

“Trapped” by History (Interview with Bulgarian historian Stefan Detchev)

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We are pleased to introduce TRIBUNE readers to Stefan Detchev, a Bulgarian historian who has published and edited many books and articles about Bulgarian and Balkan history and cultural studies. One of his recent articles, titled “Let’s leave the History to the historians. But which historians?” attracted a great deal of attention in both Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia. In a uniquely objective and professional way, his recent text demystifies a large part of the national historic myths in both countries. He offers a detailed explanation regarding the specifics of the historical dispute between the two countries, while at the same time offering a new approach, a new reading - which could lead to the resolution of the bizarre Macedonian-Bulgarian dispute. Detchev is a Doctor of History and Associate-Professor of Modern Bulgarian History and Historiography. He was a guest lecturer at the University of Complutense in Madrid and the University of Graz. Currently teaches at the Southwestern University in Blagoevgrad and at the University of Sofia.

- Mr. Detchev, can you please share with us what inspired you to become a historian?

The first time I felt attracted to what is called “History” was the moment I received my 4th grade history textbook in primary school. I remember it as if it were yesterday: it had a picture of Tzar Simeon on the cover page. Before that, I only heard older pupils talking about “History”. The school usually distributed the textbooks in the beginning of September. I collected my copy, went home and immediately began reading. I couldn’t stop reading it, and within 2-3 days I finished the whole textbook. On September 15th, I attended my first day of school already knowing all of the lessons.

Otherwise, I am a specialist in modern and contemporary Bulgarian and Balkan history, with a special focus on the period between the 19th and 20th century. I am interested in a wide range of topics, including political, economic and cultural history. I have publications on a variety of issues – ranging from political ideology, to nationalism, and the history of nutrition and sexuality

- Do you remember the first time you heard something about Macedonia?

Yes, indeed. I still have a very clear memory of my first contact with Macedonia, when it was part of former Yugoslavia. From the late 1960s until the end of the 90s my father worked for the Bulgartabac tobacco company, and in 1975, together with his colleagues he visited Yugoslavia. At the time I was a 5th grade student, and I can still remember the armchairs and the sofa in our living room being covered with plastic bags full of goods from Yugoslavia. One of them was a t-shirt produced in Macedonia, which attracted a lot of attention when I wore it at school. One day, one of my teachers told me: “You have a very beautiful t-shirt!”, to which I proudly replied “It’s from Yugoslavia!”. I remember thoroughly going through everything my father brought from Yugoslavia – all of the inscriptions, labels, advertisements – and was impressed by the fact that everything produced in Nish (Eastern Serbia) was written in a language close to ours, but the goods produced in Prilep, Skopje and Ohrid were in a language almost identical to ours. I believe that the thing that impressed me the most (without being able to understand and comment on it at the time) was the analytic nature of the language, the absence

of grammatical cases, and the use of the article. Even today I remember some of the ads: “Kikiriki, lupeni, parzheni vo maslo, soleni”. Or “Kupuvaite gi nashite ubavi proizvodi ...”

I have one more memory - which I believe took place in the late 1970s – just after I read the book “The Macedonian Question: Historical-Political Reference”, published by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1968. I accidentally stumbled upon a radio program broadcasted by Radio Skopje, dedicated to the anniversary of Gotse Delchev. The program presented an expose about his life and work - however, from what I heard, I could not recognize that they were talking about the same person. Gotse was presented as a revolutionary who fought mainly against Bulgarians and Greeks.

- Your publications are followed with interest on both sides of the Belasitsa Mountain, especially your recent article (regarding the “Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness and Cooperation” signed between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria), which attracted a great deal of attention. As a historian, what is your general opinion about the Treaty itself? Does this agreement create prospects for progress regarding the historical disagreements between the two countries?

I am not quite sure whether politicians and diplomats that included Article 8, paragraphs 2 and 3 in the treaty have a clear understanding that on both sides of the border there aren’t many people who are ready and willing to deal with the past and the “historic events” by conducting “expertly” and “objective” “scientific interpretation” of sources. (This is literally required by the text of the treaty, and the words just mentioned in quotations are taken verbatim from the document.) However, such an approach would be extremely unpopular in both Bulgaria and Macedonia. Both countries have fundamentally confusing national historic narratives, in which the problematic (or shall I say, false) areas are the ones that are most present in the media and enjoy a relatively high level of public approval.

- How would you explain the essence of the current historical dispute between the two countries? Give us an example of the confusing historic narratives you mentioned previously.

In the period from 1945 to 1991, the government in Yugoslav Macedonia promoted a certain version of “Macedonianism”, which is far from the ideas of the “national revivalists”, of the IMORO and the Ilindentsi, as well as of the IMRO that was active between the two world wars. This Macedonianism is even quite different from the initial ethnic Macedonianism that was openly promoted by the Communist-dominated IMRO (United). For the activists of the IMRO (United) the ethnic Macedonian nation emerged out of the Bulgarian nation, and at one point simply became distinct from the latter. On the other hand, since the 1960s the government in Bulgaria (under the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party and Todor Zhivkov) began developing an extremely rigid kind of nationalism, which does not allow any room for nuances and specific interpretations - and it is, thus, unable to understand the dynamics related to the process of nation building in Macedonia.

As a result of this situation, for decades now, young Macedonian students have been taught that throughout history their biggest enemies were the Bulgarians; and in the same time, young Bulgarians have been taught that the ethnic Macedonian nation is “artificial” – unlike their own nation, which apparently has existed forever. These versions of Bulgarian and Macedonian nationalism continued to develop in the same direction even after 1991. Bulgaria failed to formulate a new flexible policy towards Macedonia; and Macedonia, instead of embracing the historical facts and offering a

new, more realistic interpretation of history – underwent a process of “antiquization” and falsifying of the ideas and the past of the historical IMRO.

