

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
DOCTORAL PROGRAM

9th October 2016

Prof. Monica Black
Search Committee Chair
Department of History
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996

Dear Prof. Black and members of the Search Committee,

I am writing to apply for the tenure-track position at assistant professor level in Eastern European and/or Russian History. Under the direction of Prof. Mark Mazower, I am completing my Ph.D. in History at Columbia University, titled “A Cyber-Socialism at Home and Abroad: Bulgarian Modernisation, Computers, and the World 1967-1989”, with an expected degree date of May 2017. I am a historian of modern Eastern Europe, with experience in teaching Russian history too, whose focus on the Balkans, history of technology, and the late 20th century in a global context will complement the department’s existing strengths.

My current work employs a dual methodology of a commodity history of the Bulgarian computer industry (manufacturing up to half of the Eastern Bloc’s electronics), and an ethnography of the technical and economic class that created it, thought with it, and sold it across the world. This was a communist country led by a centralized party. It needed money, it sought prestige. It used computers to do both those things, and because it did so globally, my deeply researched local story becomes an international story of innovation, ideology, and exchange. The global nature of this industry became a channel and field for the transmission of new business and economic practices across the Iron Curtain. Granted much freedom by the Politburo, and backed by a concerted state secret intelligence effort, technical intellectuals and managers became plugged into transnational business and professional networks, meeting the First World’s practices on the ground of the Third, with India being my case study. At the same time, the export-oriented nature of this industry undermined the automation utopian dreams of the party, which was seeking a non-political reform of its moribund economy. Ultimately, this led to the intellectual discourse being turned against it by its technicians in a call for reform, while their technocratic managers translated their clout into newfound economic power after 1989.

Based on work in Bulgarian, Russian, and Indian archives, this work challenges both the usual chronologies and geographies of the communist period, as well as showing the benefits of loyalty to a superpower. The Iron Curtain becomes porous, while the end point of 1989 disappears when we look into the continuation of economic and even political power past the reputed fall of communism. It also argues against the irrelevance of small states to large geopolitical issues, showing how the prism of Bulgaria can tell us much about the nature of the socialist international economy, and indeed the links between capitalism and communism. My interests, combined with my languages, allow me to research and teach both European and international history, beyond my main region of interest.

My next research project grows out of the current one, as I address the socialist business class through a study of socialist economists, businessmen and intellectuals and their engagement with the

emerging information economy of the 1970s in the West. As my first project, the work will be based on research in many languages and archives (Bulgaria, Russia, ex-Yugoslav, the Vienna International Institute for Systems Analysis). Practices such as systems analysis and mathematical modelling, the know-how of negotiations and business practices, issues of service economics and the information age, became a common language across the Iron Curtain. Did the Eastern Bloc really fail to enter the information age? I will argue that it didn't, showing for the first time how certain segments of the population utilized the new information systems and links. I believe that my intersection of technology and politics, and in integrating South-Eastern Europe history in global history, complements well your department's intellectual concerns, such Prof. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius's expertise in German relations to Europe and the north-eastern part of the continent; Prof. Shellen Wu's focus on how a state's interaction with world science changes its own worldviews; or Prof. Denise Phillips's upcoming study of innovation using a single locus for the discussion.

In my classes, I bring European history alive by getting students to think through primary sources. In my teaching of the radicalisation of the late 1960s and 1970s during the "Europe since 1945" class, I employed a wide range of punk and rock songs from both sides of the Iron Curtain, as well as manifestos and writings by student radicals of the period, to convey the dissatisfaction that drove the decade. When teaching Russian and Soviet history, I used Russian science-fiction stories and pictures and records of esoteric animal experiments from the immediate post-1917 period to allow students to understand the radical utopian visions that drove 1920s Soviet politics and culture. In teaching 20th century history, I run film series to illustrate contemporaneous responses to issues we are studying, such as modernisation, war trauma, or the sexual revolution. For the 19th century, I replace this luxury with other primary sources of suitability. I believe in one-on-one or small-group tutoring, probably out of my experience as an A-level tutor in the UK. I have carried this over to my work as a teaching assistant in Columbia, combining the ability to lead class discussions with a keen sense of individual mentoring on writing. I emphasize that the ability to craft and support an argument is one of the key skills a student can take away from an undergraduate history class, apart from specific knowledge. As such, I always make myself available and encourage discussion of writing methods and presentation too.

I am eager to offer courses on post-1600 European history, especially the role of Europe in the world. My courses will place major issues of the time such as nationalism, urbanisation, industrialisation, the 'German/Balkan etc' questions, in the framework of wider world trends such as imperialism, globalisation, the rise of international organisations, and development. At the same time, I will teach more specialised courses on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but always with an eye to questions beyond the region themselves, showing them to be an integrative part of both European and global developments. I also want to offer thematic courses on the information society and the Cold War; a history of science in the Eastern Bloc; and on empires and state formation in Eastern Europe.

I am attaching my curriculum vitae as well as a writing sample on Bulgaria's relations with the Global South. You will also receive references from Mark Mazower and Adam Tooze (Columbia), and Mary Neuburger (University of Texas-Austin). Please let me know if I can provide any additional information for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Victor Petrov