

**The International Children's Assembly “Banner of Peace”:
A Case Study of Childhood under Socialism**
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Wrapped in nostalgia and constantly inviting adult imagination, the social category of childhood has provided ample ground for the waging of symbolic battles. This analysis zooms into a peculiar account of the child which bears double ideological charge – the vision and experience of childhood under socialism. The approach to childhood as a social construct is particularly productive when applied to state policy, because it reveals crucial relationships between the seemingly apolitical nature of the child and nation-building ideologies. It is intriguing, for example, to observe the discursive ways of state socialism in presenting images of happy childhood which enact the benevolence of the party-state. In this sense, the current study aims to contribute to existing discussions of politicized childhood by foregrounding the conceptual efforts of constructing the child as embodiment of socialist righteousness.

Argument and Context

The following pages chart a unique exploration of key political stakes and discursive steps embraced by state leadership in late socialist Bulgaria (1970s-1980s). They present for the first time a thorough analysis of the ideological appropriation of childhood – one that is particularly intriguing due to its ambivalent origin and the subjective factors coming with personal power in totalitarian societies. Upon a brief discussion of childhood under socialism and its Bulgarian realities, this study examines alternative conceptions of childhood sustained by Bulgaria's cultural policy in the late 1970s. These fresh images and ideals of the child are then traced in their interaction with traditional ways of imagining children under socialism – with a focus on the political dividends drawn by the Bulgarian Communist state in order to renew the ideational appeal of its discourse.

In particular, a leading point of argument stems from the so-called Children's Assemblies that – held under the aegis of UNESCO and Bulgarian Communist leadership – became a major cultural event advertising the wholesome conditions of Bulgarian children. The Assemblies (1979-1988) advanced major political agendas of the Bulgarian state by adopting the image of childhood to validate and re-inscribe their benevolent paternalistic role in the care of children and to invoke the progressive ethos of socialist states as leading peace-makers in the Cold War context.

It may be further argued that the Assembly initiative conjured up a composite image of the child – embodied by young participants and on various media – that accommodated two incompatible philosophies of childhood. It constructs and enacts an ambivalent ideal of the child that is creative and spontaneous while highly scripted, empowered with political agency while portraying the child in need of protection. Furthermore, while the state authoritative discourse enacted harmonious and liberated childhood, a number of social realities in Communist Bulgaria opposed this utopia. Thus, the Children's Assembly reflects the discursive and lived paradoxes of late Bulgarian socialism, with regard to the stakes pursued through national rhetoric and the perceived role of children.

Through archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, this study unveils previously uncharted aspects of the ideological labor behind the "Banner of Peace" Assemblies. As discussed in the following lines, it examines closely their original conception in the context of

socialist cultural production. It ponders on the vagaries of personal power and their lasting effects in public imagination. Ultimately, it reminds of the peculiar symbolic utility of the child for the socialist project and its meaning-making strategies.

For the purposes of this analysis, a very productive point of departure may be found in the often unquestioned relationship between national policy and the role of childhood. Although focused on the interplay of nation and the child in western society (such as the United States), anthropologist Sharon Stephens offers valuable findings that may be applied to the socialist context. It is not uncommon for politicians to talk and act "in the best interest" of the nation's children: "the innocent and vulnerable child has strong political appeal" exactly because it has been cleansed of historical, ethnic, economic and other culture-defined specificities (Stephens 8). A universalized *child* in the singular, Stephens remarks, helps to steer clear of political conflict over differing visions of the nation, and of the place of children variously marked by their socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender and region (8). Thus, while notions of the child and of childhood in general underwrite a host of nation-building documents and acts, they still linger unexamined in popular imagination.

In this sense, the nation-state constructs its self-image by including children whose identities are malleable enough to justify state policies and generally advertize national wellbeing, and by excluding or ignoring those who do not exhibit "normal childhood". The child ultimately operates as a national resource of both symbolic and physical order that may be harnessed toward state objectives. Zooming into the socialist context, prior studies point to the crucial role of children and youth as the future builders of the revolutionary society (Mead and Calas 183-184). Because it needed the child as a live presence and pledge for its anticipated bright future, the socialist party-state positioned children as an essential element of its symbolic décor.

