

7 — The VMRO and Ilinden (1893–1903)

The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija, or VMRO) and the Ilinden (St. Elias’s Day) Uprising on 2 August 1903 occupy a sacred place in Macedonian history and in the imagination of patriotic Macedonians everywhere.¹

The VMRO organized the 1903 uprising in Ilinden and aimed to establish an autonomous or an independent Macedonian state, or a “free Macedonia” (*slobodna Makedonija*). The VMRO and the revolt help explain the subsequent history of Macedonia and the Macedonians. The VMRO, in one or another of its variants, became a permanent fixture in Macedonian history and survives today.

Ilinden became synonymous with the Macedonian national struggle. The push for national recognition and statehood during the Second World War and the achievement of both within Tito’s Communist-led Yugoslav national liberation movement before war’s end earn the term “second Ilinden.” And the proclamation of independence by the republic of Macedonia in 1991, in the wake of Yugoslavia’s bloody disintegration, is often the “third Ilinden.”

The leaders of the original VMRO, in the Ilinden period, and the failed uprising itself have become icons in the Macedonian pantheon and mythology. They have served as sources of pride and inspiration for

generations of Macedonians in their efforts for national recognition and freedom.

Two sections make up this chapter. First, the VMRO emerged in 1893 and grew over the following decade. Second, the VMRO's Ilinden Uprising started 2 August 1903 and ended with its bloody suppression in the autumn.

The VMRO (1893–1903)

On the eve of the twentieth century, Macedonia was a backward, unstable, and neglected region of the Ottoman empire. The lot of the mass of its inhabitants was difficult and deteriorating; this was particularly true of the Macedonians, the majority of the multi-ethnic population. The empire's economic stagnation was clearly evident in Macedonia, with a general decline in economic life. The small-scale manufacturing that had made a promising beginning in the first half of the century was not growing. Some new small enterprises were emerging, but in cities such as Salonika and Bitola (Monastir) and usually under the control of foreigners or members of the other ethnicities in Macedonia: Greeks, Jews, Vlachs.

The basis of the economy remained agriculture: 80 percent of the population was rural and worked in farming, as did half of the urban inhabitants. However, the agrarian sector, like the economy as a whole, was suffering. There was shortage of cultivated land, and by 1900 the oppressive chiflik landholding system embraced all the fertile areas of Macedonia. Muslim lords, or *beys*, were the de facto owners of virtually all the fertile arable land; 552 chifliks controlled half of it.² Most of the other chifliks were breaking down into small and unprofitable estates. The entire sector was backward and primitive in operation and working methods.

There were some 180,000 agricultural households in Macedonia in 1900; only 15,000 possessed large or medium holdings, and 10,000, small holdings. About 70 percent owned no land or a totally inadequate amount. They worked under unbearable conditions on chiflik lands, which usually belonged to Turkish or Albanian beys. Most residents of chiflik villages and exploited workers on chiflik lands were Macedonian. In fact, four-fifths of those villages were home to Macedonians, and the rest of the agrarian population eked out an almost equally miserable existence tilling the poor soil surrounding their mountainous villages.³

The taxation system had become corrupt, unjust, and oppressive to the Christian peasants. Tax collectors bought their posts from the government at high prices and enriched themselves at the expense of the poor tax-paying *raya*. The latter had to make numerous payments to the government—a military head-tax, an education tax, a tax for the upkeep of roads and bridges, and so on—and received nothing in return. However, “The most onerous tax imposed on Christian peasants was the *ösür*, 10 percent levy on their total income, crops and produce. Tax collectors, acting as officers of the state, overtaxed peasants in order to turn a profit, sometimes demanding five or six times the *ösür*, arrived at by overestimating the market value of the crops. There were instances when peasants were left with virtually nothing after the visit of a tax collector, and sometimes the *raya* simply destroyed their crops rather than pay the exorbitant rates, since the deficit was no greater than if they had paid the taxes.”⁴

Political conditions were even worse. The imperial officials sent to peripheral provinces such as Macedonia were corrupt, inefficient, and ineffective. The administrative apparatus guaranteed Muslim predominance; it could not ensure law and order or provide minimal security of life and property to Christians. According to one estimate, in 1895 alone there were 150 Muslim armed bands terrorizing Macedonian villages, committing murder, rape, and extortion.⁵

The neighboring states’ continuing and intensifying struggle for Macedonia further complicated the political situation. A church-sponsored drive for control of Macedonians’ spiritual and cultural life via propaganda, threats, and enormous funding had by the 1890s become state-sponsored and -supported campaigns of increasing violence. By 1900, use of force was almost standard, with armed bands terrorizing Macedonians.

