

Epilogue

For well over a century and a half, virtually throughout the age of nationalism in southeastern Europe, the Macedonian question was the central issue dividing Balkan peoples and states. Neighboring Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia struggled for possession of Macedonia. In order to justify their pretensions, each state claimed the Slav or ethnic Macedonians as its own (i.e., as Bulgarians, Greeks, or Serbs). Hence, from the very outset the territorial struggle was also a contest for the hearts and minds of the Macedonian majority in Ottoman Macedonia. Each state sought to win over or force to its own side all Macedonians, or at least those in the areas that it claimed and hoped to acquire and annex. These neighbors' imperialistic and annexationist policies and aims in turn necessitated that they deny any sort of distinct Macedonian identity—territorial, political, ethnic, national.

After they divided Macedonia by force of arms in the two Balkan Wars of 1912–13, they intensified and reinforced their denials because recognizing Macedonian identity would have threatened their past gains and/or future aspirations in the territory. Although the political left in each of them recognized the Macedonians as a distinct south Slav ethnic nation, their bourgeois ruling elites resorted to repression and violence

to stamp out any signs or impulses of Macedonian separatism, patriotism, or nationalism.

During the push for national liberation in the Second World War, the Macedonians won the recognition of Communist Yugoslavia, and at the end of the war that of Fatherland Front Bulgaria. However, Yugoslavia's lasting—and Bulgaria's short-lived—recognition did not settle the Macedonian problem. It only focused the controversy. Greece, after the Civil War (1947–49), and Bulgaria, after the 1948 expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform, had to come to terms with the Macedonian nation and republic in the Communist Yugoslav federation. The nationalist authoritarian regime in Athens, and the Stalinist in Sofia, adopted virtually the same position: deny the existence of a Macedonian nation or a Macedonian minority in its own country and call Tito's republic "artificial." These became and have remained the views of the two countries and of their official historians. They also "hoodwinked" (Captain P. H. Evans's term) many foreign observers, including scholars, into embracing their claims.

The Bulgarian ruling elite assumed and hoped that the multinational Yugoslav federation would soon collapse and that Tito's "artificial Macedonians" would reembrace their "natural and true" identity—the Bulgarian. Instead, after the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Macedonians chose to remain Macedonian. Greece regretted the collapse of its ally Yugoslavia, where the Serbs kept the "Skopjans" under control. However, even then the Greeks were determined to force the Macedonians there to remain under Serbian hegemony. It must have distressed them to see their small neighbor surmount their threats and embargoes, gain recognition, and survive as an independent state.

During the long struggle for Macedonia, some ethnic Macedonians adopted or had to adopt the national identity of one of the competing nations. This was not unusual or peculiar to Macedonians in the age of nationalism. Members of other dominated or oppressed ethnicities went through similar experiences, especially in the many regions in central and eastern Europe where the dominant nation or nations denied the existence of a people or peoples.

Under very trying circumstances, most ethnic Macedonians chose a Macedonian identity. That identity began to form with the Slav awakening in Macedonia in the first half of the nineteenth century. The process was continuous but complex and protracted. It was not complete until

the struggle for national liberation in the Second World War and its aftermath. Yugoslav Macedonia, in an atmosphere of relative cultural freedom, standardized the Macedonian language, created a vibrant national culture, and facilitated national integration.

Bulgaria and Greece's denial of the Macedonian identity, nation, and minorities, and the same stance by some influential Serbian politicians and the Serbian Orthodox church, have kept alive the Macedonian problem: the "apple of discord" and the "stumbling block" to Balkan cooperation. It is difficult to comprehend, let alone rationalize, such denials in today's Europe. One may argue that in the past Macedonia's neighbors perceived recognition as a threat to their earlier gains or future aspirations there. Such thinking is now completely out of place. After the collapse of Communism in Europe, the end of the Cold War, and Yugoslavia's bloody wars of succession, it is inconceivable that any party would even consider using force to change frontiers.

By the same token, EU expansion into the Balkans should permit more enlightened and tolerant policies toward national minorities. Greece and Bulgaria are already EU members, Macedonia is a candidate, and Serbia, Albania, and possibly Kosovo are keen to join. In this European context, resolution of minority problems should emerge in accordance with the principles of the EU and UN charters: recognition of minorities and respect for their linguistic, cultural, and religious rights.

In any event, it seems that the time has come for a historic accommodation between the Macedonians and their neighbors. The precondition for that is the genuine acceptance by the latter of a Macedonian identity, nation, and state and of Macedonian national minorities. Indeed, by now this has become a Balkan necessity. There is no other acceptable solution to the Macedonian question.

Historians will continue to debate how the Macedonian identity formed, as they do with all others. However, there can be no doubt that a Macedonian nation exists. Denying the existence of the Macedonians in all parts of Macedonia did not help solve the Macedonian problem and did not contribute to Balkan stability in the past, and it will not do so in the future. Only a settlement that recognizes the Macedonians and respects their national rights would last and enhance stability and tranquility in the Balkans and in the united Europe.