

Challenging Greek History-By-Slogans

By Victor Bivell

Thank you Dushan and the Australian Macedonian Literary Association. I'm very happy to launch these two short and very interesting books - *The Little Book of Big Greek Lies* by Risto Stefov in Canada, and *Ancient Greek and Other Ancient Testimonies About the Unique Ethnic Distinctness of the Ancient Macedonians* by Aleksandar Donski in Macedonia.

Let me start with the obvious - that Greek Government lies are very topical at present. They are on the front pages of the newspapers and often the lead stories on the nightly TV news. They've been there for a couple of years, and that is where they are likely to stay for a few more years while the Eurozone debt crisis gets sorted, and the Greek economy continues in recession.

We've all seen the TV news with the dramatic demonstrations and riots in Athens and outside the Greek parliament. The reporters tell us the Greek people are calling their own government "Liars" and "Thieves".

I saw one photograph of a demonstrator with a sign in English that said exactly those words - "Liars & Thieves", and I thought: that guy could be a Macedonian. Because the Macedonians have been calling the Greek Government liars and thieves for over a hundred years. The Greek Government lied about Macedonia when it was under the Turks, saying there no Macedonians there, that they were Greeks. Then it stole half of Macedonia in 1912-13 when it sent in the Greek army, and it has been lying about Macedonia ever since.

So I look at the photos, and the TV clips, and I think perhaps the whole crowd could be Macedonian, because the Greek people have woken up to their own government and now agree with the Macedonians. Yes, we agree on something. The Greek Government has managed to do the impossible and unite Greeks and Macedonians in the same view. Miracles can happen, so let's have hope that the Greek people might keep learning the truth.

Meanwhile, it is not only the Greek people who have had their eyes opened. The rest of Europe is also amazed at the whopping great lies the Greek Government told them so that Greece could join the Euro. If you measure the lies in money, these are probably some of the biggest lies in history. Billions of Euros worth.

In 2010 a report by the European Commission accused Greece of "widespread misreporting of deficit and debt data" and "severe irregularities... including submission of incorrect data, and non-respect of accounting rules".

London's Financial Times newspaper put it less diplomatically, and accused Greece of "falsifying data" and that it "deliberately misreported" financial data. In another article the European economist Edin Mujagic called Greece a liar three times, and he also used the words "untrustworthy", "cheating", "manipulate", "blackmail, and "massive squandering".

I'm pretty sure Dr Mujagic doesn't come from Macedonia, but he sounds like a Macedonian too.

If we look at the big picture we see that for over a hundred years the Macedonians have been saying that Greek governments have been lying about Macedonia, politics, history, human rights, and the ethnic structure of Greek society. Now the Greek people, the Europeans and the rest of the world know that Greek governments have been lying about finance and money for over 10 years.

To better connect these two sets of lies is the challenge for Macedonian activists.

That is actually not an easy thing to do. I tried two years ago when the Greek lies to enter the Eurozone first became known. But the media is much more interested in Greek lies about money than it is in Greek lies about human rights or history.

But the connection needs to be made, and it is still early days. We need the Greek people, Europeans and the rest of the world to better understand what has really been happening in Greece over the past 100 years. We need the world to better understand how dishonestly Greek governments have been treating their own people - Greeks as well as the Macedonians and other minorities - and how dishonestly Greek governments have been treating the Republic of Macedonia.

So the arrival of these two books - *The Little Book of Big Greek Lies*, and *Ancient Testimonies about the Ancient Macedonians*, if I can call it that, is very timely.

Both books tackle Greek government propaganda that is both persistent and shameless. They do this with a huge amount of very credible evidence that contradicts the Greek government's immovable position on what it euphemistically calls 'national issues'. The Greek government and its Greek academic and Greek media cheer squad shamelessly ignore this evidence, but others will not.

As a general rule, the world outside Greece will always look at all the points of view available and make up its own mind. But as Macedonians, we have to somehow make these people interested in our points of view, in our issues, so having these books in English is a very good start.

