

STATEMENT

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Regarding the PhD dissertation of Borislav Yordanov Dichev on topic: “The Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia during World War II.” (2.2 History and Archaeology. History of Bulgaria. Modern Bulgarian History (1878–1944))

I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of the doctoral thesis of Borislav Dichev, a PhD student at Sofia University. In this capacity, I present the following STATEMENT:

Borislav Yordanov Dichev graduated in Bulgarian Philology (MA) and History in 1986. In the following years, he demonstrated an interest in and ability to research problems in modern Bulgarian history, particularly those related to the national issue, military and diplomatic history, World War II, and the Jewish issue. As expected, in this statement I will focus primarily on the characteristics of his PHD dissertation.

The PhD dissertation is entitled "Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia during World War II" and comprises 420 standard pages. In the introduction, the author set out the main objective of the study – to present "a complete picture of the ethnic presence" of Bulgarians in the aforementioned territories during World War II. The tasks of the study (also referred to as "objectives") were also specified – six in total.

The topic of the study is well chosen in terms of both its problematic and spatial-chronological aspects. It is a matter of lands that are part of the geographical region of Macedonia.

These lands were populated by Bulgarians but were remained under foreign rule during the Second World War. The author successfully argued the relevance of the issue both from a general historical perspective and in terms of its contemporary significance as an "important element of contemporary neighborly relations." A detailed review of the literature on the subject had also been provided. Here, the author demonstrated his historiographical knowledge not only of the specific topic, but also of the Bulgarian national issue in general. Dichev was familiar with and made appropriate use of pre-World War II journalism, documentary sources, and the papers of leading scholars such as Georgi Daskalov, Dimitar Gotsev, Svetozar Eldarov, Vanya Stoyanova, Yura Konstantinova, Nikolay Kochankov, and etc. Dichev had brought numerous unpublished documents from several archives, most notably the institutional collections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Bulgarian legations in Berlin, Rome, and the Balkan capitals. I fully agree with my colleague's conclusion that the fate of Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia was a peripheral topic for Bulgarian historical science until the collapse of the communist regime.

The PhD dissertation is divided into two parts with a total of six chapters. The approach was also extremely successful. While the first part traced the fate of Bulgarians in Aegean Macedonia, the second one described the lives of their compatriots in Western Macedonia. In each part, divided into separate chapters, the issues of local government and self-government, cultural and educational struggles, and attempts to restore church structures were examined. Each chapter ends with a conclusion that adequately summarizes the author's general conclusions.

There are many merits and contributions in this study. I will mention the most significant ones:

The author was familiar with and presented, in the necessary introductions, the policies of Greece and Yugoslavia towards the Macedonian Bulgarians between the two world wars. Dichev depicted in detail the political events in the Balkans in 1940–1941, which significantly changed the situation in the region: the Italian-Greek war, Germany's intervention, the defeat of Yugoslavia and Greece, and Bulgaria's role in all these events. The student revealed the repressive policies towards Bulgarians pursued by the Greek and Albanian collaborationist administrations and pointed to the almost complete continuity in this respect with previous political regimes.

The author also took into account the impact of significant events during World War II on the situation in Aegean and Western Macedonia: the turning point in the war in the winter of 1942–1943, Italy's surrender in the summer of 1943, the withdrawal of German troops in the summer of 1944, and the September coup d'état in Bulgaria.

One of the significant contributions of the PhD dissertation was the highlighting of the different attitudes of the German and Italian occupation forces towards the people of Bulgarian origin. Dichev argued that while the German authorities were aware that their presence was temporary and attempted to mediate between Bulgarians and Greeks, Bulgarians and Albanians, and Bulgarians and the administration, Italy, until its capitulation in the summer of 1943, visibly favored the Greek element and the Greek administration to the detriment of the Bulgarians. The author explained the reasons for this seemingly illogical behavior—Rome's plans to incorporate Greece in the form of a personal union based on the Albanian model. The nuances and differences between German and Italian policy did not prevent the author from noting and highlighting the commonalities in their actions and positions. Dichev explained their refusal to allow the restoration of the Bulgarian educational network with their fears of Bulgarian territorial aspirations and, accordingly, their unwillingness to allow these territories to come under Bulgarian jurisdiction at a later stage. At the same time, the author also noted the dynamics in the behavior of the German and Italian units and the reasons for the changes. For example, the more tolerant attitude of both the Germans and the Italians towards the Bulgarians from the beginning of 1943 was explained by the strengthening of the Greek armed resistance against the occupiers.

In a broader context, Dichev also traced the dynamics in bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Italy, Bulgaria and Germany, and Germany and Italy on the Macedonian issue – the determination of the Vienna Line; the Bulgarian-Italian disputes; Bulgaria's desire to occupy the whole of Macedonia in the spring of 1941 and its reluctance to expand its territory two years later. Against this backdrop, the author described the difficult life of Bulgarians living under foreign rule, their attempts to restore the educational and church network that had existed before the Balkan Wars, their complex relations with the occupying forces, their hopes for the elimination of national oppression, and the new disappointments that followed.

