

Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question

VICTOR ROUDOMETOF

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It has become a commonplace to say that the Macedonian question stubbornly refuses to die a quiet death. The forces that gave birth to it in the nineteenth century (nationalism and modernity) are still very much alive, and unlikely to subside in the foreseeable future. In the course of its long life the Macedonian question has

undergone many transformations, occasionally reflecting those of the region's inhabitants.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian nationalism had a two-fold aim: on the one hand, to transform the Christian Slavs of the area into nationals by shattering the unity fostered by religion and on the other, to carve out as much Ottoman land as circumstances allowed them. After the expulsion of the Ottomans from the Balkans and the turbulence caused by World War I, assimilation of all those who found themselves on the wrong side of the border became the order of the day. During the interwar years, Serbia and Greece promoted the 'Hellenization' and 'Serbianization' of their slices of the Macedonian pie with varying degrees of intensity and success. The emergence of a federal unit bearing the name of Macedonia within Tito's Yugoslavia added yet another important ingredient to the fabled 'Macedonian salad', as the wars over land gave way to a war of words over the name, language, and cultural heritage of Macedonia. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that digesting the Macedonian salad has caused many problems to all sides concerned. This too is unlikely to end soon, not least because the independence of the Macedonian state following the recent Yugoslav wars brought to the forefront new concerns, and revived old controversies.

In a very real sense, the Macedonian question remains to this day largely unanswered. This is aptly illustrated, for example, by the recent US recognition of the UN-styled 'FYROM' as 'Macedonia'. A morale-boosting move, intended to strengthen the position of the Macedonian government as it faces an increasingly restive Albanian minority, the recognition caused much apprehension in Greece. However, the mass demonstrations of the early 1990s were not repeated. This is an important development, for it clearly shows that nationalism can be a destabilizing force in Greek politics only if the political parties (or the church) allow it to rear its head by manipulating it for their own ends. But the political isolation that Greece suffered earlier seems to have persuaded the Greek political establishment that the experience is certainly not worth reliving.

Victor Roudometof attempts to tackle a number of these and related issues as he explores the emergence and evolution of the Macedonian imbroglio. The book begins with a discussion of broader theoretical issues connected with 'national narratives' and 'collective memory', and pays particular attention to the conflict between 'citizenship' and 'nationhood' in the Balkans, a battle that has always tended to favour the latter. The focus then shifts to the 'symbolic struggle for Macedonia' during the 1990s, when Greece and Bulgaria confronted the challenges posed by an independent Macedonian state, and analyzes the controversy surrounding Macedonia's hotly contested nationalist credentials, symbols, and flags. After two chapters devoted to the historical background of the subject, in which he examines the contrasting Greek, Bulgarian and Macedonian 'national narratives', the author returns to the current situation with a comprehensive treatment of the minority question. This part of the book includes not only the question of Macedonian minorities (or lack thereof) in Greece and Bulgaria, but also an account of Albanian minorities in Greece and Macedonia.

Although the bulk of the book deals with current affairs, the chronological purview of Roudometof's analysis is commendably wide, as it stretches from the Greek–Bulgarian church struggle of the nineteenth century to the current twists and turns of the subject. The inclusion of the Albanian factor is equally important. Although the Albanians have not been traditional players in the Macedonian game, demography is now on their side. They comprise at least 23 per cent of the population of the Macedonian republic, and it may safely be said that their conduct and aspirations will determine to a considerable extent the future and stability of that state.

Another welcome feature of this book is its theoretical armour, for Roudometof is clearly at home with theories of nationalism and social construction of memory. In his introduction, he states that his aim was to provide 'a sociological perspective on the issues involved in the various controversies over Macedonia' (p. 2). Broadly following a number of recently published studies, mainly but not exclusively by social anthropologists, Roudometof approaches national narratives as 'an act of selection, appropriation, and proliferation of selected features from a people's past' (p. 194), and analyzes national identities as 'fluid' and 'situational' (p. 196). These are sound principles, although their novelty is somewhat less pronounced now than it was, say, ten years ago.

Given the considerable breadth of the book, it is inevitable that some issues receive less solid treatment than others, as in the case of communism in the interwar years. The 1924 IMRO manifesto, for example, was not signed as a 'joint declaration' by the Balkan Communist Federation and the Greek and Yugoslav communists (p. 99); nor was the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in any way involved in it (p. 100). Further, the Communist Party of Macedonia was established in 1943 and not in 1934 (p. 100). These small points, however, should not detract from the value of the book as a serviceable and wide-ranging guide to the complexities of the Macedonian question, which will appeal both to students of history and to specialists in international affairs. Although the author himself, a historically-minded sociologist, appears to consider his theoretical approaches as his main contribution to the subject (p. 25), readers may also welcome this book as a useful and theoretically-informed work of synthesis, based on a wide array of secondary sources, and supported by an excellent bibliography.

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