

The Democratisation of the Macedonian Question

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*What implications does nationalism have for the democratisation of history?
Discuss with specific reference to the historical representations of the formation of the
Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation.*

Synopsis

Every year, on the 2nd of August, you'll be safe to say that any Macedonian you know will be donning their most wonderfully ostentatious attire to attend a celebration of the Ilinden Uprising at their local Macedonian function centre. For years I have partaken in this commemoration, yet until recently I never thought to ask why a failed revolution against the Ottoman Empire in 1903 is religiously celebrated by the Macedonian community every year. One year when I asked about a portrait of a strange, but seemingly ubiquitous moustached man on the wall I was told that his name was Goce Delčev and he was the embodiment of the Macedonian people and leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) in their fight to freedom. I was warned that I may be told differently, but I was taught to dismiss these lies as foreign propaganda. What I soon learnt is that not everyone interpreted the history of Delčev's fight to freedom in the same way. I discovered that Bulgarians generally believe that Goce Delčev and the IMRO are Bulgarian and Macedonians are really Bulgarians with a mistaken ethnic consciousness. I was also told that there is a second Macedonia, one in Greece, and the Greek orthodox historical view is that the name Macedonia exclusively belonged to a Hellenic tradition. When and why the people of the Macedonian vilayet developed a national consciousness is at the core of the debate. This is the Macedonian Question and the IMRO debate is inextricably linked. This disputed historiography has metaphorically mirrored the violence of Macedonian independence. In this essay, I will explore how the two main groupings of nationalist historians (pro-Macedonian and pro-

Greek) have approached this subject and assess what implications their approaches have for Keith Jenkin's proposal for the democratisation of history.

Essay

History is basically a contested discourse, an embattled terrain wherein people(s), classes and groups autobiographically construct interpretation of the past literally to please themselves. There is no definitive history outside these pressures... Knowledge is related to power and that, within social formations, those with the most power distribute and legitimate 'knowledge' vis-à-vis interests as best they can.... A relativist perspective need not lead to despair but to the beginning of a general recognition of how things seem to operate. This is emancipating. Reflexively, you too can make histories.

Jenkins, K (1999:2004) *Re-Thinking History*,
Routledge, New York, p.23, 31

Keith Jenkins has challenged the paradigms of traditional historical practice. He has laid bare the institutions that allow 'dominant voices [to] silence others'¹ and has delegitimised the centralised authority of academia. Jenkins condemns this history and instead tries to present a democratic practice of history; the process towards which is founded not on the quest for objective truth, but an acknowledgment of perspective, and inescapable epistemic fragility. Ultimately, the movement towards history's democratisation aims to emancipate its practice by exposing history's dominant-

marginal spectrum² so that all voices of historical representation are allowed to contribute to our collective picture of the past. Jenkins establishes that ‘history is theory and theory is ideological,’³ and the ideology behind most history is not democratisation. It is evident that in the historical representations of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, the dominant ideology is that of nationalism. Benedict Anderson noted in 1983⁴ that nationalism is based on the social construction of an ‘imagined political community’⁵ that involves collective ‘amnesias’ that ‘spring narratives’⁶ often to serve political ends. Anderson’s theory explains why it is that in the fight between nations to obtain hegemony or even independence, it is rare that political objectives coalesce with the democratisation of history. It is because a history written from a foundation of nationalism inevitably aims to present a historical representation that privileges one group through the marginalisation of another. As Jenkins demonstrates, history with this aspiration to dominance is at its core incompatible with the practice of democratic history because it is not written from a perspective of ‘interminable openness.’⁷ The historiography of the IMRO has been defined by a contested discourse of competing nationalist histories. The core debate centres predominately around the nature and purpose of the organisation and the reality of the people its revolutionaries saw themselves as representing. These specific questions belong to the wider framework of the ‘Macedonian Question’. No historical account has yet been written that does not attempt to provide the definitive answer to these questions and marginalise oppositional responses. Thus, the historiography of IMRO has not been written in a democratic manner and these historiographical trends would need to be re-examined if this history was to be rewritten with Jenkins’ purpose of history at its foundation.

