

10 Macedonian Nationalism: From Right to Left (1920s and 1930s)

The interwar period represented, according to Ivan Katardžiev, “a time of maturing” of Macedonian national consciousness and national identity.¹ These two decades saw the three major nineteenth-century trends—the intelligentsia’s Macedonianism and Macedono-Bulgarianism and the masses’ Macedonianism (*našizam*)—coalesce in a clearly articulated and unambiguous Macedonianism and Macedonian nationalism on the left. In the history of the Macedonian people (i.e., the Slav speakers), this outcome marked the culmination of a long, complicated, but continuous process of national development and affirmation.

This chapter considers in turn three stages in interwar Macedonian nationalism. First, there reemerged in Bulgaria in the early 1920s rightist and leftist Macedonian organizations, which tried unsuccessfully to merge in 1924. Second, the VMRO’s terrorist activities and aims represented Macedonian nationalism on the right and appeared dominant in the 1920s. Third, the organizational work and the platform of the VMRO (*obedineta*, United) represented Macedonian nationalism on the left and was in the ascendancy in the 1930s.

Unification Aborted (1924)

As we saw in the previous chapter, the partition of Macedonia and the settlements of 1913 and 1919 came as a shock to the Macedonian peo-

ple. Instead of experiencing liberation, they found themselves under new and harsher regimes. Educated Macedonians and activists, especially in Bulgaria, where the largest number of them now lived, felt confusion, low morale, and deep divisions. An agonizing process of soul searching eventually led to their regrouping into a political and national right and left.

In order to win popular support throughout Macedonia, each wing presented itself as the true successor of the original VMRO. The pro-Bulgarian right used the name “VMRO” after the 1907 congress, when the organization split. It continued to claim and use the name after reestablishing the organization in late 1918. Nominally, it had three equal, joint leaders—Todor Aleksandrov, Aleksandŭr Protogerov, and Petar Čaulev. It was obvious from the outset, however, that the youthful, handsome, resourceful, energetic, and charismatic Aleksandrov was in charge; many people used the label “Aleksandrov’s VMRO.”

The reestablished VMRO became a formidable organization, with Pirin Macedonia as its stronghold. From its secure and protected bases there, it launched frequent armed incursions and propaganda campaigns into Aegean and particularly Vardar Macedonia. Although it appeared to be and was far better organized and more united than the left, it had its own left wing, former Sandanists, and experienced its own share of divisions and splits. In December 1922, left-leaning deserters formed the Macedonian Emigré Federalist Organization (MEFO); another group of former Aleksandrov supporters formed the Macedonian Federalist Revolutionary Organization (MFRO). Those ‘federalists’ who survived Aleksandrov’s wrath moved toward or eventually joined the Macedonian left.²

The left too wrapped itself in tradition. The VMRO of Goce Delčev and the Ilinden Uprising, or its mythology, provided the sole legitimation for any leader and movement seeking the hearts and minds of Macedonians. In late 1918, a group of former leaders of the Seres revolutionary district called for a united, independent homeland. Dimo Hadžidimov epitomized their views in a brochure, *Back to Autonomy* (1919).³ It proposed reestablishment of the original VMRO and its national program. Since the name “VMRO” had become the property of the right, the left had to settle on a modified version of that name. Its organization bore the rather awkward name “Provisional Representation of the Former United Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization” (PPBOVMRO). It brought together many close friends and associates

of Goce Delčev's, such as Ćorče Petrov, Dimo Hadždimitov, and Petar Poparsov, and former comrades of Sandanski's in the Seres district. Like the right, the left sent emissaries and appeals to the Paris Peace Conference, but it had no more success. The two groups' open antagonism and confusing demands probably did more harm than good for Macedonian unification and autonomy.

In the years just after the war, the left fared much better in Bulgarian domestic politics. In the parliamentary and local elections of 1919, the PPBOVMRO (or PP) supported the candidates of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), who fared surprisingly well both in Pirin Macedonia and in areas with many émigrés. Although its leaders were on the left, and some of them were even members of the BKP, Bulgarian Communist leaders did not approve of their Macedonian preoccupation and disregard of social and economic issues. The BKP thought the PP too nationalist and sought to take it over—in fact to transform it into its own department or section.

In 1920, the BKP did just that: it dissolved the PP and replaced it with the Emigrant Communist Union (EKS). It planned to dominate Macedonian, Thracian, and Dobrudjean émigrés. However, because it dwelt on ideological issues rather than on national problems, many Macedonians deserted it. Some members and followers of the PP refused to join the new organization and carried on as independent Communists, independent even of the BKP; others joined Aleksandrov's VMRO or organizations that it controlled. The latter strengthened the left wing of the Macedonian right.

Other non-Communist groups on the left emerged after 1918. The Macedonian Federalist Revolutionary Organization included leading intellectuals and some seasoned revolutionary activists such as Pavel Šatev and Todor Panica. The Ilinden Organization attracted and hence reactivated some of the old revolutionary stalwarts. It had ties with the left wing of Aleksandrov's VMRO and considerable influence even with Aleksandrov himself. At least until the mid-1920s, the Macedonian left was not a united movement: unlike the right, it did not have a single, powerful leader operating through a centralized and tightly controlled organization.⁴

After the defeat of the Communist uprising of September 1923 in Sofia, the new authoritarian regime outlawed the BKP and the Agrarian Union and repressed leftist Macedonian organizations. A number of leftist activists departed Bulgaria and established headquarters in Vienna,

which was becoming a center for Balkan political émigrés. Dimitar Vlahov (1878–1953), a VMRO veteran and former Bulgarian diplomat, helped coordinate the activities of Macedonians there. Assisting him were Todor Panica, Rizo Rizov, and Dr. Filip Atanasov, and they won over Petar Čaulev, the third member of the VMRO's central committee.

