

On the road with Douwe Kalma

Jan Menno Rozendal



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Op reis mei Douwe Kalma

Introduction

It was another sunny day. I follow an established pattern: put on light clothes and a rucksack and race down the stairs to get outside fast. As so often in these weeks, I go to Tumbe Kafe, the hill to the south of Bitola. The walk takes me through the busy shopping street Shirok Sokak, through the city park, past the dilapidated football stadium where FK Pelister unsuccessfully plays its games.

At the foot of the hill, another routine, I stop at the coffee vending machine. It asks ten denar, barely 15 eurocents, for a cup of extremely sweet brownish liquid. It's impossible to dispense with the sugar, or in any case I don't know how. The next part is the toughest of the whole journey: although the hill may not be very high, the way to the top is very steep. When I finally reach the top, I sit down on the bench. My bench.

I've got my sweaty back towards the city. To the left and right of me there are mountains and a valley stretches out before me. Somewhere in the distance, about 10 kilometres as the crow flies, lies the border with Greece. But no matter how well I concentrate, the landscape doesn't provide me any clues about where the border is exactly. 'It's all Macedon,' people tell me all the time, from both sides of the division line invented by humans. But what is Macedon then, exactly, and to whom does it belong? It isn't easy, Macedon is a fluid concept, as I've heard from people with a poetical bent.

My thoughts go back to yesterday. With much international scrutiny a referendum was held in this country about the possible name change from the 'Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedon' to the 'Republic of North Macedon'. Of course, you need to come up with everything eventually: borders, a language, a name... I pause my musings, take a sip of water and get from my bag the thin booklet I brought with me from far away Fryslân. It's called Fryslân en de Wrâld (Fryslân and the World). The author is Douwe Kalma.

The phenomenon Kalma

On 3 April 1896 Mr and Mrs Kalma from the Frisian village of Boksum were delighted by the birth of their first, and last, child. The single child would be called Douwe. The boy loses one of his parents at the early age of 11: his seriously ill father sees a self-chosen death as his only way out. With the help of some farmhands the mother and son manage, but Douwe's future is not in agriculture: he is a good learner and attends the Gymnasium, grammar school, in Sneek. He follows this with studies in Theology. But his future wouldn't be in the pulpit either and he soon quits his studies.

In the meantime, young Douwe had made some waves with his pen. In 1913 he debuts with articles in *Sljucht en Rjucht*, the periodical of the Frysk ('Ald') Selskip (Frisian ('Old') Society) started in 1844. Not long afterwards he writes reviews for the largest Frisian newspaper, the *Leeuwarder Courant*. The young man's ambitions do not stop here: he sends in articles to the national *Telegraaf*, which places them. His sharp pen is noticed by critics and supporters alike: admirers and critics of the new phenomenon quickly become embroiled with one another.

This certainly happens when Kalma establishes the *Jongfryske Mienskip* (The Society for Young Frisians) on 20 November 1915, with himself the centre of attention. Nevertheless, he soon has to relinquish some power to others: Douwe is called to arms, because even in the neutral Netherlands the threat of the Great War looms over the horizon. Still, Douwe did not vanish from the stage: after all, he is and remains the self-appointed leader of the new future for Fryslân. The new Fryslân which should leave the periphery and its provincialism behind and demand a central place in the, as Kalma sees it, North Sea culture. Take on an international attitude and come up with high quality art: the bar is set high from the start.

Gathering the Frisian youth around him was part of the plan Kalma had to promote the Frisian struggle, the struggle for the preservation but also the development of the nation's distinctiveness. Not only that: he wanted to lead the endeavour.

This led to critics giving him mocking nicknames such as the King of Fryslân. A king who managed to survive a couple of crises, but who was eventually deposed before his time.

There quickly arose a querulous atmosphere in the Jongfryske Mienskip, with Kalma regularly as the centre of the discontent. The transformation from the initially closed artistic club to an open society, the polemical language Kalma threw at opponents, the continual shifts in views on politics, religion, tactics or ideology of their leader: none of this helped. The common complaint that Kalma changed his ideology and plans more often than his clothes, wasn't plucked out of thin air.

Was Kalma even born to take on this role of a leader? His bibliography seems to suggest otherwise: being a good writer doesn't necessarily make you a good leader or politician. His polemical, often personal style makes his writing interesting, but leadership requires more tact and composure. Even though the charismatic Kalma could easily attract followers, he could push them away just as quickly. The political adventure which he eventually embarked on with his friend Fedde Schurer, the Christian Democratic Union, did not become a success. Kalma side-lined himself more and more, he even lost the Mienskip after another conflict. In 1931 he left Fryslân to become a teacher in Eindhoven. His part in the Frisian Movement appeared to be played out.

