

11 War and Revolution (1940–1949)

This chapter's first four sections look at Macedonians' situation between 1941 and 1944, and the fifth, at the new postwar "Macedonian questions." The first considers Macedonians' plight under the new partition, and the second, their "hostile neutrality" toward the occupiers. The third, about Vardar Macedonia, examines their leftward, Macedonianist drift, declaration in November 1943 of a federal Yugoslavia with a Macedonian republic, and the republic's formal establishment in August 1944. The fourth section details Macedonians' wartime situation in the Greek and Bulgarian partitions. The fifth outlines the position of Macedonians in a substantially Communist Balkans, as Greece's Civil War reached its right-wing dénouement.

A New Partition (1941–1944)

Following the collapse of Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941, occupying powers again partitioned Macedonia. Bulgaria occupied most of Vardar (Yugoslav) Macedonia and eastern and a small part of western Aegean (Greek) Macedonia. The central, most strategic regions of Aegean Macedonia, including Salonika and the coast, remained under direct German control. The most westerly region of Vardar Macedonia,

which included the towns of Tetovo, Gostivar, Kičevo, Debar, and Struga, became part of Italian-occupied Albania. Italy occupied the rest of western Aegean Macedonia—the districts of Kastoria (Kostur), Florina (Lerin), Kozani, and Grevena—until its collapse in September 1943.

Once again, most Macedonians—in Bulgarian and Italian-Albanian areas—were under foreign masters that imposed their own national ideologies and identities. Bulgaria presented its occupation as the realization of its “historic right,” as the liberation of “its own national territories.” It did not treat the lands as a protectorate and did not set up a special administration; it strove to absorb them. Accordingly, Sofia introduced the Bulgarian political, administrative, judicial, and police systems there. It gave all responsible positions to trusted people from Bulgaria with proven ideological and nationalist credentials. In order to maintain law and order under German supervision, Bulgaria deployed a large military and police presence in the “newly liberated lands” throughout the war. According to one source, the Bulgarians and Italians concentrated 120,000 men in Vardar Macedonia.¹

Moreover, Bulgaria declared all Macedonians in the occupied lands to be Bulgarians and embarked on a policy of “Bulgarianization.” The Directorate for National Propaganda spearheaded the drive and sought to eliminate all reminders of Serbian rule. Standard Bulgarian became the official language, and the vastly expanded educational system, the chief instrument of Bulgarianization. In the 1941/42 academic year, occupation authorities opened 800 primary schools, 180 middle schools (*osmoletki*), and 17 secondary schools (*gymnasia*).² They also planned a university in Skopje, which opened in 1943/44 as Tsar Boris University. They staffed the educational system too with “proven” people from Bulgaria. All levels of education focused instruction on Bulgarian studies—language, history, and culture—which of course included Macedonia and its people.

The Directorate of National Propaganda also supervised a number of institutions—philological, historical, ethnological, and so on—which published only works proving that Macedonia and its people were Bulgarian. Sofia mobilized all institutions and media under its control and influence, such as radio, press, theaters, museums, and churches, to serve the national cause, to spread and entrench Bulgarianism among Macedonians. It also expected all public servants to serve as eyes and ears and to report on any dissent in word, thought, or deed.

Its policies toward other, non-Macedonian ethnicities, which it did

not expect or even try to win over, were much harsher, more ruthless, and more devastating. The Bulgarians tolerated the Muslims, Albanians, and Turks in Vardar Macedonia, but ignored their rights and needs. While they saved the Jews of Bulgaria proper, they transferred to the Nazis those of Macedonia, who ended up in death camps.

In eastern Greek (Aegean) Macedonia, east of the River Strimeon (Struma), the Bulgarians were ruthless toward Greeks, by then the majority there. As we saw earlier, Greek authorities forcefully relocated the area's Macedonians, its Slavic-speaking inhabitants, after the Balkan Wars and the Great War. They expelled most of them to Bulgaria and resettled the area with Greek refugees, whom the Turks had expelled from Asia Minor. "Since there were few Slavs in those regions, the Bulgarians here sought not to convert the local population but to eliminate it in one way or another and to replace it with Bulgarian colonists."³ Or, as Hugh Poulton stated: "In their own portions the Bulgarians imported settlers from Bulgaria and acted in such a way that even a German report of the time described their occupation as a 'regime of terror.'"⁴

