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IN MEMORIAM



Spyridon Sfetas
(1960—2021)

Spyridon Sfetas was a university professor, historian, and one of the most distinguished Balkanologists of our time, who unfortunately left us too soon. He was born in 1960 near Larissa in Greece. After completing his bachelor's degree at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, he continued his education at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. As a scholarship holder, first of the Greek and then the German government, he completed his M.A. and Ph.D. studies at the mentioned university. In his doctoral dissertation entitled "Die Makedonische Frage im Rahmen der interbalkanischen Beziehungen 1920—1924," defended in 1991, he focused on the then burning Macedonian Question, which he continued to explore in his later research. Upon his return to Greece, he became a research fellow at the Institute for Balkan Studies (IMXA) in Thessaloniki in 1993. A few years later, he began his academic career as a lecturer at the Department of Modern and Contemporary Balkan History at the School of History and Archeology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, first working as a lecturer (1999), then as an assistant professor (2004), and finally an associate professor (2009). The Department has acquired a prestigious reputation in Greece and the Balkans in the recent

decades, which can be largely attributed to Sfetas' efforts. He participated in many international conferences in the country and abroad, and his research has immensely contributed to our knowledge of the history of the Balkans. He collaborated with several academic journals and was also a member of the editorial board of the *Balcanica* journal. Sfetas was fluent in English, German, French, Russian, Serbian, and other Balkan languages. He left us at the age of 61 after a short illness, leaving many pages of Balkan history unwritten.

What was Sfetas like? As a scholarship holder of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, I had the opportunity to attend an M.A. program at the School of History and Archeology and the honor of meeting the late professor. He always talked while walking hurriedly down the hallways towards his office, which housed a pile of books and papers he had collected for new research. I had to quicken my pace to keep up with him as he talked to me in his native language and fluent Serbian. Our conversations may have seemed strange to a passer-by; in the middle of a sentence, the professor would effortlessly switch to a language in which he could better express his thoughts at that moment while inserting some phrases in other foreign languages – the mark of a true polyglot. Sometimes it was not easy to follow his train of thought; in his desire to impart knowledge to his students, due to the vast amount of information, he could not always keep his stream of consciousness in check. Sentences came rushing one after another, opening up a wide range of topics. In that way, he encouraged his students to consider a problem in more depth. “I will show you the way, and you should make your way to the boulevard”, the professor would say in his lectures, wanting to awaken a creative impulse in his students for a new deep dive into history. Professor knew that *mining* was difficult but necessary work for good historians, encouraging his students to shed light on unexplored topics and to work with archival materials that had yet to see the light of day.

“As a historian, I try to examine the past, because without the past one cannot understand the present and predict the future without being a prophet”, he used to say. Sfetas tried to write Balkan history from a broader perspective than that of Greek traditional historiography.¹ He used historical sources written in several languages, as well as in Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Slovenian, and Romanian. As the professor used to say, he first heard the Romanian language while traveling by train across the Balkans. Then he thought that he would be “ashamed to call himself a Balkanologist” if he did not know such

¹ He even consulted the historical sources in Yugoslav and Bulgarian state archives to broaden his point of view when researching the history of the Greek civil war and the Cyprus problem, see *The Civil War. Documents of Yugoslav and Bulgarian Archives* (Εμφύλιος πόλεμος. Έγγραφα από τα Γιουγκοσλαβικά και βουλγαρικά αρχεία, 1999); Cyprus and *Yugoslavia. Documents of Yugoslav Archives, 1967—1974* (Κύπρος και Γιουγκοσλαβία. Έγγραφα από τα Γιουγκοσλαβικά αρχεία, 1967—1974, 2016).

an important language for the study of this region. After returning to Greece, Sfetas started learning Romanian. In his work, he paid a lot of attention to Greek bilateral relations with other Balkan countries, always keeping in mind the circumstances that prevailed on the world-historical stage. The professor was aware of the impact that the Great Powers had—and still have—on the future of small countries such as those in the Balkans. He was especially interested in the Macedonian Question, which became relevant again with the breakup of Yugoslavia. Sfetas was one of the members of the mixed academic commission formed by scholars from Greece and Northern Macedonia, which dealt with historical, cultural, and educational aspects. Supporting the Prespa Agreement, he made great efforts as the president of the commission for school textbooks and contributed immeasurably to the correct use of the term *Ancient Macedonia* in the neighboring country.

Sfetas has also left his mark in other neighboring countries, contributing invaluable to the study of certain topics related to Balkan history. We will list only some of the publications that are of great importance for the study of the Balkans. First of all, we should mention Sfetas' *Introduction to Balkan History* (*Εισαγωγή στη Βαλκανική Ιστορία. Τόμος Α' και Β'*, 2009 and 2011) in two volumes, where he retraces historical processes in the Balkans, keeping in mind all the countries separately, in a timeframe spanning from the period of the Ottoman conquests to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The book is mandatory reading for all history students, for whom it is mostly intended. His main research interest—the Macedonian Question—was the subject of many publications, where he explored the development of the Question during the 20th century (*Όψεις του Μακεδονικού ζητήματος στον 20ό αιώνα*, 2001), the problems of the Albanian population and its rising nationalism in North Macedonia (*Οι Αλβανοί των Σκοπίων. Θέματα εθνοτικής συνύπαρξης*, 1995), the construction of the Macedonian identity (*Η διαμόρφωση της σλαβομακεδονικής ταυτότητας. Μια επώδυνη διαδικασία*, 2003), as well as the repercussions of the Question on Serbian/Yugoslav-Greek and Bulgarian-Greek relations (*Στη σκιά του Μακεδονικού. Η κρίση Αθήνας – Βελιγραδίου στη δεκαετία του 1960*, 2007; *Η Βουλγαρία και το Μακεδονικό ζήτημα 1950—1967. Πλήρη τα απόρρητα βουλγαρικά έγγραφα*, 2009; *Ο ανακήρυκτος πόλεμος για το Μακεδονικό. Βουλγαρία – Γιουγκοσλαβία*, 1968—1989, 2010), while he also used historical sources written in Serbian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, and other languages.

Probably even more interesting—at least from the Serbian point of view—are the studies concerning the relations between Belgrade and Athens, where he dealt with some aspects of Tito's Yugoslavia and the Regime of the Colonels that ruled in Greece (*Η Τιτοϊκή Γιουγκοσλαβία και η δικτατορία των Συνταγματαρχών* (1967—1974), 2016), as well as the period that followed when Karamanlis came to power (*Η Τιτοϊκή Γιουγκοσλαβία και η Μεταπολιτευτική*

Ελλάδα του Καραμανλή (1974–1979). Έγγραφα από τα γιουγκοσλαβικά αρχεία, 2012). The Professor also closely followed the policy of the neighboring country during the subsequent period. He supported Serbia's stance on Kosovo and Metohija and openly criticized the policy of Albania and the position of European countries in the media whenever he had an opportunity. He was a great and sincere friend of the Serbs in hard times, at a moment when Serbia could hardly boast to have many sympathizers in other countries. Recognizing the value of Professor Sfetas' lasting contribution to historical science, the least that Serbia could do is to support a translation of his studies into Serbian and so allow his work to endure.

Jasmina Tomašević

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