

Blaze Ristovski

MACEDONIA AND THE MACEDONIAN PEOPLE

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About This Book

Academician Georgi Stardelov

Blaze Ristovski has built and developed a distinctive methodological approach in his interpretation of the history of the Macedonian people. This approach incorporates an essential component adopted from positivism: the scholarly method and the struggle for truth in facts and in dealing with facts. From what the Germans called *Geistesgeschichte* (the History of the Spirit) it has taken the interpretation of

historical facts as a spiritual substratum, as a dynamic human fundamental. Accordingly, this Macedonian historical thinker analyses and follows the history of the Macedonian people as a history of Macedonian culture. Blaze Ristovski believes that the entire spiritual opus of the Macedonians is the foundation and firm support for their historical survival. This approach in his book *Macedonia and the Macedonian People* is not an arbitrary invention, but a consequence of the tragic destiny of the Macedonian people through history, who were driven and sometimes dominated by alien histories.

For a long time, up to the Antifascist Assembly of the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM, 1944), with no state institutions of their own, the Macedonians had found shelter in their own culture, developing first as a people and later forming a nation. Forced to create its own national culture without its own nation-state, the culture of the Macedonian people was characterized by several specific features. It was undoubtedly the result of its creative genius, but was also used as a means in its struggle for freedom. The model of this type of culture is best expressed by Fichte and his famous idea of *Kultur zur Freiheit* (Culture for freedom). It is this fate of the Macedonian culture that contributed to the fact that, in the case of Macedonia, national culture grew as a key element of what we can call a Macedonian ideology. For this reason, the protagonists of the struggle for the development of national consciousness and popular unity in Macedonian history were not so much its political strategists but primarily its cultural figures: poets, writers, linguists and collectors of folklore — in a word, the Macedonian intelligentsia.

In this situation, bearing in mind the ethnic relatedness among the South Slavs, the closeness between their languages, their shared faith, geographical links, etc., Ristovski is aware that the history of the Macedonian people cannot be explained and interpreted without the examination of South-Slav culture, where similar or even identical

cultural initiatives and aspirations developed during the long historical process. Consequently, he most often applies the comparative historical method in the analysis of these initiatives and aspirations. He compares and studies precisely those endeavours which have given Macedonian culture an indigenous trait and an indigenous national individuality. Hence his book is basically concentrated on revealing and presenting what I would call *the history of Macedonian history* in its Balkan and South-Slav context.

Thus the principal aim of Academician Ristovski in this work is his endeavour to interpret and study Macedonian history in its quintessence, always bearing in mind that the quintessence of the history of the Macedonian people is its culture and spiritual continuity. Politics, for instance, is dominated by discontinuity. In politics everything is ephemeral and occurs on a day-to-day basis, making it changeable and transient. States and their political orders change following the logic of some inexorable rhythm: they appear and then disappear from the historical scene, followed by new ones that trace the same path. These are followed by even newer ones, and so on. Policies and states do not intermingle with each other. On the contrary, they are opposed to and destroy each other. The spiritual continuity of a people can be followed only in its culture, where it develops uninterrupted. For this reason, it is only there that a people can show its united and indivisible personality.

Ristovski starts precisely from this irrefutable fact and carries out the idea of his book by following the history of the Macedonian people in an undeviating and uninterrupted spiritual continuity — the result of the millennium-long survival of the Macedonians in their highly exposed position in the Balkans, where the fury of the destruction of great achievements raged. This book is indeed a detailed survey of the Macedonian spiritual and historical experience over the centuries. It is a profound cross-section and a comprehensive study of those fundamental Macedonian periods in which

and through which the being of the culture of the Macedonian Slavs crystallized, over the centuries, as a Macedonian-Slavonic-Byzantine culture: from the process of their conversion to Christianity and the creation of Slavonic literacy, through Macedonian national and cultural development during the Macedonian Revival of the 19th century, when the Macedonians strengthened their consciousness through their own creativity, through the cultural ideas of the 'Lozars' and the national programme of the Macedonian Scholarly and Literary Society, and through Macedonian national thought and culture in the period between the two world wars.

Ristovski's book *Macedonia and the Macedonian People* is built upon a coherent concept in the establishment of the spiritual and historical continuity through which the individuality of the Macedonian people and its culture was formed. This can best be seen by the structure of the book itself. Namely, he completes his study of the Macedonian national and cultural thought with the start of the Second World War, as he designates the ASNOM years — the most significant period in the history of the Macedonian people — as an organic continuation of the long struggle of this people for national liberation. It was a period in which the Macedonians finally succeeded in establishing a Macedonian state, though only in a part of the historical, ethnic and cultural territory of Macedonia.

