

OPINION

for the dissertation of ALEXANDAR JOSHEVSKI,
PhD student at the Department of History of Bulgaria,
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On the topic: "IMARO and IMRO Activists and the Bulgarian Rule of Vardar
Macedonia (1941-1944)"

for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"
in the field of Higher Education 2. Doctor of Philosophy and Humanities
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Doctoral Program "History of Bulgaria" (Modern Bulgarian History 1878 – 1944)

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vanya Petrova Stoyanova,
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The dissertation of PhD Alexander Joshevski deals with one of the most dramatic periods of the Modern Bulgarian history and the development of the Bulgarian national question. The governance of Vardar Macedonia annexed to Bulgaria during the Second World War and the attitude of the activists of the Internal Macedonian and Adrianople Revolutionary Organization (IMARO) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) towards it is a topic that gives rise to polar interpretations and assessments by historians in Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. Its elaboration is essential for the multilateral study of the Macedonian question, the actors of the liberation movement involved in its solution and the national character of their activities. Its choice is a challenge for any researcher, even more so for a young scholar, and deserves admiration in itself.

The dissertation, 314 pages in length, consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, appendices and a bibliography.

In the introduction a historiographical overview of the topic is made, paying special attention to the main works in the historiographies of Bulgaria, the Republic of North Macedonia and Croatia. Some English-speaking, Central European and Greek scholars are also

presented, who partly address it in writings of a more general nature. However, the doctoral student's actual knowledge of the research on the dissertation's subject matter becomes apparent in the course of the presentation, when, in elucidating specific issues, he discusses the different points of view and polemicizes with the authors – an approach that I find correct and productive.

The lack of a comprehensive study on the topic, as stated in the introduction, is an objective reason for Alexander Joshevski to undertake its development. He sets out to investigate the fate of the activists of IMARO and IMRO and Ivan Mihailov personally after the annexation of Vardar Macedonia to Bulgaria in 1941; what their attitude was towards the Bulgarian rule in the period 1941-1944; whether and to what extent they participated in it; what their relations were with each other and with the Bulgarian authorities; how they accepted the annexation of the region to Bulgaria and what their views were on the solution of the Macedonian question.

The dissertation is written on the basis of a rich and varied source base – archival materials from the state archives of Bulgaria, the Republic of North Macedonia and Croatia, published documents in thematic collections, diaries and memoirs of participants in the events, periodicals from the era – carefully and critically analyzed by the PhD student.

The structure of the dissertation is subordinated to the chronological-thematic approach, it is logical and justified by the development of historical processes and the main accents in them.

The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled "Vardar Macedonia on the Eve of Bulgarian Rule", is introductory in nature. It traces the state of the region within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the situation of the Bulgarians there in the interwar period. It presents the activists of the IMARO and IMRO in Vardar Macedonia, as well as the activities of the refugee organizations of the Macedonian Bulgarians and their views on the Macedonian question. The defeat of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941 and the establishment of the Bulgarian Action Committees as a form of self-organization of the local Bulgarian population after the entry of the German troops are examined.

The second chapter is devoted to the veterans of IMARO and the Bulgarian rule of Vardar Macedonia. This problem has been underestimated in historiography and therefore its examination has a contributory character. The author shows with examples the support that the remaining living revolutionaries gave to the Bulgarian state policy for the annexation of Vardar Macedonia as an act of liberation and national unification. The return of some of them to

Macedonia and their participation in the national celebrations is discussed, as well as the growth of the structures of the Ilinden organization in the newly liberated lands. Particular attention is paid to the discussion and adoption by the National Assembly of the Law for the especially meritorious in the liberation struggles activists in February 1943, recognizing them as Bulgarian national revolutionaries. In their applications for pensions they personally declared their Bulgarian national affiliation.

The third chapter of the dissertation, dealing with Ivan Mihailov and the Bulgarian rule of Vardar Macedonia, is also distinguished by its scientific contributions. It traces his path in emigration after the Coup of May 19, 1934. His attitude towards the Bulgarian rule in the region and the Bulgarian state during the Second World War, from which he deliberately distanced himself, is examined. The author presents new information about his activities during the war, bringing documentary evidence that gives a new insight into the image of him that has emerged in historiography. They reveal Ivan Mihailov's views, expressed as early as 1943, on the future of Macedonia and the struggle for the Bulgarian cause in it, his negative opinion on the measures against the Jews in Bulgaria and Croatia during the war, his attitude towards the USA and Italy, etc. The continuity in his views on the solution of the Macedonian question and the idea of an autonomous Macedonia as the only chance for the preservation of the Bulgarian spirit in it is shown.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation sheds light on the relations between the IMRO activists and the Bulgarian military and administrative authorities in Vardar Macedonia. The author examines the two main groups and the leading figures in them, claiming to represent the Bulgarians fighting for freedom in Macedonia, implacable opponents of the Serbian regime – the circle around Ivan Mihailov, on the one hand, and the activists around the Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization (MYSRO), on the other, who lived and operated in Vardar Macedonia. Defined by historians as "the Chkatrov – Gyuzelev group", they, according to Al. Joshevski, should be called "IMRO – MYSRO". Both accepted Bulgarian rule as liberation, but while the former, placed under the watchful eye of the Bulgarian security services for manifestations of separatism and autonomism, played no significant role in it, the latter acted in support of Bulgarian unification. The criticism they leveled at the Bulgarian authorities was not because of their differentiation on the basis of different national identities, but because of the government's failings and unpreparedness for the task they were expected to perform. This chapter also deals very briefly with the hostile attitude of the Communist Party of Macedonia towards the activists of IMARO and IMRO, which, contrary to historical truth,

denied the existence of a Bulgarian nationality in the region. The inclusion of this paragraph does not pretend to be a detailed study of the issue, but aims to throw a bridge to the next historical era and the subsequent pogrom against the Bulgarians in Vardar Macedonia.

My criticisms of this fourth chapter of the dissertation relate to the organization of the text in its second paragraph. In an effort not to omit a single important appearance of a worker from the IMRO or MYSRO circle, the author enumerates different events with various characters in them, often "giving the floor" to the documents themselves, at the expense of his own voice as narrator and commentator. Moreover, the story of the situation of the Bulgarians in the Italian occupation zone disturbs the chronological sequence of the narrative, and therefore it seems to me that, without disputing the necessity of addressing the topic, it would be more appropriate to separate it into a paragraph of its own.

These remarks do not alter my opinion of the undoubted merits of the dissertation, which achieves its stated aims. It is written in clear and readable language. The bibliography, impressive in its length and varied character, is well arranged in accordance with scientific requirements. The nine appendices illustrate the text and bring the reader closer to the atmosphere of the time.

The abstract adequately reflects the content of the dissertation and the contributions mentioned in it correspond to the achievements.

The publications on the subject meet the requirements of the Act on the Academic Staff Development and the Regulations for its implementation. In the course of preparation of his doctoral thesis Alexander Joshevski has participated in seven scientific forums where he has presented the results of his research.

The dissertation presents the PhD student as a talented young scholar who is able to work critically with a variety of sources, think analytically, and formulate original theses and convincing conclusions. As a member of the Scientific Jury, I will vote with full conviction that the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" be awarded to Alexander Joshevski.

March 30, 2025

Assoc. Prof. Vania Stoyanova, PhD