Dimitar Vlahov established contacts with the Communist International—the Comintern—in Moscow, which provided moral and material support. The central committee of the VMRO was also seeking ties and alliances with other Balkan parties and movements that favored a more radical and acceptable solution of the peninsula's national problems. Aleksandrov made contact with Stjepan Radić, leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, who was already in touch with the Comintern.

The Comintern realized the great potential of a united Macedonian revolutionary movement under its influence and worked to bring the two sides together. Serious negotiations began in Vienna, in the autumn of 1923, between the VMRO's central committee and representatives of the Macedonian left and the Comintern. They ended successfully in April–May 1924, with accords calling for unification on the basis of a program similar to that of the original VMRO. The most significant document—the so-called May Manifesto—had an initial text drafted by two people: Vlahov, a representative of the Comintern, and Nikola Kharlakov, a BKP leader. The three members of the VMRO's central committee then corrected and revised the text and signed it. It appeared in Vienna as Manifesto of the United VMRO on 6 May 1924.

The document declared that history showed that the Macedonian people could rely on only Europe's progressive revolutionary movements, which also fought against their governments' imperialist policies, against the unjust peace treaties, and for the self-determination of their own and other peoples. In the Balkan context, the VMRO would cooperate with those who struggled against the expansionist policies of European imperialism, which Balkan governments also helped implement. The VMRO would welcome and accept “the moral, material and political support of the USSR, the only power fighting for the liberation of all oppressed peoples, for their self-determination and federalization, and whose Balkan policy does not seek any imperialist aims.”

The manifesto stressed the need to work for democratization of Macedonia's neighbors and their unification in a Balkan federation, which would pave the way for just resolution of the Macedonian ques-

tion. It defined the VMRO's goal as liberation and unification of Macedonia into an independent state in its natural, geographic, and ethnographic boundaries. Until that happened, Macedonians in their temporary countries should fight for their minority rights on the basis of equality with other national groups.

The May Manifesto concluded by declaring that the central committee of the VMRO would terminate all persecutions and revoke all executive measures against individual activists, groups, and organizations. It called on all patriotic Macedonians to join the common struggle for a free, independent homeland as a pillar of the future Balkan federation.⁵

There was little in the document that was radically new. Its aims resembled those of the original VMRO but reflected the changed circumstances of partition. However, it proposed a revolutionary transformation—unification of left and right and creation of a strong front for national liberation. Moreover, the united movement should ally itself with and depend on Europe's "progressive forces," which rejected the political and in some cases the territorial status quo; more specifically, it should form a working alliance with the Comintern and the Soviet Union.

The events in Bulgaria in 1924 that followed release of the May Manifesto have not received adequate investigation and explanation. However, there is no doubt that the three VMRO leaders who signed the document came under intense pressure and threats from Aleksandŭr Tsankov's government, which compelled Aleksandrov and Protogerov to revoke their signatures. On 1 August 1924, the two men issued a declaration, which the official Bulgarian press publicized widely; it stated that they "did not sign any manifesto and that the published manifesto is a mystification of exalted communists."

This humiliating recantation, however, could not save Aleksandrov; on 31 August, a VMRO assassin ambushed and murdered him on Mount Pirin. The plot—which the minister of the army, General Ivan Vŭlkov hatched, with the knowledge of Protogerov, Aleksandrov's leadership rival—had Tsankov's approval. The government blamed the Macedonian left for the murder and used it as a pretext for a bloody campaign of liquidation in Bulgaria and Pirin Macedonia.⁶ It took place systematically and efficiently under the direction of Vančo Mihailov, Aleksandrov's ambitious private secretary in Sofia and successor as leader of the VMRO.

The VMRO and Macedonian Nationalism on the Right

The renunciation of their signatures, and thus of the accords, by two of the VMRO's three leaders finalized the movement's split, which had existed from its inception in 1893. Under Mihailov's leadership, from 1924 until the organization's demise about 1945, the right retained the VMRO name and embraced the somewhat opaque program of Aleksandrov's organization. As Katardžiev observes,⁷ until the May Manifesto the VMRO had no clearly defined political program, and, like Aleksandrov's character and personality, its pronouncements and tactics were full of real or apparent contradictions.

The program had its basis in the well-known and popular slogans and aims of the original VMRO. Its core plank was an autonomous Macedonian state. Its long-term aim was the liberation and unification of all parts of Macedonia into one independent country. Its short-term goals were, first, recognition of the minority rights of Slav Macedonians (whom both Aleksandrov and Mihailov considered a Bulgarian ethnic, or Macedono-Bulgarian, minority), and, second, recognition of Macedonia as an equal and autonomous member in a South Slav or Yugoslav or wider Balkan federation.⁸

On 12 February 1933, the so-called Great Macedonian Assembly in Blagoevgrad (Gorna Dzhumaia) revised and reformulated the program. Supposedly 20,000 people attended, representing Macedonian associations in Macedonia, the Balkans, the rest of Europe, and North America. They decided to abandon the minimal aim and to reformulate the maximal one into a "Free and Independent United Macedonia—the Switzerland of the Balkans." One formula captured its essence: "To be under no-one. To be ourselves. To govern ourselves." (*Da ne bideme pod nikogo. Sami da si bideme. Sami da se upravuvame.*)⁹

The VMRO hoped to achieve its own revolutionary struggle against the occupiers of Aegean and Vardar Macedonia and was willing to accept the aid of any outside party willing to aid the cause. This explains, for example, Aleksandrov's constant shifts as he searched for allies among opponents of the status quo on both the ideological left and the ideological right. In early 1921, he ceased activities against the Macedonian left; in June 1920, he urged the VMRO in Vardar Macedonia to vote in municipal and parliamentary elections for the Communists and all those who promoted federal reorganization of Yugoslavia. In July 1923, he

even expressed readiness to accept incorporation of Aegean Macedonia into Yugoslavia on condition that Macedonia receive autonomy. During 1922, he declared that the VMRO would not interfere in the internal affairs of Bulgaria and would not even oppose organized Communist work in Pirin Macedonia, since national liberation did not preclude social change. From 1920 until his assassination in 1924, Aleksandrov kept contacts and negotiated with representatives of the BKP and the Comintern, and in 1924 he even signed the May Manifesto.