The Little Book of Big Greek Lies is a good introduction for the general reader. It is easy to read and presents 20 of the Greek government's most blatant propaganda lines.

The government calls these 'national issues' but really they are 'national myths' that have the status of 'official national myths'. They are so official that to challenge them is to risk severe criticism from other Greeks. It can risk fear and an attack of "Cambridge Courage", as happened when Cambridge University backed out of publishing the book *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood* by Greek American academic Anastasia Karakasidou. And it can risk death threats, as happened to Ms Karakasidou when Chicago University found the courage that Cambridge University did not and published her book.

Mr Stefov gives us some insight into the power of these official 'myths' in his introduction. The series of articles from which the book grew were meant to be humorous. He says "The real surprise however was the vast amount of attention the articles received, not just from Macedonians, but also from Greeks who saw the articles not as humorous but as a 'horrible thing to do', not because they were not true but because they were "airing Greek dirty linen" in public. This series of articles has generated more feedback than all my articles put together. I received emails with criticism that ranged from being called 'a dirty liar' to being threatened with bodily harm."

So let's look at some of these propaganda lines, these slogans, or 'national issues' as the Greek government prefers to call them.

They cover history - "The Ancient Macedonians were Greek", "Philip II United The Greeks", "4,000 Years of Greek Civilization", and "Macedonia Was Liberated in 1912, 1913".

They cover who the Greeks think they are - "Modern Greeks are Direct Descendants of the Ancient Greeks", "Greece is an Ethnically Homogenous Nation", "Greece is a Democratic State", and "Greeks are a Superior Race".

They cover what Greeks think they contributed to the world - "The Koine Language is Greek", "The Ancient 'Greek Gods' Were Greek", and "Macedonian Monks Kiril and Metodi Were Greek".

And of course, they know better than we do who we are, so some of the issues are about the Macedonians - "There is No Such Thing as a Macedonian", "Tito Created the Macedonian Nation", "No Macedonians, Turks, Albanians or Vlachs Live in Greece Today", "The Macedonian Language Does Not Exist", "Macedonians Are Slavs", and "No Macedonians Exist in Macedonia".

Greek governments have been carrying on a propaganda war for a very long time and every Greek and every Macedonian has heard these lines many times over.

Mr Stefov's book neatly summarizes them for all to see, discuss and debate, and refute or extend.

Some of the slogans are quite impertinent and offensive, telling Macedonians who they are and continuing to insist on it even when the Macedonians disagree, or are deeply offended.

That so many Greeks are sensitive about these propaganda lines is really not surprising. They too have had these lines repeated to them since their childhood and the lines go to the heart of what they have been told they are as a people, what they have been told about their history, what they have been told about their ethnic origins, and what they have been told about their place in the world.

If Greece were a place of intellectual freedom, where opposing views could be freely put forward and debated, analyzing these slogans would be part of normal public discourse.

But Greece is not a place of intellectual freedom. Take the slogan "No Macedonians, Turks, Albanians or Vlachs Live in Greece Today". This is the official Greek government line. To say otherwise is to risk threats and being called a 'traitor', as happened with Greek human rights campaigner Panayote Dimitras.

A lovely feature about Big Greek Lies is that it concludes with the essay The Apology of an Anti Hellene by modern Greek writer Nikos Dimou. This is an essay that everyone should read. Mr Dimou has run into big trouble with his fellow Greeks for speaking his mind, first in 1975 when he wrote an essay that got him labeled "Dimou the anti-Hellene", and then big time in the 1990s when he says, "I rebelled against the eruption of Greek nationalism. The daily newspaper Kathimerini promptly expelled me from its ranks." Mr Dimou has lived outside Greece for many years.

All countries have national myths, 'favoured stories', a way they prefer to see themselves, but in countries with intellectual freedom these ideas are open to discussion and debate. For example, Australians think of

themselves as a "fair" people, that we treat people equally, but everyone is free to challenge that view and to give examples of where we are not fair. This is something we all love about Australia.