From its onset in the 1920s, the Bolshevik state positioned youth in the vanguard of social construction. Once accepted in the Pioneer Organization at the age of 7-9, a Soviet child relinquished her childish position in order to perform her responsibilities as a good student, ideological model and corrective to peers and adults alike (Gorsuch 15-16; Mead and Calas 185). To demonstrate the continuity of a heroic tradition, young Pioneers replicated the social world of adults in their political activities by attending meetings and parades, working in the field to aid agricultural enterprises, capturing criminals, and even dying as adults, loyal to the communist cause (Paunova 214). Thus the child under socialism mattered not only as the vulnerable core of domesticity (Stephens 10), but also as the living proof of a virtuous new order. This philosophy defined its marked visibility in the public sphere, well beyond the confines of the family.

It is, therefore, important to detect the traditionally *embodied* nature of socialist childhood – it captivated the mind not so much by mediated images on photographs, film and canvas, but rather through the physical presence of happy children. A case in point is Ildiko Erdei's analysis (2004) of the Yugoslavian Pioneer Organization as a marker of national and ideological growth. In its pursuit of socializing "ideologically decided children" and for the children's "best interests," the Yugoslavian party-state implemented the "ideology of the happy child" by producing the symbols of its success: the happy faces of young Pioneers engaged in structured activities (169).

Childhood in Communist Bulgaria: Conventional and New Formats

As in other nations in the Soviet bloc, Bulgarian children experienced a heavily didactic education in the early decades of socialist rule. This was particularly true given the ideological

dependence of Bulgarian leadership on any political step taken by Moscow, which would characterize Bulgaria as the most loyal of Soviet satellites. In following the Soviet model, children's learning and leisure activities aimed to cultivate a collectivist ethos that would dominate individual talent and interests. The Bulgarian "Septemvriiche" (Young Septembrist) Pioneer Organization – built after its Soviet counterpart for the political education of youth – strove to neutralize cultural legacies from the family and mold a homogenized set of cultural capital (Paunova 214). Simultaneously, this model gave equal access to knowledge, skills, and practices that had been the privilege of only some children.

A perceived threat to young Bulgarians lay in the tools of Western ideological diversion - lifestyle choices such as decadent rock music, Western fashion, consumerism, and resulting attitudes like bad manners, and irresponsibility. Since the early 1970s, the external enemy to socialist morals lost its distinctly Western origin (K. Taylor 53) and took on the shape of poor taste or tastelessness which was battled through a number of state programs.¹ In this case, children's ideological purity became policed by efforts to instill particular aesthetic and emotional effects through Pioneer conduct.

Despite their contempt for bourgeois aesthetics, socialist cultural reformers also banked on the "sanctifying touch of high culture" (Jenkins 15) to educate future citizens in matters of good taste. Thus, the genres of aesthetic education in school and extracurricular Pioneer activities very much resembled Western cultural production - exhibitions, literary recitals, musical and dance performances. These activities made part of the all-people's amateur arts movement which offered the benefits of cultural expression, yet in a restricted and ideologically sanctioned way. Thematically and through their "joyful experience" (Shirvindt 60), they always came to foreground the superiority of socialist order and the mass accessibility of high culture to all social groups.

A different page in educational and cultural strategies was opened when in 1975 a new political figure stepped in at the lead of the state Committee for Culture (CC) and as acting Minister of Culture: Ludmila Zhivkova, the daughter of long-standing Communist leader, Todor Zhivkov. As an historian trained in the West, Zhivkova harnessed state resources toward grand-scale cultural programs that would often push at socialist canons in order to achieve much broader humanist ideals. A pivotal project of hers, the International Children's Assembly "Banner of Peace" was held on the occasion of the UN International Year of the Child (1979). The Assembly invited children from around the world to the nation's capital to send a message of peace through creativity. Throughout four big meetings (1979, 1982, 1985, 1988) and two mini-assemblies (1980, 1986), young participants would engage in creative activities in the arts, sport, science and technology, and would even convene in the first ever Children's Parliament.

The Children's Assembly: Rationale and Enactment of the Child Creator

As the focal point of this research, the "Banner of Peace" Assemblies unveil their conception and ideological role through a host of sources that overpass the conventional boundaries of archive-based historical inquiry. It is therefore worth to briefly comment on the combination of methodologies that best address the rationale and enactment of this past event. A great deal of

¹ The overall effort of the Bulgarian state in rectifying tastelessness and cultivating the "new personality" of communism was embodied by the Program for Aesthetic Education, started in the mid-1960s and remodeled in the 1970s.

information on Bulgaria's cultural policies in the 1970s-1980s was destroyed or never committed to paper or film, because it touched on topics which jeopardized the position of important individuals. Other pieces of data are not yet processed and made available by Bulgarian state archives. Thus, a major part of findings rest on written and oral accounts by Assembly organizers, participants and witnesses. This project builds a peculiar relationship to performance. On the one hand, it takes performance as its object of analysis by dwelling on the enacted nature of the children's meetings, seeking their experiential dimensions. On the other hand, it engages performance on an additional, methodological level to recognize the epistemic value of embodied knowledge.