The nationalistic purposes behind the historiography of the IMRO to date is demonstrated through analysis of the division between the major historians that have written on the subject. Orthodox Macedonian historians such as Alexander Hristov and Andrew Rossos represent the IMRO as the spearhead of the ‘Macedonian national awakening’; while orthodox Greek historians Nicolaos K. Martis and Dimitris Livanios deny the existence of an ethnic ‘Macedonian’ consciousness and represent the IMRO as an agent of Bulgarian irredentism. Historical thought on the matter has come largely from historians subscribing to either bloc. These are historians whose nationalistic objectives permeate their entire polemic.

Each faction has spawned a state-sponsored popular history, which both embellishes and supports each case.

Nicholaos K. Martis, a former member of the Greek army and government come historian, states clearly in the introduction of his book, *The Falsification of Macedonian History*, that the aim of the publication is: ‘to raise the lid off the deception that so craftily, noiselessly and insistently has covered the truth for decades now concerning the history of Macedonia, a history that is simple and crystal clear.’⁸ Martis, like all his contemporary nationalist historians, aims to dispel ambiguity and produce the definitive historical truth. His history is written with the sole aim to discredit oppositional, and thus dangerous answers to the Macedonian Question. This is evident in his treatment of the assertion that ‘the struggle of the IMRO was that of the Macedonian people’, which he refutes by claiming that any notion of a Macedonian nation has ‘no historical foundation’⁹ but is ‘repeated continuously in order to achieve the brainwashing of the public.’¹⁰

Thessaloniki educated historian Dimitris Livanios furthers Martis’ thesis, albeit unlike Martis, in a more authoritative frame of historical conventions. In his book, *The Macedonian Question*, Livanios attributes any support for the IMRO to the ‘merciless terror’ that was a ‘decisive factor in shaping the alleged national preferences of the peasants’¹¹. Yet Livanios claims that these national preferences were to the church of either the Bulgarian Exarchists, or the Greek Patriarchists. He attributes any notion of ‘the use of the term “Macedonian”... in a “national”, as opposed to a regional sense to denote a Slavic group distinct from Serbs and Bulgarians’¹² (which he terms ‘Macedonianism’), as the work of a ‘small circle of intellectuals, who professed a Macedonian consciousness, however inconsistently’.¹³ Livanios further argues that any contextual representation of Macedonianist claims that the group represented by IMRO were ‘Macedonian’ was the work of ‘Serbian politicians and scholars... in an attempt to deny those Slavs to Bulgarian nationalism, thus safeguarding the “historic rights” of Serbia in the region.’¹⁴ By representing ‘Macedonianism’ as an imagined construction of Serbian annexationists and confused Bulgarians, Livanios leads the reader to Martis’ conclusion that the people of the Macedonian vilayet set out on a path of a collective ethnogenesis without any historical foundation. To sustain this argument Livanios uses footnotes throughout his work, yet the sources he quotes are selectively chosen to support his

pro-Greek thesis. On one occasion, he footnotes 'for a pro-Macedonian account, see Andrew Rossos.' Thus, it becomes apparent that both Livanios and Martis do not see themselves as presenting a pro-Greek account of the IMRO and the wider Macedonian Question, but only the 'truth', which warrants the discrediting of opposing interpretations, namely all 'pro-Macedonian' accounts.

Correspondingly, Macedonian historiography of the IMRO aims to further Macedonian nationalism similarly through aspirations to historical dominance in order to build a historical foundation on a shared yet disputed past. More specifically, the construction of Macedonian nationalist history has responded accordingly to the changing purposes which it has served.