The Greek drive in Macedonia was now under the leadership of the National Society (Ethniki Hetairia)—a secret organization that started in Athens in 1894—and had support from the Greek government, army officers, and wealthy and influential citizens. In place of the St. Sava Society, Belgrade created the Political Education Department (Političko prosvetno odelenie) to direct Serbia’s efforts in Macedonia. The great successes of the exarchate and Bulgarian diplomacy in Macedonia inspired creation in Sofia of the Macedonian Supreme Committee (Makedonski vürkhoven komitet) in 1895. The new body “ostensibly represented the Macedonian immigrants in Bulgaria,” but in reality “it

was organized under the auspices of the Bulgarian crown and was essentially a Bulgarian instrument.”⁶

All the antagonists sought to browbeat each other and each other’s “parties” in Macedonia and to win the support of its people—or rather to terrorize them into submission. Their ultimate goal was to prepare conditions either for the land’s annexation (Bulgaria’s objective) or for its partition, which gradually became acceptable to Greece and Serbia.

It was Macedonia’s unenviable and untenable situation—economic backwardness and exploitation, political instability, insecurity, oppression, and the real threat of annexation or partition—that drove patriotic intellectuals to start organizing to defend the interests of their land and people. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the 1880s and early 1890s they formed various groups and circles in towns in Macedonia, as well as in Bulgaria, Serbia, and outside the Balkans. Many of them, however, wanted a body that would unite them and organize and coordinate the efforts of all patriots.

The foundations of such an association, which became the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (*Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*, or VMRO),⁷ were the work of young men who met in Salonika on 23 October (o.s.) / 3 November (n.s.) 1893. The founders were five Exarchist schoolteachers, Hristo Bataldžiev (1868–1913), Andon Dimitrov (1867–1933), Damian (Dame) Gruev (1871–1906), Ivan Hadžinikolov (1872–1903), and Petar Poparsov (1868–1941), and a physician, Dr. Hristo Tatarčev (1869–1952), who had studied in Zurich and Berlin.

In 1894, schoolteacher Giorgi (Goce) Delčev (1872–1903) joined them; the military academy in Sofia had recently expelled him for revolutionary activities. He soon emerged as the movement’s outstanding leader but died in the spring of 1903 in a highly suspicious ambush by Ottoman troops. His death deprived the VMRO of its most charismatic, selfless, devoted leader and its guiding spirit shortly before the Ilinden Uprising, which he sought to forestall.

Others who joined in the mid-1890s and left their imprint were Jane Sandanski (1872–1915), a shoemaker who emerged as a post-Ilinden leader of the VMRO’s left wing, and Dimo Hadžidimov (1875–1924) and Ćorče Petrov (1864–1921), both teachers, writers, intellectuals, and ideologists of the movement’s left.

The body that these well-educated young men⁸ founded was not a modern political party with a particular ideology. It was rather a move-

ment for national liberation comprising different ideological orientations, ranging from conservatism and clericalism on the right to socialism and anarchism on the extreme left. Its outstanding leaders were in effect populists within a not clearly defined left. They came together not through a common political ideology but rather because of their shared love for Macedonia and its people (*narod*), their common patriotism, and their common national-political consciousness.