However, at the end of the 1930s things are different again: the author made a glorious comeback when he defended his dissertation on Gyspert Japickx in Groningen on 6 May 1939. This was the first dissertation written in Frisian and doctor Kalma was warmly welcomed back into the Frisian cultural scene. But as quickly as he regained interest and admiration, he lost his status all over again. This was the result of the second great conflict on the world stage.

After the Germans invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, they quickly found their way to the ringleaders of the Frisian Movement. These might be more amenable to cooperate with the new authorities, a regime that could be more open to the wishes of Fryslân than the former Dutch government?

To manage this new situation and to speak with one voice, they decide to establish a so-called Triumvirate, with a seat for the liberal Ald Selskip (Old Society) and the Kristlik Selskip (Christian Society), as well as a third person from the folk movement, a somewhat euphemistic name for national-socialism. Kalma sees himself as the ideal representative of the Old Society but overplays his hand by confiding that he recently joined a Frisian fascist party. Alarmed by this development, the Old Society pushed his namesake J.J. Kalma forward as a candidate and Douwe seemed to have pushed himself out of the game once again.

During the war Kalma keeps collaborating with the occupier, something for which he is heavily criticised after the liberation in 1945: he's banned from publishing for a long time. A ban which he ignores: as is typical for Kalma, he regards himself mistreated for this, but he never managed to regain his central position in the Frisian Movement. He retreats to the Frisian village of Rottefalle, where he starts work on translating the complete works of Shakespeare whom he greatly admires. As he is translating the final bits and pieces, he is hit by a car in 1953. He passes away at the age of only 57.

The perhaps most well-known Dutch historian ever, Johan Huizinga, characterised the (then still youthful) Kalma thus: a remarkably talented and spirited young man who writes with a dangerous ease. Huizinga calls the highfaluting words used by Kalma in his work typically provincial: being attracted to the mystical as a way to overcome the periphery. This is reflected in Kalma's famous work *Fryslân and the World*.

Fryslân and the World

A phenomenon, an icon even, but a conspirator as well, a dilettante, a troublemaker ... you can use them all to describe Douwe Kalma. What drove him to go into these varied directions? His homosexuality in such times when this, to put it mildly, wasn't accepted by the general public, is often brought up in speculations about this question. The notion that because he couldn't love a woman, he wanted Fryslân to love him, is sometimes raised. A notion which lies somewhere between pop psychology and an interesting angle.

Nevertheless, it is possible to extract one consistent thought from all of the changes in direction: the advancement and promotion of Fryslân, which was a bit of a backwater at the start of the 20th century. For this Kalma was a creative force, not conservative: he did not want to build a wall around the country, but place Fryslân within the larger whole. To make Fryslân more international without losing its own character, such as its language.

As the leader of a new generation he made himself only really heard on 29 January 1916, when he was but 19 years old. The speech he held on this day, entitled Fryslân and the World, was later published and thus preserved. This was the speech I brought with me to Bitola, the text that I'm reading as the sun rises higher and higher above the Tumbe Kafe.

The speech was written and held in the middle of the first world war. The most striking element is the subdivision of Europe Kalma makes. According to him this part of the world, so embroiled with one another, consists of four parts: the Slavic, Latin, Teutonic and the Anglo/Scandinavian part. But the crux of the matter is this: while the formerly Teutonic Holland has become increasingly 'Latinised' during the past few decennia, Fryslân had always been more part of the North Sea Culture, thus of the Anglo/Scandinavian part. Moreover, Fryslân is the missing link, the bridge between the Scandinavia of Ibsen and Bjørnsen and the England of Keats and Shelley. This bridge function, that was no less than the manifest destiny of Fryslân.

This approach has a couple of implications. First, this means a connection to other nations than your own: naturally the Scandinavian and English nation, but also the Frisian siblings in the North of Germany, for example. Thus, the Frisian nationalism of Kalma is international as well: it did not look inwards but outwards. Secondly, it meant a (cultural) disconnect with the Netherlands, the country where Fryslân had been bound with in a political and governmental sense, amongst others, for centuries.

However, the ultimate, far-reaching notion that this might also mean a political secession from the Netherlands, was never espoused by Kalma. While Fryslân had a distinct function as an independent cultural factor, the political implications of this remained limited for him and the Mienskip.

