Patriotic Macedonians have traditionally considered the period 1903–19 and, more particularly, the decade 1903–13 as the most tragic in their history. For Macedonian patriots and nationalists, the partition of their land—which the VMRO fought and the Ilinden Uprising sought to prevent but the European powers approved in 1913 and the Allies confirmed in the peace settlement in 1919—represented a tragedy. In Macedonian mythology, it represents the greatest injustice that Macedonia and its people have ever suffered.1

Three sections make up this painful chapter. First, the VMRO declined rapidly and by 1908 became virtually irrelevant. Second, the resulting political vacuum in Macedonia allowed the neighbors free rein, and in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 the armies of Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia partitioned the territory. Third, another conflict over Macedonia erupted in 1915 during the Great War and led to repartition, and the post-1918 peace settlement confirmed, with minor modifications, the original division of 1913.

The VMRO’s Decline and Split (1903–1908)

In the decade after Ilinden, instability, turbulence, and violence became permanent features in Macedonia. For patriots, who sought the preser-
vation of territorial integrity, it proved calamitous. Major developments, internal and external, harmed their cause and paved the way for partition.

As we saw in chapter 6, the defeat and the bloody suppression of the uprising unnerved the VMRO. Many of its leading activists perished, and many survivors fled to Bulgaria. The aftermath saw destruction or disruption of its institutions and organizational networks. Defeated, disorganized, and demoralized, the remaining leaders had to examine themselves, search their own souls, and reconsider the VMRO.

Calls for reexamination of the organization surfaced by late 1903. From the outset, the debates were heated, divisive, and full of violent accusations and recriminations. The leaders’ first major gathering, in Sofia in January–February 1904, attracted the most notable figures from all parts of Macedonia. They debated the VMRO’s past, present, and future and failed to agree on anything. Two major groupings emerged, which historians usually consider “left” and “right.” However, these terms related more to views about Macedonia’s future than to ideological beliefs. In general, the left represented a pro-Macedonian orientation, and the right, a pro-Bulgarian.

The stronghold of the left was the Seres revolutionary district, which Jane Sandanski led. It was much more unified and homogeneous in its views than the right. It called for radical changes in the VMRO’s structure: for decentralization and democratization, including elections. It also sought to diversify the social base to bring in the growing urban elements and to curb the predominance of teachers, most of whom worked for the Bulgarian exarchate. Its national and political program reflected the VMRO’s traditional ideals: continued faith in a general uprising, but only under favorable internal and external conditions; protection of the movement’s independence; and rejection of all foreign interference. The ultimate aim remained “Macedonia for the Macedonians” (i.e., preservation of territorial integrity and achievement of one of the following: autonomy within the Ottoman empire, outright independence, or equal partnership in some future Balkan federation).

The right was more heterogeneous and less unified on most issues. It included activists whose aims were identical with those on the left, but who felt that outside help was essential and looked toward Bulgaria. However, Macedonians who were openly pro-Bulgarian or even considered themselves Bulgarian led and dominated it. They seemed to focus their activities on Exarchist Macedonians. Their leaders Hristo Matov
and Dr. Hristo Tatarčev resided in Sofia, and their stronghold after Ilinden was the Skopje revolutionary district. They embraced centralization and opposed major changes in organization.

Most of the right’s leaders had no confidence in a planned and well-prepared internal uprising. They favored continuation of armed strikes against Ottoman targets in order to provoke outside intervention by Bulgaria or the great powers or both. In their writings, declarations, and proclamations, they also put forth autonomy as their ultimate aim, undoubtedly the main reason why they attracted support in Macedonia and especially among the many Macedonian refugees and immigrants in Bulgaria.
However, Macedonian autonomy embodied different meanings for the right’s various elements. For some, as with the left, it meant a truly self-governing state with equality for all its ethnic elements. For others, it implied some sort of association with Bulgaria. And for still others, it represented but the first step toward annexation by Bulgaria and creation of a Great, or San Stefano Bulgaria.