Their and the VMRO's main, if not sole, common aim was the liberation of Macedonia and its people and the establishment of an autonomous and eventually an independent homeland or an equal partnership in some sort of Balkan federation. Such a state would liberate the Macedonians from Ottoman domination, which they equated with political oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural backwardness. It would also free them from the devastating foreign—Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian—propaganda, intervention, and terror, which split the Slav Macedonians in family, village, town, and homeland into antagonistic “parties,” or camps, and threatened annexation or partition. Macedonians were to free their land for the Macedonians.⁹

The VMRO's founders and most of its pre-Ilinden leaders sincerely believed in autonomy and had a clear idea about territorial boundaries—to include all of geographic Macedonia¹⁰—but not about terms such as “Macedonian people” (Makedonski narod) and “Macedonians” (Makedonci). They knew about the many religions—Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, and so on—and that Orthodox Christians consisted of Exarchists, Patriarchists, and adherents of the Serbian church. They were equally aware of the many ethnic groups: Turks, Greeks, Jews, Albanians, Vlachs, Roma (gypsies), and so forth. But the VMRO's pronouncements and the writings of its leaders and spokesmen suggest less-clear thinking about the ethnic belonging and identity of their own people—the majority Macedonians, or Macedonian Slavs, the Makedonski narod—which they claimed to represent and on whose behalf they launched a life-or-death struggle.

As we saw in chapter 6, the Makedonisti in the movement identified themselves and all Slav Macedonians, irrespective of church affiliation, as Macedonians, as a distinct ethnic entity related to, but different and separate from, the Bulgarian and Serbian. At the other extreme, the Bulgarophiles considered themselves and all Slav Macedonians Bulgarian.

However, the views of many, if not most, top leaders were not so

clear-cut or easily discernible. They had studied in Exarchist (Bulgarian) schools and worked in Exarchist (Bulgarian) institutions or organizations. They referred to themselves and to Exarchist Macedonians as Macedonian Bulgarians (Makedonski Bŭlgari).

Yet their patriotism and national identity were Macedonian, not Bulgarian. Did they consider themselves and all the other Exarchist Macedonians ethnically the same as the Bulgarians of Bulgaria proper, or different (i.e., Macedonian Bulgarians)? If either was the case, then what was the ethnic identity, or belonging, of their cousins or even siblings who may have affiliated themselves with the Greek (Patriarchist) or the Serbian (Orthodox) “party”? Did members of such divided families belong to the different ethnicities and nations fighting for Macedonia? It seems strange and paradoxical that, at a time when ethnic-linguistic identity obsessed politicians and intellectuals and grounded nation and state building in the Balkans and elsewhere in eastern Europe, the VMRO’s leaders did not pay greater attention to this critical issue.

There is no simple answer to this paradox, and one must speculate. Perhaps, unlike the Makedonisti and bourgeois politicians and intellectuals in general, the VMRO’s left-leaning leaders consciously avoided or side-tracked the issue. Since they belonged to the political left and were populist or even socialist, the inclusive concept *narod* (people) may have been more important and appealing to them than the narrower and exclusive *nacija* (ethnic nation). However, practical considerations must also have played a role. Because their sole aim was a united, free Macedonian state, they may have deliberately set aside that issue until liberation came. Slav Macedonians’ ethnicity was a highly divisive subject; foreign propagandists had already divided them into antagonistic sectarian camps. Raising this matter would have only exacerbated these divisions at the time when unity and cooperation were indispensable.

Furthermore, the leaders had attended Exarchist schools or studied in Bulgaria and felt greater affinity to that country. They could not afford to alienate the Bulgarians, because most of them worked at Exarchist schools or in Exarchist-controlled institutions or organizations in Macedonia or in Bulgaria. Finally, they needed international aid, funds, supplies, arms, and political and diplomatic support. Greece and Serbia were openly antagonistic and were doing all they could to undermine and defeat their movement. Bulgaria’s paternalistic attitudes and policies appeared to them more acceptable and promising.

The VMRO statutes, which Delčev and Petrov had prepared early

in 1897, after the Salonika Congress of 1896, and which Delčev revised in 1902, called on all discontented elements in Macedonia and the Adrianople area to unite “to win full political autonomy for these two provinces through revolution.” They appealed for an end to “propaganda and national dissensions which divide and weaken the population . . . in the struggle against the common foe.”¹¹

However, for reasons we considered above, others saw the movement as pro-Bulgarian; except for Exarchist Vlachs, most members of other ethnicities ignored the VMRO’s call. Even Macedonians belonging to the Partiarhist (Greek) or the Serbian “party” showed little enthusiasm. Hence, the VMRO had and maintained its base only among Exarchists—its greatest weakness as an all-encompassing national movement.