At the start of the occupation, in May—June 1941, the Italians administered western Vardar Macedonia directly. In July 1941, they attached the territory to Italian Albania and transferred its administration to the Ministry for the Newly Liberated Albanian Lands, in Tirana. In February 1943, when they abolished this ministry, they passed its functions to the appropriate ministries of the quisling Albanian government. They consolidated their rule with the support of proponents of Great Albanianism, with whom they staffed the administrative, judicial, and police systems. Albanian Fascists received the highest positions, and local collaborators, the lower offices.

Just as Bulgaria sought to Bulgarianize the areas under its occupation, Albania aimed to do something analogous for western Vardar Macedonia. And its measures and policies resembled those of the Bulgarians. The school system and education in general were to assist forced Albanization. All Serbian schools gave way to Albanian, and all Serbian or Macedonian teachers who taught in Serbian, to teachers from Albania. All non-Albanian pupils—Macedonian, Serbian, and so on—had to attend these schools, and their instruction inculcated Great Albanianism and fascism. All jobs in public service required Albanians speaking the language. All signs, even on private buildings, had to be in Italian and Albanian. The names and surnames of non-Albanians had to take on an

Albanian form. Even telephone conversations in a language other than Italian or Albanian were illegal.⁵

Paradoxically, Macedonians and other inhabitants of central Aegean Macedonia, which was under direct German control, and the western, under Italian, fared better. The two occupying powers allowed the Greek quisling government to administer the area under their supervision. While the economic situation there, as elsewhere in Macedonia and occupied Europe, worsened, the political situation improved. The Germans and particularly the Italians passively neglected them; Greek officials could no longer enforce the oppressive measures of the Metaxas regime. Early in the war, the Macedonian-populated western Aegean region became a stronghold of the Communist-led Greek resistance, which displayed far greater understanding and tolerance vis-à-vis the Macedonians.⁶

Hostile Neutrality and Beyond (1941–1944)

The vast majority of Macedonians, overwhelmingly peasants, knew very little, if anything at all, about Italian Fascism or German Nazism or the intentions of each, but they did expect relief from the Bulgarians. The occupation authorities, especially the Bulgarians, posed as liberators and exploited opposition to the repressive prewar Greek and Serbian/Yugoslav regimes to at least neutralize many Macedonians. Traditional Bulgarophilism also helped their cause at the start.

Generally speaking, however, most Macedonians felt a sort of hostile neutrality toward their new overlords. As far as they knew or could remember, their land was always under occupation, but their patriotism would not countenance *foreign* occupiers. As Captain P. H. Evans in western Aegean Macedonia wrote in December 1944: “The Macedonians are actuated by strong but mixed feelings of patriotism. . . . There is . . . thriving and at times fervent local patriotism; and a feeling, hard to assess because rarely uttered before strangers, and because it fluctuates with the turn of events and of propaganda, for *Macedonia* as such, regardless of present frontier-lines, which are looked upon as usurpation.”⁷

Yet, lacking organization, leadership, and arms, they could not even think of standing up to the occupiers, let alone defeating them. In order to survive, they pretended to adjust. As an old man told Captain Evans:

“You see, we have had so many different masters that now, whoever comes along, we say (placing his hands together, but smiling and making a little bow) ‘kalos oriste’ [welcome].” “It was most eloquent,” continued Evans. “It is this perfect duplicity of the *Macedonians* which makes them difficult to know. It is hard to find out what they are thinking.”⁸

Macedonians were traditionally suspicious of all foreigners—that is, of everyone who did not belong to them, who were not *naši*, who did not belong to their land, did not speak their language, did not sing their songs, did not practice their customs, did not eat their food, did not celebrate their festivals, did not suffer their sufferings. They maintained this hostile neutrality toward the occupier until its rule became unbearable, or until they felt sure that active opposition had a realistic chance of success, and then they fought as bravely and ruthlessly as any peasant people. Survival was of the essence.

