

THE RECEPTION OF THE HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE: THE CASE OF MACEDONIA

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I come from a region where history has happened every day during the past 13 years. I have had a chance to live in two states: the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and today in independent Republic of Macedonia. Two passports, two political systems, two patterns of social and political values, two histories – personal and collective, and two memories – if I may say so. I myself am a child of a marriage of two different cultures (a relic of ex-Yugoslavia).

Since 1945, UN diplomats have been trying to invent polite terms for the Balkans and Eastern Europe as “undeveloped” or “in development”, which, in fact, define relatively or absolutely poor and backward society. In this sense, I am a citizen of a country that completely fits these terms. I also live in a state which in 2001 went through military conflict and still does not have a completely defined identity; for example, the problem with the name and the state symbols, the borders etc. Yet, I’m not claiming that the uncertainty and the insecure feeling regarding the existence are monopoly and exclusivity of the country or of the region from which I originate. Today, in the modern world, these feelings are much more universal than ever. Nevertheless, living in a region/regions between people disappointed of their past, even more dissatisfied with the present and uncertain about their future generates a very dangerous situation – anger, despair, disappointment, xenophobia, intolerance, and most of all fear. People ask who is to blame and looking for the culprits, often blame foreigners.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, new states (except Slovenia) still experience their transitions (which seems to be without end) in the attempt to adjust themselves to the pattern of parliamentary democracy, erroneously “translated” capitalism into the idea of free market economy, and promotion of civil values. In Macedonia, this process is going very slowly, and it could be noticed that it is more on a formal-legal than on a social level.

In this respect, the Macedonian reality represents almost an ideal ground for use and abuse of the historical consciousness, as a substitute for the ongoing extremely unstable and uncertain existence which the citizens of Macedonia are facing every day. “The great past” and “the rich tradition” that are continuously

a subject of interest in the scholarly, semi scholarly, as well as in the literary and public discourse, represent a psychological axis that for the majority of the citizens provides the necessary level of security and a feeling of belonging. I will quote several statements that are frequently heard and present in the public discourse of the past 12 years: “Macedonia a biblical country”, “Macedonia – the clasp of the world”, “Macedonia – cradle of Christianity and Slavic literacy”, “Macedonia a mythical country”, “2000 years of Macedonia”, etc. History, or more precisely the historical myths, became the most secure refuge and shelter for the vast majority of the Macedonian citizens. “Transition” becomes a magic word that could transform anything into its meaning. On the other hand, keeping in mind the political dimension in the use of the myths, they were, and still are, a sort of a background for certain political elite, manipulated for political purposes. The support found in history and in tradition offered by some political parties to the voters of Macedonia, was neither scholarly based, nor critically reviewed: it is an “instant” history for obtaining votes. Many politicians were hoping that the response of the voters will depend on the one who offers the best history – the more glorious is the history of the Macedonians, Albanians, Vlachs, the more votes will be obtained. Although this model was not implemented completely, it still produced results. Clearly, 2000 years of Macedonia sounds far more delightful than 58 years of the Republic of Macedonia, 46 of which in the SFRY and 12 of complete independence. And again we come to a phenomenon, also present in the other ex-Yugoslav countries which is the timid or I would rather say ignorant attitude towards recent communist past. The more remote past is considered to be “authentic” Macedonian, Albanian, Vlach which is a paradox if we are familiar with the 19th century Balkans’ history. The national identification in a contemporary sense was impossible and almost unknown for those times¹.

The key question is whether the changes in the society, at least on a formal level, have reached the institutions in which the history is made, and if these changes influence things like: the preparation of history curricula on all levels of education as well as the history text-books as a part of the educational reform in any way.

Unfortunately, the changes that happen in the institutions of educational character like the universities, institutes, the *Bureau for promotion of education* etc., instead of giving a result with a positive trend in the society, show a retrograde tendency. The researches carried out by my colleagues from the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research regarding the educational system in Macedonia (the figures are from 2001), with a special focus on the school subject – history, reveal that: 40% of the students do not think that the differences make life more beautiful, 44% think that they are

¹ A. Karakasidiu, *Fields of wheat, Hills of blood*, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 54-77; N. Jordanovski, *Between the necessity and impossibility of a national history*, Paper presented on the second workshop in London, 2000.

endangered by enemies from everywhere, 51% think that the neighboring countries are a threat for the survival of Macedonia, and 59% would like to live in another country².