The VMRO’s immediate task was to prepare the restless masses for revolution, and so it set up a secret, hierarchical network of committees to that end. The organization was to be sovereign and independent and free of foreign influences and interference. A central committee was, in name at least, the highest decision-making organ.

The VMRO set up regional, district, and local organizations. It divided Macedonia into revolutionary regions, each with a regional committee in charge. At the outset the following were such regions: Salonika, Bitola, Skopje, Štip, Strumica, Gorna Dzhumaia, and Veles-Tikveš. Within each region were districts with revolutionary committees, whose chiefs, the *vojvoda(i)*, enjoyed great power. Local cells reported to local committees. The three levels of committees organized and had at their disposal armed units, *četa(i)*, consisting of *komita(i)* and with a *vojvoda* (chief), which comprised the VMRO’s standing paramilitary arm. The *četi* performed police and security duties for the organization and, most important, readied the vilayets for rebellion.

Activists at all levels recruited new adherents, and membership slowly grew. At first, most newcomers were teachers, students, and priests, but soon craftspeople, tradespeople, and merchants joined as well. Before Ilinden, the VMRO had won active support from some peasants and passive acceptance and sympathy from the vast majority. By 1903, the VMRO was in virtual control of some areas of Macedonia, where it administered its own postal service, tax collection, and justice system. It was becoming a state within a state in Ottoman Macedonia.

Despite considerable organizational accomplishments, the VMRO was far from ready for the planned popular revolt. It did not gather the

financial resources to procure the arms and train the masses, the army of the revolution. The conservative and practical peasants were hesitant to risk joining the struggle unarmed and defenseless.

Moreover, the VMRO had no political or diplomatic allies, and it was extremely weak and vulnerable. As we saw above, Greece and Serbia were openly hostile to it and its aims. Official Bulgaria, while occasionally sympathetic, disliked its aims and sought to undermine its independence. Help from Bulgaria appeared more and more unlikely. The great powers, especially Russia and Austria-Hungary, which had strong interest in the area, had massive internal problems, and they did not want to see unrest and disorder in the remaining Ottoman possessions in the Balkans. About 1900, Russia and Austria-Hungary were seeking to preserve the territorial and political status quo there; an 1897 agreement between their foreign ministers, Count Muraviev and Count Goluchowski, respectively, aimed “to keep the Balkans on ice.”¹²

Events swept the VMRO along against its better judgment. In the first years of the new century, its founders thought conditions unfavorable for a successful insurrection and feared the resulting disaster. However, by default, or more probably by design, open or concealed opponents of it and its national aims called for a revolution.

The Supreme Revolutionary Committee (Sofia, 1895) and its members, Supremists, sought to achieve Bulgarian aims: direct annexation of Macedonia or nominal autonomy. From the outset it competed with the VMRO, sought to take it over, and, when it failed, became a determined opponent. It tried to discredit the organization among the people, betrayed or physically eliminated some of its leaders, and hindered its activities and sabotaged its development with armed raids and premature and doomed uprisings, such as that in Gorna Dzhumaia in the autumn of 1902.

Ilinden

In January 1902, Ottoman authorities in Salonika arrested a VMRO activist and former Supremist, who, under pressure and torture, revealed the names of VMRO members. As a result of this—the so-called Salonika Affair—close to two hundred people went to jail, including virtually all the members of the central committee. When Ivan Hadžinikolov, the only exception, learned that the police wanted him, he turned over to

Ivan Garvanov, leader of the Salonika regional committee, the VMRO's symbols of authority and secret and sensitive information about the organization, membership, and so forth. Then Garvanov allegedly betrayed Hadžinikolov, whom the Ottoman police arrested as well.

Ivan Garvanov, a Bulgarian-born physics teacher in the Salonika Boy's Gymnasium, was a former leader of the anti-VMRO Revolutionary Brotherhood, which had close links to the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. Hadžinikolov had thus unwittingly passed de facto control of the VMRO to an opponent in the service of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. As Perry writes: "Garvanov, who was in the right place at the right time[,] stepped into the leadership void created by the arrests of the legally constituted Central Committee members. Thus what he was unable to achieve by force and coercion, Garvanov accomplished thanks to a twist of fate, possibly augmented by a bit of duplicity, though this is unsubstantiated."¹³

With the VMRO's reins in his hands, Garvanov abandoned its policy of patient, careful, systematic preparation and called for an immediate uprising. He argued that the failed Gorna Dzhumaia revolt, which the Supremists organized in 1902, had created a desperate situation, that events were moving fast, and that the VMRO had to act soon. At the end of December 1902, he announced a VMRO congress in Salonika in early January 1903 to decide whether to launch the uprising in the spring. The unconstitutional and unrepresentative congress, which met on 15 January (N.S.) / 26 January (O.S.), attracted 17 delegates of less importance, and Garvanov appears to have chosen most of them himself.