Yet he also engaged in seemingly contradictory activities. He maintained close ties with the reactionary political, military, and court opposition to Stamboliski's regime in Bulgaria and its allies on the Macedonian left, whom he suspected of seeking rapprochement with Pašić's Yugoslavia at the expense of the cause. In October 1922, he launched an attack on Nevrokop, stronghold of the Sandanists, the federalists, and Todor Panica. A year later, he ordered the murder of Ćorče Petrov, a theoretician of the Macedonian movement and Stamboliski's confidant, and that of several other associates of the Bulgarian prime ministers.

And, as we saw above, in the prolonged struggle between the Agrarian government and Tsankov's reactionary opposition, Aleksandrov's VMRO directly assisted in the latter's victory and assumption of power. The VMRO helped suppress the Communist uprising in September 1923 probably because Aleksandrov believed that the Communists acted too late, were poorly prepared, and had no chance of success. It was wiser to be on the side of the victor, Tsankov's new regime.

Aleksandrov's renunciation of the May Manifesto and other documents that he signed in Vienna in 1924 strongly suggests that he was running out of options. Tsankov and the Bulgarian conservatives were in full control: for them, Aleksandrov's free and independent VMRO had outlived its usefulness—it no longer served their interests.¹⁰ Their murder of him proves that he was their captive.

Perhaps Aleksandrov did not act out of ideological considerations but considered himself a Macedonian patriot fighting for Macedonian autonomy. "That meant not only against Serbs and Greeks but also against Bulgarians, like Stamboliski, who tried to extinguish the patriot game. Anyone who offered aid to the 'cause' was welcome; when necessary, Aleksandrov worked with the Communists, and took money from Mussolini."¹¹

Aleksandrov's successor, the authoritarian, bureaucratic, secretive,

ruthless Ivan Mihailov, played the “patriot game” in a more straightforward manner. From the moment he took power, he allied the VMRO very closely with the Bulgarian nationalist and revisionist right. He also cooperated actively with the other revisionist powers—Benito Mussolini’s Fascist Italy, Admiral Horthy’s right-wing Hungary, and Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany—and with right-wing movements, such as the Croatian Ustaša.

Under Mihailov, the VMRO identified itself so closely with Bulgaria and its irredentist aims that one could legitimately question his Macedonian patriotism, the independence of his organization, and its devotion to autonomy for the homeland. Moreover, the VMRO’s organizational, propaganda, and military activities in the other two parts of Macedonia declined. Incursions by armed bands into the Vardar region gave way to terrorist acts against individual Yugoslav officials. Otherwise, the VMRO employed whatever armed strength it possessed in terrorist acts against, and murders and assassinations of, its opponents on the Macedonian left and, after 1928, among the Protogerovists, as well as to maintain its grip over Pirin Macedonians.

Despite its patriotic Macedonian slogans, the VMRO had become radically different and appeared so to observers in Bulgaria and abroad and among Macedonians. It had turned into a Bulgarian-based, émigré terrorist organization serving primarily the interests of the Bulgarian state, its own fascist patrons, and its own leaders. By the late 1920s, its influence in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia was declining, and it was losing support in Bulgaria, in the Pirin region, and among the large Macedonian emigration. It no longer looked to be, as in Aleksandrov’s time, a popular Macedonian movement for national liberation.

Probably Mihailov’s realization of the VMRO’s increasing irrelevance forced him and his colleagues in the early 1930s, especially at the Great Macedonian Assembly in Gorna Dzhumaia, to redefine the organization. They attempted to restore its former image as a Macedonian movement independent of the Bulgarian state and fighting for a united, independent homeland—the “Switzerland of the Balkans.” Yet this attempt clearly convinced Sofia’s ruling elite, as well as many Bulgarians, that the VMRO had become an embarrassment—that their country should pursue its interests in Macedonia on its own. And, as we saw above, after May 1934 the new regime banned and liquidated Mihailov’s VMRO.

The great ease with which authorities did so revealed the weakness

of rightist Macedonian nationalism. Through its control of the Pirin region and widespread terrorist activities, the VMRO looked like a powerful force for national liberation. During the early 1920s, many confused and disoriented Macedonians had been searching for leadership and direction; and Aleksandrov, who seemed to offer those, had used Bulgaria and other supporters and sympathizers to further the national cause. Under Mihailov, however, the weaker VMRO became totally dependent on Bulgaria and Italy, which used it as a terrorist group to further their own revisionist aims.

The source of the VMRO's weakness under both men, and hence of right-wing Macedonian nationalism, was the lack of a meaningful program. Neither leader offered a coherent, comprehensive political, social, economic, and particularly national platform to attract and hold Macedonians throughout their divided homeland. Of course, the VMRO called constantly for a free, united, independent homeland, but it never presented a realistic strategy to reach that virtually impossible goal. Nor did it ever elaborate coherently and convincingly on the future state's political system, its social and economic organization, or its cultural set-up.

In view of Mihailov's close association with the authoritarian regimes in Sofia, which claimed Macedonia for Bulgaria, and with the fascist powers and movements in Europe, what could the VMRO offer the oppressed, overwhelmingly poor Macedonian peasants? Or rather, what could they expect from it?