Active collaboration with the occupation authorities was not widespread—it involved only certain groups and regions. In Italian-occupied western Vardar (Yugoslav) Macedonia, by then part of Great Albania, many ethnic Albanians collaborated actively. They joined the Albanian Fascist Party, the reactionary Albanian National Front (the *Bali Kombetar*), or other Italian-sponsored organizations, which were keen to wipe out Macedonians and all non-Muslims in the area. The Macedonians there struggled to survive.

In Aegean (Greek) Macedonia, the German and Italian occupiers offered little to satisfy the Macedonians’ patriotic impulses. Their vague promises of a free Macedonia won over some disorganized Bulgarophile groups belonging to Mihailov’s VMRO—at least while they appeared to be winning the war. With the aid of the Bulgarian Club in Salonika and of Bulgarian officers attached to the German garrisons there and in Edessa (Voden), Florina (Lerin), and Kastoria (Kostur) in central and western Aegean Macedonia, they set up the *Komitet* or the *Komitadži* movement. This political and military organization of Macedonians attracted approximately ten thousand followers in about sixty villages in the district of Kastoria. Members formed their own bands, or paramilitary units, which the occupiers armed, and were to defend their own villages against attacks from neighboring Greek refugee villages, as well as from bands belonging to both the Greek Communist-led resistance and the nationalist resistance.

The *Komitadži* movement was more anti-Greek and anti-Communist.

nist than pro-German, -Italian, or -Bulgarian. By late 1943 and early 1944, the Greek Communist-led resistance, the National Liberation Front—the Greek Popular Liberation Army (EAM-ELAS), with the aid of its Slav-Macedonian National Liberation Front (SNOF), the Macedonian liberation organization in Greece—had defeated and neutralized the Komitadži movement. After the tide in the war began to change in 1943, many of the armed komitadži, as well as other active Macedonian collaborators, switched over to the Macedonian or primarily Macedonian units of EAM-ELAS and thus to the struggle for national emancipation of the Macedonians of Aegean Macedonia.

The situation in Bulgaria's new parts of Macedonia was much more complex. As I noted above, Macedonians who had formed a Bulgarian identity welcomed the occupiers as liberators. The Macedonian right, followers of Mihailov's VMRO, hoped to follow Croatia's example and attain a united and autonomous or independent country with Bulgaria's aid. Members of both groups collaborated actively with the new authorities. The Macedonian left opposed the occupation on both national and ideological grounds. For the majority of Macedonians, Bulgarian occupation initially represented welcome relief from brutal Greek and Serbian rule and appeared more tolerable and less repressive. Passive acceptance or benevolent neutrality, and a wait-and-see attitude, greeted the Bulgarian occupiers.

Early in the war, however, the Bulgarians began to exhaust their welcome even among the most pro-Bulgarian elements. They could not long sustain the material benefits, such as regular supply of basic necessities and orderly rationing, especially in a lengthy war. And their freeing of Macedonians, including Communists, from the former regimes' jails could not mask their nationalist, anti-Macedonian, dictatorial rule.

Moreover, the occupiers treated Macedonia as a colonial extension of Bulgaria proper. They ignored its regionalism, which even the most Bulgarophilic Macedonians had respected, as well as its traditional (and overwhelming) demands for autonomy or statehood. They showed remarkable disdain and distrust for all Macedonians, including the most Bulgarophilic leaders of the Mihailovist VMRO. They excluded the latter from senior positions, which they awarded to Bulgarians or occasionally to Macedonians who were natives or longtime residents of Bulgaria and were solid Bulgarian nationalists.

Forcible Bulgarianization offended the vast majority of Macedonians. In July 1942, even a group of very prominent Bulgarophiles and

representatives of Mihailov's VMRO, who worried deeply about mass disillusionment with and alienation from Bulgaria, sent a representation to the Bulgarian tsar. The group complained about continued partition, lack of Macedonian representation, total neglect of agrarian reform, disorderly supply and provisioning, ruthless police and bureaucrats, and contempt for the native intelligentsia.