Likewise Macedonia. Macedonians have views about who we are, and these are sometimes seen as contradictory. But the important point is that Macedonians are free to debate the issues.

That is why I am proud to be a Macedonian in a way that I would not be proud to be a Greek. Let's take the extremely controversial example of whether the Macedonians and the Greeks are descended or ethnically related to their ancient Macedonian and ancient Greek counterparts.

The Greek view is "Modern Greeks are Direct Descendants of the Ancient Greeks". This is not a topic for public debate. To challenge that view is to risk being called unGreek, or worse, if there is such a thing.

In Macedonia, some people believe the Macedonians are direct descendants of the ancient Macedonians, some believe they are descendants from slavic invaders, and some believe they are a mixture of ancient Macedonians, slavic invaders and other peoples. Yes, the topic can generate extreme heat and it can ruin friendships.

But for me, the important part is that Macedonians are free to discuss and debate it and to freely present all available evidence. That is why at an intellectual level I am proud to be Macedonian, even though my family comes from what is now Greece.

Mr Stefov gives the general reader plenty to discuss and debate. For each propaganda line he succinctly summarizes the Greek position and then gives some of the key evidence and arguments as to why he says the claims are untrue.

We get a very nice feel for this style with the opening paragraph to Big Greek Lie No 1, that "Modern Greeks are Direct Descendants of the Ancient Greeks" subtitled "The greatest victims of Greek lies are the Greek themselves".

"How can a region in the Balkans where modern Greece is located today, which has been open to a multitude of invasions, conquests and settlements, remain homogenous and untouched for two thousand seven hundred years? Ironically, as the Greeks claim, how can modern Macedonia, a region neighbouring modern Greece, be so heterogenous that it has completely lost its original identity?"

That's a good question, and the author then discusses some of the key developments that have formed the modern Greek people, and concludes with an excellent quote from professor Donald Nicol "The ancient Greeks were after all, of very mixed ancestry; and there can be no doubt that the Byzantine Greeks, both before and after the Slav occupation, were even more heterogeneous."

This is the book's style with all 20 Big Lies. It does not try to do too much or labor the point, but is a very good introduction to each slogan.

Each 'Big Lie' could be developed into a full book, and that is what Aleksandar Donski has done with his book, which focuses on the slogan "The Ancient Macedonians were Greek".

The world hears this line over and over, and in his introduction Mr Donski explains why. "It is of great importance to Greece to prove that the name Macedonia and the ancient Macedonians were "Greek", which means that today's Macedonians "have no historical right" to use these "Greek names"."

This Greek logic can also be applied to the Greeks. If the modern Greeks are not direct descendants of the ancient Greeks, as Mr Stefov and many others argue, then they have no more right to the heritage of the ancient Greeks than anyone else. That is why they keep asserting they are direct descendants.

But the Greek position on the ancient Macedonians also needs to be challenged head on, and Mr Donski's approach is to quote the ancients themselves, particularly the ancient Greeks. The 212 page book is a deep mine of quotes from some of the ancient world's most famous writers and leaders, all of them saying or implying that the Macedonians and the Greeks were ethnically separate people and nations.

Among the more than 60 ancients he quotes are the Macedonian kings Alexander the Great, Philip II and Philip V; leading Greeks Aeschines, Appian, Arrian, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Homer, Isocrates, Pausanias, Plutarch, Polybius, Praxagoras, Theopompus, and Thucydides; leading Romans Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, Flamininus, Justin, Livy, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Seneca, and Tacitus.

Other historical figures quoted are Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, Agrippa, Strabo, Clement of Alexandria, Josephus Flavius, and Tatian the Assyrian.