However, the most vulnerable part, the "Achilles' heel," of the VMRO's general political program was Aleksandrov and Mihailov's national agenda. Both leaders considered and declared themselves Macedonian patriots. They claimed to possess a political and civic Macedonian consciousness. But they also thought of themselves as Macedono-Bulgarians—Bulgarian speakers. Since, in the age of nationalism in the Balkans and in eastern Europe as a whole, language was the chief determinant of ethnicity, hence nationality, the two men defined themselves also as Bulgarians. They did not recognize a separate Macedonian language and hence ethnic identity.

Their official platform recognized the existence of Macedonians—of a Macedonian people (*narod*)—and that it consisted of various ethnic elements: Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, Jews, Vlachs (Romanians), and so on. They were all Macedonians; they constituted the Macedonian people, the Macedonian political, civic nation. That nation had its own

interests, aspirations, territory, and destiny, and their realization required an independent state. Moreover, Balkan political reality necessitated such a solution of the Macedonian question. It was the only way to end intra-Balkan rivalries and guarantee peace.

Hence the spokesmen of Mihailov's VMRO gave the term "Macedonian people" (*Makedonski narod*) great symbolic and practical significance. They stressed repeatedly the need to propagate it constantly and widely in order to cultivate common political ideals and a common political identity and nation. As Katardžiev observes, they understood and defined "Macedonian" in the same way as they did "Swiss." It was not ethnic, but it was not solely geographic either. It denoted Macedonians' political belonging; it manifested not their ethnic, but rather their civic national consciousness.¹²

It is difficult to determine whether Aleksandrov and particularly Mihailov were naive or cynical; most probably the former was more naive, and the latter, more cynical. Needless to say, neither the Balkans nor Macedonia constituted a Switzerland. That declared conception of the Macedonian nation would have seemed out of place before Ilinden, as K. Misirkov pointed out in 1903. It appeared—and was—even more unrealistic in the 1920s and 1930s. Contrary to the expressed hopes of Aleksandrov and Mihailov, the non-Macedonian ethnicities did not, and did not wish to, identify themselves as Macedonians. The Albanians, Greeks, and Turks in particular identified ethnically, that is linguistically and culturally, as well as politically, with their "maternal" nations and had already formed or were forming their respective non-Macedonian ethnic national identities.

Moreover, Macedono-Bulgarianism and the Macedono-Bulgarian identification of the Macedonians, which Aleksandrov and Mihailov's VMRO propagated, was becoming a relic of the past. As we saw in an earlier chapter, it had never resonated with Patriarchist Macedonians and adherents of the Serbian Orthodox church under Ottoman rule. The elimination of all Bulgarian presence and influence in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia after partition in 1913 and particularly after 1919 and the expulsion from there of many Exarchist-educated Macedonians undermined Bulgarophilism and Macedono-Bulgarianism in those two regions.

For the growing majority of Macedonians there, especially those born after 1900, Macedono-Bulgarianism was a strange concept. Many were illiterate or semi-literate, attended Greek or Serbian schools only

briefly, and spoke Macedonian at home, on the street, and in the marketplace. Literary Bulgarian was as foreign to them as Serbian and Greek. Even more than under Ottoman rule, such people's Macedonian identity, Macedonianism (*našizam*), was a product of attachment to their homeland, identification with its language and folklore, and reaction against their rulers' discriminatory and repressive policies. By the early 1930s, Macedono-Bulgarianism was evaporating in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia. The identity survived there only in part of the older generation.

For obvious reasons, the situation was much more complex among Macedonians in Bulgaria. However, even there, the hybrid Macedono-Bulgarianism was on the way out. Some well-established émigrés, whose families had been in the country for generations and had embraced Bulgarianism and formed a Bulgarian national identity, considered Macedonia a Bulgarian land and like most Bulgarians suspected VMRO's Macedonianism, which seemed too Macedonian for their liking. Educated Macedonians—many intellectuals in the Pirin region and in Bulgaria—belonged to the political left. They rejected Mihailov's VMRO both on ideological grounds—it associated with and depended on Bulgaria's authoritarian regimes and on Europe's fascist powers—and on national grounds, because of its national agenda. By the late 1920s, they were joining the Makedonisti and, as did the Comintern and the Balkan Communist parties, embraced Macedonianism and recognized a separate ethnic nation.

The peasants of the Pirin region, who suffered under Mihailov's VMRO, supported its patriotic appeals, which reflected their Macedonianism (*našizam*). But even they were suspicious of its close ties with official Bulgaria and hence of its Macedono-Bulgarianism. Moreover, they were feeling increasing alienation because of the VMRO's violence, terror, oppressive political rule, and economic exploitation.¹³

VMRO (ob.): Macedonian Nationalism on the Left

By the late 1920s, Mihailov's VMRO was facing challenges in all parts of Macedonia, particularly in Bulgaria, from the reorganized Macedonian left in the form of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—United (*Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija—obedineta*), or VMRO (ob.).¹⁴ Leftists founded the organization

in 1925, after the failed attempt in 1924 to unite all Macedonian factions in the spirit of the original VMRO. For the Macedonian left, it was the successor of the various groupings that sustained the left until then. It had its headquarters in Vienna; its best-known leaders—including émigrés Dimitar Vlahov (1878–1953), Metodija Šatorov-Šarlo (1897–1944), and Vladimir Poptomov (1890–1952)—had been active in Pirin Macedonia or elsewhere in Bulgaria.