The leaders’ strong pro-Bulgarian orientation received no open publicity; it remained a “hidden agenda” but gradually became even stronger and better known. As a result, many observers came to identify the VMRO’s right with the ideas and aims of the former, Sofia-based, Supreme Macedonian Revolutionary Committee, which had emerged in Sofia in 1895 and served Bulgarian state interests in Macedonia. Opponents on the left would designate people on the right as “Vrhovists” (Supremists) and their pro-Bulgarian program and aims as “Vrhovizam” (Supremism).

A general congress was to determine the VMRO’s future. Preliminary congresses took place in the five revolutionary regions—Bitola, Salonika, Seres, Skopje, and Strumica—between May 1904 and July–August 1905. The heated debates there only confirmed the deep divisions between the Macedonian left and the pro-Bulgarian right. The left prevailed at Salonika, Seres, and Strumica. The Bitola region leaned left, and the Skopje region, right. However, all five agreed on a general congress to deal with the post-Illinden malaise. Although the statutes required general congresses in Macedonia, long debates decided that, because of the difficult situation there, this conclave would take place at the Rila Monastery in Bulgaria, very near the Ottoman border in Macedonia.

The historic Rila Congress met at the beginning of October 1905, attracted 21 delegates from all over Macedonia, and lasted a month. The left prevailed: the new central committee included Dame Gruev, Pere Toševo, Todor Popantov, and Dimo Hadžidimov, the rising ideologist of the left and editor of the VMRO’s Revolucioneren list (Revolutionary Newspaper). The gathering endorsed liberation as the ultimate aim and, to that end, a well-prepared popular uprising. It condemned neighbors’ interference and stressed the VMRO’s determination to resist it by all possible means. It specifically warned against the dispatch of Vrhovist armed bands into Macedonia and against the exarchate’s encouraging “Bulgarian state nationalism” in Macedonia.

However, the apparent unity soon proved ephemeral. The old divi-
sions resurfaced, and the movement fractured permanently. The right declined to implement the decisions, and the polarization erupted in heated discussions over the meeting place for the next annual general congress. Contrary to the Rila agreement, the right insisted on Sofia. Although a compromise proposal for Rila passed, the congress never met.Shortly before it was to convene, the right issued a declaration insisting that the VMRO coordinate its activities with, and accept financial aid from, Bulgaria. These demands ran against the strongest ideals of the left. The gap between left and right was unbridgeable.

The right, which usurped the name “VMRO,” held a congress under Bulgarian auspices in Kiustendil, Bulgaria, in 1908 and revised the decisions from Rila. A congress of the left met in Macedonia in May 1908, shortly after the Young Turk Revolution; attending were representatives of the Salonika, Seres, and Strumica revolutionary regions, and they reconfirmed their ideals. The split marked the beginning of a vicious struggle. The assassination, or “liquidation,” in November 1907 of Boris Sarafov and Ivan Garvanov, two leaders of the right, turned into a war of extermination that lasted until the late 1940s.

The revolution in Istanbul in 1908 marked the end of the VMRO as the original Macedonian national and revolutionary movement. The left, under Sandanski, supported the Young Turks, and in the following year it became the legal Popular Federalist Party. The Young Turk regime promised to reform and modernize the empire along liberal-democratic lines and hoped and expected that a united Macedonia would become one of its administrative and autonomous units.

The right aligned itself even more with Bulgaria and, with its support and the exarchate’s guidance, set up the Union of Bulgarian Clubs as its own legal front. Unlike the left, however, it did not support the Young Turks and did not give up its arms and armed actions or the VMRO name. With the regime’s total failure to fulfill its promises and the outbreak of the First Balkan War in 1912, the Union came under direct control by Sofia. During the Balkan Wars and the Great War, Bulgaria used it to recruit Macedonians for the Bulgarian war effort and supposedly to liberate Macedonia.2

Intervention, Wars, and Partition (1903–1913)

After Ilinden in 1903, the mid-decade decline of the VMRO—the only organized defender of Macedonian interests—created a political vac-
uum. It opened the door to more intense intervention by the great powers and the neighboring kingdoms. Two Balkan wars followed in 1912–13, leading to partition of Macedonia; a third during the First World War repartitioned Macedonia; and the postwar settlement ratified partition.