These are some of the most renowned figures in the ancient world, and all of them had something to say about the Macedonians and how they were different from the Greeks. Some examples:

Donski writes: "Justin clearly separated the Macedonians from the Greeks when he writes about the preparations of the Macedonian army before the battle of Issus, too. It is well known that Alexander at the time divided his troops by nationality. He talked about all the different reasons of the importance of this battle to all the troops, of all nationalities, in order to lift their spirits. Here we see that he was a great psychologist as well. We read:

"He excited the Illyrians and Thracians by describing the enemy's wealth and treasures, and the Greeks by putting them in mind of their wars of old, and their deadly hatred towards the Persians. He reminded the Macedonians at one time of their conquests in Europe, and at another of their desire to subdue Asia, boasting that no troops in the world had been found a match for them, and assuring them that this battle would put an end to their labours and crown their glory."

Donski comments: "We can see that all four peoples, the main core of the Macedonian army, are separately mentioned, those being Illyrians, Thracians, Greeks and Macedonians."

Of course there were many more Greeks against Alexander than with him in Asia, including at the Battle of Issus, where Alexander and the Greeks had a major confrontation. Donski quotes Arrian:

"But as soon as Darius was certified of Alexander's approach for battle, he conveyed about 30,000 of his cavalry and with them 20,000 of his light-armed infantry across the river Pinarus, in order that he might be able to draw up the rest of his forces with ease. Of the heavy armed infantry, he placed first the 30,000 Greek mercenaries to oppose the phalanx of the Macedonians."

Donski says "Here we see that the number of Greeks who fought in the Persian army against Alexander was at least 30,000, like Alexander presumed. We can see that these Greek units were sent to fight against the strongest part of the Macedonian army - the Macedonian phalanx.

"Arrian says that this battle had the biggest clash between the Greeks and Macedonians, and the main reason was the great hatred between these two peoples. Arrian writes:

"This was a violent struggle. Darius' Greeks fought to thrust the Macedonian back into the water and save the day for their left wing, already in retreat, while the Macedonians, in their turn, with Alexander's triumph plain before their eyes, were determined to equal his success... The fight was further embittered by the old racial rivalry of Greek and Macedonian."

Donski comments "The ancient Greek historian Arrian, using data and information from the Macedonian historians Ptolemy and Aristobulus, clearly wrote that "old racial rivalry" existed between the Macedonians and the Greeks. This is one of the highest levels of impatience and hatred that can exist between two nations. So who, after this statement, can claim that the Macedonians and the Greeks were the "same nation"? What kind of members of the same nation have "racial rivalry" i.e. "racial hatred" between each other?"

The Roman philosopher and senator Cicero spent a year in Macedonia. Donski writes: "In one of his works called "In Pisonem" (written around 55 BC and dedicated to his friend Piso), Cicero clearly mentions the borders on that day's Greek countries. Here we read: "...all Achaia, and Thessaly, and Athens, in short the whole of Greece, was made over to you."

"We can practically see that for Cicero it was very clear that Greece was made of Achaia, a territory around Athens and Thessaly. Macedonia isn't even mentioned as a "Greek country" at all."

For a Jewish perspective, the book quotes the historian Josephus Flavius, who wrote about the Seleucid Macedonians who ruled the Holy Land.

Writing about the death of the leader, Judas Maccabee, Flavius says he "left behind him a glorious reputation and memorial, by gaining freedom for his nation, and delivering them from slavery under the Macedonians."

On the same subject: "The nation of the Jews recovered their freedom when they had been brought into slavery by the Macedonians."

He also said the Jews were "under the government of the Macedonians", that "Onias saw that Judea was oppressed by the Macedonians and their kings", and that Simon Maccabee "freed the Jews from the dominion of the Macedonians, after one hundred and seventy years of empire".

Donski comments: "All of this is extraordinary important information especially because in a lot of world encyclopedias and other works it is untruthfully written that the Seleucids supposedly spread "Greek culture and language" in their state, that they built "Greek cities" etc... we can see from the testimonies himself Flavius made that the Jews were completely aware that they were under Macedonian (and not Greek) slavery."