The name of the institution I work for is *Institute for National History* (INH). It was founded in the distant 1948, under the protection of the Government, striving to research, study and acknowledge the history of Macedonia and the Macedonian people, in order to assert the Macedonian national identity. The name of the institution in 2003 is still the same. In a symbolic way it shows that almost nothing has been changed in its concept, organization, research methodology, the methodology of education and consequently, in the historiographical production as a creator of “truths” related to history, above all the local and the regional one. If we look at the catalogue of publications of the INH in the last 12 years, we can notice the following:

1. Almost 90% of the publications contain in their title the name Macedonia, no matter which period of history they concern;
2. The publications are mostly from the field of political history with the difference that now, the Ilinden period is treated more “explicitly”, as well as the role and the activities of IMRO,³ in comparison to the previously over-researched World War II, the communist past and the contemporary history;
3. The old fashioned positivistic approach in the survey of the past is still a dominant model in the INH;
4. There is no publication that treats the problems of everyday life of the people of the Balkans or more general aspects of Balkan history.

In 1998 this Institute, a part of the University “St. Cyril and Methodius”, introduced postgraduate studies for “national history and the history of the people and the states of the Balkans”. The study groups are structured chronologically, so the problem and interdisciplinary approach in the study of history are non-existent. Whatever period of history the students choose to study, they are obliged to take one foreign language as well as methodology of history as subjects. The students studying Antiquity or the Middle Ages will have to pass: “National history of Macedonia and the Macedonian people from prehistoric times until 1371” and “History of the people and the states of the Balkans”. Those studying the period of the Ottoman Empire and recent history, have to pass exams such as: “National history of the Macedonian people from 1371 until the Balkan wars” and “History of the people from the Balkans and the Macedonian people in the Diaspora”. Students interested in contemporary history, study the subjects “National history of the Macedonian people from 1913 until 1945” and “National history of the Macedonian people from 1945 until 1991”.⁴

² M. Najcevska, *The high-school education a factor in the inter ethnic (in)tolerance*, in *The sources and the factors of inter ethnic (in)tolerance in the process of education*, Skopje, 2001, p. 50.

³ IMRO – Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization.

⁴ V. Karapeeva, *Postgraduate Studies and Doctoral Theses at the Institute of National History*, in “Review of INI”, 45-1/2001, p. 155-159.

The entire program of postgraduate studies is based on studying, political history as well as national history (and everything that it might mean), with occasional references to the (political) history of the neighboring nations. We all know that history plays an important role, not only regarding our self-consciousness but also regarding the development of a collective identity of the society as a whole. Unfortunately, the problem is that in 2003 at the INH and at the Department of History (Faculty of Philosophy), which are both research and educational institutions, we can not see change in the notion that a society that is unable to have a critical view of its past, will not be able to define its own opportunities and position within the multinational and multicultural Balkans' identity as a part of the European society.

Historians are a part of society⁵; they have a personal historical consciousness and they themselves are a part of historical cultures. Therefore, they are not only influenced by the historical consciousness, but they also play an important role in the national history consciousness by providing an appropriate discourse. Since the term objectivity, especially in the social sciences, was seriously and convincingly put into a question, we need to keep in mind the political dimension and the responsibility in our scholarly and educational work. The great historian E. Hobsbawm once said that he thought that the profession of a historian, unlike the profession of a nuclear physician cannot harm anyone, but he changed his mind when became older. Thus, he said: "Our researches can be converted into bomb factories, just like IRA has learnt to produce explosive from a pesticide". We, the historians, are responsible for the historical facts in general, as well as for criticizing the political and ideological abuse of history in certain cases.

In spite of the efforts made in the last two years for restructuring and moving towards the credit-transfer system, which would also mean a complete reorganization of the educational program and curricula for the university courses, we are forgetting one very important thing. That is that there is no supplementary education and communication with the scholarly institutions in Europe, especially for those working in the field of history and use the credit-transfer system. It is like spinning around in a vicious circle. Why?

