

# 9 — Macedonia in Three Parts (1920s and 1930s)

## Partition and Assimilation

For all Macedonians, the Balkan Wars and partition shaped the period between the two world wars. The peace conferences and treaties of 1919, which allowed self-determination for many other “small,” “young” peoples of central and eastern Europe, denied this right to the Macedonians. Except for a few minor adjustments that harmed Bulgaria, they confirmed the partition that the Treaty of Bucharest set out in August 1913.

The victorious Allies, especially Britain and France, thought that the Macedonian problem was over. They could satisfy two of their clients, pillars of the new order in southeastern Europe: Greece and Serbia, now the dominant component of the new kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, or Yugoslavia. Even though those two states did not obtain as much of Macedonia as they had hoped, they too pretended that Macedonia, its people, and their problem had ceased to exist. Serbia proclaimed Vardar Macedonia to be South Serbia and its inhabitants South Serbs; for Greece, Aegean Macedonia became simply northern Greece, and its residents Greeks, or at best “Slavophone” Greeks.

Although Bulgaria had enjoyed the greatest influence among the Macedonians, its defeat in the Inter-Allied and the First World Wars left it with only Pirin Macedonia, or the Petrich district, as it called the area.

Its ruling elite did not consider the settlement permanent; but lacking sympathy from the victorious great powers and with revolution threatening at home, it had to acquiesce for the moment.

The peace conferences upheld the decision of the London Conference of Ambassadors, in December 1912, to give the new state of Albania small parts of Macedonia: Mala Prespa (Little Prespa), west of Lakes Ohrid and Prespa, and Golo Brdo, further to the north, where most inhabitants were Macedonian.

The three partitioning states denied the existence of a distinct Macedonian identity—ethnic, political, or territorial. Greece and Serbia claimed the Macedonians within their boundaries as Greeks and Serbs, respectively; Bulgaria continued to claim all Macedonians as Bulgarians. Hence the Macedonians in all three areas constituted unrecognized and repressed minorities. They found themselves in much more oppressive circumstances after their “liberation” from Ottoman rule. Under the latter they had communicated and prayed freely in Macedonian, could declare who they were, and could choose their political-church affiliation. Under the Balkan ‘liberators,’ they had to accept the national identity of the ruling nation or face excommunication and its political, economic, social, and cultural consequences.

Forced assimilation had two significant results. It enhanced assimilation among those Macedonians who for reasons of necessity or advantage embraced the new national identity temporarily or permanently. It also hastened the growth of Macedonianism, the development of national consciousness and identity, among those who rejected forced assimilation and were subject to repression and discrimination.

Macedonians sympathized with, and many of them actually joined, the activists, nationalist and communist, who rejected partition and called for a free Macedonia (*slobodna Makedonija*)—an autonomous or independent, but united, state. This was the central tenet of rightist nationalism, which the revived VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, or Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija) represented under Todor Aleksandrov and then, after his assassination in 1924, Ivan (Vančo) Mihailov.

It also became the fundamental principle of leftist nationalism, as we can see in the new VMRO (*obedineta*, United), or VMRO (ob.), of 1924 and its sponsors and supporters, the Communist International (Comintern), the Balkan Communist Federation, and the Communist parties of Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia. The Balkan Communists

made up the only political parties in the three partitioning states to recognize a distinct Macedonian national identity and to defend the Macedonians and their national cause.

Consequently, throughout the interwar years Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia faced a Macedonian problem. In differing ways, the matter helped destabilize all three. Moreover, since Greece and Yugoslavia approved of this settlement, and Bulgaria sought to destroy it, it was the primary cause of regional instability. It remained the stumbling block and doomed to failure any attempt at interstate cooperation. We now look in turn at the situation in Yugoslav (Vardar) Macedonia, in Greek (Aegean) Macedonia, and in Bulgarian (Pirin) Macedonia.

### **Yugoslav (Vardar) Macedonia**

Vardar, or Yugoslav, Macedonia covered 25,713 square kilometers, or about one-tenth of Yugoslavia, at its founding in 1918–19. According to the first Yugoslav census, it had 728,286 inhabitants. Although the vast majority of them were Macedonians, we have no exact figures for them or for the various ethnic minorities. As Ivo Banac observes: “though it [the census] reveals a great deal about the official ideology [unitarism and centralism], it is not particularly helpful as a statistical guide to the size of each national community. . . . For one thing, nationality was not a census rubric. The religion and the maternal language of the population are therefore our only guides to nationality. But here also, official attitudes got in the way of clarity. As far as Slavic population was concerned there were only three possibilities: (1) ‘Serbian or Croatian,’ (2) ‘Slovenian,’ (3) ‘other Slavic.’”<sup>1</sup>

Since the Macedonians were officially Serbs, officials counted them as “Serbian or Croatian.” They grouped Macedonians with all the Orthodox believers in Yugoslavia, and the Macedonian Slav Muslims (Torbeši), with all the country’s Muslims. It is equally difficult to determine the number of Albanians, Jews, Turks, Vlachs, and so on. Officials counted them together with their fellow coreligionists or conationals in the kingdom.

The first Yugoslav basic law—the Vidovdan Constitution—came into force on Saint Vitus Day, 28 June 1921. It passed “without the participation and against the will of most of the non-Serb parties.”<sup>2</sup> Nikola Pašić, premier since 1903 of Serbia and now of Yugoslavia, and the

leading advocate of Great Serbianism, pushed it through the constituent assembly (which the people elected on 22 November 1920) by 223 of 419 votes. Almost all the votes in favor were Serbian (183); Pašić virtually bought the rest from the Muslims (32) and the Slovene Peasant Party (8). The Croatian Peasant Party, under Stjepan Radić, the dominant (and nationalist) Croatian representative, boycotted the conclave; the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), which won the most votes and seats in Macedonia, could not take part. Yugoslavia outlawed it at the end of December 1920, and it would remain illegal throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

The Vidovdan Constitution based itself on unitarist Yugoslavism. The Serbs saw the new state as an extension of 'Greater Serbia'; it "was to be strongly centralized, Serbian dominated, and ruled by the Karadjordjević dynasty."<sup>3</sup> Until 1928, under a barely functioning parliamentary system, Serbian centralist-dominated governments ran the kingdom. They arranged the necessary majorities in the Skupština (assembly) by "buying" the support usually of Muslim deputies, but also of the Slovene People's Party, and in 1925–26 of Stjepan Radić himself. This unworkable system, which constantly pitted decentralizers against their opposite numbers and which the Croatian Peasant Party almost always boycotted, ended in 1929.