Although you can hear that Fryslân had the right of secession in the background of their declaration of intent, this was where they stopped. Not only for Kalma and the Jongfryske Mienskip, but for others as well in later times, up to the present day. Actually, I think you can say that this has been a non-issue for the most part.

I've tried to explain this to several Europeans while I've been in Bitola, that even the biggest names in the Frisian Movement never really wanted to call for independence. That is tough in Bitola, a city encircled by cemeteries of all kinds of stripes, of people who died here for people and country, for an identity, in the hills of the Balkan. Here you enforce your own identity not only through the courthouse, conferences, journals or universities: you take possession of the street, of the country. And if you have to, by force.

Why did it never come to this in twentieth century Fryslân? History has played an important role in this: the Frisian Movement only came into existence when the Dutch unitary state had already existed for several centuries. A state which, in collaboration with Fryslân, had to fight for so long against foreign conquerors. The political union between Fryslân and the rest of the Netherlands, colloquially known as 'Holland', was thus a conscious choice and had a specific purpose. That later 'Holland' became dominant and that people in Fryslân wanted to do more justice to their own language and culture, therefore did not automatically lead to political consequences.

A second aspect became a topic for wide-ranging discussions in the coffee shops along the Shirok Sokak; and it basically boils down to the fact that the Dutch, and the Frisians as well, aren't revolutionaries. Not now, nor a century ago. Even after the end of the first world war, when all of Europe was in flux, the Netherlands stayed relatively quiet. The call to socialist revolution by the Frisian politician Piter Jelles Troelstra was reduced to a 'misunderstanding' in the history books soon after: the event didn't amount to much anyway.

Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that the ideas of Kalma in the time of *Fryslân and the World* were free of obligations: the author would always be an active force to make Frisian the main language of government and at school: in his eyes, Dutch should be a secondary language. Another international prospect: Kalma thought that English should be taught at school as well.

However, in many respects Kalma wasn't that unique in the ideas put forward in his *Fryslân and the World*. The mobilisation of the Frisian youth had been tried earlier in the 20th century, in the *Boun Jong Fryslân* (Union of Young Frisian) established by J.J. Hof, who would later become the arch enemy of Kalma. The idea of a North Sea Culture wasn't new either: the founder of the *Ald Selskip*, Harmen Sytstra, had also posited this. Likewise, the concept of a sea as the central axis of a shared culture is, obviously, not unique.

The singular achievement of Kalma was to give the Frisian movement new momentum; in a time when minority groups let themselves be heard all over Europe. In Flanders, for example, in Brittany or in Wales: inasmuch the (long) 19th century was the century of nationalism, at the end of that era the time had come for small and minority languages to demand their place in society. A special case is the Balkans, where a world power crumpled up and several groups were ready to stake out a physical space for themselves. In a much more forceful way than in Frisian.

Ilinden and Macedonian self-awareness

For the moment I put Kalma back in my backpack and saunter down the *Tumbe Kafe*. I walk past two fighter planes from the Yugoslavian era and a bit further I see a large building. It is the old military academy as used by the Ottomans until the beginning of the 19th century. Kemal Atatürk stayed here a couple of years as well; Bitola's museum has a permanent exhibition about him. Turkish tourists know their way to this building.

The sick man of Europe is one of the most famous and pregnant descriptions of a world empire in decline. The Ottoman empire hadn't kept up with its times, had enormous debts and saw its power and influence crumble all around in the 19th century.

At the empire's western border, the Balkans, various groups started to make themselves heard. The century of nationalism was at work here as well: Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece, amongst others, strove for (greater) autonomy and the Sultan had no other option than to acquiesce. But what about the Macedonians?

To return to the introduction: do the Macedonians even exist? Where does their land begin and end, who live there and what is their common past? Was there a reason why only at the end of the 19th century a Macedonian movement arose which thought about a Macedonian identity? It was already 1893 when the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation VMRO was founded in Salonika (nowadays Thessaloniki in Greece). So, an internal organisation for all Macedonians, but with an international outlook.

Regarding the last part, it's important to know that the Macedonians realised that their struggle would only become a success with international support. That is why the group sought to grab the attention with everything they did; such as the kidnapping of the American missionary Helen Stone in 1901. In that time, they perpetrated some terrorist attacks, as they would be called today, in Thessaloniki, such as on the French passenger ship *Guidalquivir*. As a matter of fact, the so-called boatmen are still lauded as heroes in Macedonia, they have received a prominent statue in Skopje.