The occupiers' attempts to draw many Macedonians into active collaboration failed. The Bulgarian nationalist and rightist organizations that they established in 1941 for virtually every age group attracted few members. Their effort in 1942 to create and underwrite a military organization, the *kontračeti*, produced even worse results. The *kontračeti* were military units of Macedonians, whom Bulgaria recruited from among followers of Mihailov's VMRO and of other rightist, pro-Bulgarian groups who accepted the Bulgarian stand on Macedonia. The occupiers organized and paid them to fight the Communist-led National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Macedonia (NOV i POM) and to frighten the populace from joining or aiding it. They set up only eight such units, with twenty to thirty members each. In the following year, 1943, most of them underwent defeat and dispersal, and many members joined partisan units.⁹

Conscious of Germany's coming, unavoidable defeat, in the summer of 1944 Sofia approached the Allies for separate peace talks. It also toyed with setting up, with German aid, an autonomous Macedonia under Bulgarian influence. At the end of August, the Germans dispatched Vančo Mihailov, who had spent the war years in Zagreb, to Macedonia to survey the situation and declare an "Independent Macedonia." The rugged mountains around Skopje were already in partisans' hands, and, after a brief sojourn with trusted lieutenants, Mihailov wisely decided to accept defeat and departed Macedonia for good.¹⁰ Moreover, this capitulation marked the final defeat of Macedono-Bulgarianism in the long struggle for Macedonians' loyalty. Macedonianism would prevail.

Toward a Yugoslav Republic (1941–1944)

Although Macedonians passively accepted occupation, the new rulers had no political, socioeconomic, or, most important, national program and vision for Macedonia, so they could not win active collaboration.

Consequently, even before the tide of war turned, they could not compete with the Communists of the three original Balkan partitioners and the resistance movements that they organized and led. The Communist parties in Bulgaria (BKP),¹¹ Greece (KKE), and Yugoslavia (KPJ) pushed clearly and strenuously their vision: adaptations of the Comintern program for Macedonia. They offered their traditional, ideologically inspired social and economic transformation, with the promise of equality and justice. More significant, they advanced a Macedonian-driven national program of self-determination that promised national liberation and equality, even statehood.

The three parties did not necessarily agree on the ultimate outcome and would not unconditionally promise their respective countries' Macedonian possessions. In reality, the KPJ and the BKP each hoped for Macedonian unification under its own auspices, or within its own country, or within a south Slav or Balkan federation that it hoped to dominate. The KKE, which would obviously not join a south Slav federation and could hardly expect to dominate a Balkan federation, may therefore have wanted Aegean Macedonia out of plans for a united Macedonian state. In any case, its leadership emphasized equality for and protection of national rights of Macedonians in Greece, rather than Macedonian statehood.¹²

Unlike the Balkan Communist parties, which manipulated the Macedonian question to further their ideological and political aims, Macedonian Communists, all members of one or another of those parties, saw national liberation as the primary aim. This stance frequently forced them to choose between their party's position and their own dream—liberation, unification, and statehood. While some adhered to their party's discipline and position, many others at critical times broke ranks and shifted to the political party that seemed closest to Macedonian aims.¹³ Metodija Šatorov-Šarlo (1897–1944)¹⁴ exemplifies this predicament. He was born in the Ottoman empire, in Prilep, in what became Vardar Macedonia. Before 1918, he emigrated to Bulgaria. In 1920 he joined the BKP and in 1925 the VMRO (ob.), and he became a leader in both. In the 1930s, he worked in Moscow for the Comintern and became an authority on Balkan national revolutionary movements. In 1939, he returned to Macedonia, and in the following year he became leader of the Regional Committee for Macedonia of the KPJ (PK na KPJM). He immediately changed the body's name from "for" to "in" Macedonia, replaced Serbo-Croatian with Macedonian as its working

language, and sought to win autonomy for it. In 1940, at the KPJ's fifth conference in Zagreb, he joined its central committee, the only member from Macedonia.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Bulgarian occupation of Vardar Macedonia in 1941, the KPJ and BKP argued over control of the regional party organization in their struggle for Macedonia. The KPJ called for armed struggle against all occupiers and restoration of Yugoslavia's territorial integrity. It envisaged a new, Communist Yugoslavia in which Vardar Macedonia would join a federation of equal republics. The BKP continued to advocate the Comintern position—a united Macedonia in a Communist Balkan federation.