Before final suppression of Ilinden in autumn 1903, the European powers intervened to stabilize the situation, in line with the Russian-Austro-Hungarian understanding of 1897 “to keep the Balkans on ice.” Already in October 1903, St. Petersburg and Vienna, the two capitals most concerned with the Balkans, prepared the so-called Mürzsteg reform program. It recommended that Russian and Austro-Hungarian representatives accompany the Ottoman inspector general on his tour of Macedonia and report on conditions there; reorganization of the *gendarmerie* under a foreign general and officers; reform of the judiciary; and financial aid for return of refugees and rebuilding of villages. The other powers approved the program, and the sultan accepted it, but virtually nothing happened.

In March 1908, Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign minister, proposed an autonomous Macedonia. Tsar Nicholas II and his and his wife’s uncle King Edward VII discussed it when they met at Reval (Tallinn, Estonia) in June. The Young Turk Revolution in July ended any further discussion of reform in Macedonia.

Armed Supremist bands expanded operations in Macedonia. They coordinated their efforts with the right wing of the VMRO until the two virtually merged before the revolution in Istanbul. Their targets were no longer solely Ottoman symbols and authorities, but almost as frequently leftist leaders and followers in the VMRO.

Serbs also intensified their activities. By 1905, there were eleven Serbian armed bands operating in Macedonia. In the same year, a supreme committee in Belgrade, with branches in Skopje and Bitola, took control of them; the Serbian General Staff took over the entire movement. Serbia aimed to entrench its influence in central Macedonia, along the Vardar valley, as a base for its future drive for unhindered access to the Aegean.

Greek armed bands grew in number, had better organization, and were much more aggressive. They were under the direction of various local organizations throughout southern Macedonia, in the Salonika and Bitola vilayets, which took orders from the Macedonian Committee in Athens. Wealthy Greeks in Macedonia and Greece funded them generously, but the state budget provided most of the money. Locally re-
cruited bands seemed not very reliable, and most of the armed men and officers came from Greece and many from Crete. The Greeks fought both wings of the VMRO and sought to terrorize and force the Exarchists and their communities to return to the patriarchate. Greek efforts in Macedonia were under more direct government control and were better organized than those of Serbia and even of Bulgaria.4

The Young Turk Revolution in July 1908, restoration of the 1876 constitution, and decisive defeat of the conservative Muslim counterrevolution in April 1909 appeared to signal a new and promising era in the Ottoman empire. The resulting general euphoria temporarily ended foreign-inspired armed actions in Macedonia.

Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia had to change tactics and adapt. They replaced armed bands with political associations that continued the struggle by legal means. As we saw above, the Bulgarians sponsored the Union of Bulgarian Clubs, which brought Bulgarians and Bulgarophile Macedonians together with the right wing of the VMRO. Serbia launched the Associations of Ottoman Serbs, which operated not only among the Serbs in Old Serbia proper, but primarily in Macedonia. Likewise, the Greeks founded numerous political clubs and many supposedly nonpolitical societies, brotherhoods, and unions, all under the well-established Greek elite in Constantinople (Istanbul).

Withdrawal of armed bands and suspension of armed struggle soon ended. Once in power, the Young Turks proved unwilling to abandon Muslim hegemony and to grant real political representation and religious equality throughout the empire, let alone decentralization and local autonomy. They implemented a program that called for Turkish hegemony, greater centralization of power, and Turkization. On 16 August 1909, the Law of Association banned ethnically or nationally based political organizations; on 27 September, the Law for the Prevention of Brigandage and Sedition forbade armed bands in the European provinces.

The new regime’s nonintroduction of promised reforms, which outcome the neighboring Balkans states expected and indeed hoped for, gave them a pretext to renew armed intervention in Macedonia. In the two years preceding the First Balkan War in 1912, acts of violence by these armed bands or by the special “pursuit battalions” that the Young Turks created, spilling of blood, and destruction of property increased dramatically. It seemed as if the Balkan states were intent on solving the Macedonian issue by provoking war with the Ottoman empire. They
sought to impress public opinion in the great powers that the only solution for Macedonia was its liberation from Ottoman rule—that is, the end of Turkey in Europe. Austria-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and the resulting “Annexation Crisis,” which broke out only months after the revolution in Istanbul and pushed the divided great powers to the brink of war, seemed only to propel the Balkan states further in that direction.\(^5\)

The powers of the Triple Alliance (Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Italy) and the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) avoided war over the Annexation Crisis. However, the triumph of Austria-Hungary and the capitulation and humiliation of Russia destroyed the two empires’ entente, which Goluchowski and Muraviev had arranged in 1897 “to keep the Balkans on ice.” The Dual Monarchy’s gains endangered Russia’s traditional aims in the Near East, threatened Serbia and Montenegro’s independence, and challenged the expansionist aims of all Balkan states.