In the spring of 1903 much blood is spilt. On 4 May Gotse Delchev, one of the most prominent revolutionaries, was murdered. This led to riots throughout the country, and people tried to start a real revolution up to six times. They didn't succeed. The following Ilinden uprising didn't work out either. Yet, counterintuitively, that wasn't the immediate goal. The VMRO had a greater objective in mind: to fan the flames of the anti-Turkish feelings of the European powers and have them intervene in the region. Cynically worded: they hoped that the Ottoman's reprisals to the revolutions would be so bloody that 'Europe' would no longer stand by and do nothing.

However, the revolutionaries were out of luck. In the first place because Macedonia wasn't ready for a revolution, not militarily, or even organisationally. The second problem was that the revolutionaries did not all have the same aim in mind: one group of fighters wanted independence for Macedonia (the separatists), another group saw Macedonia as a part of Bulgaria, with whom they shared the language (the unitarians). Many of the fighters of the VMRO came from Bulgaria as well, or at least had received their education there. The third problem was of a tactical nature: in precisely this period, around 1900, the European powers did not wish to intervene in the Balkans. For various reasons they wanted the Sick Man to remain weak but alive.

All of this was recognised and acknowledged by many revolutionaries: many heavyweights such as Delchev, Sandanski and Karev had spoken out against boisterous or impetuous actions. Nevertheless, their voices were drowned out by others who thought the time was right to light the fuse.

On 2 August 1903, on the feast day of St Ilias (Ilinden), the revolution was begun. It started in the town of Krushevo, high up in the mountains and poorly accessible. The Macedonians persevered for ten days, ten days of the 'Republic of Krushevo', the first one of its kind to be proclaimed in the Balkans. After those ten days the Ottomans arrived to restore order, using the expected atrocious methods. A European intervention to this massacre did not materialise.

So, a failed revolution, but one which would become very important for the emergence of a Macedonian identity. The revolutionaries did not only appeal to the Christian but to the Islamic part of the population as well. In a pamphlet, not preserved in its original form except for this fragment, it was made clear to the local Muslims, a group which probably had more affinity for the coreligionist Ottomans than the Macedonians, that they fought for them and their rights as well. The conflict was not motivated by religious feelings, but an effort by all Macedonians against a common enemy. An enemy which taxed heavily and was organised feudally. Is it too much to see in this a link with the Frisian anger about the absentee lordship of Holland?

Let's return to Ilinden and what followed. The internal struggle between the unitarians and the separatists was decided in favour of the latter on a congress in Rila a few years later: an autonomous Macedonia would be the goal of the VMRO. A goal which would be achieved only in 1991.

Right of autonomy: language and identity

Still with Kalma in my backpack I walk through the city park of Bitola, where statues of the fallen local heroes stare at me, heroes from various conflicts and eras. This neighbourhood has certainly known its fair share of wars: during the first world war the Balkan front was close by the city. And before that, there had been several Balkan wars; first with everybody, i.e. Serbs, Bulgarians and Greeks, against the Ottomans, afterwards against one another. With Macedonia at stake.

All three staked a claim on the country, either on historic, linguistical, or ethnic grounds. From the south the Greeks, from the east the Bulgarians, from the north the Serbs. Through infiltrations, church schisms, information campaigns, fighting or charm offensives all three tried to win this piece of land and its inhabitants for their cause. All three seek, and find, support for their claim from a European power. In the end, the Macedonian land is divided amongst the three countries in 1913.

As the American president Wilson talks about the right of autonomy for peoples all across the globe in 1918, a speech which is keenly listened to by the Young Frisians of Kalma as well, the Macedonians have neither country nor a (recognised) language of their own. The Greeks even go as far as banning speaking Macedonian at home in their part. It would never get as bad as that in Fryslân with regards to Dutch rule.

The second world war created a new dimension, especially in the Serbian part. This part of Macedonia had felt itself marginalised by the Serbs before and so, at first, had welcomed the Bulgarian fascists as liberators: were they not their kin with approximately the same language?

But, in turn, the Bulgarian showed themselves to be bad governors too, which renewed the feelings of oppression by the people. A sentiment which was astutely played on by the partisan leader Tito: he sent his lieutenant Tempo to the area to organise the resistance and, as the Axis powers were definitively defeated shortly after, Macedonia became a part of post-war Yugoslavia.

Again 'part of' but with more autonomy as part of a federation. The Yugoslavs (still led by Serbia) even planted the seeds of a national identity in the hearts of the Macedonians. Of course, this was done out of self-interest: by granting the Macedonians their own place under the sun, the inhabitants wouldn't be so easily swayed to seek the ultimate liberation in the east, with the Bulgarians.