The gathering debated whether to aim for spring. Even the carefully selected delegates divided on the issue. At the outset only one supported the proposal unreservedly. However, after lengthy and at times acrimonious discussions, during which Garvanov applied every possible pressure tactic, including unfounded promises that the Bulgarian army was ready to aid the insurgents, Garvanov had his way. In the end, the opponents backed down for the sake of unity, and the participants agreed unanimously to call for a revolt in the spring.

The decision divided the VMRO leadership at all levels. Some of its best-known figures, such as Delčev, Petrov, and Sandanski, rejected it. In fact, Petrov denounced it as Supremist inspired and destructive. Delčev was the top-ranking leader who could have mounted a successful opposition campaign. Evidence suggests that he was planning to do that

at a congress of regional leaders, near Seres on St. George's Day (6 May 1903).

When he was on his way there, Ottoman troops attacked him and his četa in the village of Banica. Delčev suffered serious wounds and died on 4 May. There are no satisfactory explanations of the ambush. It is possible that an Ottoman spy discovered Delčev's plans or that Garvanov betrayed them to the authorities. In any case, the "MRO [Macedonian Revolutionary Organization] lost its most charismatic figure, a man who had come to symbolize the spirit and aspirations of the organization. Delčev's death removed from the revolutionary movement its most popular and effective leader and the most potent and influential opponent of Garvanov."¹⁴

During the spring of 1903, the atmosphere in Macedonia grew more tense and violent. In late April, violence by the Gemidžii in Salonika rattled Europe. This group of revolutionaries and anarchists resorted to terrorism to bring Macedonia's plight to the attention of the great powers. On 28 April, they sank the *Guadalquivir*, a French-owned ship, in Salonika harbor; on the same day, members threw three bombs at the Constantinople Express as it pulled into Salonika railway station.

On the night of 29–30 April, explosions shook many parts of the city: bombs devastated popular cafés, blew up the city's gas supply, and hit the Ottoman Bank, the post office, and the German school. The Ottoman authorities responded by mass arrests, detaining more than five hundred people. The great powers sent ships to Salonika, and Russia and Austria-Hungary pressed on the High Porte a reform program to enhance Christians' security in Macedonia.

In this extremely tense atmosphere, a rational discussion, let alone reversal, of the decision of the Salonika congress was not possible, and planning continued. A congress of the Bitola (Monastir) revolutionary region met from 2 to 7 May in the mountain village of Smilevo. The leaders there acted for the VMRO as a whole and represented the most important revolutionary districts—eight of them, stretching from Ohrid and Kičevo in the west to Kastoria (Kostur) in the south, Demir Hisar in the east, and Prilep in the north. The vast majority of the region's inhabitants were Macedonians and Vlachs, Exarchists, and VMRO supporters. Its mountainous terrain seemed ideal for guerrilla warfare, and its population appeared willing and ready to join the uprising because Ottoman abuses in the vilayet were particularly severe.

Dame Gruev, who also represented the VMRO's central committee,

chaired the gathering. Some delegates strongly opposed the Salonika decision, and even Gruev expressed reservations, but, as he had told Delčev at their last meeting, it was too late to turn back. The majority agreed with him and resolved to launch the revolution after the harvest. It also selected a three-member general staff—Gruev, Boris Sarafov, and Anastas Lozančev—to determine the exact date. In late July, the general staff felt the situation ripe for revolution, and on 28 July it issued a circular, which set the date as 2 August, St. Elias's Day. It also called on the people of Macedonia to join the struggle. A memorandum to the great powers declared that failure to introduce reforms had driven the exploited and oppressed Christian masses of Macedonia and the Adrianople region to armed struggle. It also expressed the hope that the great powers would at least ensure introduction of real reforms.

