

# H-Net Reviews

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**Hugh Poulton.** *Who Are the Macedonians?* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. xvii + 218 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34598-1.

**Reviewed by** Steven Sowards (Swarthmore College)  
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Hugh Poulton has written a concise introduction to Macedonian history, couched in terms of national identity and its historic origins. Some will quarrel with his conclusions, but the book fulfills the need for a handy synopsis.

In its focus, sources and scope, the book can be divided into two parts. The first half traces the general development of ethnicity and its political expression in Macedonia from prehistoric times up to 1945. The second half examines Macedonian ethnic identity since World War II, culminating in a detailed account of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia during the collapse of Yugoslavia.

Poulton begins with a geographic definition of Macedonia and a necessary consideration of the many Balkan nationalities, including the inhabitants of today's "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM). Poulton sums up the Neolithic, classical, medieval, and early modern history of the region, relating historical facts to contemporary nationalist concerns while condemning the practice of "backdating ... modern concepts on to history" (p. 3). He discusses the Ottoman "millet" system as a shelter for the separate ethnicities during the centuries of Turkish rule, then summarizes the nineteenth century rise of Balkan nationalism, while concisely discussing the use and misuse of history in nationalist debate (pp. 24-25). In tracing the rise of Macedonian nationalism, Poulton outlines the tangled politics of the VMRO (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), and interventions by Macedonia's Balkan neighbors and the European Great Powers. The first half of the book recounts developments in Macedonia during the interwar years and World War II.

The second half of Poulton's work looks at Macedonian history since 1945, especially events during the

twilight of Yugoslav unity since the 1980s. Poulton has extensive personal knowledge: the dust jacket identifies him as an "East European researcher for Amnesty International, specializing in the Balkan countries," and he has written elsewhere about minority rights and refugees. Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas contributed the forward to Poulton's first book, *The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1991).

Macedonian identity remains the fundamental issue in Macedonian studies. Poulton considers three defining criteria: geography, residence in the smaller area making up the FYROM, and ethnicity. At each stage of the book, Poulton discusses all of Macedonia's nationalities, including Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, Turks, Jews, Roma and Vlachs. However, the "Slav inhabitants of Macedonia" (p. 2) occupy the center of Poulton's narrative. He cautiously accepts a Slav Macedonian identity, even as he describes and critiques its construction in a recent "process of ethnogenesis" (p. 120).

Balancing the general with the specific, Poulton is sometimes at odds with himself, and the result may satisfy no specific audience. At a time of Balkan crisis, an introductory work on Macedonia, ethnicity and nationalism makes sense, but long passages about "murshids," "murids" and "tarikats" (p. 29) will be heavy going for general readers. There is no glossary of terms from Turkish, Arabic or the Balkan languages: specialists will not need one, but some assistance with vocabulary would help a wider audience. In the same vein, only specialists may appreciate the very detailed discussion of events between 1989 and 1993; a general audience may be frustrated by the inability of any book to compete with CNN and other media sources, for continuing the story up to the present day.

At the same time, specialists may be disappointed by Poulton's use of secondary sources. Poulton cites over one hundred books and articles in footnotes in the book's first half, but there is no separate bibliography and it is difficult to evaluate the sources at a glance. At times, Poulton relies heavily on a few secondary publications, and his selections are subject to question. The section on the Great Power reforms of 1903 to 1908, for example, overstates the British role (in keeping with older sources) and exaggerates the degree of German participation (pp. 60-61). For a single reference to the fate of Bulgaria's Jews in the Holocaust (pp. 112-113), why not cite Frederick Chary's *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940-1944* (1972)? On the Bogomils, would not John V. A. Fine, Jr.'s *The Early Medieval Balkans* (1983) be more suitable than Poulton's choices? Such details will pass general readers unnoticed, but raise questions among specialists and scholars. On a more substantive level, Poulton seems at home with South Slavic language sources, but relies on secondary sources and translations for Greek affairs. A reader new to the topic may need better assistance to understand Greek claims in Macedonia.

Accurate, authoritative editing and indexing lends credibility to works on controversial topics. In this regard, Poulton is not well served by his editors. A simple spellchecker should have corrected "Yugoslavia" in a footnote (p. 194). Sentence fragments mar a long footnote running across pp. 28-29; footnote 27 on p. 126 is simply missing. In an "op.cit." reference on p. 103, Poul-

ton apparently cites Elizabeth Barker's classic, *Macedonia: Its Place in Balkan Power Politics* (1950), but the original entry seems to be missing (again pointing to the absence of a bibliography). Annoying mistakes like this are too common.

The index also shows inattention. Spelling is inconsistent, with "Belov, A." in the index (p. 211) for Aleksandar Belev (p. 112), and "Weisenthal, S." (p. 217) for Simon Wiesenthal (p.113). The entry for "AVNOJ" (p. 211) refers to p. 193, a misprint for p. 103. Some entries are out of alphabetical order, including "Sarafov" (p. 216), and "EAM-ELAS" (p. 213). Such mistakes are not central to the text, but they fail to offer it the support it deserves.

As Poulton says, in studying Macedonia "it seems impossible to avoid offending some or even many, although needless to say this is not our aim" (p. 3). To study Macedonia is to be frustrated by its tangle of languages and Balkan connections; to publish one's conclusions is to be controversial, and Poulton can expect predictable condemnation from opponents of a Macedonian state.

Despite its shortcomings, anyone needing a concise introduction to modern Macedonian history should be grateful for Hugh Poulton's book. There is still no definitive work on Macedonian history, especially in a language accessible to Western European or American audiences. While we wait for such a work, Poulton's book usefully and concisely summarizes the main events and key issues, and thoughtfully relates past history to current events.

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