**REVIEW**

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vladimir Stanev,

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**OF THE DISSERTATION OF ALEKSANDAR YOSHEVSKI**

ENTITLED

“**Activists of the IMORO and IMRO and the Bulgarian Administration of Vardar Macedonia (1941–1944)**”

for obtaining the Educational and Scientific Degree “Doctor” in professional field: 2.2. History and Archaeology

The presented dissertation was developed at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of History, under the scientific supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Naum Kaichev. The text is 314 pages long and organized into an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, appendices, and a bibliography with sources in various languages.

The documents submitted by the doctoral candidate meet the regulatory requirements.

### 1. Structure, Content, and Results of the Dissertation

The historical fate of Macedonia has long intrigued Bulgarian society—and Bulgarian historians as well. Many questions on the topic remain unresolved. In this context, Aleksandar Yoshevski has properly focused on a subject that is both underexplored and ideologically charged: the Bulgarian administration in Vardar Macedonia from 1941 to 1944.

The introduction substantiates the choice of topic, highlights its relevance, and notes the lack of prior scholarly interest. It includes a solid historiographical overview. The aims and corresponding tasks of the dissertation are clearly articulated—to investigate the attitudes of different groups within IMORO and IMRO toward the Bulgarian administration in Vardar Macedonia, with special attention given to Ivan Mihailov. One goal is to examine whether there is a difference in attitude between veteran and younger activists in the national liberation movement. The methodology, structure, and sources used are also described. Archival materials from three countries were utilized, with Bulgarian sources predominating.

The chosen structure is well thought out and enables a comprehensive presentation of the historical narrative without unnecessary details or digressions.

**Chapter One** serves as an introduction and presents the situation in Vardar Macedonia before 1941, when WWII reached the region, covering its administrative, economic, and demographic conditions.

It’s a bit unusual that a subchapter on refugee organizations in Bulgaria appears here, as it doesn't match the chapter's title, but there’s no better place to address this issue.

The events of April 1941 are examined in detail, along with the activities of the Bulgarian Action Committees.

**Chapter Two** focuses on IMORO veterans after April 1941. It logically begins with the establishment of Bulgarian authority in most of Vardar Macedonia. The process and the ambiguous status of the region are briefly covered. The chapter also discusses Italian territorial ambitions and support for its Albanian proxies.

It would have been beneficial to explain the term “occupation” more thoroughly with reference to international law of the time.

There’s some inconsistency between the title and the content, as the chapter discusses not only IMORO veterans but also members of IMRO and MMTRO. It’s stated that they return to Macedonia after April 1941, but in most cases these are brief visits from Bulgaria. Some minor digressions occur, such as the coverage of the 1903 uprising anniversaries, which are not clearly tied to the dissertation’s main thesis. However, the key conclusion is that the “Ilinden” veterans fully supported the Bulgarian authorities.

The subchapter on veterans’ efforts to obtain state pensions may seem tangential but is both interesting and informative. It concludes that the Ilinden activists warmly embraced the Bulgarian administration, with few exceptions.

**Chapter Three** is devoted to Ivan Mihailov. It traces his life from the 1934 coup until WWII.

This section is compelling, but the true nature of Mihailov’s stance toward the Bulgarian government in Macedonia remains unclear. The doctoral candidate overlooks the possible influence of wartime events on Mihailov’s views.

Importantly, the dissertation concludes that Mihailov maintained a neutral stance—neither helping nor hindering the Bulgarian authorities. His supporters believed they represented the Macedonian population and deserved to govern. However, younger activists from MMTRO challenged this and were more inclined to cooperate with the Bulgarian state.

**Chapter Four** examines IMRO activists and Bulgarian governance in Macedonia.

The subchapter titled “Notable Cases among the Local Intelligentsia during the War” is puzzling—it lacks clear purpose and deals with individuals not affiliated with IMRO, making its inclusion questionable.

This chapter is the weakest—disorganized and unclear, although also potentially the most interesting. It acknowledges serious and justified criticisms of the Bulgarian administration but notes that these were sometimes driven by wounded pride, unmet ambitions, and unfulfilled expectations.