The revolution broke out in the evening of 2 August at Ilinden¹⁵ in the Bitola (Monastir) vilayet, which remained its focal point. The insurgents attacked estates and properties owned by Muslim *bey*s, destroyed telephone and telegraph lines, blew up bridges and important official and strategic buildings, and, in some places, attacked local garrisons. One of their earliest successes was the capture on 3 August of Kruševo, a picturesque mountaintop town 1,250 meters above sea level, with a largely Macedonian and Vlach population of about 10,000. There, under socialist Nikola Karev, the rebels established a provisional government, issued a fiery manifesto reiterating the revolution's aims, and declared the Kruševo Republic.

Large-scale revolutionary actions took place elsewhere in the Bitola vilayet, in the counties of Kastoria (Kostur) and Florina (Lerin); in various localities in the counties of Ohrid, Kičevo, and Prilep, revolutionary authorities emerged. The vast majority of the non-Muslim inhabitants of the vilayet supported the revolution. As Henri Noel Brailsford, a British journalist who was in Macedonia in 1903 and 1904, wrote: "there is hardly a village [in the Monastir vilayet] which has not joined the organization."¹⁶

Elsewhere in Macedonia, undertakings were far less intense and widespread. In the Salonika, Seres, and Skopje regions, the smaller numbers of rebels attacked railway lines, especially the Salonika-Skopje and Skopje-Bitola lines and railway bridges over the Vardar. Exact and impartial statistics on the number of active participants in the uprising are not available. An official publication of the VMRO in 1904 claimed that

26,408 fighters took part in the period from 29 July to 19 November 1903. More than two-thirds of them, or 19,850, fought in the Bitola vilayet, 3,544 in the Salonika, and 1,042 in the Skopje.¹⁷

The extent and intensity of the revolt surprised the European powers, the neighboring Balkan states, and the Ottoman authorities. However, it was also obvious from the outset that without external assistance—a decisive diplomatic intervention by Europe or military help from the Balkan neighbors, particularly Bulgaria—the premature, badly organized, poorly armed uprising would fail. Europe wished to preserve the status quo; each of the Balkan states claimed Macedonia and the Macedonians. Hence the rebels had to face alone the Ottoman empire—a declining giant, but one with substantial military power.

The Turks, with 350,931 soldiers by mid-August, concentrated in Macedonia 167,000 infantrymen, 3,700 cavalymen, and 444 guns.¹⁸ The offensive aimed at isolating and eliminating the focal points of the uprising. The first attack was against the town of Smilevo; after its capture, they concentrated on Kruševo, the seat of the republic, the uprising's greatest achievement. The operation there began on 9–10 August, and by 12 August, according to some estimates, the 1,200 rebel defenders faced 20,000 Ottoman soldiers with heavy artillery. Battle continued throughout 12 August; by evening, the remaining rebels and the leaders of the republic fled, fighting through the siege.

After defeating the insurgents at Kruševo, the Ottoman army moved systematically against the other centers and gains of the revolution in the Bitola vilayet and elsewhere in Macedonia. They faced vigorous and stubborn resistance, and the conflict continued throughout September and well into October, until the final suppression of all traces of the uprising.

For nearly three months, Macedonia writhed in the throes and flames of Ilinden. The immediate consequences were disastrous for Macedonia and its people, especially the Macedonians and the Vlachs. Data concerning death and destruction vary greatly, but it appears that as many as 8,816 men, women, and children died; there were 200 villages burned, 12,440 houses destroyed or damaged, and close to 70,836 people left homeless. The Ottoman army and police and armed bands of Muslims continued a terror campaign against Christians even after the uprising ended.¹⁹

The psychological and political impact of the ill-timed and failed uprising is beyond calculation. The optimism, high hopes, and expecta-

tions for a free and better life that the VMRO and the revolt generated gave way to “panic, demoralization, disillusionment and hopelessness.”²⁰ The VMRO fragmented into antagonistic factions keen to destroy one another and never regained its pre-Ilinden strength, prestige, and unity of purpose.

