

OPINION

**on the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “PhD”
according to the announced procedure for the defense of the dissertation of doctoral
student Borislav Yordanov Dichev from Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski”**

Prepared the opinion. Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Nikolay Dimitrov Kochankov, DrSc.,

National History Museum

Reason for writing the opinion: Order № RD-38-263/27.05.2025 of the Rector of the Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski” for determining the composition of the Scientific Jury in an open procedure for the defense of the dissertation of doctoral student Borislav Yordanov Dichev and the Decision of the Scientific Jury of 26.06.2025 for preparing an opinion as a member of the Scientific Jury.

Author of the dissertation: **Borislav Yordanov Dichev**, doctoral student in independent preparation in the doctoral program History of Bulgaria - New Bulgarian History (1878-1944) at the Department of History of Bulgaria at the Faculty of History of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” with scientific advisor: **Prof. PhDr. Veselin Yanchev, DrSc.**

Topic of the dissertation: “The Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia during World War II”.

I. General presentation of the dissertation

The fate of the Bulgarians who remained outside the new state boundaries of Bulgaria after 6 April 1941 is an integral part of the national narrative of the aspiration to unite all Bulgarians in one state. B. Dichev has set himself the ambitious task of uniting and building on previous studies on the subject in a common complex by examining the situation of the Bulgarian population in Aegean and Western Macedonia living under German-Italian occupation and local Greek and Albanian administration.

The PhD student has adopted a problem-chronological structure of the dissertation, organized in an introduction, two sections: part A and part B with three chapters each, a conclusion and a bibliography.

II. Assessment of the structure and content of the dissertation

Structurally and in terms of content, the thesis meets the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Science and Education. The doctoral candidate demonstrates the ability to systematize and summarize a vast amount of archival material for the stated purposes of the research. The empirical data presented clearly illustrate the fate of the Bulgarian population under wartime occupation, the struggle to preserve its national identity, and the revival of its cultural, educational and religious institutions.

The introduction justifies the enduring scholarly interest in the topic, which outlines new perspectives in scholarship to more fully illuminate the decades-long struggles of Bulgarians under denationalizing and assimilatory regimes. The complex nature of the task at hand presupposes a good bibliographical awareness and attraction of considerable empirical material from Bulgarian archival repositories.

Part A of the dissertation, organized in three chapters, traces the struggle of the Bulgarian population to win representation in local government bodies and the state of Bulgarian cultural, educational and ecclesiastical affairs in Aegean Macedonia in 1941-1944.

The doctoral thesis convincingly reveals the different attitudes of the representatives of the German and Italian occupation regimes towards the aspirations of the Bulgarians for the satisfaction of nationality rights. In the German zone, the approach to Bulgarian demands was softer, while the Italian authorities, with the assistance of the Greek administration, organized persecutions of local Bulgarians. The problem of establishing local Bulgarian self-defence units was also highlighted.

Attempts to re-establish the exarchate school network and Bulgarian language education, which were restricted by the collaborationist Greek administration, are explored.

Data on the policies of the German and Italian occupation authorities regarding the demands of the Bulgarian population for the restoration of their right to worship in their native language and the resistance of the Greek administration.

Part B of the dissertation, organized in three chapters, traces the attempts of the Bulgarian population in Western Macedonia under Italian-Albanian rule (1941-1943) to preserve their Bulgarian spirit. The situation during the German occupation of the region (1943-1944) is also examined.

The policy of the Bulgarian authorities to protect the rights of the Bulgarians in Western Macedonia, subjected to denationalization and repression by the occupation authorities and the Albanian administration, is highlighted. After the capitulation of Italy, the Bulgarian population in Western Macedonia was given the opportunity to set up its own local authorities and to organize self-defense units.

The doctoral student traces with numerous examples the policy of the Bulgarian state to reestablish education in Western Macedonia. He also traces the activities of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to rebuild church structures in the area as a constituent part of the newly formed dioceses of Skopje and Bitola.

III. Identification and evaluation of the scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation

The dissertation contains scientific and applied results that can be considered as contributions and meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its Implementing Regulations. The main merits of the dissertation can be outlined in the following directions:

1. The dissertation defends the claim that it represents a complex study of the problem of the fate of the Bulgarian population in Aegean and Western Macedonia during the Second World War.

2. The movement for the restoration of the exarchate school network and the cultural and educational organizations of the Bulgarian population in Aegean Macedonia, the resistance of the collaborationist Greek administration and the policy of the occupation authorities towards the struggle of the Aegean Bulgarians for the restoration of their national rights are illuminated in detail.

3. Many examples are used to illustrate the Bulgarian state's policy of admitting students from Aegean and Western Macedonia to Bulgarian schools and integrating them into the Bulgarian educational system.

4. The denationalizing nature of the policy of the Italian occupation authorities in Western and Aegean Macedonia, carried out by prohibiting the opening of Bulgarian schools, persecuting and destroying Bulgarian literature, expelling Bulgarian teachers from Western Macedonia, and prohibiting the enrollment of Bulgarian students from the region in schools in Vardar Macedonia, is examined.

5. The policy of the Bulgarian state and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to revive the Bulgarian national spirit in the two districts by restoring Bulgarian church work is examined in detail.

6. The policy of the German and Italian occupation authorities towards the aspiration of the Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia to elect their own local self-government bodies is highlighted.

7. The factors which necessitated the formation of armed units for self-defence against Greek and Albanian nationalist and communist terror and the excesses of Albanian robber gangs are indicated.

IV. Critical remarks and recommendations

In the section “Sources and Literature,” 13 of the archival holdings listed are not cited once. I will mention the fonds of the Bulgarian legations in Athens, Belgrade, Berlin Zagreb, Rome, Tirana. There are also inaccuracies in the listed literature.

B. Dichev cites many archival sources, but some of them were found and used before him by other authors. He does not mention these researchers everywhere. I will mention the research of Prof. G. Daskalov, Prof. D. Michev, Assoc. Prof. N. Kochankov.

V. Questions to the dissertant

In 6 places the doctoral student cites the archival collection of the Society of Metropolitan Journalists. See CDA, f. 185 K, op. 1, a.f. 52, l. 34-35. These are notes numbered 120, 152, 328, 365, 369 and 664 on pages 45, 59, 119, 129, 132 and 227. I would ask B. Dichev to explain what document he is citing and what necessitates its repeated use.

VI. Conclusion

The abstract correctly reflects the content of the dissertation and presents the main research achievements. Borislav Dichev has published three articles on the dissertation. This fulfils the minimum national requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the mandatory criteria of the Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski” for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor|.

On the basis of the above, I believe that the dissertation work of Borislav Yordanov Dichev meets the criteria for scientific research with meritorious points. I confidently give a positive opinion and will vote to award the doctoral degree of Doctor of Education and Science to the doctoral candidate.

Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Nikolay Dimitrov Kochankov, DrSc.

27.08.2025