Not so different at all is the situation among both “expert” historians and other human scientists. To this very day, a whole department at the Sofia University is engaged in lecturing the “History of Bulgaria” (starting at least from the early Middle Ages, up until now). In Skopje, on the other hand, we have the “Institute of National History”, which explores the past of Macedonia and the ethnic Macedonians “from antiquity to the present”. The media on both sides of the border continue to be overwhelmed by false and mythicized romanticist narratives about the past of “our people”.

- I am glad you mentioned the need for nuanced interpretations! What would be a realistic, objective interpretation of the emergence of the ethnic Macedonian identity? At what point and under what conditions did it start developing?

One of the things that the Bulgarian historiography should accept is the fact that “ethnic Macedonianism” and the “Macedonian language” is not solely an issue of violence conducted by a single-party totalitarian government. In reality, the emergence of ethnic Macedonianism as a form of identity, takes place in Vardar Macedonia (and to a certain extent in Aegean Macedonia) with the purpose of resisting the violent policies of Serbianisation (that is, Hellenisation). The immigration from Macedonia to Bulgaria by many people who had a well-established Bulgarian identity, the fading connections between the locals and the IMRO in Vardar Macedonia, as well as the two decades spent living in a different (Serbian) institutional framework, without any contacts with the Bulgarian state - leads to the emergence of a generation which began defining and crystallizing a separate ethnic Macedonian consciousness. This Macedonianism, which emerged in the period between the two world wars, was aimed at preserving local cultural specifics and fighting against Serbianization.

Towards the end of 1933, the notion of a Macedonian ethnicity and a separate Macedonian language was officially accepted by the Communist IMRO (United), and in the beginning of 1934, the Comintern (Communist International) itself also gave open support for these positions. From that point on, Macedonian communists who were members of the Bulgarian Communist Party also began consider themselves as “ethnic Macedonians”.

As far as Aegean Macedonia is concerned, the establishment of ethnic Macedonianism in that area was, to large extent, also facilitated by the the Greek and Yugoslav leftist forces during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). This process opened up the space for opposing the policies Hellenization - this time no longer based on Bulgarianism, but on the basis of a Macedonian ethnic identity.

The fact that such process did not take place in Pirin Macedonia proves that the ethnic Macedonian identity emerged mostly there where the Bulgarian language, education and culture were isolated and where the people did not have direct access to them! Consequently, instead of stigmatizing, the Bulgarian historiography should seek better ways to understand and explain these dynamic processes that took place in this given historical period.

- In your opinion, what is the basis of the history-related “misunderstandings” and stigmatizing taking place between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria?

The biggest issue is the imposed perception of history in Balkans, according to which the history should be “national” and should extend as far back into antiquity as possible. The second issue is the inability to analyze historical figures, outside of today’s

understanding of the ethnic nation. Another problem (present in both countries) is the widespread notion of the need for some kind of “national unification”, which is not so different from old-fashioned irredentism. Yet another issue is the inability to perceive the ethnic nation as a modern phenomenon - and on that note, the Bulgarian nation is only 50 to 100 years older than the Macedonian. To sum it up, I would like to quote the Belgian Bulgarianist Raymond Detrez, who once summarized the Bulgarian-Macedonian issue as follows: In Bulgaria they say “If once you were Bulgarians, then today you are also Bulgarians!”, and in Macedonia they say “If today we are ethnic Macedonians, then we have always been ethnic Macedonians!”

- What do you think should be done in order to overcome the current problems?

The problems cannot be resolved unless both sides agree to recognize certain realities that are beyond doubt. Skopje should acknowledge that the national revivalists, as well as the activists of the historical IMORO/IMRO were both Bulgarians (in terms of their ethnicity and language) and Macedonians (in terms of their struggle for an autonomous and later independent Macedonia) the same time - and that it was very difficult to make a distinction between the two. Sofia, on the other hand, should clearly recognize the consensus that exist today in Macedonian society: 1) The Macedonian ethnic nation is a separate and independent nation, and 2) Macedonia must be a separate and independent state. As you can see, the road ahead of us is still too long and it will take time to reach our goal. That is why, the Treaty is only a step, or I would rather say a leap (maybe the first of its kind) into the right direction. Addressing these issues will be very difficult and will take time. Both historiographies are extremely conservative and reactionary. Due to nepotism in the Balkans, we might also expect from the young generation of historians to criticize and reject the ideas of their historian fathers and grandfathers.

There is another very important thing, which is still not fully understood by the establishments of both Bulgarian and Macedonian historiographies. The educational systems in both countries should comprehend and explain to young people that identity is not a biological feature, and is not determined by blood and DNA – but it is rather a socio-historical product. Identity is both multifaceted and variable in time and space, and in given contexts - and is influenced by many criteria, which rarely are unchangeable. It is also predetermined by the interaction of different groups in given contexts, and - depending on the particular historical period - the scope and social depth may also be unequal. In that sense, the Bulgarian-Macedonian case is only one of the many confirmations of the latter on this God’s world. Hence, both biased historiographies should find common points in their search for more nuanced and historically accurate national narratives – ones that would reflect the whole complexity and variety of the Macedonian Question. This is an absolute necessity if we intend to cultivate educated, open-minded, tolerant towards the “other”, and responsible citizens that don’t live their lives with paranoia that someone is stealing their history; or having the perception that the only form of history in this world is the “national” one. No, histories can also be “common” and shared - and sometimes so intertwined, that national historiographies only distort this picture. To achieve this, both sides need to make the necessary effort. Only through this kind of nuancing of the narratives will the shared historical past and shared celebrations become a reality.