Last but not least, Dichev highlighted the Bulgarian state's concern for its compatriots who remained under foreign rule. With regard to the so-called “translators” at the commandant's offices

in the Aegean, the student revealed their real role as protectors of the population with Bulgarian origin. He described the Tsarstvo's efforts to send textbooks, books, and periodicals in Bulgarian, as well as the systematic insistence of Bulgarian diplomacy on its partners to open Bulgarian schools; the overall support for the Bulgarian school in Thessaloniki and for the semi-legal schools in Western Macedonia; the admission and maintenance of students from the lands under foreign jurisdiction in Bulgarian schools in Vardar Macedonia and in the prewar territories.

Of course, in such a large-scale work, some errors, omissions, and imperfections were noticeable. Given that Aegean Macedonia remained under Greek jurisdiction, it would have been beneficial for the author to familiarize himself in greater detail with the Greek political system on the eve of World War II and, above all, with issues of local government under the Regime of August 4th (the dictatorship of General Metaxas) and the so-called State of Greece (collaborationist Greece). However, it should be added that Ditchev had a detailed knowledge of the structure and functioning of Albanian state institutions under Italian occupation, which was important for a proper understanding of the life of Bulgarians in Western Macedonia. In his work, the author did not always take into account that during the period, Aegean and Western Macedonia were ethnically heterogenous regions, and that the numerical dominance of people with Bulgarian identity was more of a wish than a reality. The paper practically ignored the Bulgarian Grecoman Bulgarians (or Bulgarophone Greeks), who constituted a significant part of the Bulgarian-speaking population in Aegean Macedonia.

Critical analysis dominated the PhD dissertation, but at times there were noticeable lapses into patriotism and over-reliance on Bulgarian sources. For example, the data from the so-called “census” conducted by the Bulgarian Club in Thessaloniki and Bulgarian government officials in territories not under Bulgarian jurisdiction were taken at face value. To speak of 11 000 Bulgarians in Thessaloniki and 75% Bulgarians in the Kostur region in 1941 was very problematic. On this basis, some not particularly well-argued claims were made, such as that the German occupation authorities demonstrated “insufficient awareness of the ethnicity” of Aegean Macedonia. The claim that the Vienna line was drawn “without taking into account the ethnic makeup of the region” was also unfounded. It is true that the Bulgarians at the time considered the division to be unfair, but the researcher must take into account that these were ethnically mixed lands. And while

Bulgarian villages in the Struga and Kichevo areas remained in Albania, the Skopje and Kumanovo regions, with dozens of Albanian villages, came under Bulgarian jurisdiction.

Probably for the same reasons (patriotic bias and overconfidence in sources), the undoubtedly difficult situation of Macedonian Bulgarians under Greek and Albanian jurisdiction was presented with excessive drama. The word “terror” was used 150 times in relation to them. The fear of it was attributed to the lack of violent pro-Bulgarian sentiments in the cities of Aegean Macedonia in the spring of 1941, while overlooking the fact that violence and fear were always stronger in villages, where there were no international observers or media and where the population had lower levels of literacy, education, and civic culture. It also failed to take into account the fact that Bulgarians were a minority in these cities, and that a significant part of them had been under Greek influence for more than a century before the WWII. In places, the author contradicted himself. Even for the spring of 1943 he claimed that “the Italian occupation authorities continued their policy of tolerating the Greek administration” – and this at a time when, as Ditchev himself pointed out, the Greek gendarmerie was forbidden to leave the city of Kostur, and Bulgarians were given the opportunity to form their own militias. Similar conclusions could be drawn about the situation of Bulgarians in Western Macedonia in early 1944, which, according to the author, did not improve despite the admission of Bulgarians as mayors and even as members of “self-defense organizations”, which were essentially paramilitary groups.

In places, there were deviations from the topic – the educational policy of the Bulgarian state as a whole and in particular in the new territories was described at length. This narrative has its place in the work, but it definitely needed to be conveyed more concisely. There were also repetitions. The 1941 report by a Bulgarian intelligence officer was reproduced twice. The letter to Italian Minister Plenipotentiary Magistrati from May 1941 was also quoted twice. The “transition from class-party criteria to national positions” in Bulgarian historiography of the 1970s and 1980s, discussed in the introduction, did not in fact represent an abandonment of the criteria in question, but rather their reformulation in view of the regime's new (pseudo)nationalist rhetoric, adopted entirely for party-political reasons. Grigor Velez was not an academic within the meaning of Bulgarian law.

The comments made and the inaccuracies identified did not alter my overall positive impression of the PhD dissertation. Ditchev's work is a valuable scientific achievement. It meets

all the requirements for a doctoral dissertation in the scientific field of “History and Archaeology.” The sources are well known, correctly cited, and conscientiously analyzed. There are no signs of plagiarism.

In addition, the student meets the minimum legal requirements. Between 2023 and 2025, he published a total of three scientific articles on the topic of the dissertation in the scientific journals “Minalo” and “Voennoistoricheski sbornik.” He is the author of two biographies of Bulgarian officers and several other scientific articles exploring issues in modern Bulgarian history. The prepared abstract meets the requirements.

In conclusion, I declare that based on my overall impressions of the student and his PhD dissertation, I will vote FOR awarding him with the scientific and educational title of “doctor” to Borislav Dichev.

Assoc. Prof. Svetoslav Zhivkov, PhD