The same scholars who take part in writing the standard history of the Macedonian people, are working on the history curricula, write the text-books for the elementary and high school programs, and teach history at University. In other words we are dealing with a closed group of historians that is creating the image of the past on all levels of the educational process.

In the past 12 years, *The Bureau for Promotion of Education of the R. Macedonia* together with the *Ministry of Education and Science* has changed

⁵ P. Burke, *Historical facts and Historical fictions*, in "Filozofski vestnik", 2/1994, p. 179-180. Burke says: "Historians can not observe the past as it really was with an eye innocent of prejudice because like everyone else are prisoners of their 'point of view', in other words stereotypes, assumptions or mentalities of their own time, place, social group (including of course their gender)".

history curricula and the text-books several times. Some of my colleagues and few professors from the Department of History are also members of the commissions which plan and create the history curricula. However, there is no structural change in the quality of the books or in the methodology for the subject of history. The choice of topics, the terminology, the conceptual apparatus, the black and white approach, the confusion over the name Macedonia throughout the centuries, the lack of human dimension in the interpretation, and the almost total neglect of the minority communities, *let alone human rights*, point to a retrograde process in which the old-new stereotypes and prejudices, especially those related to the “national” history, produce for the recipient an image of a victim-nation throughout the history, which they comprehend in an emotional and an affective way, rather than in a rational and a critical one.

There is a strong domination of the political history of the region over the history of everyday life and the anthropological phenomenon from the history of human kind in all dimensions of its existence. *People are not present*. The literal reading of facts is the main characteristic, with no contextual analysis of the problems, with deficiency of multiperspective view in the interpretations especially in those related to national history, using partial rearrangement of mythology by means of creating ultimate truths once again when it comes to the national past.

I will briefly quote some of the conclusions of the research (conducted in 2001) related to elementary and high schools’ history text-books used in the Macedonian and Albanian classes. “The composition of the books and the space given to certain topics underlines clearly the main intention for an ethno-national education. Patriotic feelings are clearly profiled within the margins of ethnicity. With a historicism predominated by an aesthetic history in a literary form (indecent for historical analysis), with an inappropriate balance between the history of today and tomorrow, the only achievement could be a kind of emotional satisfaction for the students that may result in an uncritical attitude, and further on with a permanent discontent and frustration. The education headed to ethnocentrism has manifestation in the historical meaning that is being attributed to everything (even in a most distant way) that can be connected through space, population or the nature with the name ‘Macedonia’, being of course always highly appreciated”.⁶

From all the things I pointed out in my paper, it clearly reveals that the treatment of past either in research activities or in the educational process is not at all an optimistic one. However, I think that with some changes in the Macedonian society that took part last years, there are opportunities for creating the critical nucleus of experts and clerks of the public administration, working according to their competence and within the institutional structures, for an improvement and general reconstruction of the educational process on all levels.

⁶ M. Najcevska, *op. cit.*, p. 62-63.

To live in the Balkans, a region which is said to produce much more history than it can consume, is extremely hard, mostly because of the uncertainty one faces every day; wars, changes of borders, economic blockades, poverty, misery, interethnic problems, increasing corruption, enormous unemployment rate, nationalism. By saying this I do not like to fall into stereotyping the Balkans as a place where “people kill each other and it (the killing) is in the very essence of their cultural identity”. A kind of “truth” that fits easily in the already determined European myth for a man of the Balkans from Ruritania, which from a political point of view is going to be current on the market for a long time.

Apart from the declared principles of civil society to which the Republic of Macedonia is aspiring (this phenomenon is also present in some other ex-Yugoslav countries), after the attainment of independence, the matrix of the former ideology was transferred, with an incredible easiness, in the so-called national or more precisely ethno-national ideology. At the same time, the minority communities in the Republic of Macedonia, especially the biggest – the Albanian one, were no less infected with the national-romantic dreams. The political parties, founded strictly on national bases, started a fight for voters’ sympathies. This showed that the citizens, whose environment (even the one they disliked) was seriously damaged, needed some kind of support for setting a new way of existence. The support was found in history.