Upon the formation of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (SRM), official histories foregrounded the 'socialist nature' of the Ilinden Uprising of 1903 orchestrated by the IMRO. Alexander Hristov in his 1971 work *The Creation of Macedonian Statehood*, refers to the 'radical middle classes in Macedonia' orchestrating a 'national liberation movement of... all classes of Macedonian society' against a 'capitalist social order' for the 'establishment of a free Macedonian state.'¹⁵ Hristov's purpose behind this interpretation was to create a Macedonian national history that resonated with the policy of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Historian William W. Hagen interprets the aim of the SFRY's leader Josip Broz Tito as attempting to 'satisfy each Yugoslav nationality's basic collective claims while at the same time balancing them against each other to... ensure that no one national group overwhelmed the others.'¹⁶ The necessity to maintain this precarious equilibrium is reflected in Hristov's portrayal of the IMRO. In his work Hristov foregrounds the proletarian internationalism of an IMRO that was 'common to the entire people' and 'guaranteed equality of right to the different nationalities inhabiting Macedonia.'¹⁷ Thus, although presenting an entirely different portrayal of the IMRO, the purpose of Hristov's history is not democratisation, rather it is to support the national policy of the SFRY.¹⁸

Upon the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the purpose of the national history changed from serving to establish a Macedonian socialist tradition under the SRM to supporting the 'extremely nationalistic platform'¹⁹ of the IMRO's supposed successor, the VMRO-DPMNE²⁰ government. The Macedonian national representation of the IMRO has been refashioned so that the objectives

of the revolutionary organisation reflect the policy of the current day VMRO-DPMNE. The rationale behind this historiographical trend is to position the predominant political party of the new republic as the direct successors of an IMRO represented as champions of Macedonian nationalism. This has the effect of positioning the platform of the VMRO-DPMNE as synonymous with nationalistic patriotism. A history written to achieve this objective must claim to be the definitive history and must attempt to marginalise differing perspectives.

Canadian-Macedonian historian Andrew Rossos is credited as having published 'the first professional English language overview of the history of Macedonia,'²¹ although historian Stefan Troebst suggests that his 'teleologic portrayal... is negatively affected by... the Skopjan view of history'²² and thus is considered a pro-Macedonian nationalist account, representing the latest developments in orthodox Macedonian historiography. Rossos begins his book *Macedonia and the Macedonians: A History* by stating that 'most of the literature on the Macedonian question, though vast, tends to be biased and tendentious and even the scholarly works are of even and dubious quality and value.'²³ Thus Rossos, like all nationalist historians in this historiography, has begun his work with an attempt to marginalise oppositional voices in favour of the account presented. For this reason, Rossos' work is indicative of the traditional historical practice described by Jenkins, not his vision for democratisation. Yet, despite Rossos' anachronism in '[transposing] the dominant ethnicistic way of thinking about the Macedonian people into a narrative that is both streamlined and modern, although not totally historical,'²⁴ his account is to some extent able to accommodate ambiguity. In his pro-Macedonian discussion of the aims of the IMRO he concludes that 'the organization emphasized the Macedonian people (narod), patriotism, political consciousness and total equality of all ethnic groups and religions in Macedonia' yet he is able to concede that 'There was not total internal unity on the issue; there were differences even among the VMRO leaders. The body's right wing was openly Bulgarophilic.'²⁵ It is for this reason that however much influenced by the purposes of nationalism Rossos' thesis may be, his account only goes some of the way to creating the myth of the IMRO able to be utilised by the VMRO-DPMNE. Rossos' thesis is ultimately inadequate because in the quest for the truth that will lay the foundations of a nation, there is no room for ambiguity, as it impedes the necessary creation of the concrete from the undefined.