In 1926, Nikola Pašić died. In 1928, a Montenegrin deputy from the Radical (Pašić's) Party shot the Croatian powerhouse Stjepan Radić in the Skupština, and he soon died.

Centralists, including King Alexander, used the resulting crisis to abolish the Vidovdan Constitution, "aiming to preserve centralism [instead] by extra parliamentary means."<sup>4</sup> Alexander abolished the constitution, dissolved the assembly, and made himself dictator. On 3 September 1931, he issued a new constitution, which nominally ended his personal rule. But, as Stavrianos notes: "This document, which remained in force to the 1941 German invasion, was merely a legal fig leaf for the royal dictatorship which continued as before."<sup>5</sup> The electoral laws announced a few weeks later guaranteed huge majorities in the assembly for the government party. They abolished proportional representation and provided that the party that received a plurality in a national election—the government party—would receive two-thirds of the seats. They accomplished exactly that goal in the elections of 1935 and 1938.

On 9 October 1934, Vlado Černozemski, a Macedonian terrorist

with Italian, Hungarian, and Croatian Ustaša (far-right, fascist) connections, assassinated Alexander in Marseilles, together with Louis Barthou, the French minister of foreign affairs. However, the king's "system" remained intact during the regency (1934–41) of his young cousin Prince Paul and the premiership (1935–39) of Milan Stojadinović. The twelfth-hour negotiations in late 1938 and 1939 of Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković with Vladko Maček, new leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, could not resolve the country's profound problems. True, on 26 August 1939, only days before the outbreak of war, the two men signed the *Sporazum*, which granted most Croatian demands. It came too late, did not satisfy extremists on either side, and further complicated national and political divisions and antagonisms that had built up over two decades.

The interwar struggle over (de)centralization of the Yugoslav state and between Great Serbian demands and those of Croatia and Slovenia involved leaders of the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and, to a lesser extent, Muslims. This conflict affected Macedonians as well, but they were not direct participants. They had no formal representation and could not voice their demands legally. However, they waged their own battle with Belgrade, which related to their very existence and their national, political, and economic survival.

As we saw above, the ruling elite in Belgrade officially declared and considered Vardar Macedonia a Serbian land, an integral part of Serbia, and the Macedonians, Serbs or South Serbs. However, since Macedonians rejected this designation, Belgrade treated their land as a Serbian colony and its inhabitants as objects of Serbianization. Thus the new Serbian rulers initiated policies that would have been inconceivable even under the old Ottoman regime and aimed to destroy all signs of regionalism, particularism, patriotism, or nationalism.

They acted on several fronts, totally controlling political life and repressing any dissent, deporting "undesirables" or forcing them to emigrate, transferring Macedonians internally in Yugoslavia, assimilating and denationalizing others by complete control of education and cultural and intellectual life, colonizing the land, and practicing social and economic discrimination.<sup>6</sup> They divided Yugoslavia arbitrarily into thirty-three districts (*županija*), including three in Macedonia—Bitola, Bregalnica, with its center in Štip, and Skopje. Under Alexander as dictator, the kingdom had five large regions (*banovini*), with Vardar Macedo-

nia and parts of South Serbia proper and Kosovo forming the Vardar banovina, with its center in Skopje.

The local administration meant no more to Macedonians than the government in Belgrade. They had no real representation in either. Unlike the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslim Slavs of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Muslims of Kosovo and Macedonia (Albanians and Turks), and even ethnic minorities in the north, they could not establish political parties or any other ethnic organizations. Only Serbian or Serb-dominated Yugoslav parties could form and function legally in Vardar Macedonia.

From the outset, Macedonians rejected Serbian rule and domination. They showed their discontent in the election for the constituent assembly on 22 November 1920, which “was eminently fair; a quality that was not to be characteristic of later elections.”<sup>7</sup> As Banac pointed out, the Communist Party (KPJ) won almost two-fifths, or about 37 percent, of all Macedonian votes. In local elections on 22 August, the Communists had won in some of the principal towns: Skopje, Veles, Kumanovo, and Kavadarci. Both polls revealed a strong protest vote from economically backward Macedonia.<sup>8</sup>

The KPJ would enjoy a strong following in Macedonia even after Belgrade outlawed it in late 1920. As an illegal and underground organization, it and its front attracted new, younger Macedonian intellectuals on the left who studied and matured under Serbian rule.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise, Macedonians who voted tended to support the opposition Democratic Party during the 1920s. Under the 1931 constitution and new electoral laws, elections became meaningless, and their results tell us little about the political situation and trends in Yugoslavia and even less about those in Vardar Macedonia. Moreover, we can detect the sizeable discontent and opposition to Serbian rule in the 1920s and early 1930s in widespread support, passive and active, for the anti-Yugoslav (-Serbian) underground and terrorist activities of the reestablished and reorganized VMRO.<sup>10</sup>

Belgrade appointed the chief administrators and officials in Macedonia—usually Serbs with proven nationalist credentials. They imposed on the Macedonians Serbian administrative and legal codes without regard to local conditions or requirements. Their behavior was even more offensive. D. J. Footman, the British vice-consul at Skopje, described it as invariably harsh, brutal, arbitrary, and corrupt. “Officials depend for their promotions and appointment on the service they can render their political party,” he wrote. “It is therefore natural for them to make what

they can while they are in office. I regard this as the factor which will most militate against improvement in administration.”<sup>11</sup>

The British Foreign Office echoed these sentiments. Its lengthy review of 1930 stated: “At present Yugoslavia lacks the material out of which to create an efficient and honest civil service. This want is especially felt in the new and ‘foreign’ provinces such as Serb-Macedonia. To make matters worse, the Yugoslav Government . . . are compelled to pursue a policy of forcible assimilation and, in order to ‘Serbise’ the Slavs of Serb-Macedonia, must necessarily tend to disregard those grievances of the local inhabitants which spring from the violation of their local rights and customs.”<sup>12</sup>

Forcible Serbianization began during the first Serbian occupation (1913–15). The new rulers acted fast to eliminate all vestiges of Patriarchist (Greek) influence in the south of Vardar Macedonia and particularly the widespread Exarchist (Bulgarian) presence. The policy ended in September 1915, when Bulgaria entered the war, occupied Vardar Macedonia, and introduced forcible Bulgarianization. At the end of the war, again under Serbian occupation, the Vardar Macedonians experienced their third “baptism by fire” in five years.

Many members of the Exarchist-educated elite and numerous Macedonian activists felt they had to leave with the retreating Bulgarian army and sought refuge in Bulgaria. Remaining Exarchist clergymen and teachers lost their posts; some suffered expulsion and ended up in Bulgaria as well. Their places went to nationally proven individuals, mostly Serbs, but in some cases to Serbophile Macedonians.

All Bulgarian signs gave way to Serbian; all Bulgarian books, to Serbian. Various Serbian social and cultural clubs, societies, and organizations replaced Bulgarian counterparts. The government Serbianized personal names and surnames for all official uses and, whenever possible, inserted Serbian equivalents in place of local Macedonian place names. In September 1920, the Orthodox churches of the new state united, and the Macedonian Orthodox community in Vardar Macedonia transferred to the Serbian Orthodox church.

Most important, Yugoslavia did not recognize the Macedonian language and forbade its writing and publishing. It declared Serbian the official language of Vardar Macedonia and the maternal tongue of Macedonians there. Serbian became the language of instruction at all levels of the educational system, from kindergarten to the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje—a branch of the University of Belgrade and Vardar Mace-

donia's only interwar institution of higher learning. Serbian was also compulsory for all official purposes and in all official dealings.

In fact, Serbian was to serve as the major carrier of the Serbian national ideology and thus as the instrument for Serbianization. The chief guarantors of this effort were to be a strong armed presence and new colonists and settlers. Yugoslav (Vardar) Macedonia became a veritable armed camp. Anywhere between 35,000 and 50,000 armed men from the Yugoslav (Serbian) army, *gendarmérie*, and armed bands of the state-sponsored Association against Bulgarian Bandits, with headquarters in Štip, were active in Macedonia. Over 70 percent of the Yugoslav military police force—12,000 men out of 17,000—was there as well.

Moreover, Belgrade had far-reaching plans for colonization: it hoped to settle 50,000 Serbian families and create Serbian oases and bridgeheads throughout the region. It encouraged Serbian speculators to purchase huge tracts of the best land from departing Turkish landowners and make it available to colonists.

For various reasons, however, by 1940 only 4,200 households, many of them families of veterans of the Salonika front in the First World War, had settled. One of their main duties was to help maintain "law and order," or "pacify," the restive land. They were to fight the frequent attacks and incursions by armed bands from the reestablished VMRO operating from bases in Pirin (Bulgarian) Macedonia. More important, they were under orders to punish severely local VMRO leaders and sympathizers. Indeed, they were to eradicate any sign or evidence of passive or active Macedonianism or Macedonian activity, which Serbia equated with "Bulgarianism" and Communism and hence with treason and made subject to death, imprisonment, internment, exile, and so on.

During the depths of the royal dictatorship, between 1929 and 1931, and as part of efforts to promote Yugoslav nationalism, the regime also founded in Macedonia "national organizations"—Yugoslav sports, social, and cultural societies and associations. However, these groups remained primarily Serbian and did not win over Macedonians, nor did the National Guard, a network of paramilitary bands, or the association that Serbia promoted as the Yugoslav Youth of the Vardar Banovina.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the regime also discriminated economically against Macedonians. In all Balkan countries, "The high birth rate, the low agricultural productivity, the inability of industry to absorb the population surplus, and the lack of domestic market adequate to support industrial expan-

sion—all these condemned the peasants and the urban workers to a low living standard and no hope for the future.”<sup>14</sup>

But extreme poverty worsened these problems in Macedonia. The long struggle for Macedonia under Ottoman rule, the two Balkan wars, and the military campaigns of the First World War in Macedonia caused enormous human and material losses. They damaged or destroyed many towns and villages. War stopped cultivation of large tracts of land; ruined animal husbandry, an economic mainstay; damaged railway links and bridges; and rendered useless means of communication.

The partition had devastated the economy of all parts of Macedonia. Historically and traditionally, the whole area comprised an economic unit, which the Vardar valley, along with the Bistrica and Struma rivers and the Aegean littoral, linked together. The new, artificial borders severed traditional markets from trade routes and sources of supply and destroyed economic unity that had existed since ancient times.

Interwar Vardar Macedonia was probably Yugoslavia's least developed region. In 1921, when Yugoslavia's illiteracy rate was 51.5 percent, and Slovenia's only 8.8 percent, Macedonia's was 83.8 percent. In the same year, the urban population counted only 27 percent of the total; and, in 1931, 75 percent of Yugoslavs still worked in agriculture, with probably 43 percent of that figure active and the rest surplus. There were many landless households, and many others owned less than a hectare. The methods of cultivation were primitive, and the yield of grain crops on 81 percent of the cultivated land was among the lowest in Europe. After the Great War, more land switched to industrial crops, such as cotton, tobacco, and opium poppies. Yet cotton growing declined after the war, because partition and new boundaries deprived it of its traditional market, the textile industry in Aegean Macedonia. Production of tobacco and opium poppies fell dramatically when demand for and prices of both collapsed during the Depression.

The industrial sector, or the urban economy, was equally backward. After the war, there were only 16 industrial enterprises left in Yugoslav Macedonia. By 1925, their number grew to 27; the state owned 11, and Serbs and Czechs 16. The following five years saw 25 new firms, mostly small power stations and food-processing plants, with the participation of local investors. The banking system expanded modestly as well. In addition to existing branches of Serbian banks in Skopje and Bitola, new banks opened in Skopje, Štip, and other towns. The craft industry—an

urban staple—was in decline; it lacked resources to modernize, and many craftspeople had also to work on the land.

The Depression hit the small, underdeveloped industrial sector even harder than the agrarian economy. By 1932, about thirty plants shut down. During a recovery of sorts in the late 1930s, some new enterprises started up. Overall, however, on the eve of the Second World War, industrial plants in Macedonia were small and technologically backward. In industrial development, Macedonia ranked last in Yugoslavia.<sup>15</sup>

Serbia was not to blame for Macedonia's historic economic backwardness. No progress, however, occurred between the two world wars; Belgrade did hardly anything to alleviate Macedonia's economic situation, and its discriminatory practices tended to exacerbate its peoples' plight. As O. C. Harvey of the British Foreign Office reported after a visit to Yugoslav and Greek Macedonia in April 1926: "Such discontent as exists springs from genuine economic distress . . . And wherever else the Serb is spending his money, he does not seem to be spending it in Macedonia. Yet this country is perhaps really the biggest problem for the Serbs."<sup>16</sup>

It needed radical land reform: redistribution to landless and poor peasant households of properties of large landowners, mostly departed or departing Turks. However, Belgrade repeatedly postponed promised reforms, and when it acted in 1931 it aimed first at colonization. The laws on land reform favored colonists—veterans from the Salonika front, members of Serbian bands, military policemen, frontier guards, financial officials. Belgrade gave them the best lands and encouraged them to settle in Macedonia.

By 1940, of 381,245 hectares up for distribution, the government had given 142,585 hectares to 17,679 colonists and Serbian volunteers and only 85,511 hectares to 30,582 agricultural tenants and peasants. At the same time, it continued to exploit the agrarian economy even during the depths of the Depression through state monopolies of industrial crops such as opium, tobacco, and silk cones. For example, the export price of opium fell by only 42 percent in 1927–35, but the purchase price of crude opium dropped by 77 percent.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Macedonia lacked infrastructure for industrial development. Yet the government did virtually nothing to initiate even small-scale industrial growth. In the 1930s, it constructed the Veles-Prilep-Bitola roadway with French financial aid. Such limited and isolated

undertakings could not stimulate industrial development, which would have absorbed the surplus rural poor.

On the eve of Yugoslavia's collapse in 1941, R. I. Campbell, British minister at Belgrade, summed up the sad history: "Since the occupation by Serbia in 1913 of the Macedonian districts, the Government has carried out in this area, with greater or lesser severity, a policy of suppression and assimilation. In the years following the Great War land was taken away from the inhabitants and given to Serbian colonists. Macedonians were compelled to change their names . . . and the Government did little or nothing to assist the economic development of the country."<sup>18</sup>

### **Greek (Aegean) Macedonia**

Greece acquired the largest territory in the partition of 1913: Aegean Macedonia covered 34,356 square kilometers. The Greek state preserved the region's territorial unity but not its Macedonian name. Aegean Macedonia formed the core of the new Greek province of Northern Greece, which also included western Thrace and southern Epirus, and its chief administrative officer, or governor, was the kingdom's minister for Northern Greece.

Greece further subdivided Aegean Macedonia into three directorates, or provinces: the central, with its seat in Salonika, included the districts of Salonika, Chalcidice (Chalkidiki), Kilkis (Kukuš), Edessa (Voden), and Vereia (Ber); the eastern, with its capital in Kavala, included Seres, Drama, and Kavala; and the western, with headquarters in Kozani (Kožani), included Kozani, Florina (Lerin), and Kastoria (Kostur).

As we saw in previous chapters, statistics on the ethnic composition of Ottoman Macedonia are notoriously unreliable and confusing. Nonetheless, all sources except Greek ones agree that the Slavic speakers, the Macedonians, constituted the majority before partition.<sup>19</sup>

The competing statistics on Aegean Macedonia are equally problematic, yet all but Greek sources find the Macedonians its largest single group before 1913. The figures range from 329,371, or 45.3 percent, to 382,084, or 68.9 percent, of the non-Turkish inhabitants, and from 339,369, or 31.3 percent, to 370,371, or 35.2 percent, of the area's approximately 1,052,227 people.<sup>20</sup>

Todor Simovski prepared one of the most detailed breakdowns for the region just before the Balkan Wars. Using Bulgarian and Greek sources, he estimated 1,073,549 inhabitants: 326,426 Macedonians, 40,921 Muslim Macedonians (*pomaks*), 289,973 Turks, 4,240 Christian Turks, 2,112 Cherkez (Circassians), 240,019 Christian Greeks, 13,753 Muslim Greeks, 5,584 Muslim Albanians, 3,291 Christian Albanians, 45,457 Christian Vlachs, 3,500 Muslim Vlachs, 59,560 Jews, 29,803 Roma, and 8,100 others.<sup>21</sup>

The number of Macedonians in Aegean Macedonia began to decline absolutely and relatively during the Balkan Wars and particularly after 1918. The Treaty of Neuilly, 27 November 1919, provided for the “voluntary exchange” of minorities between Bulgaria and Greece. According to the best estimates, between 1913 and 1928 Greece forced 86,382 Macedonians to emigrate from Aegean Macedonia, mostly from its eastern and central provinces, to Bulgaria.

More important still, under the Treaty of Lausanne, 24 July 1923, which ended the Greek-Turkish war of 1920–22, the compulsory exchange of minorities forced 400,000 Muslims, including 40,000 Macedonians, to leave Greece, and 1.3 million Greeks and other Christians to depart from Asia Minor. In the years up to 1928, the Greek government settled 565,143 of the latter refugees, as well as 53,000 Greek colonists, in Aegean Macedonia.

Thus, by removing 127,384 Macedonians and settling 618,199 refugees and colonists, Greece transformed the ethnographic structure of Aegean Macedonia in fifteen years.<sup>22</sup>

However, available evidence on Macedonians after 1928 is even shakier. The official Greek census of 1928 sought to present an ethnically homogeneous state and minimized all minorities, especially Macedonians, or “Slavophone” Greeks, and the census cited only 81,984 of them. That figure is far too low when we compare it to all non-Greek pre-1913 statistics.

Stojan Kiselinovski, a Macedonian historian who has evaluated pre-1914 statistics, migrations of the 1920s, and the Greek census of 1928, offered a more credible and realistic figure. He estimated that at least 240,000 Macedonians remained in Aegean Macedonia before the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the overwhelming majority inhabited the western part—the districts of Kastoria (Kostur), Florina (Lerin), Kozani (Kožani), and Edessa (Voden)—which the population shifts little affected; unlike the eastern and central parts, its people preserved their

Macedonian character. The population movements of the 1920s rendered Macedonians a minority in their own land—and an unwanted, unrecognized, and oppressed minority at that. This group bore the brunt of the Greek state's policies of forced denationalization and assimilation.

The Treaty of Sèvres of 10 August 1920 required Greece to protect “the interests of the inhabitants who differ from the majority of the population in nationality, language or faith.” It had to provide non-Greeks with equal political and civil rights and allow them to use their native tongues in the press, courts, churches, and primary schools.

In September 1924, Bulgaria and Greece concluded the Kalfov-Politis Agreement, in which Greece recognized the presence on its soil of “Bulgarians.” This arrangement provoked a crisis in traditionally amicable relations between Greece and Serbia/Yugoslavia, which feared that Greece's recognition of its Macedonians as Bulgarians would only justify Bulgaria's claims that even Vardar Macedonians—indeed, all Macedonians—were Bulgarians. Consequently, Yugoslavia threatened to abrogate its 1913 alliance with Greece unless the latter recognized the Macedonians of Aegean Macedonia as Serbs. In any event, the strong protest from Belgrade provided the Greek parliament with a welcome and suitable pretext not to ratify the agreement, and in January 1925 the Greek government pronounced it null and void.<sup>24</sup>

Greece now changed its approach to its Macedonian problem. After frequent criticism at the League of Nations in Geneva that Greece was not protecting minority rights as Sèvres required, Greece promised maternal-language instruction in the primary schools of areas with compact groupings of Macedonians.

Athens appointed a three-member commission in the Ministry of Education to prepare a primer for the schools. *Abecedar* (ABC) appeared in Athens in 1925<sup>25</sup> in the Florina (Lerin)-Bitola dialect but in the Latin rather than the Cyrillic alphabet. Ostensibly, it was for Aegean Macedonia, and Greece submitted it to the League to show its compliance with its treaty obligations. “The Bulgarian representative described it as ‘incomprehensible’ but the Greek representative to the League, Vasilis Dendramis, defended it on the grounds that the Macedonian Slav language was ‘neither Bulgarian nor Serbian, but an independent language’ and produced linguistic maps to back this up.” However, the Greek government never introduced the *Abecedar* in schools, and it confiscated and destroyed all copies of the text.<sup>26</sup>

Greece proclaimed Aegean Macedonians as Greeks or Slavophone

Greeks. Denial of their identity and forced assimilation took on institutional form and remains official Greek policy.

There is little scholarship in the West on interwar Macedonians of the Aegean region. They suffered isolation from the world, even from relatives in Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. Few Westerners, including diplomats, ever ventured into their area, west of Edessa (Voden), until the early 1940s. Most academic and nonacademic observers were Grecoophiles and readily accepted Greek claims for ethnic homogeneity; for them Aegean Macedonians did not exist.

The Macedonians were never part of Greek life. The ruling elite and its bourgeois parties accepted ethnic homogeneity, Macedonians' nonexistence, and forced assimilation, discrimination, and oppression—and this situation still continues. Furthermore, most Greek scholars have agreed. Hardly anyone has undertaken serious research or published scholarly studies on the political, social, economic, or cultural life of Macedonians or other minorities in the country. And dissenting scholars, domestic or foreign, do not gain access to archives and primary sources on Macedonian themes in research institutions in Greece. The Macedonian question was and remains the “Achilles' heel” of Greek politics and scholarship.

Only the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), in accord with the general line of the Comintern, took up the cause. As with the other Balkan Communist parties, in the 1920s it recognized the Macedonians in all three partitioned regions as a distinct Slav nation with its own language, history, culture, territory, and interests. *Rizospastis*, the main newspaper of the KKE's central committee—the only official organ of a Balkan Communist Party to appear legally through most of the 1920s and 1930s—was until 1936 Greece's only major publication to write about the Macedonians and hence constitutes an invaluable source.<sup>27</sup>

Between the world wars, the Macedonians in Aegean Macedonia, a minority in their own land, were overwhelmingly rural and scattered in mountainous villages and small towns. They no longer formed a majority in any large urban center. And, since Greece had expelled virtually the entire Exarchist (Bulgarian)-educated intelligentsia and most Macedonian activists to Bulgaria or distant places in Greece, especially the islands, they lacked an elite. Well-educated Macedonians remained few in number; their Greek education in now totally Greek Salonika and

especially in Athens estranged many of them from their Slavic roots and cultural traditions.

As I indicated above, political life in Greece excluded Macedonians. The perennial struggle between royalists and republicans, which dominated interwar politics at least until General Ioannis Metaxas became dictator in 1936, little affected their lives. After 1936, official neglect and oppression gave way to open persecution. The regime deported many Macedonians from their native villages near the Yugoslav border to Aegean islands; interned many on uninhabited islands, where they perished; and tortured tens of thousands in prisons or police stations. Their “crime” was to identify themselves as Macedonians, to speak or be overheard speaking Macedonian, or to belong to or sympathize with the KKE, the only party to take any interest in their plight.

Macedonians had direct contact with officialdom only through the local administrator, priest, teacher, policeman, and tax collector, all state appointees. Most such officials were Greeks from other regions, and some were assimilated Macedonians, whom other Macedonians derisively called *Grkomani* (Grecocized Macedonians). They and refugee families from Asia Minor who received the best land controlled the native Macedonians.

Like the Serbian administration in Vardar Macedonia, the Greek in Macedonian areas of Aegean Macedonia seems to have been harsh, brutal, arbitrary, and totally corrupt. Colonel A. C. Corfe, a New Zealander and chair of the League of Nations Mixed Commission on Greek-Bulgarian Emigration, reported in 1923: “One of the Macedonians’ chief grievances is against the Greek Gendarmerie and during our tour we saw many examples of the arrogant and unsatisfactory methods of the Gendarmerie, who commandeer from the peasants whatever food they want. . . . One visits few villages where some of the inhabitants are not in Greek prisons, without trial.”<sup>28</sup>

Captain P. H. Evans—an agent of Britain’s Special Operations Executive (SOE), who spent eight months of 1943–44 in western Aegean Macedonia as a British liaison officer (BLO) and station commander—described the attitude “even of educated *Greeks* toward the *Slav* minority” as “usually stupid, uninformed and brutal to a degree that makes one despair of any understanding ever being created between the two people.”<sup>29</sup>

Greece was a poor agrarian society. Its new northern territories, in Macedonia and Thrace, were more backward and became even more

desperately so with the settlement of hundreds of thousands of destitute refugees from Asia Minor. However, discriminatory Greek policies worsened the situation of the Macedonians, who benefited not at all from wide-ranging agrarian reforms in the 1920s. The government gave Greek peasants state and church lands, and lands that it purchased from larger estates that departing Turks or expelled Macedonians vacated.

Nor did ambitious and costly government-sponsored projects that drained five swamps and lakes and recovered thousands of hectares of land help Macedonians. On the contrary, Athens confiscated arable land from Macedonian peasants and villages and gave it to newcomers for economic and political reasons. Peasants—most of the Aegean Macedonians—became marginal, in subsistence farming. Their plots were too small and infertile, their methods primitive, their yields too low. They barely eked out an existence.

The few nonpeasant Macedonians—shopkeepers, craftspeople, and tradespeople in villages and small provincial towns (Kastoria, Florina, Kozani, and even the larger Edessa) were not much better off. However, there was virtually no industrial sector to employ surplus labor and improve economic conditions. There was no local capital, and the government did not invest in this region. There were a few large-scale government projects such as construction of the Metaxas line of defense, but they excluded Macedonians unless they joined extreme nationalist, right-wing, or fascist organizations.

The industrial recovery in central and eastern Aegean Macedonia—involving textiles, food processing, and tobacco in Salonika, Seres, Drama, and Kavala—which began before the Depression and continued in the later 1930s, provided work for some refugees from Asia Minor but not for Macedonians in western areas. The latter remained neglected and poor in this beautiful, picturesque, virtually unknown corner of Europe.

The only way out appeared to be emigration, and many of the Macedonians left in search of a better life in Canada and the United States in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Such large-scale emigration undoubtedly delighted Athens, for it facilitated Hellenization of the area that had the most Macedonians.<sup>30</sup>

The situation of Greece's Macedonians was hardest of all in culture. As in Vardar Macedonia, people here could no longer decide their own identity—the “liberators” demanded total assimilation. Aegean Mace-

donians had to embrace the national identity, become Greek in every respect, or suffer the consequences. The state employed all its resources—including military, churches, schools, press, cultural institutions and societies, and sports organizations—to further the cause.

Before the Balkan Wars, there had been many Slav schools throughout Aegean Macedonia. The Exarchist church controlled 19 primary schools in towns and 186 in villages, with 320 teachers and 12,895 pupils. There were also four Serbian schools and about two hundred other community-run Slav primary schools in villages. After partition, Greece closed all the Slav schools and destroyed their libraries and other teaching aids. It replaced them with an inadequate number of Greek schools. The education was poor, especially outside district centers. Illiteracy remained prevalent, and even students at village schools were at best only semi-literate.

Athens, like Belgrade with Serbianization, “Grecocized” names or replaced them with Greek. In November 1926, a new law ordered replacement of all Slavic names of cities, villages, rivers, mountains, and so on. Athens sought to eradicate any reminders of the centuries-old Slavic presence in Aegean Macedonia. In July 1927, another decree ordered removal of all Slavic inscriptions in churches and cemeteries and their replacement with Greek ones. This campaign reached its most vicious in the later 1930s under Metaxas. The government prohibited use of Macedonian even at home to a people who knew Greek scarcely or not at all and could not communicate properly in any tongue but their own.<sup>31</sup>

As in Serbia/Yugoslavia, so in Greece assimilation failed. Western Aegean Macedonia remained Slav Macedonian, and the Macedonians there stayed Macedonian. As Captain Evans emphasized: “It is predominantly a *Slav* region, not a *Greek* one. The language of the home, and usually also the fields, the village street, and the market is *Macedonian*, a *Slav* language. . . . The place names as given on the map are *Greek*, . . . but the names which are mostly used . . . are . . . all *Slav* names. The *Greek* ones are merely a bit of varnish put on by *Metaxas*. . . . *Greek* is regarded as almost a foreign language and the *Greeks* are distrusted as something alien, even if not, in the full sense of the word, as foreigners. The obvious fact, almost too obvious to be stated, that the region is *Slav* by nature and not *Greek* cannot be overemphasized.”<sup>32</sup>

### Bulgarian (Pirin) Macedonia

Bulgaria, the third partitioning power, enjoyed the greatest influence among Macedonians, but its defeat in two wars left it with the smallest part, Pirin Macedonia, or the Petrich district. The region covered 6,788 square kilometers and had 235,000 inhabitants. According to one source, after the First World War and the various exchanges or expulsions of populations, 96 percent of its residents were Macedonians.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, there were many refugees and émigrés from Macedonia, perhaps hundreds of thousands, who had settled all over Bulgaria, especially in urban centers such as Sofia, Varna, Russe, and Plovdiv, following post-1870 crises in Macedonia. They tended to keep their Macedonian memories and connections alive; or, as Stavrianos puts it: “Some had been assimilated, but many remained uprooted and embittered.”<sup>34</sup>

Until the Balkan Wars, Pirin Macedonia was part of the Seres *sanjak*, which had six administrative districts: Nevrokop, Razlog, Gorna Dzhumaja, Melnik, Petrich, and Demir Hisar. Partition brought division of the Seres sanjak: the city of Seres and the district of Sidirokastron (Demir Hisar) became part of Aegean (Greek) Macedonia, and the rest comprised Pirin Macedonia. Until the coup d'état in Sofia in 1934 and the military dictatorship, Pirin Macedonia remained united—a Bulgarian administrative region with five districts and with its capital in Petrich. The new regime split the area into two parts: one in the Sofia administrative region, and the other in the Plovdiv.

The Macedonians' situation in Bulgaria,<sup>35</sup> where the major nationalist trends thrived in Pirin Macedonia and among the many Macedonians in its capital, was radically different from that of compatriots in Greece and Serbia/Yugoslavia. Sofia assumed a more ambiguous position: continuing paternalism vis-à-vis Macedonians in all parts of Macedonia, toward whom it acted as patron but whom it claimed as Bulgarians. This approach left Pirin Macedonians to do what they wanted. Unlike Athens and Belgrade, Sofia tolerated free use of the name “Macedonia” and an active Macedonian political and cultural life.

Organized activity, which virtually ceased in the other two parts of Macedonia, reemerged in Bulgaria immediately after 1918. The ranks of Exarchist-educated Macedonians and Macedonian activists in the Pirin region, in Sofia, and elsewhere in Bulgaria gained émigrés and refugees from the other parts of Macedonia. After an agonizing, bitter, divisive

struggle, by the early 1920s they again regrouped into left and right, in the VMRO tradition.

The left consisted of organizations such as the Provisional Representation of the Former Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, the Ilinden Organization, the Macedonian Federative Organization, and the Émigré Communist Union, which had links with the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP). It identified with the left of the original VMRO and the Sandanists (Jane Sandanski's followers) of the post-Ilinden period.

Intellectuals of the original VMRO led it—for example, Dimo Hadžidimov, Ćorĉe Petrov, and Petar Poparsov, who survived the uprising and partition. As with the original VMRO and the Sandanists, they sought a united, independent homeland; but now they hoped for aid from the Balkan and European left, or “progressive forces.” In the early 1920s, they enjoyed considerable support in Pirin Macedonia as well as among Macedonians in Sofia and elsewhere in the country. They allied with the Agrarian government of Aleksandŭr Stamboliski. Unlike most Bulgarian politicians, he was not a proponent of a Great Bulgaria and, while pursuing rapprochement with Yugoslavia, was sympathetic to the Macedonian national cause.<sup>36</sup>

After the coup d'état of 9 June 1923 installed a reactionary, revisionist, authoritarian regime, and especially after suppression of the Communist revolt in September, the new government outlawed the Macedonian and the Bulgarian left. Those groups went underground, and their organizational center moved to Vienna. Leaders of the old political parties, the military, and the Macedonian right had planned the Bulgarian coup to reestablish the traditional ruling elite and pursue a revisionist foreign policy. The Macedonian right played a critical role in both the June coup and suppression of the Communist revolt. Macedonian terrorists carried out the bloody and gruesome murder of Stamboliski and launched a murderous campaign against the leaders of the Macedonian left that forced survivors underground or out of the country.

The Macedonian right grouped itself around the VMRO, which had resurfaced in 1919 under its reactivated central committee—Todor Aleksandrov, Petar Ćaulev, and Bulgarian general Aleksandŭr Protogrov. Until his murder in 1924, the charismatic Aleksandrov led and dominated the right and hence the VMRO. He was a schoolteacher by training and “the last of his kind, a combination of a hajduk, warlord and politician.”<sup>37</sup>

Like the left, the right claimed the name, tradition, and heritage of the original VMRO, adopting its statutes and rulebooks and calling for a united, autonomous homeland. Between the world wars, people commonly called it the “autonomist” VMRO and its followers, Macedonian “autonomists.” Unlike the left, however, the right waged armed struggle. From secure bases in Pirin Macedonia, the VMRO regularly dispatched armed bands into Aegean and Vardar Macedonia. They hoped to undermine the status quo by striking at Greek and Serbian symbols and authorities. However, they also depended on Bulgaria, or rather its revisionist, nationalist right.

As a result, the VMRO projected a confusing double image—a Macedonian patriotic revolutionary organization fighting for the national cause, but also an instrument of Bulgarian revisionism pursuing a Great Bulgaria. In the early 1920s, dual identity and aims helped win it widespread support among Macedonians and Bulgarians. By the late 1920s, however, the duality was undermining its strength and following among both groups.<sup>38</sup>

Except for the brief, abortive attempt to unite the Macedonian left and right in the spring of 1924,<sup>39</sup> the VMRO until 1934 served loyally and was a junior partner of Bulgaria’s authoritarian and irredentist regimes. After Alkesandrov’s murder in August 1924, which Sofia instigated to avenge his rapprochement with the left, the VMRO became even more dependent on the regime. His young, ambitious, and scheming private secretary and successor, Ivan (Vančo) Mihailov (1896–1990), who lacked his charisma and élan, transformed the VMRO into a terrorist organization serving Bulgarian irredentism and the interests of its leader and his cronies, who ruled Pirin Macedonia.

In return for its loyalty and services, Sofia rewarded Mihailov’s VMRO with a free hand over the Macedonians in Bulgaria. The VMRO established its rule in the Pirin region and control over the many Macedonian societies, associations, and other organizations in Bulgaria, which served as its legal front and facade and suppressed its opponents. From 1924 to 1934, Pirin Macedonia was the VMRO’s private domain—“a state within a state,” or “a Macedonian kingdom,” within Bulgaria. The presence of Bulgarian institutions and officers was only nominal, for they depended totally on Mihailov’s lieutenants, who exercised power on behalf of the VMRO, which controlled every aspect of the inhabitants’ lives.

Through its local chieftains, the VMRO oversaw the poor agrarian

economy and exploited it, supposedly for “the national cause.” The chieftains collected taxes from everyone, insisted on “donations” (protection payments) from owners of larger estates and representatives of major tobacco firms, and in turn allowed “donors” to exploit the peasants. They tightly supervised the small urban and industrial labor force; strikes were not legal in the Petrich district.