The Comintern and the Balkan Communist parties—Bulgarian (BKP), Greek (KKE), and Yugoslav (KPJ)—recognized VMRO (ob.) at once, and the Balkan Communist Federation (BKF) accepted it as a partner. It was illegal in all partitioning states, because it was both Macedonian nationalist and pro-Communist. It sought to win over progressive intellectuals in the Balkans and in western Europe. Its publications—the newspapers *Balkan Federation–Federation Balkanique* and *Makedonsko delo*, and its frequent pamphlets, which it had printed in Vienna—were distributed in western Europe and among Macedonians in the United States and Canada. Its newspapers and pamphlets also reached all three parts of Macedonia clandestinely through its own organized network of groups and through the underground channels of the three countries' Communist parties.

In Bulgaria, VMRO (ob.) had numerous and dedicated followers in Pirin Macedonia and elsewhere among emigrants, especially after liquidation of the Mihailovist VMRO. It was also making inroads into Aegean and Vardar Macedonia. Indeed, it sought to act as a Communist Party of Macedonia and attempted to serve as a Communist-led national or popular front, until the Comintern, which had adopted the “Popular Front” policy, dissolved it in 1937.

The Comintern, the Balkan Communist parties, and the VMRO (ob.), like the original VMRO, had emphasized a Macedonian political and civic consciousness and nation and embraced the cause of liberation and reunification. This was to occur through a socialist revolution, paving the way for a Balkan Communist federation, with reunited Macedonia as an equal partner.

Their heightened interest brought Balkan Communists into closer contact with the Macedonian masses, whose support they sought. They learned about the Macedonians' local loyalties, language, customs, and social and economic interests—that is, their Macedonianism. Moreover, the Communists recruited young Macedonians, who, unlike their parents and grandparents, had while growing up experienced not the pa-

tronizing ways of competing outside propaganda, but the harsh realities of foreign misrule. And these young recruits introduced the Macedonianism of the masses into party organizations.

Both the masses and the Macedonian recruits pushed the VMRO (ob.) and the Communist parties toward Macedonianism. By the late 1920s, the Balkan Communist parties, after long, heated debates, embraced Macedonianism and recognized the Macedonians as a distinct Slav ethnic nation with its own language, history, culture, territory, and interests.¹⁵ The Comintern's recognition came in 1934.¹⁶

The role of the VMRO (ob.) in Balkan Communist politics and in grounding and organizing the development of Communism and nationalism in Macedonia has received little attention from Balkan Communist historians, including Macedonians. The reason lies in the ambivalence of the three states' Communist parties toward the Macedonian question, as well as in their relationship with the VMRO (ob.). The Communist parties, under pressure from Moscow, paid lip service to the cause but relegated its resolution to a hypothetical Balkan Communist federation. The limited available evidence suggests that they did not think seriously about parting with their Macedonian lands. Their primary interest, like the Comintern's, was in using Macedonia for ideological purposes—to further the class struggle and the socialist revolution.

In contrast, the VMRO (ob.) and Macedonian Communists in general, while taking ideology, class struggle, and revolution seriously, focused on the national cause. Also, the Balkan Communist parties, to whom many, if not most, of its active followers belonged, did not approve of the parallel and divided loyalties of their Macedonian comrades. Consequently, the VMRO (ob.), although the Comintern supported it, never gained full acceptance by the fraternal Communist parties in the peninsula. The Comintern's change in tactics triggered its dissolution in 1937, but the Balkan parties welcomed its demise—they always had sharp differences on Macedonia and between their respective national interests and Macedonia's. These differences later seriously harmed the cause of Macedonian liberation and unification.

In the meantime, the official Comintern and Balkan Communist line on Macedonia spurred its nationalism. Acceptance of a Macedonian ethnic nation represented its first official recognition by an international movement led by a great power, the Soviet Union. During the late 1920s and particularly the 1930s, the Communist parties, the VMRO (ob.), and their numerous legal, semi-legal, and illegal organs and front orga-

nizations in divided Macedonia encouraged and supported the growth of class and of national consciousness.

The party cells and the numerous Macedonian political, cultural, literary, and sports groups, clubs, societies, and associations that the VMRO (ob.) and the Communist parties sponsored and supported, especially in Skopje, Sofia, Belgrade, and Zagreb, became the training ground, the schools, of nationally conscious leftist Macedonian intellectuals. They provided Macedonian nationalism with its first systematic legal or semi-legal institutional infrastructure, with a home, and with organized bases, which, in the absence of a national church, earlier generations could not establish in the theocratic Ottoman empire. Such a network and its members helped the movement's three major trends—the masses' Macedonianism (*našizam*) and the intellectuals' Macedonia-ism and Macedono-Bulgarianism—to coalesce gradually into a leftist Macedonianism and nationalism.¹⁷

All in all, their endeavors strongly affirmed Macedonian national life, consciousness, and thought. They prepared the ground for a literary language and facilitated growth of a national culture and political thought. This process did not develop at the same pace and with the same intensity in all three parts of divided Macedonia.

Conditions for national development were least favorable in Aegean Macedonia, which had contributed so much to the Macedonian awakening. Macedonians now had no large urban center that they could call their own; most of them lived in small, isolated, mainly mountainous towns and villages. For the few who had had a good education, their schooling in Greek tended to estrange them from their Slavic roots and cultural traditions. Moreover, the VMRO (ob.) had started there rather late, and its activities lagged behind those in the other two parts of Macedonia. It was also virtually impossible to establish even elementary printing facilities in the Cyrillic script, and use of Macedonian was illegal even at home while Metaxas was dictator.

Rizospastis, the newspaper of the central committee of the Communist Party of Greece—the only official organ of a Balkan Communist party to appear legally through most of the interwar years—was before 1936 the sole major publication in Greece to recognize and defend the Macedonians. In addition to condemning the bourgeois regimes in Athens, it also consistently attacked their repressive treatment of the Macedonians,¹⁸ who saw it as their sole defender.