Language was and remains an important distinctive cultural element in this regard. Therefore, it was a stroke of genius when Tito (for the first time) officially recognises the Macedonian language as 'its own', instead of just a 'Bulgarian accent'. The moment was symbolic as well: it took place on 2 August 1944, on the day of Ilinden. A year later the Macedonian alphabet was standardised, although under Bulgarian protest who saw all of this, not entirely without reason, as just a 'Yugoslavian invention'.

This 'invention' wasn't the only move: the 'national history' of Macedonia, with emphasis on the country's Slavic past, became part of the school curriculum in Yugoslavia. Moreover, a Macedonian Orthodox church was established. In these and later years, major military conflicts remained a thing of the past: Bulgaria was a member of the Warsaw pact, Greece became a member of the NATO and Yugoslavia searched for and found its own way through Titoism. A new balance had developed, even though the balance turned out to be extremely fragile after the death of Tito and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its vassals.

This made the words 'Balkan War' not only something from ancient times but something of the 1990s as well. Yugoslavian Macedonia declared its independence as well and was spared the atrocities which took place in, for example, Bosnia and Kosovo.

A lucky break for Macedonia was the immediate recognition of their country by Bulgaria (even though it was only as a 'state' not as a 'nation') while the Greeks refrained from claiming a part of Macedonia for themselves. However, the name ...

North Macedonia, Fryslân, Europe and the World

I walk up the stairs and I'm back in my apartment. I put Kalma on the table and switch on the tv: the news of course. It becomes clear that a large majority of the Macedonians who voted during the referendum, voted YES. At the same time, I'm made aware of the fact that the turnout was remarkably low: even many young people whom I've spoken to recently, stayed at home. The proposal in its present form is simply insulting and above all: what does it matter? Defeatism is a quite popular feeling, politics is only something that gets in the way of people, they've heard too many empty promises.

Nevertheless: if both parliaments agree, then FYROM can be changed to the Republic of North Macedon. An elegant solution I think, but I know I'm too dispassionate about this. I write a blog about the referendum for Other Words and give it the title What's in a Name? The fact that Kalma has translated these same words into Frisian makes me smile slightly.

Will this be the final chapter for this heavily contested piece of land? It doesn't seem like it. Although the borders in the south, east and north are relatively solid, in the west Albania has a lot of appeal to both the Kosovars and the Albanians in Macedonia. Especially in the north western part of the country there live many Muslims, who feel they are second class citizens. Meanwhile, the Christian majority keeps a suspicious eye on them: could they be a 'fifth column' in this country? You can feel the tension even in Bitola, it led to violent riots and destruction between both groups in 2001. I still recall the words and gestures of a local poet, from just a few days ago: he snapped his fingers and said dejectedly: 'It can happen again just like that.'

For a better future they turn their eyes mostly to the west, which has remained relatively quiet for a long time and where people live prosperously and freely.

A Europe where small and minority languages are officially recognised, even though the deeper recognition of the Frisian language had to be forced on the well-known and infamous Kneppelfreed (Cudgel Friday) of 1951. Nevertheless, Frisian nationalism remained limited after that event: even the Frisian National Party does not aim for the separation of Fryslân from the other provinces of the Netherlands.

A hook-up between the North Sea cultures has never fully materialised, except for a few incidental collaborations. Kalma himself walked down different paths too later in his life: his disdain for Germany had largely disappeared at the (start of the) second world war. This typifies how opportunistic Kalma was: the herald of his time was very important for the breakthrough of the Frisian Movement, but his lack in consistency of ideas and organisational talent prevented him from playing the important role people had expected of him in 1916 when his warning call Fryslân and the World thoroughly shook up the cultural life of Fryslân.

Who knows, maybe Fryslân and Macedon will be part of the same coalition in the near future: if all goes well, North Macedon will become a member of the EU in a few years. The differences between the two regions are obvious, of course: peripheral Fryslân vs. the centre of international routes that is Macedon. Fryslân was able to develop itself in relative freedom and quiet over the past centuries while Macedon was heavily subjugated for so long. Homogenous Fryslân in contrast to diverse Macedon. Fryslân is part of the Netherlands while Macedon is its own state with its own minorities within it...

Lastly: was Kalma correct, is the soul of the Slav peoples really that distinct from the one of the North Sea cultures? Or are these fluid concepts as well?