Nonetheless the Ilinden Uprising represented a landmark in the history of the Macedonians. It was the first such organized effort bearing the Macedonian name, taking place throughout the territory, and calling for a free state encompassing the whole of geographic Macedonia. It helped to redefine the so-called Macedonian question at home and in the rest of the Balkans and Europe. Thereafter people would view the problem no longer as Bulgarian or Greek or Serbian, as each of the neighbors claimed, but first and foremost as Macedonian.

The uprising and its disastrous end changed the national movement and long helped shape national identity. For the Makedonisti, Ilinden confirmed all their worst fears and forebodings. In their view, the revolt was a huge mistake—certain to fail because it involved only the Exarchist Macedonians. Further, expecting Bulgarians to offer armed support was totally unrealistic, because they saw the two lands’ interests as divergent and would not risk their own to aid the Macedonians.

The Makedonisti now believed more than ever that the real enemy was the neighboring Balkan nationalisms, including the Bulgarian, which claimed Macedonia and divided its people against each other. They saw salvation only in the termination, with Ottoman help, of all their activities and their expulsion. This might facilitate the normal and natural unification of all Macedonians. A standardized language and a common culture, church, and political and economic interests would ground that unity and safeguard their land’s territorial integrity. In short, what the Makedonisti wanted, and what Krste Misirkov and the other leaders stressed repeatedly, was unification of all Macedonians on a strictly domestic basis of patriotism and within the context and with the help of the Ottoman state. Otherwise, they warned, their ambitions and greedy neighbors would conquer and partition Macedonia.²¹ They proved true prophets in both respects. Force of arms partitioned Macedonia in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, but a Macedonian nation would also complete its formation on a Macedonian ethnic basis.

The events of 1903 and their aftermath even more profoundly affected the Macedono-Bulgarians—the political separatists—particularly the right-wingers who tended to be extremely pro-Bulgaria and expected

its aid. The defeat of the uprising was in fact their own defeat, and it plunged their Macedonian national orientation into a crisis from which it never fully recovered. However, in 1904, only a year after Ilinden, Bulgaria appeared to consider in principle a Serbian proposal to divide Macedonia into spheres of influence. This came as a shock to the pro-Bulgarians, who looked up to that country and expected it to protect Macedonian interests.

The Macedono-Bulgarians' crisis, which spurred fratricidal infighting and assassinations within the VMRO, was deep, and there was no easy way out. Those on the Macedonian left had to acknowledge that the Makedonisti were right: the interests of Bulgarianism and Macedonianism were divergent, Macedonian patriots could not rely on Bulgaria, and victory would be virtually impossible without Macedonians' uniting on strictly domestic terms. It was becoming obvious that Macedono-Bulgarians would have to choose between the two nationalisms, which had become irreconcilably contradictory; they could not be Macedonians and Bulgarians. This predicament helped split the VMRO between its Macedonian left and its pro-Bulgarian right—a divide that had existed since 1893.²² The post-Ilinden crisis launched the prolonged and agonizing end of Macedono-Bulgarianism.

The VMRO's organizational network throughout Macedonia and the Ilinden Uprising affected the masses as well, enhancing their awareness of their land and of themselves as Macedonians. The concepts "Macedonia" and "Macedonian" had already acquired national connotation and coloring for the intelligentsia and the better educated, but not necessarily for the peasants, especially in rural areas.

The latter still tended to identify most often with a particular region—Bitolčani, Kosturčani, Prilepčani, and so on—and naš for them embraced inhabitants of neighboring regions. The recent turbulent events, which placed Macedonia on the map of Europe, also made them more conscious of the idea of Macedonia, which was larger and more abstract than their own region. And their understanding of naš broadened and widened to include many people speaking Macedonian dialects akin to their own. This was true of Exarchist villagers but also of Patriarchists and adherents of the Serbian church. This was a critical development in the transformation of the peasant, the naš, into a Macedonian, which took place between the turn of the century and the Second World War and its revolutionary aftermath in Macedonia.²³

Finally, the VMRO of Ilinden became an integral part of national

folk culture and mythology. Folk songs and tales and fictional and political writings glorified the original leaders and the uprising, which became national symbols that resonated with people from every walk of life, along with the VMRO and its program for a free land (slobodna Makedonija). The failed revolution metamorphosed into a glorious national epic, a myth that inspired all future generations of Macedonian patriots, revolutionaries, and nationalists.