

OPINION

of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aleksandar G. Grebenarov – Institute for Historical Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, member of the scientific jury,

for the dissertation work of Borislav Yordanov Dichev on the topic "The Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia during the Second World War", doctoral student in independent training at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of "History of Bulgaria", for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor", professional field 2.2. History and archaeology, DP History of Bulgaria – New Bulgarian History (1878 – 1944) with scientific supervisor – Prof. Dr. Veselin Yanchev.

Borislav Dichev 's dissertation includes an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, sources and literature, with a total volume of 421 pages. The chosen topic, until recently poorly represented in Bulgarian historiography, is important not only from a scientific point of view. It is socially significant, relevant and painful for many descendants of Bulgarians from Aegean and Vardar Macedonia, whose ancestors abandoned their homeland in order to save their name, language and identity, seeking protection in the motherland or "beyond the ocean". The local Bulgarian population, which did not change its place of residence after 1919, was subjected to the denationalization aspirations of Athens and Belgrade, aimed at changing the ethnodemographic appearance of both parts of the historical and geographical region of Macedonia.

In introductory texts, doctoral student B. Dichev presents a truthful picture of the lives of the suffering Bulgarians subjected to repressive regimes in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia after World War I. The rulers of the two countries – Greece and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (since 1929 – Yugoslavia) did not recognize the existence of a Bulgarian minority, closed Bulgarian schools, libraries, cultural societies, They closed or renamed all former Bulgarian church and educational centers, led by the Exarchate until 1912, changed the naming system, destroyed Bulgarian monuments, punished individuals for possessing Bulgarian books and magazines, extradited Bulgarian priests and teachers, and used economic coercion and physical violence to achieve their goals.

Through an abundance of facts, the dissertation presents the processes in Aegean and Western Macedonia during the period of World War II with their specific features. After the initial euphoria of the establishment of the German-Italian military occupation regime in Greece and the collapse of the local administrative and military-police structures, administrative

transformations to the detriment of the Bulgarian population followed. The work is saturated with valuable evidentiary materials for its social and economic discrimination. Due to the geostrategic aspirations of Italy, the Greek rulers and armed formations were left to dispose of the area with impunity. The exhibition follows the educational and church manifestations of the local Bulgarian population, which intensified after the capitulation of Italy (1943) and Berlin's permission for the entry of Bulgarian military units into Greek territory.

The doctoral student also researches in depth the changes in Western Macedonia. Here Italy has a leading role in the joint management with the Albanian collaborationist administration . The data collected shows that before the "eyes" of the Italian allies, a strong Albanian invasion is tolerated using terrorist methods against the Bulgarians, with the aim of their forced displacement. Rome does not show favor to the Bulgarian demands. What's more! It tries to include in the occupation zone cities with a centuries-old Bulgarian history, including Ohrid, Struga, Resen, in contrast to the ethnodemographic statistics presented by the ruling circles in Sofia and the Macedonian refugee organizations. The dissertation also provides answers to problems in the area that arose after the capitulation of Italy and the subsequent changes in its administrative and military management.

The pages of the dissertation, examining the movement for the restoration of Bulgarian cultural, educational and church work in Aegean and Western Macedonia, are also of valuable contribution. Along with the initiatives of local Bulgarians, the support to the local population from Bulgarian state institutions is shown – the Council of Ministers, individual ministries, the Directorate for National Propaganda, the Directorate for Religious Denominations, the Main Commissariat for Supply, as well as the assistance from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The assistance of public organizations in Bulgaria and especially the Macedonian refugee formations, which provided valuable assistance to the suffering population in difficult moments during the Second World War, is also indicated.

This part of the dissertation also "illuminates" the activities of famous scientists, intellectuals, church and military figures, leaders of revolutionary and legal Macedonian organizations, public figures, personal benefactors, etc., who left a mark in the defense of Bulgarianness. Due credit is also given to those in power in Bulgaria – regents, ministers, including prime ministers, who supported the Bulgarian cause in Macedonia.

The work supplements with new facts a number of organizational manifestations of the Bulgarians such as the Bulgarian Club in Thessaloniki, the Bulgarian self-defense formations – “Okhrana” in Aegean Macedonia and “Bulgarian "self-defense" – a little-known formation operating in Western Macedonia (Tetovo region). The focus of the dissertation also includes

the intense manifestations of the Bulgarian community in Thessaloniki, initiated by the restored Bulgarian municipality, the church "St. George" with the created children's and youth choir and the student dining room to it, the church "St. Sava" in the city, the Bulgarian school "St. St. Cyril and Methodius".

The doctoral student has analyzed the speculative use of the slogans "Autonomous Macedonia", "Independent Macedonia" and their variations, which occupied a priority place in the ideological platforms of the national liberation organizations of the Macedonian Bulgarians. He rightly notes that during the years of World War II, calls for such a state-legal status for the region were used to cover up foreign interests in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia in opposition to the Bulgarian national cause.

The statements made by B. Dichev about the policies of Germany and Italy, which ruled Aegean and Western Macedonia in collaboration with Greece and Albania, respectively, are well-reasoned. The facts confirm their aspirations to uphold their strategic policies, ignoring the interests of smaller countries such as Bulgaria, which, however, turned out to be the necessary and faithful ally of the Axis after the capitulation of Italy.

The merit of the dissertation is the vast amount of literature used on the topic, as well as the rich source base. The documents used have been published in documentary collections or are stored in Bulgarian archives, a significant part of which is entering scientific circulation for the first time.

Some notes can be made to the dissertation. In the historiographic review, it is not superfluous to add assessments of more recent studies, including "History of Bulgaria. Vol. 9, History of Bulgaria 1918 – 1944". S., 2012 – publication of the Institute for Historical Research at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences ; "Macedonia. History and Culture from Antiquity to the Present Day". Vol. 1. S., 2023 – published by the Institute for Historical Research at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Macedonian Scientific Institute.

The work would be enriched by including data on the repercussions of the Drama Uprising (1941) in the Aegean part of Macedonia.

In a future edition of the book, which I recommend, I would suggest that the note about Anastasia Karakasidou – professor of social anthropology (p. 105) be clarified that she is not a writer. The text could be supplemented with information about the change in her scientific and life destiny after the appearance of the cited monograph , shedding light on the Bulgarian origin of the population in Greece; the expression “ German-Italian aggression against Greece and Yugoslavia” (p. 263) could also be clarified , due to a contradictory interpretation of the concept

of “aggressor” for the specific case, on p. 266 it is inaccurately noted that Prespa is a city; ethnodemographic maps and other illustrative materials could be included to illustrate the text.

In conclusion, I find that Borislav Dichev's dissertation on the topic "The Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia during World War II" is of undeniable scientific contribution . The doctoral student has shown skills in researching, analyzing and summarizing facts about events and processes relating to the Bulgarians in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia and their struggle for national liberation.

The presented work, the indicated contributions, the proposed abstract and the three publications give me reason to vote positively for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Borislav Yordanov Dichev.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Grebenarov

31.08.2025