The originality of this book, among the other important books by Ristovski devoted to this field, lies precisely in the ambition of its author to subject what is considered 'most disputed' in Balkan historiography concerning the representation and presentation of Macedonia to historiographic and culturographic analysis. Ristovski studies Macedonian culture and language and the development of the Macedonian people as an individual entity within the Slavonic and Balkan context, all of which have been organically linked with the great spiritual achievements of the great and unrepeatable — even in terms of world history — Macedonian 9th century. This was a time when a new

Slavonic civilization and culture was born in Macedonia, spreading throughout the Slavonic world. The second part of the book deals with the building and strengthening of historical and cultural consciousness among Macedonians in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This most recent book of Ristovski's comes at a time when it can often be heard in some circles that Macedonia, the Macedonian people and Macedonian culture is, to put it mildly, a phenomenon that was created from nothing in the mid-20th century, as if by some arbitrary act: someone came up with the idea — for which there is no support in history — of creating a Macedonian people, a Macedonian language and Macedonian culture, and he created them. Ristovski replies to this ominous sound of trumpets, blown by seraphic Balkan trumpeters, with rare intellectual calm. He puts forward his concept — which requires exceptional knowledge in the field of Balkan studies, and where this erudite Macedonian writer and historian is certainly on his own territory — of the indestructible continuity of the Macedonian idea, of its organic genesis and emergence and spiritual growth in a continued, millennium-long Macedonian nocturne, and of the spiritual survival of the Macedonians in time and space. His basic theoretical position can be summed up in the following way: Macedonia in its present form would never have existed had it not been an inseparable part of history, had its long struggle had no continuity of its own in that gigantic epic that it created in history, in search of itself and of its own spiritual and cultural identity.

When touching upon the question of continuity in the emergence and historical evolution of the Macedonian people and its culture, we are undoubtedly delving into the realm of the spirit and the world of ideas. For this purpose, it is these — this spiritual substance and this cultural dimension of the Macedonian historical continuity — that Academician Ristovski analyses. As a history of the history of Macedonia, his book

explores the achievements of the Macedonian creative spirit. For this reason, it does not concentrate on battlefields. It does not deal with the long-lasting struggles, old and new, such as the eye-gouging battle of Mount Belasica, nor does it deal with harsh bloody slaughters such as those near the rivers Vardar, Crna and Bregalnica. It does not describe the death masks of the heroes or traitors, nor is it obsessed with the bitter destiny of the many commanders and comitadjis, outlaws and vassals. No, there is nothing of that kind in this history of Macedonian history. On the contrary, there is something encyclopaedic in it, a profound knowledge, something which can be seen only in the rare historiographic books that evaluate and re-evaluate historical facts not merely from the viewpoint of the positivist approach and what is known as the 'school of facts', but also and essentially from the viewpoint of the soul of the people, from the point of view of the spiritual, popular sense of the Macedonian which has been deeply interwoven within this people and has glimmered in them throughout the centuries. Journeying through the various cultures and periods that have roared under the mysterious Macedonian sky, this book explores the spiritual imprint, forgetting no endeavour and no name which has been made part of it. It recalls and historically reflects those major Macedonian ideas and their protagonists that have intertwined with each other over the centuries, building the original and indigenous Macedonian historical fresco-painting.

Ristovski's book *Macedonia and the Macedonian People* may also be regarded as a kind of cultural archaeology which, describing the Macedonian cultural past as a basic *argumentum ad hominem*, frees it from all alien deposits and colours. On most of its pages, if not all of them, it maintains, with a moderate, objectivist approach, a dialogue with hundreds and hundreds of books from the Balkan plethora of historiographies, some of them relevant, but most written in favour of the victors and filled with an inexplicable hatred towards and scorn of everything Macedonian. There are

only rare examples written in favour of the defeated Macedonians, the people who had to express their defeats in folk song or tale, in legend or story, or in an unfinished testament.

I believe that the principal value of this book of Ristevski's is the fact that, in contrast to an earlier period in Macedonian historiography, it hides nothing, nor does it try to exclude or change what historical sources give as the ethnic or national attributes of the Macedonians. Amidst the insane Balkan historical jumble it is indeed an impartial and objective book, or it aims to be so as far as is possible in this region. It aims to pit facts against facts, and not wishful historical thinking, which has become a recognizable trait of a large number of incompetent Balkan historical fanatics. I am referring to no one in particular, and to no one side. I am referring to all of them, to all those who still remain prisoners of their national ideologies.