Macedonians frequently addressed their many letters and other communications to it affectionately: “Dear Rizo,” or “our only defender”; they sometimes wrote in Macedonian—“the only language we know”—though in the Greek script; and most of them signed “a Macedonian” or “a group of Macedonians from . . .” They used *Rizospastis* as their mouthpiece—their only platform for declaring their national identity and the existence of their nation—and to demand their national rights.

A letter from the village Ksino Neron (Ekši-Su), from “many Macedonian-fighters,” stated: “We must declare loudly to the Greek rulers that we are neither Greeks, nor Bulgarians, nor Serbs, but pure Macedonians. We have behind us a history, a past, rich with struggles for the liberation of Macedonia, and we will continue that struggle until we free ourselves.”

And, rejecting remarks by A. Pejso, a parliamentary deputy, the leader of a VMRO (ob.) group in Giannitsa (Ġumendže) wrote: “We declare to you that we are neither Greeks, nor Bulgarians, nor Serbs! We are Macedonians with our language, with our culture, with our customs and history. . . . Do you think, Mr. Pejso, that they [Gruev, Tošev, Delčev, and so on] were Bulgarians? No, they were Macedonians and fought for a united and independent Macedonia.”

The aims of the Macedonians in Greece find elegant expression in a lengthy communication from “G. Slavos,” writing on behalf of a VMRO (ob.) group in Voden (Edessa):

We, Macedonians here, held a conference where one of our comrades spoke to us about the program of the VMRO (ob.) and about how the minorities live in the Soviet Union.

He told us that the Macedonians in Bulgaria and Serbia are fighting under the leadership of the Communist parties for a united and independent Macedonia.

We declare that we will fight for our freedom under the leadership of the Communist Party of Greece and [we] demand that our schools have instruction in the Macedonian language.

We also insist on not being called Bulgarians, for we are neither Bulgarians, nor Serbs, nor Greeks, but Macedonians.

We invite all Macedonians to join the ranks of the VMRO (ob.), and all of us together will fight for a free Macedonia.¹⁹

Although Yugoslavia was as keen as Greece to stamp out all signs of Macedonianism, conditions in Vardar Macedonia proved more conducive for its development. Cities such as Skopje, its administrative capital,

and district centers such as Bitola, Ohrid, Prilep, and Veles retained their Macedonian character. The number of educated Macedonians was growing each year, in high schools, the Philosophical Faculty in Skopje, and universities elsewhere in Yugoslavia, especially in Belgrade and Zagreb. True, they studied in Serbian or Croatian, but Macedonian remained the language of home and of everyday life. An antidote to the Great Serbian content of their education lay in Macedonianism, for towns, high schools, and especially institutions of higher learning were hotbeds of leftist radicalism.

As we saw above, use of the national name was illegal, as was publishing Macedonian material in the national language or even in Serbian/Croatian. Nonetheless in the 1930s Macedonian intellectuals were no longer only proclaiming the existence of their nation and language. Despite oppression, they worked to create a literary language and a national culture. They even found a way to evade the official ban, wrote on national themes in Serbian/Croatian and in Macedonian, and published at least some of this material in leftist publications in Skopje, in Belgrade or Zagreb, or in illegal publications of the KPJ.²⁰

V. Il'oski, R. Krle, and A. Panov wrote plays in Macedonian, and performances became national manifestations in Vardar Macedonia.²¹ The Communist activist and talented essayist and poet Kočo Solev Racin (1908–1943) published on the Macedonians' political and cultural history in such leftist Yugoslav periodicals as *Kritika*, *Literatura*, *Naša stvarnost*, and *Naša reč*. But his greatest work, possibly the most influential prewar literary achievement in Macedonian, was *Beli Mugri*, a collection of his poetry that appeared illegally in Sambor, near Zagreb, in 1939.²² Young and gifted poets V. Markovski (1915–1988) and K. Nedelkovski (1912–1941) grew up in Vardar Macedonia but ended up in Sofia and before 1939 published collections in Macedonian.²³

In the late 1930s, journals such as *Luč* (Skopje, 1937–38) and *Naša reč* (Skopje, 1939–41), which focused on national affairs, published scholarly and literary pieces, many in Macedonian, by a growing number of younger intellectuals. Finally, on the eve of war, the KPJ's Regional Committee for Macedonia put out its short-lived, illegal, occasional publications, *Bilten* (1940) in Serbian/Croatian and Macedonian and *Iskra* (1941) in Macedonian.

But Macedonian life was most vibrant in Bulgaria, particularly in Sofia, which housed many activists and intellectuals from all over the partitioned homeland. Although official Bulgaria still hoped to harness

Macedonian patriotism to Bulgarianism, its traditional patronizing attitude allowed for a more tolerant milieu. There, unlike in Vardar Macedonia, people could use the national name freely, many institutions and organizations identified with Macedonia, and numerous publications carried the national name. This atmosphere also accounts for the wide-ranging influence of the VMRO (ob.) among Macedonians there.²⁴

Young, nationally conscious intellectuals dominated the so-called Macedonian Progressive Movement (MPD) in Bulgaria and its many, often short-lived, newspapers and journals.²⁵ In 1935, a young intellectual, Angel Dinev, ran perhaps the decade's most significant Macedonian publication: *Makedonski vesti* (1935–36), a journal covering history, learning, and literature.