The overall standard of living was noticeably lower there than in the rest of Bulgaria: the average income was lower, and the cost of goods of daily consumption higher. Moreover, residents had a heavier tax burden. In addition to taxes to Sofia, they had to pay an “autonomy tax”—a sort of sales tax on all goods—as a contribution to the “national cause,” the liberation of Macedonia. As Stavrianos puts it: “The unfortunate inhabitants were required to pay two sets of taxes, one for the Sofia treasury and the other for the IMRO.”<sup>40</sup>

The VMRO’s control of political life was no less rigid. The inhabitants enjoyed only political rights and activities that its leadership allowed them. Nominally there were political parties and a multi-party system, but all candidates in local and parliamentary elections had to receive VMRO approval. The region’s members of the Bulgarian parliament (Sobranie) formed a separate group, or caucus, and obeyed the VMRO’s dictates. Moreover, these “Macedonian” parliamentarians led the various Macedonian organizations in Bulgaria—the Ilinden Organization, the Macedonian Youth Union, the Vardar Student Society, and, most important, the Macedonian National Committee (MNK) of the Macedonian Brotherhoods in Bulgaria. Through the MNK, the VMRO controlled the numerous and well-organized brotherhoods, or benevolent associations, that embraced the many refugees and émigrés from Aegean and Vardar Macedonia throughout Bulgaria.

The MNK was in effect the VMRO’s legal front in Bulgaria and beyond. By the mid-1920s, Mihailov’s VMRO had established its presence abroad. The newspaper *La Macédoine*, from Geneva, was its official organ in western Europe. The Macedonian Political Organization (MPO) of the United States and Canada, with headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana, modeled itself on the MNK in Sofia. This umbrella organization brought together the numerous village, town, or district brotherhoods of Macedonian immigrants, primarily from Aegean but also from Vardar Macedonia, who settled in those two countries. The MPO and its *Macedonian Tribune–Makedonska Tribuna* dictated the VMRO’s line to the brotherhoods, lobbied on its behalf in Washington,

in Ottawa, and at the League of Nations, and collected from poor Macedonian immigrants substantial sums for the liberation of the homeland—or rather for Mihailov's VMRO.

The VMRO's precarious unity under Mihailov lasted only until 1927, when the coalition, the so-called democratic accord, which had governed Bulgaria after 1923, split over foreign policy. Andrei Liapchev, prime minister since 1926, favored a pro-British and -Italian course. Aleksandŭr Tsankov, a former prime minister, wanted a pro-French and hence a pro-Yugoslav Balkan policy. Mihailov sided with Liapchev, a Macedonian by birth from Resen in Vardar Macedonia; General A. Protogerov, his rival in the leadership of the VMRO, sided with Tsankov, whom the majority of Bulgaria's officer corps seemed to support. Mihailov used this disagreement to purge the Protogerovists, whom he now blamed for the murder of Aleksandrov in 1924. Protogerov became the first victim, murdered on 7 July 1928. His group responded by killing Mihailovists, and this "Macedonian fratricide" continued for six years in Pirin Macedonia, Sofia, and other towns in Bulgaria.

The Mihailovists reclaimed the VMRO and, at least nominally, the Macedonian movement in Bulgaria. However, by liquidating or driving into exile outstanding leaders of the left and then of the Protogerovists, Mihailov and his henchmen weakened the national movement in Bulgaria and in the other parts of Macedonia. Many Protogerovists and their sympathizers in the legal Macedonian organizations moved toward the illegal, underground Macedonian left in Bulgaria.

The bloodletting and useless armed incursions into Greek and Serbian Macedonia undermined the VMRO's mass support. Moreover, the VMRO and Macedonian activists were becoming isolated in Bulgaria. Bulgaria's educated public resented their constant interference in politics and even more the frequent, well-publicized murders and assassinations, often in Sofia, which tarnished Bulgaria's image abroad. By the early 1930s, Mihailov's VMRO and its most loyal adherents in the legal organizations—the most Bulgarophile elements within the Macedonian movement—had become totally dependent on Sofia's reactionary governing elite.

After the coup d'état in May 1934, the new regime of Kimon Georgiev must have decided that Mihailov's VMRO was more trouble than it was worth. It outlawed the organization, liquidated its networks, and arrested or expelled leaders who did not escape.<sup>41</sup>

The new government took direct control of Pirin Macedonia. It

abolished the Petrich administrative district and split it into two parts: it annexed one to the Sofia province and the other to the Plovdiv. More important, it liquidated the VMRO's de facto "state within the state" and integrated the region into Bulgaria. The new order was not much better for the residents. However, the old VMRO regime found very few defenders.

### **Macedonianism Survives**

The interwar attempts by the partitioning states to eradicate all signs of Macedonianism failed. Forcible assimilation in Greece and Serbia did produce some of the desired results. Some Macedonians accepted or felt they had to embrace the host's national ideology and constructed Greek or Serbian identities. However, many more reacted negatively and helped to form the ethnic Macedonian national identity. Bulgaria's more tolerant and paternalistic policies fostered continuation of Bulgarophilism among Macedonians. However, neither official Bulgaria nor the VMRO could reconcile the conflicting interests of Bulgarian irredentist nationalism and of Macedonian patriotism and nationalism. When they had to choose, Macedonians opted for their native Macedonianism.

Early in 1941, the British vice-consul at Skopje claimed that most Macedonians belonged to the national movement: "90 percent of all Slav Macedonians were autonomists in one sense or another." Because the movement was secret, however, gauging the relative strength of its various currents was difficult, although clearly the VMRO had lost ground since its banning in Bulgaria and the exile of its leaders. While the diplomat acknowledged the close relationship between Communism and "autonomism," or nationalism, he downplayed the contention that Communists used the Macedonian movement for their own ends. As he saw it, since every Macedonian was an autonomist, almost certainly "the Communists and autonomists are the same people," and Macedonian Communists were not doctrinaire and were "regarded by other Balkan communists as weaker brethren." "My opinion," he wrote, "is that they are autonomists in the first place and Communists only in the second."<sup>42</sup>