The complexity of the situation—with competing interests from Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, and visions for an independent Macedonia—adds richness to the dissertation.

A significant conclusion is that Ivan Mihailov neither supported nor worked for Hitler or Mussolini, but he also distrusted Bulgarian politicians who had, up to 1941, sought rapprochement with Belgrade at the expense of Bulgarian interests in Macedonia.

The conclusion is brief but appropriate, summarizing the key findings. The doctoral candidate could have more confidently articulated the dissertation’s contributions.

Yoshevski rightly concludes that the conflict between Mihailov’s group and former MMTRO activists was personal in nature, rooted in competing claims to legitimacy.

The dissertation could have been clearer in stating that among former IMRO leaders there were differing views—some accepted Bulgarian governance as liberation but remained passive, while others advocated for autonomous Macedonia within Bulgaria, not due to directives from Berlin or Rome, but based on their own vision for the region’s future.

The group around Ivan Mihailov ultimately did not participate in governing Vardar Macedonia.

The diceration has several Appendices, though some are of poor quality and their purpose is unclear.

The literature is well-organized, and the dissertation demonstrates extensive use of archival sources and periodicals, reflecting serious scholarly effort. The work is grounded in a diverse and rich documentary base, with well-reasoned arguments.

Citations meet academic standards and are linked to the main text. Footnotes often provide helpful historical context about figures mentioned in the text.

The dissertation is written in a patriotic but balanced tone, with a clear effort toward objectivity. This contrasts sharply with the official historiography of the Republic of North Macedonia, which distorts the views of former IMRO and IMORO activists on Bulgarian administration.

### 2. Evaluation of Publications Related to the Dissertation

Three related publications in scholarly journals have been submitted, fulfilling the minimum requirements for awarding the doctoral degree.

### 3. Evaluation of the Abstract

The dissertation deserves a more detailed abstract. It appears hastily written.

Nonetheless, it corresponds to the main text and includes a section on the dissertation’s contributions—a key element of any abstract.

### 4. Critical Remarks and Questions

The dissertation is written in good academic language. Some terminology choices require clarification. There are technical and spelling errors—for example, the word “инжинер” (engineer) is misspelled on pages 206 and 207. Some abbreviations are not explained at first mention or change form later in the text, such as “СМББ” becoming “СМКПББ”.

A large part of the data is based on secondhand accounts and memories, which reduces reliability—perhaps due to a lack of concrete archival sources.

Citations from archives should reference “folio,” not “page.” This is inconsistent in the text. On pages 131–132, a page reference ends with “г.” (indicating a year), which is confusing.

The claim that certain documents are published for the first time in this dissertation appears twice, but the documents themselves are not included.

It would have been useful to analyze in detail competing visions for resolving the Macedonian question—independence, federalization, or union with Bulgaria.

On page 179, Tsar Boris III’s pardon of Ivan Mihailov is mentioned but without explanation or discussion.

**Questions for the candidate:**

1. What, in your view, was Ivan Mihailov’s real influence in Macedonia during the stated period?
2. Did he seek contact with Bulgarian authorities?

### 5. Conclusion

I know Aleksandar Yoshevski to be an excellent doctoral candidate who has always demonstrated dedication and thoroughness. He actively participated in the academic life of the Faculty of History.

My overall impression of the dissertation is that it represents a significant effort to clarify the facts, gather a large body of sources, and analyze them in depth. The conclusions are well-founded. This is an original and contemporary study of a partially explored and ideologically sensitive topic, offering new perspectives and knowledge. Despite some shortcomings, it meets academic standards and has the necessary qualities for a successful defense.

The dissertation submitted for public defense is a thorough study that meets all scientific standards. All stated goals and tasks have been achieved, and the main hypotheses are convincingly defended.

**Therefore, I support awarding the Educational and Scientific Degree “Doctor” in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology.**

**March 28, 2025 Vladimir Stanev
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