Hence the crisis initiated a chain of developments that pushed Serbia and Bulgaria together, forced Russia to seek the cooperation of a united bloc of Balkan allies to check Austro-Hungarian influence and its spread to the south, and emboldened the Balkan states to contemplate taking the Eastern Question, and thus the Macedonian issue, into their own hands. Finally, the threat from Austria-Hungary and the prospects of dazzling gains from a war against the Ottoman empire made Balkan unity very attractive.\(^6\)

Protracted discussions between Bulgaria, Russia, and Serbia and between Serbia and Bulgaria culminated in the Serbian-Bulgarian Treaty of Alliance on 13 March 1912. This relationship constituted the core of the Balkan System of Alliances of 1912, which became complete when Greece allied with Bulgaria on 29 May and Montenegro reached a verbal understanding with Bulgaria on 28 August and a treaty of alliance with Serbia on 6 October.\(^7\)

The new system aimed to destroy the status quo and expand the allies’ territory at the expense of the Ottoman empire. The Secret Annex of the Serbian-Bulgarian treaty set out the territorial settlement and the division of Macedonia into uncontested Serbian and Bulgarian zones and a contested zone for the Russian tsar to arbitrate.

Bulgaria and Serbia allied not because they both feared the Dual Monarchy—Bulgaria had no quarrels with Austria-Hungary—but to expand territorially. The new partners saw the offensive clauses of their
agreement as its primary consideration. The ultimate success or failure of their rapprochement would depend on the realization of these ambitions. Serbia sought to expand to the south and southwest into Macedonia, Old Serbia, and Albania and thus win an exit to the Adriatic to secure its precarious existence. Bulgaria looked south and southwest, to Macedonia and the Aegean, and as far east as possible, toward Constantinople (Istanbul) and the straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

The main weaknesses of their alliance, and hence of the Balkan system, were apparent from the outset. The allies still could not resolve the perennial puzzle—dividing territorial spoils—particularly Macedonia. Although Bulgaria and Serbia had finally agreed, with Russia’s aid, on partition, there were political circles in Belgrade, including Prime Minister Nikola Pašić, who felt that Serbia had paid too high a price in Macedonia to win Bulgaria’s friendship and sought revisions. More important, Bulgaria and Greece could not reach an accord before the war and side-tracked the issue.

Above all, Russia, protector of the delicate entente, had ideas that differed from those of the Balkan states. It failed to grasp the parties’ real intentions and saw the arrangement as a defensive tool against the Dual Monarchy. For the allies, it allowed an immediate war against the Ottoman empire. Moreover, they expected Russia, which was not ready for and opposed such a war, to protect them against the certain hostility of Austria-Hungary.

Encouraged by the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish, or Tripolitan, War in September 1911 and citing growing violence and instability (which they helped create) in Ottoman Europe, the Balkan states decided on war too. They called on the great powers to force the High Porte to implement reforms in Europe in accordance with article 23 of the Treaty of Berlin. On 13 October 1912, they handed a collective note, or rather an ultimatum, demanding the same to the Ottoman representatives in Athens, Belgrade, and Sofia. As they hoped and expected, the empire rejected both the powers’ démarche and their own collective note, and on 17 October Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia broke off all diplomatic ties with the empire. The declaration of war and the opening of hostilities followed the next day, starting the First Balkan War.

The allies’ swift and decisive victories, which soon terminated Ottoman rule in Europe, transformed the war into a European crisis. The winners, especially Serbia and Montenegro, now needed and expected
Russia to safeguard their gains against Austria-Hungary. The fate of the alliances, which were so important to Russia, depended on this.