Popular history in the Republic and abroad, rather than being an avenue for the democratic practice of history, in fact supports the VMRO-DPMNE and other Macedonian nationalists in a way that Rossos was unable to. A prominent example of this popular Macedonian historiography is a 2011 documentary directed by Ivo Trajkov entitled *The Roots of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation*.²⁶ The Ministry of Culture in the Republic of Macedonia supported the production of this documentary which was written by the director of the Skopje Institute of Folklore, Blaže Ristovski. Absent not only in this documentary, but in almost of all popular Macedonian historiography is any consideration of the ambiguities or complexities concerning the nature and aims of the IMRO and the Macedonian Question more generally. Ristovski states that the IMRO was founded under the premises that ‘Macedonia is a distinct territory with its own name, history, and culture; that Macedonians are a distinct people, a nation; that the Macedonian language is distinct in the Slavic world; that the Macedonian church is the national church; that Macedonia looks for autonomy in Turkey.’²⁷ Contrary even to the analysis of both Hristov and Rossos, in this documentary there is no mention of how the IMRO operated within the multi-ethnic Macedonian vilayet and no discussion of the IMRO’s pro-Bulgarian factions. It is because these two pieces of the complex picture of the IMRO’s past complicate the racially exclusive nationalist platform of the Republic of Macedonia that they are omitted from Macedonian popular history. Thus, through analysis of the work of Hristov, Rossos and Ristovski, one can conclude that both traditional and popular Macedonian historiography has been written from a foundation of nationalism. Although, the specific nationalist interests these histories aim to further determines the perspectives that are ultimately silenced.

In this historiography of conflicting partisan perspectives, one often seeks the ‘independent’ historian for the objective account. Respondent historians, such as the British Douglas Dakin and the American Duncan M. Perry have written to provide the ‘objective analysis’. These historians provide a more promising model for the democratisation of this history, yet these historians too cannot escape the social forces at work on the production of history.

Douglas Dakin in his 1966 publication *The Greek struggle in Macedonia, 1897-1913* states that ‘by indoctrinating the Macedonian peasantry with socialist

and revolutionary ideas’ the IMRO’s ‘aim was to liberate Macedonia from Turkish yoke, and to secure “Macedonia for the Macedonians”, the implication being that the Macedonians were a nationality.’²⁸ Dakin foregrounds in his analysis both the socialist elements of the IMRO and does not entertain the possibility of the contextual existence of any form of a Macedonian national consciousness. Thus, Dakin provides an unbalanced and simplistic analysis of the IMRO and the Macedonian Question.²⁹ Further, it is evident that he has been limited to the historical paradigms established by his contemporary nationalist historians.

Duncan M. Perry in his work *The Politics of Terror: The Macedonian Revolutionary Movements 1893-1903*³⁰ presents a nuanced account of the competing factions within the IMRO and their differing aims. While Perry does not attempt to marginalise perspectives contrary to his own (he hopes to ‘offend all equally’³¹), he does not acknowledge the epistemic fragility of his arguments and displays limited insight into how his ideology, contextual biases and perspectives have inevitably and indelibly marked his work. It becomes clear that Perry does not wish to add to the historiography of the IMRO, instead he aims to provide a ‘re-evaluation’ in which he has ‘endeavored to remain apart from the numerous biases.’³² Jenkins’ post-modernist theory accepts the impossibility of this endeavour, yet Perry does not. For this reason neither the work of Dakin or Perry are able to be regarded as examples of democratic history.

The historiography of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation remains an exemplary study of the traditional practice of history as critiqued by Jenkins. The assertion that ideology forms the basis of all history is shown to be true through an analysis of the relationship between the practice of history and nationalism in its many forms. Jenkins’ truism that history is a contested discourse within which voices compete to achieve dominance through the marginalisation of opposition is established through critique of the purpose behind the differing interpretations presented of the IMRO. It has also been shown that historians in their construction of this historiography have utilised the conventions and institutions of history to distribute and legitimise their interpretations of the IMRO. These perspectives have been shown as spurring from a variety of purposes; whether that be to obtain political hegemony through historical construction or to specifically avoid nationalistic bias altogether, each historian has been shown as wanting to produce the final

analysis. The historiography of the IMRO is indicative of traditional history and not its emancipation through democratisation. The Macedonian Question will remain interminably open, as will all questions of history. It is the practice of forging national narratives based on ethnically exclusive and marginalising ideologies of nationalism that has encouraged conflict within Macedonia and has fueled the countries international disputes. It is through the abandoning of this practice of history that Macedonians may see an end to these conflicts. To afford one the right to a voice within the historical sphere is to afford one equal opportunity too in the political sphere. It is through the democratisation of history that we may see some resolution to the democratisation of Macedonia.

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Endnotes

1. Jenkins, K (1999:2004) *Re-Thinking History*, Routledge, New York, p.23

2. *ibid*, p. 32

3. *ibid*, p. 24

4. Anderson, B 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. Verso, London

5. *ibid*, p. 6

6. *ibid*, p. 204

7. Jenkins, K 2003. *Refiguring History: New thoughts on an old discipline*, Routledge, London, p. 6

8. Martis, N. K., 1983. *The Falsification of Macedonian History*, Graphic Arts, Athens

9. *ibid*, p. 79

10. *ibid*, p. 80

11. *ibid*, p. 11

12. *ibid.*, p. 14

13. *ibid.*, p. 15

14. *ibid*.

15. Hristov, A 1971, *The Creation of Macedonian Statehood*, trans. B Mears, Izdavač, Skopje, p. 22

16. Hagen, W. W., 'The Balkans' Lethal Nationalisms', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 1999), pp. 52-64, Council on Foreign Relations

17. Hristov, op. cit., p. 23

18. It is important to note that Hristov held the position of a professor at 'Kultura Skopje' (Cultural Institute of Skopje). Jenkins makes the point in his *Re-thinking History* (p. 27) that an historian is subject to the pressure of "departmental heads, peer groups, and institutional research policies". These pressures would have most likely applied to Hristov and their effect has arguably been reflected in his thesis. This is another example of how the historiography of the IMRO is characteristic of Jenkins' model of traditional history and thus not conducive to history's democratisation.

19. Danforth, L. M., 1995, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: New Jersey, p. 101

20. Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity. VMRO and IMRO are one in the same, the first being a Macedonian acronym and the latter its English translation. The democratic parliament of the Republic of Macedonia has been dominated by the VMRO-DPMNE for most of its history. The party has pursued a policy of ethnic Macedonian nationalism based on the legacy of its namesake, the IMRO, and its revolutionary philosophy of 'Macedonia for the Macedonians'.

21. Troebst, G., A. Rossos: *Macedonia and the Macedonians*, Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas, Universität Leipzig, trans. Dowavić, R.: "Der Torontoer Osteuropahistoriker Andrew Rossos... hat nun die erste professionelle englischsprachige Gesamtdarstellung der Geschichte Makedoniens"

22. *ibid.*, trans. Dowavić R.: "Rossos' teleologische

Darstellung leidet gleich der Skopjoter Geschichtssicht an der Fixierung auf das, was er in Anlehnung an den makedonischen Begriff makedonizam „Macedonianism“ nennt

23. Rossos, op. cit., p. 79
24. Troebst, op. cit., trans. Dowavić R.: *“Die historische Meistererzählung vom ethnonational definierten „makedonischen Volk“ hat Andrew Rossos, ungeachtet ihrer streckenweisen Nicht-Historizität, in ein modernes, ja stromlinienförmiges Narrativ transponiert.”*
25. Rossos, op. cit., p. 94
26. Trajkov, I., 2011, Korenite na MRO, Naše Maalo Produkcija
27. Trajkov, op. cit., trans. Wright, A.: *“И, прв пат беше дефинирана првата македонска национална програма, во која се постави дека, Македонија е посебна територија, со свој име, историја и култура, дека македонци се посебен народ, како нација, дека македонскиот јазик е посебен во словенскиот свет, дека македонската црква е... национална црква, и бараат една автономија во рамките на Турција”*
28. Dakin, D. 1966:1993, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia 1897-1913*, Society for Macedonian Studies, Thessaloniki and the Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, p. 47
29. The argument could be made that Dakin foregrounds the socialist element of the IMRO due to the Cold War period in which he was writing and refutes any notions of Macedonian national consciousness due to his experiences within the Greek People’s Liberation Army. Yet, these are only two of many contextual pressures that could possibly have had an influence on Dakin’s work.
30. Perry, D. M., 1988, *The Politics of Terror: The Macedonian Liberation Movements 1893-1903*, Duke University Press, USA
31. *ibid.*, p. xiii
32. *ibid.*



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The landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 is often given prominence in accounts of the Gallipoli campaign. What other events or experiences of the campaign would you argue require more attention? Why?

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