What were Šatorov-Šarlo and other nationally minded Macedonian Communists, former members of the dissolved VMRO (*ob.*), to do? They could side with the KPJ, which they felt the Serbians dominated and which had embraced the Comintern position unwillingly; it now offered only liberation of one part of Macedonia under KPJ auspices. Or they could choose the BKP, sponsor and most vocal supporter of the Comintern policy, national liberation and unification. That position embodied traditional maximal Macedonian aims, and after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Šatorov-Šarlo and his allies felt that those goals were realizable. They believed, like most Communists, that the Soviet Union would win the war and spark Communist revolutions in the Balkans. Unification of most of Macedonia under Bulgarian occupation paved the way for the eventual united Soviet Macedonia.

Such reasoning and the traditional Comintern principle “one state—one party” led Šatorov-Šarlo to agree with his Bulgarian comrades, to remove the party organization in Vardar Macedonia from the KPJ's control, and to place it under the BKP. After he ignored orders from the KPJ's central committee in July 1941, its politburo accused him of anti-party and counterrevolutionary activities and dismissed him from the KPJ. In early September, Josip Broz Tito, the party's leader, appealed to the Comintern in Moscow. To its executive committee, he denounced the “old Bulgar” Šatorov-Šarlo as an opponent of the armed struggle, attacked the BKP for taking over the PK KPJM, and demanded its return to the KPJ.

The Comintern ruled in favour of the KPJ, which promptly appointed new leaders for the PK KPJM. The KPJ named as head Lazar Koliševski (1914–2000), a strong, pro-Serbian loyalist.¹⁵ The Bulgarian

police soon arrested him; he would spend most of the war in prison in Bulgaria but would become the dominant figure in the postwar republic of Macedonia in the Communist Yugoslav federation. After rejection by the KPJ, and now suspect to the BKP, Šatorov-Šarlo perished as a ranking commander in the resistance in Bulgaria in 1944. The circumstances of his death lack adequate explanation.

The Comintern's historic ruling marked a turning point in the long history of the Macedonian question. It transferred the initiative from the Bulgarian Communists, the dominant such group in the Balkans but whose country had joined the Axis, to the Yugoslavs, whose homeland the Axis had partitioned and occupied. In search of wider support among Macedonians, the KPJ, during the following year or year and a half, seemed to embrace at least in theory Macedonian national liberation and unification in Yugoslavia or in a Yugoslav-dominated south Slav or Balkan Communist federation. Yugoslav (Vardar) Macedonia would soon claim to be the Piedmont of Macedonian unification. Yugoslavia would dominate the Macedonian question until its bloody disintegration in 1990–91.

Many Macedonians joined the Communist-led resistance in Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia because they believed that their victory would bring national liberation and social and economic justice. However, since the Macedonian resistance in each partition was only a component of a larger movement, its growth and development in each responded to local conditions and circumstances.

In Vardar Macedonia, the KPJ's regional committee began preparations for organized resistance in the summer of 1941. It formed partisan units in Skopje, Prilep, and Kumanovo. The attack on 11 October 1941 by the Prilep partisans on the local police station and other symbols of the occupation launched Macedonia's revolution and struggle for national liberation, and Macedonians still celebrate it. In the following year, the leadership of the KPJ and the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), in Bosnia-Herzegovina, restructured Macedonia's KPJ regional committee several times to speed up and intensify armed resistance.

In the second half of 1942, the regional military headquarters for Macedonia became "supreme" headquarters of the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Macedonia (NOV i POM), which organized new and larger armed units. It named these units after Dame

Gruev, Jane Sandanski, Ćorĉe Petrov, and other VMRO leaders of the Ilinden period, with whom the KPJ and its regional leaders identified themselves. Armed clashes with the occupiers became larger and more frequent. Regional party leaders also established front organizations, such as the National Liberation Front (NOF), the Anti-Fascist Front of Women (AFŽ), and the Anti-Fascist Youth (AM) to mobilize the masses in support.