Flavius himself clearly distinguishes between Greeks and Macedonians. Donski says: "For example, while writing about the Jewish migration in the Asia Minor cities by the Macedonian ruler Seleucus Nicator, Flavius writes: "The Jews also obtained honours from the kings of Asia when they became their auxiliaries; for Seleucus Nicator made them citizens in those cities which he built in Asia, and in the lower Syria, and in the metropolis itself, Antioch; and gave them privileges equal to those of the Macedonians and the Greeks, who were the inhabitants..."

The book has many more equally interesting quotes, but let me finish with this one from Tatian the Assyrian as this also ties back to the Stefov book and the many things in civilization that Greeks claim are theirs. Tatian wrote Tatian's Address to the Greeks, where, says Donski, he criticizes ancient Greek authors for claiming for Greeks what they do not deserve, and where he lists parts of science and art which the Greeks took from other nations and later proclaimed as their own.

Tatian wrote "The Greeks claim, without reason, the invention of the arts. Be not, O Greeks, so very hostilely disposed towards the Barbarians, nor look with ill will on their opinions. For which of your institutions has not been derived from the Barbarians? The most eminent of the Telmessians invented the art of divining by dreams; the Carians, that of prognosticating by the stars; the Phrygians and the most ancient Isaurians, augury by the flight of birds; the Cyprians, the art of inspecting victims. To the Babylonians you owe astronomy; to the Persians, magic; to the Egyptians, geometry; to the Phoenicians, instruction by alphabetic writing. Cease, then, to miscall these imitations inventions of your own. Orpheus, again, taught you poetry and song; from him, too, you learned the mysteries. The Tuscans taught you the plastic art; from the annals of the Egyptians you learned to write history; you acquired the art of playing the flute from Marsyas and Olympus - these two rustic Phrygians constructed the harmony of the shepherd's pipe. The Tyrrhenians invented the trumpet; the Cyclopes, the smith's art; and a woman who was formerly a queen of the Persians, as Hellanicus tells us, the method of joining together epistolary tablets: her name was Atossa. Wherefore lay aside this conceit, and be not ever boasting of your elegance of diction; for, while you applaud yourselves, your own people will of course side with you. But it becomes a man of sense to wait for the testimony of others, and it becomes men to be of one accord also in the pronunciation of their language. But, as matters stand, to you alone it has happened not to speak alike even in common discourse; for the way of speaking among the Dorians is not the same as that of the inhabitants of Attica, nor do the Aeolians speak like the Ionians. And, since such a discrepancy exists where it ought not to be, I am at a loss whom to call Greek. And, what is strangest of all, you hold in honour expressions not of native growth, and by the admixture of barbaric words have made your language a medley. On this account we have renounced your wisdom, though I was once a great proficient in it."

Donski comments: "Many of these notes made by Tatian the Assyrian are really significant for some of today's Greeks as well. As for the subject we're covering, we can clearly see that while mentioning the Greek dialects, this early Christian writer does not mention the Macedonian language as a "Greek dialect"."

So to sum up, we have two excellent books that can help cut through the reams of Greek government propaganda that Macedonians and the world have suffered for too long.

Technically, the books are not perfect as they both have a number of small typos and would have benefited from a final sub-edit by a native English speaker. But these are not enough to seriously annoy the average reader.

The quality of the content comes through loud and clear. So buy the books and enjoy them. Get some extras for your interested friends, your library and your local politicians.

With the subject of Greek government lies so topical, these books are a good way to show that lies about big money are just the start of what is in the Greek government's cupboard. Help open the closet. Greece needs less history by fanatical assertion, less history by slogan, and more history by public debate. Let's help good Greeks to be free to discuss these issues without fear of self imposed exile, being called a traitor, or death threats. Open debate in Greece is the way forward for Greece and Macedonia.

Both books can be ordered from Dushan Ristevski at the Australian Macedonian Literary Association at dushan@macedon.com or 0425 231 335.

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