The circle that formed around *Makedonski vesti* embraced an entire generation of leftward-leaning Macedonians. They published sources and studies on Macedonian history and on national, cultural, and economic issues, as well as literary prose and poetry. Even though they used mostly Bulgarian, their language at school, they affirmed the reality of a Macedonian nation and sought to create a national culture. Like their counterparts in Vardar Macedonia, they emphasized the need for a literary language, and they always treated national themes with piety, but with a greater, much more certain national revolutionary zeal.²⁶

The group around *Makedonski vesti* prepared the ground for the illegal Macedonian Literary Circle (MLK) in Sofia (1938–41)—focus of the most remarkable interwar national cultural activity.²⁷ Its founding members included some of the most promising Macedonian literary talents living in Bulgaria, with roots in all three parts of their native land. The chair and guiding force was the proletarian poet Nikola Jonkov Vapcarov (1909–1942), whose cycle “Songs for the Fatherland” in *Motorni Pesni* (Sofia, 1940) testified to his national consciousness.²⁸

The members of the MLK maintained contact with their counterparts in Vardar Macedonia, whose writings they knew of; for instance, they read, discussed, and admired Kočo Racin's poetry in Macedonian. Like Racin, they were familiar with the work and ideas of K. P. Misirkov, the ideologist of Macedonianism of the Ilinden period. They took on tasks that Misirkov had set: to create a literary language and culture and to enhance national consciousness. As Vapcarov declared to the MLK, the last task was to let the world understand that “we are a separate nation, a separate people, with our own particular attributes which distinguish us from the other South Slavs.”²⁹

In such organizations in all three parts of Macedonia, with support from the VMRO (ob.) and the Balkan Communist parties, the youthful intellectuals nurtured national ideas and devotion to the national cause. They also elaborated a cohesive, leftist national ideology, which, while explaining their people's past and present, also advanced a national program for the future. Their conceptions were not all new, but largely a synthesis of the earlier views of the Makedonisti and the left wing of the original revolutionary movement, but they amalgamated that heritage with many contemporary Communist doctrines. They rejected Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian claims on Macedonia and denials of its identity. A declaration by the VMRO (ob.) in February 1935 stated:

Just as the Macedonians under Greek rule are neither "Slavophones" nor "pure" Greeks, [just] as the Macedonians under Serbian rule are not "pure" Serbs, so too the Macedonians under Bulgarian rule are not Bulgarians and nor do they wish to become [Bulgarians]. The Macedonian people have their own past, their present and future, not as a patch attached to imperialist Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, but rather as an independent Slav element which possesses all the attributes of an independent nation, [and] which, for decades now, has been struggling to win its right to self determination, including secession into a political state unit independent from the imperialist states that now oppress it.³⁰

These intellectuals argued that Macedonians possessed all the attributes of an ethnic and independent nation: their own territory and economic unity, language, national character, and history. "All these elements, taken together," wrote V. Ivanovski, a well-known Macedonian publicist in Bulgaria, "make up the Macedonian nation. They are irrefutable proof that we, Macedonians, do not belong to the Serbian, nor to the Bulgarian or Greek nation. We are a separate nation."³¹

The long historical process that led to that nation began with the Slavs' arrival and settlement in Macedonia and their amalgamation with the remnants of the ancient Macedonians, and it continued well into the nineteenth century—indeed, to their own time. It reached its height with the national awakening in the nineteenth century, which, according to the publicist and historian K. Veselinov, was "independent"—"it followed its own path"—despite various outside interventions.³² Furthermore, K. Racin, the Communist activist and poet, claimed that this separate and independent Macedonian awakening was in fact much like what happened with Bulgarians and Serbs. Responding to charges by

Professor N. Vulić, a prominent archaeologist and proponent of Great Serbianism, that even the Macedonian name was an invention, Racin maintained that it was no more so than “Bulgarian” and “Serbian.” These historic names, he went on,

were taken from the treasure chest of history. The Serbs took from their history that which they once had. The Bulgarians did the very same thing. What did our Macedonians do? They did the very same thing! . . .

There was an awareness among the Macedonians that this land had at one time been called Macedonia. They took from their historical treasure chest their name just as the Serbian and Bulgarian ideologists did. In this manner they inscribed their Macedonian name on the banner of their national revival. I think that our Macedonian revolutionary movement under the Turks did the same thing as your Serbs as well as the Bulgarians had done in the course of [their] struggle.³³

The history of the Macedonian people and particularly the memory of the original VMRO and its Ilinden Uprising of 1903 became essential components of this leftist nationalism. The study and knowledge of the Macedonians’ past were to inspire their own and future national struggles. In concluding his history of the Macedonian people, A. Dinev declared:

The people who gave the alphabet to the entire Slav world, who emitted from its womb the great revolutionary reformer Bogomil and the Puritan warrior Samuil, who lived in a revolutionary republic formed secretly on the territory of the Sultan’s state for 19 years from 1893 to 1913; who selflessly created for itself the Ilinden epic; who carried on a bloody armed struggle against the armed propagandas; who clashed with the Sultan’s troops in the streets of Constantinople; That people will never, never forget its own historical past and, despite the absence of any freedom, will not lose its ethnic character, nor its spirit, nor its mother’s speech.³⁴

To repeat, this largely youthful Macedonian national intelligentsia suffered rejection, denial of recognition, and persecution by state and society in Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia. It had nowhere else to turn, except to the Communist ideology of protest that recognized their existence. Consequently, although not all of its adherents were Communists—formal members of one of the three Balkan Communist parties—

they were all leftists,³⁵ whose view of the world the teachings of Marxism-Leninism largely shaped.

They saw and understood the world as being divided into two antagonistic fronts engaged in a life-and-death struggle. As the MPD program in Bulgaria stated: “On one side is the front of the *imperialists*; who hold under national slavery many European and colonial peoples and who oppress their own working masses; and on the other side is the common front of the *socially and nationally oppressed*.”³⁶ Macedonians endured both national and social oppression under Bulgarian, Greek, or Serbian imperialists, who had assistance from their agents of Macedonian origin. And the only way out for them, as for apostles of the original Macedonian movement, was a mass revolutionary struggle.