By combining archival study and ethnographic interviews, the present work manages to integrate both written and expressive knowledge that is not readily available in records. It follows the theoretical understanding that performance – or what Diana Taylor calls the *repertoire* – is also a way of obtaining and transmitting knowledge. That the seemingly constant data stored by the *archive* may be no less mediated than live performance (D. Taylor 16). This premise determines the analytical weight and validity of informant accounts in the present research.

The "Banner of Peace" meetings come as a result and embodiment of the Program for Aesthetic Education that was initiated in the 1960s to replace direct forms of ideological indoctrination (Kalinova 567). Under the newly appointed Chairwoman of the Committee for Culture, the program was updated to include an emphasis on awakening individual creativity - the ultimate goal of communist education which Zhivkova understood directly as "aesthetic education" (Elenkov 309).

In result, novel pedagogical practices and philosophical reasoning on the child and human evolution became invested in the rationale of the Assembly. The "Banner of Peace" initiative thus brought conceptual and practical models which contrasted with existing forms of working with children. While the Bulgarian Pioneer Organization encouraged the collective ethos of the future communist generation, the Assembly sought to discover a child's individuality through creative work. Typical extracurricular assignments for young Pioneers would urge them to memorize and reproduce works of art, without investing personal creativity. By contrast, art activities within the "Banner of Peace" meetings and subsequent movement were meant as a catalyst for children's creative imagination, irrespective of whether or not they would become professional artists (Lazarov 3).

The encouragement of free self-expression removed the expectation to meet particular criteria, and to seek adult praise and recognition. Assembly participants were not competing for prizes (Lazarov 2) – a concept which departed sharply from the regular competitions, contests, and Olympiads in the Pioneer calendar. As future Communists, young Pioneers typically strove to excel in learning, sports and social activities in the community. Their success was measurable in terms of attained victories, medals, badges, agricultural quotas, academic marks, and diplomas. The overall objective for these ideological forms was the creation of the socialist citizen:

The Pioneer Organization teaches young people in the spirit of patriotism and socialist internationalism; it aims to elevate the heroic models for their patriotic upbringing. Through the grand traditions of older generations, it cultivates the young citizen of the republic: a highly cultured and versatile creative personality. (Dimitrova 64)

Although both the Assembly and the Pioneer Organization aimed to apply the principles of aesthetic education, the scope and humanistic pursuits of the Assembly radically pushed traditional boundaries – at least, in their visionary dimensions. To a great extent then, Zhivkova was inspired to experiment with individual educational approaches to children's potential in order to diversify older teacher-centered methodologies and pose conscious alternatives to the ideological slant of socialist education.

Apparently, Assembly discourse incorporated elements of the Western approach to childhood in seeking and protecting child individuality and creativity in an effort to preserve

"natural," and therefore romanticized (in the sense theorized by Rousseau), child qualities like imagination. Woven into these perspectives lay the idea that children are not passive and unimaginative receptors of culture. They are liberated in their expression and reinterpretation of the world, aware of global inequities and acting on behalf of other children. This marked a departure from the socialization paradigm of Pioneer discourse. Simultaneously, it harkened back to the socialist child-activist who speaks and acts for social justice.

Two major conceptual frames inspired Zhivkova in her definition of the Assembly Child – one of these lay at the basis of her personal philosophy, while the other stemmed from the international children's rights discourse in the 1970s. Zhivkova's lasting interests in human evolution and the role of culture projected the "Banner of Peace" Assemblies as laboratories encouraging children's creativity and solidarity. A key influence on this vision came from the Russian artist and philosopher Nicholas Roerich, whose allegedly esoteric interests and life-work were officially banned in the Soviet Union (Gruev 807). The Roerich family developed their aesthetic and humanist ideas alongside a deeper understanding of Eastern (esp. Indian) cosmologies. The resulting teaching of the Living Ethics found even broader application and acceptance in Nicholas Roerich's cultural activism across the globe. Started in 1904 and developed in the course of thirty years, the Roerich Pact (also known as Pax Cultura) became reality in 1935, when it was signed by 36 American states (including the United States, in the face of F. D. Roosevelt) as a regional international contract (Alexandrov 70). The pact was the first legal document² that more fully addressed problems of the international protection of cultural objects and values (82). A special "Banner of Peace" flag would mark the protected status of cultural sites, similar to the Red Cross. This emphasis came from Roerich's personal conviction that only Culture (capitalized in the ennobling sense defined by the Living Ethics) brought to humanity the necessary balance and impetus for development.

Another motive for contemplating the "Banner of Peace" Assembly Zhivkova found in ongoing international efforts for a participatory approach to human and particularly children's rights. International and local organizations, like the Advisory Centre for Education (UK), sought ways in which to empower traditionally silenced voices, by presenting children as social actors, rather than the objects of acculturation (Holland 109). The movement for children's political agency came along with other threads in the public debate on human rights, such as the UN declared International Women's Year (1975), and the Decade for Women (1976-1985), marked by numerous initiatives. Despite the attempt to voice minority issues, these international efforts suffered a tug-of-war between a universal language of human rights and the differing social conditions of particular groups.

Both of these sources for Zhivkova's vision of the Assembly proposed models that did not entirely fit within the confines of Communist discourse in Bulgaria. It took some rhetorical adaptation, as well as the influential position of the nation's first lady to see the idea accomplished. As she saw children to be most open to new ideas, unburdened by political or

² It is worth noting that the document aimed to protect cultural values and institutions working in the sphere of education, art, and science, and not only material sites and objects. The accent lay on the intangible dimensions of culture, namely "educational, artistic, and scientific institutions," including their personnel, i.e. all individuals in the creative professions (Alexandrov 74-75). The pact gave basis to the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of cultural values, although its action was now limited to times of armed conflict, while Roerich insisted on its validity in both peace and war (Alexandrov 77).

personal interest, Ludmila Zhivkova focused her attention on how to convey these values to young minds, and by extension, to their families and societies.³ The International Year of the Child afforded this opportunity to adults - to discuss children's welfare and rights and thus to put forth their conceptions of childhood. In this sense, the Children's Assembly appears the instrumental project in the Chairlady's policy that sought to realize her grand vision in a radical yet subtle fashion. She directly adopted the broader idealist framework of the Living Ethics and many of the educational insights of the Roerichs, particularly their appeal to respect and encourage children's creative thought (Shaposhnikova 36–40).

Partly in order to camouflage its ideological impurity, the Assembly assumed the official rhetoric framing youth as the new socially aware citizens of (communist) society. The resulting image of childhood bore ambivalent characteristics: while being imaginative and childlike, it put forth a precociously empowered and knowing child with adult-like conviction and actions that spoke out against Cold War realities. Yet it was a child whose voice grew increasingly scripted by adults. This conceptual ambivalence would later work toward the gradual appropriation of the Assembly discourse into the mainstream discourse of socialist upbringing.

In visual terms, this composite image came through a host of representations that became widely circulated by the state-owned media. The Assembly participants and their creative activities were featured in photographs in daily papers, documentaries and reels (commissioned by the government) and regular TV reports throughout the ten-day span of the meetings. Well before the international phase of the Assembly, the regional and national talent screenings and recitals provoked a multitude of articles on the importance of children's creative freedom, innovative educational approaches and the state care for the young, expressed in the production of clothes, toys, and the provision of medical care ("In the language" 41; "The awakening" 8:2). Typical images in newspapers and journals would feature the harmonious coexistence of children from different ethnicities holding hands. Along with such group photos – characteristic of the collectivist tradition in the portrayal of Bulgarian children – there appeared individual shots of young children in the act of drawing, performance or play. These instances indicate a parallel shift toward a state of childhood which invites adult care and protection to be able to keep its innate imagination and creative flight.

Several books and dedicated albums further document the children's meetings, artwork and poems in different languages. These feature the omnipresent motto "Unity, Creativity, Beauty", scenes of meeting foreign guests, forming friendships, creating together alongside famous artists and musicians. The first "Banner of Peace" meeting (1979) is particularly vocal in its visual and symbolic presence as a unique event, full of smiles, fulfilled dreams and a shared language of art that empowers the world's children (International Children's Assembly Album).

Zooming into details of such representations, one can see not only the empowered Child Creator (conceived by Zhivkova) who wields immense artistic freedom, but also symbols traditionally associated with the Pioneer Organization and the general mode of socialist performance. Publicized photos of the Assembly show Pioneer hosts (wearing a red scarf and uniform) for the opening and closing of all events. Each ceremony is announced by the sound of bugle and fanfares – typical elements of Pioneer camps – and by structured formations of children engaging in activities ultimately scripted by adults.

Above all, the strong affective value of the Assembly was achieved by the live presence

³ Opinions and comments by Kiril Avramov and Andrei Leshkov - witnesses and organizers of the Assembly – both in personal interviews, July 2009.

of happy children from around the globe welcomed by their young Bulgarian hosts. In line with the much more visible status of childhood under socialism, the Assembly presented a well scripted performance that enacted the state rationale for a wholesome childhood. The official aegis of UNESCO and the presence of international participants well beyond the Iron Curtain pitched a most convincing case for socialist Bulgaria as a safe haven for the world's children.

Although it necessarily borrowed performative elements from socialist ritual, the Children's Assembly indeed presented a number of novel experiences for young participants. Held in major venues in Sofia and across the country, music concerts, literary recitals, exhibitions and drawing sessions would not award competitive prizes, but announce that all are winners and worthy creators in the Assembly of peace. Most Bulgarian informants who participated in the first Assembly (1979) recall the exhilarating interactions with peers from other cultures and famous artists, writers and musicians. Even from the perspective of Bulgarian children who welcomed Assembly participants this was visible:

We mainly waited in the VIP foyer, and when a plane arrived, we brought the children inside - to a room full of coca-cola, sandwiches with bacon (I still remember those!) and water melon. We exchanged coins and stamps (some of them very exotic) and it was actually pretty emotional. [...] It was a solemn and festive feeling, different from most pioneer activities. First, I had never before seen "party and state leaders" in person, and then I could see Zhivkova, Georgi Yordanov and Amadou Mahtar M'Bow! Not that it was so important to me, but these people were then inapproachable and no contact was possible. And it was a unique feeling for a 10-11-year-old to meet children from exotic and unknown countries and cultures, in the context of the governmental VIP. I felt totally outside the matrix! (Yavor Siderov)

Georgi Toshev, a former member of the Assembly children's bureau charged with organizational work, also points out that the initiative provided a break from the guarded attitude toward ideological and cultural difference, and from didactic injunctions about the unwholesome life of many capitalist children. The forum created a space that, in Georgi's words, encouraged a "cosmopolitan and civilized" feeling of curiosity, not fear of cultural domination. He further outlines the contrast between the Assembly child as "free, artistic, curious," and an individuality and the Bulgarian Pioneer who was a "fighter" for peace and social justice - one of many anonymous members in the organization.

The first Children's Parliament within the frames of the Assembly brought in additional dimensions to the envisioned image of childhood. Organized in the building of the Bulgarian National Assembly, this parliamentary session pointed to the non-childish *work* (in contrast to *play*) of hundreds of young delegates. It adopted an official letter to the world appealing to parents and decision-makers to prevent children's suffering and thus to protect the future from the threats of war, hunger and poverty (Assembly "Banner of Peace" 90). Unlike common images of weak and dependent childhood, Assembly participants manifest a precocious awareness of injustice and a mature adult-like effort to shape global decisions. While aware of their dependent position, they are no longer innocent of their own political power. This time, it is not adults who represent children's best interests, but children themselves who take a visible role and make their voices heard (Gencheva 142). Photographs of the Children's Parliament session inhabit a number of publications by showing children as adult delegates who lead discussions, vote and deliver speeches on behalf of their countries. Such enactment and its images both

resound with and trespass the definition of socialist childhood.

The opening of the "Banner of Peace" Bell Monument marks the finale and culmination of the first Assembly. This ceremony exhibits with greatest sincerity the transformative and supranational goals of the Assembly, while it also brings to light intriguing aspects to the composite image of the Child Creator. Revealed by photos and on film, the opening ritual features a series of symbolic messages to future generations. Built into the foot of the Bell Monument now rests the appeal of Assembly participants "Children of the future, accept the eternal fiery call of immortality - Unity, Creativity, Beauty!" The cosmic scale of the event becomes further revealed in Ludmila Zhivkova's speech that abounds in unusual metaphors in invoking a powerful Child Creator who precipitates the future of all humanity, not just that of the socialist project. A particular image is the concept of Fire, mentioned at least seven times in her speech. Although it makes part of socialist revolutionary discourse, in the context of Zhivkova's words, fire exhibits a sense of eternity, yet of a different sort. It stands for the creative impulse of the Child (and human individual) surpassing concrete ideological loyalties. This formula is reinforced by her final appeal, in line with the humanism of the Living Ethics: "[C]ome and place your stone into the Temple of Culture. Like the fiery bird Phoenix, you chose the path of Fire which is immortal" (Zhivkova 487). In this sense, her spoken words amid a multitude of children and state dignitaries generate new knowledge, new images and scenarios unprecedented for socialist discourse.

The Assemblies in Time

Following Zhivkova's early demise in 1981, the Children's Assemblies gradually assume the discursive tropes and goals of socialism. This shift applied to all of Zhivkova's grand ideas, revealing a less monolithic authoritative discourse that was subject to internal changes in governmental circles. It became visible in the relapse to familiar imagery and language associated with socialist childhood – both in Assembly documents and in participant experience. Images circulated in the media increasingly switched to portraying the optimal conditions for children in Bulgaria, by emphasizing the ideological vitality of the socialist project. They replicated the cheerful harmony of children's friendships across boundaries and circulated images of Ludmila Zhivkova surrounded by children in an attempt to perpetuate her noble initiative.

A host of archived materials produced after 1981 point to a constant desire to bring the growing "Banner of Peace" movement in line with Pioneer activities. As claims the "Banner of Peace" Center report, "DPO Septemvriiche is the natural environment for the unfolding of the "Banner of Peace" movement."⁴ The symbiosis of the movement with Pioneer discourse over the years produces a classic example of how the idealistic ethos behind the motto "Unity, Creativity, Beauty" and its creative impetus can be utilized towards ideological inculcation. In the process, Pioneer discourse becomes regenerated through the movement's color, vitality, and renewed striving for peace which always bears ideological connotations of socialist moral superiority. The uneasy relationship between the two remains unresolved until the fall of the system (Elenkov 68-69).

In his memories of the "Banner of Peace" project, the member of the children's bureau Georgi Toshev remarks how the Assembly was later "transformed into yet another state

⁴ Central State Archive, Committee for Culture Fund (405-10-92: 10).

enterprise."⁵ It spawned a multitude of staff and centers that were no longer concerned with actual education, but with ideological activities in line with the Pioneer Organization. In 1979, he relates, the fifteen-strong children's bureau does actual work in organization, recitals, hosting of concerts, and cooperating with renowned TV directors. For 1982, however, the Committee for Culture assigns to the bureau "largely representative duties,"⁶ which turns the idea of children's agency into a mere slogan. While the first Assembly encouraged free interaction with foreign guests, subsequent meetings, says Georgi, restricted contacts with foreigners through visible police control and a less considerate attitude to Bulgarian children.

According to Gergana Mircheva – participant in Assembly 1988 – there was different treatment for Bulgarian and foreign children, and the overall formalism of the event gradually killed her enthusiasm:

There was a division between Bulgarians and foreigners - the second being accommodated in better kept buildings. During collective lunches and dinners, the tables were so arranged that no mixing with guests was possible. Altogether, the ill-covered ideological semblances and the hollow scenarios provoked my disappointment which was reinforced by a feeling of national inferiority. The overall format was simulative and did not facilitate natural interactions among participants.⁷

Simultaneously, Bulgarian media kept describing the Assembly as a prestigious youth forum with the highest civic and artistic mission, Gergana reminisces. For many Bulgarian children, being chosen to participate was perceived as a great honor, for which other children felt jealous.⁸

Reports from the State Security archives reveal another telling example of the rift between constructed ideal and reality - particularly with regard to Bulgarian Gypsy children that have traditionally been marginalized. Thus, in 1982 a Japanese official guest took a few photos of "four semi-dressed Gypsy children who were begging for money" while the Japanese group of instructor and three children were eating ice-cream in front of the Grand-hotel Sofia (45). The Japanese woman reportedly gave them color cards and hugged them. The file further assures that "measures have been taken to prevent ill-clad Gypsy children into hotel areas that host foreign guests, as well as around the venues of the Assembly" (46). Here, we should bring to mind an interesting detail in the carnival program for the same Assembly 1982: the procession of themed displays also featured a colorful Gypsy dance troupe with a bear. It aimed to show in abstract ways the cultural variety and exuberance of Gypsy people, yet in a disciplined and selective fashion that did not present the real situation of their children. The boundaries of childhood established by the Assembly did not let in just any child. It is in such (non)presentation of minority children that, in the view of Sharon Stephens, the nation-state enacts its desired cultural identity.

Based on the above data, it becomes clear that subsequent "Banner of Peace" Assemblies veered toward verbal and expressive forms typical of Bulgarian socialist repertoire, particularly the one characterizing public space before Zhivkova's cultural projects. The fresh conceptual

⁵ Personal correspondence with Georgi Toshev, July-August 2010.

⁶ Central State Archive, Ministry of Culture Fund (405-10-92: 37).

⁷ Personal correspondence with Gergana Mircheva, January 2010.

⁸ Personal interview and correspondence with Diana Misljeva, October 2008.

elements introduced by the first children's meeting become formally replicated in language and ritual - a process that gradually erased the symbolic connotation of the events, resulting in a simulation of form. Images, phrases and actions were reproduced in line with the models of "authoritative discourse" (Yurchak 25-26) in a likely attempt to preserve a successful formula which was revised toward narrower state objectives.

Conclusion – Aestheticized Childhood and Its Aftereffects

From her own perspective, Zhivkova sought to "outwit the system" (in the words of Georgi Toshev) by creating a cultural hub whose humanistic appeal would unite people around the highest moral standards. For many contemporaries⁹ of the Zhivkova epoch, her projects attempted "an intellectual escape" from the fossilized and self-referential model of state socialism. Yet, it was exactly the ideals she summoned that acted as a mirror to an ideal social order (Handelman 41-44). In this line of thought, the noble "Banner of Peace" creed provided a "reflection" of the Bulgarian "socialism with a human face."¹⁰

In his *The Cultural Front*, Elenkov clearly articulates the symbolic utility of Zhivkova's bold visions. Through her interpretations of the new social role of culture and art, the CC Chairlady provides novel means of ideological signification for the Bulgarian state. The "Banner of Peace" Assembly and movement bear further symbolic potential whereby the socialist project is talked about in terms of aesthetic and all-human categories (Elenkov 398). The aspects of Assembly language and enactment that pass through the state ideological sieve are exactly those that remain congenial to socialist philosophy: the belief in the future of a new social order, the progressive unity against imperialist and colonial aggression, the "laws of beauty" governing all social relations in the new system. These beliefs find convenient expression and regeneration in "Banner of Peace" symbols such as the Child, Peace, Unity, Creativity, Beauty. Sanctified by the evocative rituals of the first Assembly, these images carry aesthetic and ethical charge for the flagging socialist utopia.

Here lies the "soft power" of an aestheticized and therefore empowered childhood. By its nature, the image of the child – and especially the gifted and protected child – concentrates immense symbolic capital for its nation. In all of Zhivkova's projects, the idealistic promise of spiritual enlightenment offers a novel way to assert the advantages of socialist culture, even through the unorthodox style of the Chairlady. The image of the Child Creator in Assembly discourse magnifies this effect through its romanticized apolitical appeal - it concentrates, as we see by now, the imaginative labor of the nation-state that is ultimately and fundamentally political. Thus, the more liberal and universal view on children's creativity envisioned into the socialist context largely masked existing socialization practices, without really transforming them, as Zhivkova hoped. In all cases, this image of childhood acts in favor of the benevolent Bulgarian state, and becomes embodied in the happy faces of the world's children (Gencheva 217).

In the context of growing post-socialist nostalgia among Bulgarians and other former socialist citizens, it is crucial to understand the historical parameters that bore and very often

⁹ Personal interviews with Georgi Vurlinkov and Andrei Leshkov, June-July 2009.

¹⁰ A reference to the more liberal political course taken by the Czechoslovakian Communist leader Alexander Dubček in 1968, described as "socialism with a human face."

naturalized evaluations of the recent past. Recollections of childhood under socialism are fragmentary and fail to engage with their ideological contexts. Here lies the risk of political amnesia or even manipulation. Studies as this one aim to create an awareness – not only of the ambivalent and even opposed ideologies invested in the virtual child, but also of the totalitarian dimensions of personal power. Alternatively, it may be also concluded that despite their ideological appropriation, the Assembly ideas generated some limited practical efforts to stimulate children's self-expression, as indicated by this study. Yet, their grand scale and universalist aesthetic appeal became necessarily implicated with the hegemony of state socialism

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