founder's writings.⁵⁵

Thracology was conceived as a synthesis of several disciplines: history, archaeology, ethnology, linguistics, and even physical anthropology. It was also associated with a method (which its inventor called *interpretatio thracica*) to explore and understand ancient societies without literacy (*bezpismeni obštestva*) or, in other words, the societies that "have not produced a discourse about themselves". It involved re-reading authors who wrote in Greek and Latin that might have captured fleeting traces of the world vision and ways of life of nearby illiterate societies and conveyed this kind of information after adapting it to the Greco-Roman cultural or "civilisational" mould [*civilizacionna matrica*]. A further step in this logic, which lays at the core of the concept of *interpretatio thracica* and/or *barbarica*, was a discourse analysis aimed to separate the wheat from the chaff in order to recover "the true" life and culture of these populations. Indeed,

⁵⁴ On Thracian studies see T. Marinov, "Ancient Thrace in the Modern Imagination: Ideological Aspects of the Construction of Thracian Studies in Southeast Europe (Romania, Greece, Bulgaria)". In *Entangled Histories in the Balkans*, eds. R. Daskalov & A. Vezenkov, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 10–117.

⁵⁵ Developed in Valtchinova, "Vanga", 117–123.

the method was applied to multiple groups or “tribes” that populated the territories north of Hellas: an immense “North” encompassing the steppes of Asia and several regions bordering the eastern Mediterranean, referred to as “barbarian” by ancient Greek standards. These were the peoples that Herodotus, the father of History, listed in the famous Scythian narrative (*skythikos logos*) in the fourth book of his *Histories*. This North was, therefore, more of a cultural than a geographical notion, and the “Scythian narrative” served as a key to rereading another segment of this foundational work, the much shorter “Thracian narrative” that Herodotus presents later (V: 3–15). Reinterpreting both through the same lens reinforced the advocates of Thracology in their belief in the existence of a “Thracian-Scythian community”, clearly recognisable through the centuries.⁵⁶

The notion of “non-literary cultures” was helpful in constructing a genuine philosophy of history for Southeastern Europe and beyond, covering a large part of Asia. The basic tool of this endeavour was comparing cultures without literacy, a comparison based on the writings of those (the Greek and Roman authors) who perceived them as inferior Others. The relationship established between Thracians, Scythians, and peoples related to them went well beyond geographical proximity or spatial contiguity. The concept of the Thracian-Scythian community included the so-called peoples of the steppes who, as the still lively debates attest, are localized on the ground by archaeologists up to the Altai Mountains. The “customs and traditions” of these nomadic peoples, as well as their animal art, had captured the attention of the Roerichs during their Central Asian expedition. One of the first publications on the topic of nomadic animal art was penned by Roerich’s eldest son, Yurij/George,⁵⁷ who later distinguished himself as a researcher of nomadic cultures. The very term of animal style [*zver-innyi styl’*], applied to the analysis of nomadic cultures from the steppes of Asia to the Hautes Plaines to Tibet, was adopted in the works of thracologists. While history in the strict sense of the word remained silent about these peoples, archaeology and art history focused on manufactured precious objects, which display a symbolic language common to all these societies.

Through the mystique of history, Vanga was inserted into a long temporal line of female visionaries, priestesses and prophetesses, whose authority stemmed from her alleged gift of seeing through time, and leant against the spoken (not written) word. In the same logic, Thracians and Scythians were shoehorned into one community of long-bygone cultures without literacy. Can one go so far as to attribute to the founding father of Thracology the intention

⁵⁶ An extensive analysis is provided in Valtchinova, *ibid.*, 106–117.

⁵⁷ G. Roerich, *The Animal Style among the Nomad Tribes of Northern Tibet* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1930) (Coll. “Skythika”, 3): this is the only publication that makes materials from the Roerichs’ expedition available to the academic community.

of transforming "nomadic peoples" into a civilisational banner, akin to Lev Gumilev's concept of Eurasia? The question remains unanswered, at least for the time being.

Instead of a conclusion

This overview suggests that two remarkable social phenomena in socialist Bulgaria could have been related to one and the same deep and multi-faceted process. I chose to develop one of its facets: the move from "religion" to "spirituality" reflected in a variety of events which, at first glance, had little to do with one another. However, taking an actor-oriented approach helps demonstrate the connections between all those social facts.

Alongside this central move, I highlighted a reassessment of "culture" and its centrality, developed mainly through the NR program. The singularity of this reassessment of culture, at the heart of political action in the late 1970s, is reinforced by sensitivity to the past and History with a capital H: with all the rhetorical turns and spirals it used, the *NRP* conveyed the idea that there was no "culture" without roots in "history". On the other hand, it promoted a new vocabulary to relate ongoing social facts and processes. Social realities that were (still) to be condemned or silenced were deliberately reframed in "neutral" terms, such as *spirituality*, a term that covered everything related to religious matters, or *history* as a catch-all term for all things past. The program established connections between Bulgaria and cultural traditions that were seen as carriers of universal wisdom, especially Eastern and mystical traditions. References to India, the Himalayas, and Roerich's esoteric ideals served as bridges between socialism and alternative imaginaries expressed in notions such as peace, beauty, and spirituality – new notions that entered public discourse. The Roerich Program developed in Bulgaria in the late 1970s was part of an ambitious national project: a political renewal through culture, presented as a "New Golden Age" for Bulgaria. This initiative led to an upsurge of interest in cultural-historical heritage and the adoption of a heritage discourse applied to "phenomenons" such as Vanga, accompanied by a new historical discourse.

A new way of talking about the past emerged – a discourse on the longevity of the nation and the people as the subject of their own history, where interest in the distant past was linked to concerns for the present and a prefiguration of the future. Championed by the circle around Lyudmila Zhivkova, this discourse survived her premature death in 1981 to be co-opted into the more aggressive nationalism that precipitated the end of the Zhivkov regime in 1989.

Vanga and Roerich are rarely associated with each other in the still prevailing perspective on socio-religious processes that unfolded in socialist Bulgaria. While Vanga's role was widely recognised, the effect of the *NRP* is considered

of any significance, its only surviving feature being the room dedicated to N. K. Roerich at the National Art Gallery in Sofia. However, Roerich's name still activates a powerful imagination linked to "Lyudmila" and Vanga⁵⁸, ethics and "spirituality", the East and the Mystic Mountain, to History and cosmic energies. The persistence of all these notions in the post-communist era is yet to be fully appreciated.

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⁵⁸ I was able to assess this impact in my work in post-communist Bulgaria over the last twenty years, on field sites in the central-western regions that benefited from the policy of heritage preservation of religious buildings in the 1970s and 1980s. On several occasions, the memory of the cultural policy "under Ljudmila [Zhivkova]" or an evocation of Vanga came up with the mere mention of Roerich's name.

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