This endeavor was to involve above all a collective effort to achieve national liberation and unification, since only such conditions would permit social emancipation. “The Macedonian Progressive Movement is national, for it has as its aim the national liberation of Macedonia,” declared *Makedonsko zname*. “It is not a party, or a social or a class [movement]; it is popular, democratic, because its very aim [national liberation] is a popular, democratic task.”³⁷ The same sentiments appeared in its program: “The Macedonian Progressive Movement is an independent national movement. . . . It is not struggling for socialism, but for the national liberation of Macedonia. In what kind of economic form will be organized Macedonia—that will be decided by the Macedonian population after its national liberation.”³⁸

The Macedonian intellectuals expected a difficult struggle, because they were working against three oppressor-states, as well as against Vrhovism, the rightist VMRO, which they believed had betrayed the legacy of Ilinden. Nonetheless they remained confident, for they considered their effort an integral part of “the common front of the oppressed against imperialism.” They felt as one with all the enslaved nations and with the working-class movement of the ruling states; this alliance was “especially close with the enslaved nationalities and the socially oppressed in the three Balkan countries among whom Macedonia is partitioned.”³⁹

As we saw above, they tended generally to identify their national liberation with the Comintern slogan: “Independent Macedonia in a Federation of Balkan People’s Republics.” They placed far greater emphasis on their national question than the Communists did, however, and were thus unwilling to leave it to the uncertain future and a Balkan

Communist federation. In 1933, *Makedonska pravda*, an organ of the emigration in Sofia, published a series of articles calling for “the federalization of the South Slavs on the basis of full equality and equal respect for the rights of all peoples and for the creation out of the existing Yugoslav chaos a free state of free autonomous regions.” Realization of such an entity would require destruction of the Serbian dictatorship and establishment of a people’s government. “Only such a truly people’s government would be in a position to resolve not only the Macedonian problem, but also the great problem of the unification of South Slavdom in one great, people’s, Yugoslav republic without dictators and hegemons.” Such a government would present the final resolution of “our Macedonian question and *Macedonia will be free.*”

When a reader asked whether it fought for a Balkan or for a South Slav federation, *Makedonska pravda* replied: “Our ideal and [the ideal] of all good Balkanites *is and must be the Balkan federation.*” Only such an arrangement could reconcile the cultural, economic, and political interests of the Balkan peoples and overcome their antagonisms. “We talk about a South Slav federation as *one stage toward the future Balkan federation*, which would be easier to attain after the realization of the first.”⁴⁰

Yugoslavia restricted the activities of the VMRO (ob.) to a far greater extent, and the organization’s influence was not as widespread in Vardar Macedonia as in Bulgaria. Macedonian students and intellectuals there felt much more the influence of the Communist Party (of Yugoslavia) and tended to focus on their part of Vardar Macedonia. They sought national liberation and equality for their region in a restructured, federated Yugoslavia on the way to national unification and presumably to a Balkan Communist federation.⁴¹

A more searching and critical analysis of the Comintern’s position on Macedonia appeared from the Macedonian Progressive Movement (MPD) in Bulgaria and its newspaper, *Makedonsko zname*. They argued that the Comintern defined the Macedonian national struggle “too vaguely and inconcretely,” assuming that the revolution would “come only as a common Ilinden of all Balkan peoples”—as a result of the simultaneous struggle of the nationally and socially oppressed in all the Balkan countries. The Comintern also suggested that liberation of Macedonia would depend on formation of the Balkan federation.

This stance was obviously not acceptable to the MPD and its newspaper, which were unwilling to postpone liberation indefinitely. More-

over, they complained that the Comintern ignored the fact that “the uneven decline of imperialism” would result in the “uneven development of the liberation struggle” in the Balkans. That endeavor “could succeed first in one of the oppressor states and thus the liberation be achieved first in one of the three partitions of Macedonia which would establish the beginning and become the base for the liberation of the entire Macedonia.”

D. Dinkov, one of the MPD’s representatives, pointed to the contradiction implicit in the two halves of the Comintern slogan: “Balkan Federation” and “Independent Macedonia.” He argued that the former restricted self-determination to autonomy, thus denying the possibility of a separate, independent state. The latter, in contrast, was very separatist and rejected in advance the autonomous or federal unification of Macedonians with other newly free peoples. Dinkov dismissed both conceptions as “incorrect” and did not want the national endeavor to be in a straitjacket. “How the Macedonian people will use its right to self-determination up to separation will depend on the concrete conditions after the masses win their struggle for liberation.” Consequently, the MPD replaced the old Comintern position with a call for “the right of the Macedonian people to self-determination up to its separation into an independent state–political unit.”⁴²

Accordingly, the MPD called on Macedonians in each partition to insist on self-determination and to work with all the nationally and socially oppressed in their state. After the expected victory in one of the partitioning states, the Macedonian national region within it would constitute itself as an autonomous small state (*dürzhavitsa*). That autonomous Macedonian small state would serve as “a base in the struggle for a *united Macedonian state*. It will serve as an example, will encourage, and will provide support to the other Macedonian regions to do the same in order to attain the national liberation of the whole.” “*Which [part] would start first will depend on whether the required conditions will mature first in Yugoslavia, in Greece or in Bulgaria*. We will follow this path until the liberation of the three Macedonian regions in one united Macedonian People’s Republic.”⁴³ Thus, despite differences and debates among Macedonian leftists over short-term tactics, generally speaking they shared a final aim: national liberation and unification, a free Macedonia.⁴⁴

Such aims inspired the many conscious Macedonians, both Communists and bourgeois nationalists, who joined the Communist-led resis-

tance movements in Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia during the Second World War. Long before the conflict ended, however, the Macedonian question had again become “the apple of discord,” this time dividing the Balkan Communists, who locked themselves in silent competition over Macedonia. They continued in that mode during the war’s turbulent aftermath—through abortive Yugoslav-Bulgarian negotiations for a federation, the Civil War in Greece, and the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict.