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Review of Alexis Heraclides, The Macedonian Question and the Macedonians: A History

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Alexis Heraclides

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Alexis Heraclides

The Macedonian Question and the Macedonians: A History

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Alexis Heraclides' book on *The Macedonian Question and the Macedonians* is a major contribution to the existing bibliography on the issue. Published a year after the signing and ratification (2018–2019) of the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia, which aimed at solving the name row between the two countries, Heraclides' book traces the long and complex history of the Macedonian Question since the mid-nineteenth century.

Combining a historical and international relations perspective, this comprehensive discussion of the different aspects of the issue offers significant insight into the conflicts brought about by the antagonism between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia over the former Ottoman territory of geographical Macedonia, as well as the gradual emergence of the Macedonian nation and the creation of the Macedonian state. In the last chapters, the book deals with the Prespa Agreement, especially its clauses on identity issues and their significance, and with the latest developments regarding the turbulent relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria – the latter being responsible for the blocking of the accession negotiations of North Macedonia with the EU since 2019, when Greece gave at last the green light.

Heraclides, a well-known international relations specialist in Greece and beyond,¹ has the merit of being absolutely detached and nonpartial in his analysis, which is often openly critical of Greek nationalist claims. Thus, his book, based on a vast international literature and, additionally, on discussions with prominent Balkan intellectuals, is one of the rare academic works on the Macedonian Question that bypasses the ethnocentric scholarly production of the countries involved.

The first three chapters of the book concern the onset of the Macedonian Question as part of the Eastern Question from 1870 to the 1920s, in the context of the competing national movements in the Balkans. The author presents the Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian claims to Macedonia, culminating from propaganda (by means of education, rival churches and ethnographic maps) to open conflict with the creation of armed guerrilla bands in the early twentieth century. Although, the noun Macedonians (*Makedonci/Makedones*) was mostly used then as a regional identifier, inspired by the ancient history of the region and

promoted by Greek and Serbian propaganda to counter the Bulgarian claims that all Slav speakers were ethnically Bulgarian, the exact meaning of the terms Bu(l)gar or Bulgarian and Macedonian or Macedonian Bulgarian is hard to establish and continues to be the object of controversy between present-day Macedonians and Bulgarians, both in academia and in politics.

Heraclides provides a detailed account of the Macedonian revolutionary organisation (known as IMRO or VMRO) from its foundation in 1893 and its growing impact at the turn of the century, until its decline in the interwar period. He describes the course of events that led to the Ilinden Uprising and the stillborn Republic of Krushevo in 1903, the divergent scopes and political ideologies of the VMRO leaders, their role, the internal splits and (often bloody) antagonisms, mostly revolving around one core dilemma: should the ultimate purpose be the autonomy/independence of Macedonia or, alternatively, its annexation to Bulgaria? Heraclides discusses the question of the national identity of VMRO members, still today an issue of heated debates between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, on the basis of ample original and secondary sources. The author stresses the division of the movement between the left-oriented (composed of socialists and anarchists) autonomist faction, leaning towards the creation of a transnational independent Macedonia (with the Bulgarian-Macedonians as prevailing ethnicity or not), and the right-wing supremists or centralists, who defended the cause of Bulgarian state nationalism. The actions and ideas of the former contributed to the development of a distinct Macedonian national identity, through a long process of differentiation and consolidation. On this point, Heraclides quotes historian Tchavdar Marinov, who warns against “methodological nationalism”, that is, the tendency to apply contemporary notions of nationhood on previous periods, when ethnic or national belonging was not clear, nor of primary importance (47).

However, concerning the role of VMRO, there is a part of its action that Heraclides misses to address: the participation of the Komiti or Komitadji in the so-called “Macedonian Struggle” (1904–1908), that is, the fight between rival Bulgarian/Macedonian and Greek armed bands, as well as against the Ottoman forces, for the “liberation” of Macedonia. The author refers shortly to this topic in the first chapter, concerning the antagonistic national claims on Macedonia. When mentioning this “limited guerrilla warfare”, he describes the opponents of the Greek bands as “Bulgarians” (9), without specifying that the latter belonged chiefly to the VMRO. This is not of minor importance though, since the participation of the VMRO in the fight for national allegiances by means of violence and intimidation – a conflict labelled as the “Macedonian civil war” by Tasos Kostopoulos² – sustains to this day the grievances related to the Macedonian Question. Yet, Heraclides’ omission is telling of a gap in the bibliography; while the role of the Komitadji in the bloodshed during the Macedonian Struggle is highlighted in Greek historiography, the Macedonian, Bulgarian and international literature on the VMRO focuses, rather, on the

“heroic” revolutionary aspect of its action, culminating in Ilinden, and, to a lesser extent, in the movement’s subsequent divisions, along with their political ramifications.

The next chapters focus on the consequences of the Bucharest Treaty (1913), following the Balkan Wars. The division of the Ottoman territory of Macedonia between Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria led to the integration of the Slav-speaking populations, which constituted the bulk of the rural population, to different nation-states. The assimilation policies and the oppressive measures for the “Serbianisation” and the “Hellenisation” (respectively) of the inhabitants in the interwar years, as well as the harsh experience of the Bulgarian occupation during the Second World War, contributed to the development of a distinct – ethnic or national – Macedonian identity. The book highlights the different historic experience of the population in Serbian (Vardar) Macedonia, in Bulgarian (Pirin) Macedonia and especially in Greek (Aegean) Macedonia, where the participation of big number of Slav Macedonians in the resistance movement led by the Greek Communist Party was encouraged by the latter’s commitment to minority rights, and even, for a brief moment at the final phase of the civil war (1946–1949), for the “full national restitution of the Macedonian people”. Heraclides explains meticulously the role of the Comintern in the 1920s and 1930s, the context of the creation of the People’s Republic of Macedonia in 1944–1945 as part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Tito–Stalin split and its repercussions, and the vicissitudes of the relation between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in the postwar decades.

Coming to the name dispute between Greece and the then Republic of Macedonia, the author describes the diplomatic developments for the settlement of the issue and the tense relations between the two countries until 2017. Moreover, he scrutinises the main topics of discord: the standardisation of the Macedonian language, the question of the Macedonian national historical narrative in all its variations, and – last but not least – the claim to the ancient Macedonians and Alexander the Great. Furthermore, Heraclides argues that the Greek public’s negative attitude is largely due to misconceptions, specifically that there is only one Macedonia, the Greek one, and that the Macedonian nation was fabricated *ex nihilo* by Tito. However, the Greek state has “skeletons in the closet” (213) that explain the reasons for its opposition to the independent Republic of Macedonia; these concern the alleged “Macedonian irredentism”, and “the concomitant threat to Greece’s territorial integrity”. According to the author, the Greek fears lay not only in history, but also in the existence of a Slavic-speaking population in Greek Macedonia:

Their non-recognition is, of course, partly due to the aforementioned phobia of irredentism and fear of change of boundaries, but it is also due, I would argue, to the need to forget and conceal what this ethnic group suffered during the interwar years, especially under the Metaxas dictatorship, and in the second part of the 1940s, their eviction and confiscation of their properties, and until today not being allowed to return or claim their citizenship or property. (215)

The last chapters of the book refer to the settlement of the name dispute with the 2018 Prespa Agreement and to the ongoing clash between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Heraclides gives a very interesting assessment of the Prespa Agreement and its consequences, stressing that “no state in the contemporary world has changed its name due to the desire and pressure by another state (the only exception being Austria after a world war)”.

To quote the author:

Greece achieved its main goal, the change of name, and pocketed the *erga omnes*, which was no easy matter and had not been set by previous Greek Governments as a clear prerequisite. The issue of Greek national heritage (ancient Macedonia) was also a major achievement and gain for Greece, as well as the many provisions on the sanctity of borders and against irredentism. An unexpected gain was also the alteration of several constitutional provisions ... and it is very unusual for a state to change its constitutional provisions at the demand of another state ... Greece, in order to accommodate the needs of the other party, gave in to the following: the nationality (though meaning citizenship and not nationality in the sense of a nation) to be called “Macedonian”, as well as the language ... and of course lifting the veto to accession to NATO and the EU. (235)

For Heraclides, the Prespa Agreement is clearly more favourable to Greece and, therefore, Macedonian grievances seem justified. He suggests, however, that hopefully

in its practical consequences ... especially through increased mutually beneficial economical transactions and contacts leading to better mutual knowledge and discarding misunderstandings and prejudice, [the agreement will] gradually transform itself into a “positive sum” outcome for both parties and by the same token enhance peace and stability in this volatile region of the Balkans. (238)

What he did not foresee is the unwillingness of the New Democracy government in Greece (in power since 2019) to go forward with the full implementation of the Prespa Agreement – despite the statements to the contrary. Another point of uncertainty is the possible return to power of the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia. Although the agreement cannot be revoked, noncommitment to its clauses by one or both parties will certainly lead to new tensions.

To conclude, Alexis Heraclides’ book is a valuable synthesis on the Macedonian Question, which elucidates most aspects of this complex issue, combining a thorough and balanced historical account with the analysis of contemporary political developments. Taking in account that, due to the language difference between Greece and North Macedonia, readers and even scholars mostly ignore the relevant literature of the other side, such a book in English was certainly needed.

¹ Alexis Heraclides is emeritus professor of international relations and conflict resolution at the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Athens) and author of several books on self-determination, secession, humanitarian intervention, the Middle East, Cyprus, the Greek-Turkish relations and the Aegean dispute, the Macedonian Question and others.

² Tasos Kostopoulos, “La guerre civile macédonienne de 1903-1908 et ses représentations dans l’historiographie nationale grecque,” *Cahiers Balkaniques* 38–39 (2011): 213–26, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ceb.835>.