In the course of the great powers’ deliberation on the peace settlement in southeastern Europe, St. Petersburg endeavored alone or with whatever support it could muster from its Triple Entente partners, Britain and France, to uphold the Balkan states’ aims. However, facing determined opposition by the Triple Alliance led by Austria-Hungary, Russia surrendered on the central issues: first, the Albanian question and the Serbian exit on the Adriatic and, second, Scutari (Shkodër). By so doing, Russia avoided a possible European war for which it was not ready and thus attained one of its major objectives. But it jeopardized its primary aim: preservation of the Serbian-Bulgarian alliance and thus the entire Balkan system.

Even while the allies were fighting the Ottoman empire in the First Balkan War of 1912–13, and long before the climactic Treaty of London of 30 May 1913, differences over Macedonia were undermining the Balkan alliances. The Greeks and the Serbs engaged the Ottoman forces primarily in Macedonia, occupied most of its territory, and claimed most, if not all, the areas under their military control. The Bulgarians, who carried the brunt of the fighting in the east in Thrace, near the center of Ottoman power, occupied only a small part of Macedonia but claimed most if not all of it on the basis of the alliance with Serbia.

A deadlock ensued, lines became rigid, and a negotiated resolution was not possible. For with the collapse of Serbia’s pretensions in Albania and on the Adriatic, Belgrade sought recompense in Macedonia, where it met Sofia’s unyielding opposition. The consequent territorial conflict intensified the dispute in Macedonia between Bulgaria and Greece, which in turn exacerbated rivalry between Bulgaria and Serbia. Greece and Serbia drew closer together and on 1 June 1913 signed a defensive treaty of alliance against Bulgaria. They also began to curry favor with Romania, the only nonalliance Balkan state.

The secret Greek-Serbian Treaty of Alliance on 1 June 1913 in effect ended the Serbian-Bulgarian alliance and the Balkan System of Alliances. Its primary aim was to subvert the territorial settlement in Macedonia to which Bulgaria and Serbia agreed in 1912 and to impose on Bulgaria, if necessary by force, the new arrangement. It left no room for debate or for a negotiated settlement and virtually ensured another conflict: the Inter-Allied, or Second Balkan War in the summer of 1913, which finally
destroyed the Serbian-Bulgarian rapprochement and with it the Balkan system.

The summer war violated the territorial integrity of modern Macedonia, which comprised a natural economic and, in the main, ethnocultural unity. Bulgaria and the allied Greece and Serbia forcibly partitioned their neighbor. Greece acquired Aegean Macedonia, the largest territory, and Serbia, Vardar Macedonia, with the largest Macedonian population. The defeated Bulgarians, whose influence in Macedonia had grown steadily since 1870 and who wanted desperately to annex it all and thus create a Great Bulgaria, ended up with the smallest part, Pirin Macedonia. The Peace Treaty of Bucharest of 10 August 1913 sanctioned this arrangement and ended the Second Balkan War.8

Sequel: The Great War and the Peace Settlement

The Bucharest treaty in August 1913, however, only set the stage for yet another war over Macedonia, which erupted during the First World War. The 1913 settlement was not acceptable to the Macedonians, and Bulgaria was keen to overturn it. Sofia moved into the sphere of influence of the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary and Germany) and probably saw the Great War as mainly a continuation of the Second Balkan. In September 1915, Bulgaria intervened on the side of the Central Powers by attacking Serbia primarily because of its frustrated ambitions in Macedonia.

The Serbian army was active on the Austro-Hungarian front, and the Bulgarians quickly overran the newly Serbian part of Macedonia. They reached the Greek-Serbian border, which, with brief exceptions, was until 1918 to separate the two belligerent sides in the Balkans, on the so-called Salonika, or Macedonian front. To the north of this line, the Central Powers had deployed 600,000 troops, and over time the Allies—Britain, France, and Russia—concentrated a similar force to its south. For three years, Macedonia and its people suffered under these huge forces of occupation and war.

The Central Powers handed over to Bulgaria the area of Macedonia under their control. The Bulgarians treated it as their own: they imposed martial law and declared general mobilization. They sent Macedonians to the front or forced them to perform military duties on the home front. Aegean, or Greek Macedonia, which the Allies controlled, was nomi-
nally under Greek administration but in fact under the various national forces of occupation. This situation led to frequent conflicts between the Greeks and the Serbs, who had their own designs even on this part of Macedonia.

This divided and competing administration made life worse for the Macedonians than that under the Bulgarians. In any case, both parts of occupied Macedonia suffered terribly: exploitation of material and human resources, requisitioning, martial law, and forced mobilization. Cities and towns such as Kastoria (Kostur), Florina (Lerin), Bitola, Dojran, and Edessa (Voden) near to and on both sides of the front lines experienced daily air and ground bombardment. Many villages in the heart of Macedonia, in the fertile area between Florina and Bitola, underwent total destruction.

During the Great War, the Macedonian question did not preoccupy the great powers of the two belligerent camps. True, both sides at first used Macedonia as a bargaining chip to entice strategically located Bulgaria into their respective ranks. However, once Bulgaria accepted the generous offers of the Central Powers and entered the war on their side in September 1915, the question lost its importance.

It came to the forefront again after Russia’s two revolutions in 1917 and its withdrawal from the war. The collapse of Russia—in effect, of the eastern front—forced Britain and France to turn their attention again to Bulgaria. They considered offering it a separate peace to draw it away from the enemy camp. However, unlike in 1915, when they offered Bulgaria virtually the whole of Vardar (Serbian) Macedonia, they now considered two alternative solutions. At first they thought of ceding to it Macedonia east of the Vardar; in the first half of 1918, they seemed to favor Macedonia as an autonomous Balkan state under the protection of the great powers.9

Although Macedonians could not voice freely their views, an autonomous state—the principal demand of all patriotic organizations since 1878—had received support since August 1914 from organized Macedonian émigré groups, especially in Russia and Switzerland. The Macedonian colony in St. Petersburg (Petrograd) called on the Entente Powers to take up Macedonia’s liberation as the only solution that would contribute to peace and stability in the Balkans and Europe.10 The Macedonian Society for an Independent Macedonia, formed in Switzerland in
1918, rejected the Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian claims and called for an independent state—a Macedonia for the Macedonians.\footnote{11}

Nothing came of the strong British and French proposals of 1917 and 1918. Both the Greek and Serbian governments, their wartime allies, disapproved very strongly and made it clear that they would not relinquish any of their Macedonian gains. As the war neared its end, both were hoping and planning additional gains in Macedonia at each other’s expense or at the expense of the once-again-defeated Bulgaria.

In the period between war’s end and conclusion of the treaties comprising the peace settlement in the Balkans, the future of Macedonia surfaced repeatedly in Macedonian organizations in Bulgaria as well as in Switzerland and the United States. Except for some extreme Bulgarophile elements and the right of the former VMRO, which had identified completely with the Bulgarian cause during the Balkan Wars and the Great War and would have liked annexation to Bulgaria, most Macedonian patriotic organizations called on the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 to establish a united, autonomous state under the powers’ protection. As a last resort, some even approved of a united, autonomous Macedonia in the emerging southern Slav state—the kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later Yugoslavia.

At Paris, the Macedonian question fell to the Committee on the Formation of New States. In its thirty-second sitting, on 10 July 1919, the Italian delegation proposed a “special administration in Macedonia,” and in the following sitting it suggested autonomy for Vardar (Serbian) Macedonia. Despite energetic support from France, Serbia rejected the Italian initiatives as well as a British compromise proposal at the thirty-ninth sitting.

The peace treaties forced Serbia and Greece to act only vis-à-vis minority rights. Article 51 of the Saint-Germain Treaty with Austria (10 September 1919) obliged Serbia, and article 9 of the Convention for the Protection of Minorities required Serbia and Greece, to protect the rights of all minorities in lands that they conquered and annexed after 1 January 1913—that is, in the Balkan Wars and the Great War. The Yugoslav kingdom did not fulfill this obligation; Greece has not, to the present day.\footnote{12}

Otherwise, the peace conferences and treaties confirmed the partition of Macedonia and the Macedonians that the Treaty of Bucharest laid out in 1913, with some minor modifications at Bulgaria’s expense. There was no resolution of the Macedonian question. It remained the central issue, the apple of discord, dividing the Balkan states and peoples throughout the interwar period—and even down to current times.