However, in 1941 and throughout 1942, the armed struggle in Macedonia lagged behind that in other parts of Yugoslavia. The continuing KPJ-BKP conflict over control of the party, which divided and confused local leaders and the rank and file, was only one inhibitor. As well, Bulgarian rule was markedly more paternalistic than harsh and was certainly less repressive than the previous Serbian/Yugoslav. More important, however, communication was virtually nonexistent between leaders of the armed fight in Macedonia and AVNOJ supreme headquarters in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Here geographic distance and hostile terrain played a role, but above all there were no Macedonians in the top leadership of AVNOJ. The aims of AVNOJ, even as its first session in Bihać formulated them in late November 1942, were not familiar to Macedonians. Its chief goal—national liberation of Yugoslavia—could not inspire and attract Macedonians, who saw it as reestablishment of Yugoslavia and Serbian rule—a prospect even less enticing than the Bulgarian regime. Supreme headquarters of AVNOJ knew even less about the actual situation and mood in Macedonia and about the traditional aims of its liberation struggle.

The situation began to change by the end of 1942 and particularly after February 1943, when Svetozar Vukmanović-Tempo arrived in Macedonia representing the KPJ's central committee and AVNOJ. Supreme headquarters of AVNOJ soon realized that securing mass participation of Macedonians would require that it pay attention to conditions, sensibilities, aims, and aspirations in their region, as it had done vis-à-vis other parts of Yugoslavia, such as Croatia and Slovenia. It would have to “Macedonianize” the struggle's form and content—give it a Macedonian facade as well as aims and aspirations.¹⁶

In the crucial first step, it dissolved the regional committee (PK) of the KPJ in Macedonia and replaced it in March 1943 with the central committee of the Communist Party of Macedonia (KPM). A separate Macedonian Communist party would lead the effort for national libera-

tion—not restoration of old Yugoslavia—but above all liberation of Macedonia and a new federal union of Yugoslav peoples. Both the KPM and supreme headquarters stressed the Macedonian character of the National Liberation Army and the Partisan Detachments. Macedonian officers ran the organization, and Macedonian was their language of command; they propagated national liberation of all Macedonians and, more subtly, national unification. During 1943 and 1944, this appeal attracted more and more young Macedonians to the armed resistance.

In its session on 2 August 1943, the KPM's central committee ordered the formation of larger partisan units capable of bigger operations. On 18 August, the supreme headquarters of the NOV i POM formed the Mirče Acev battallion, the first regular unit of the Macedonian army; and on 11 November, the first brigade, the Macedonian-Kosovo brigade, with 800 troops. It set up the first division in August 1944, and by November, when Skopje, the capital, was free again, there were seven divisions in the field, with 66,000 people under arms.¹⁷

The growth in strength of armed resistance facilitated larger military operations and liberation or partial liberation of areas of western Vardar Macedonia in 1943. Activities expanded further after Fascist Italy capitulated on 9 September 1943. The first liberated territories allowed bases for additional military efforts and represented the start of the future Macedonian state. The National Liberation Front established its authority in these areas. It introduced initial organs of local self-administration—the national Liberation Councils—and the first Macedonian elementary schools and religious services in Macedonian.

The “Macedonianization” of the push for liberation in the Vardar region culminated in the first half of October 1943 with the stirring Manifesto of the Supreme Headquarters of NOV i POM. The document appeared in the village Crvena Voda, in liberated territory in the Debar region. It appealed to the Macedonian people to join the struggle for independence; to build statehood through self-determination, in unity and equality with the other peoples in the new Yugoslavia; and thus to establish the basis for national unification.¹⁸

The manifesto did not gain immediate approval from all leading activists in Vardar Macedonia. Activists and intellectuals around the National Liberation Action Committee (ANOK) in Skopje prepared a sweeping critique (*prigovor*) of the document. They criticized it most of all because it ignored the plight of Macedonians in the Greek and Bulgarian partitions and hence national unification. They argued that such

unification was not solely a Yugoslav problem, but rather a Balkan question, involving Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia and their Communist parties, and therefore required a Balkan solution. They questioned whether national unification was realizable on a Yugoslav basis and thus wondered about the authors' sincerity.

Through direct and indirect contacts, supreme headquarters convinced the skeptics of its sincerity and dedication. However, it stressed that—in view of the conflicting Balkan interests of the Soviet Union and of Britain and the United States and because the Balkan neighbors (and their Communist parties) had incompatible aspirations in Macedonia—a Balkan solution might not prove possible during the war. It emphasized repeatedly that the Macedonians could achieve unity only with the help of the other Yugoslav peoples and that, even though AVNOJ embraced the aim, its leaders could not broach it publicly and officially because of its “sensitivity.”¹⁹

This very delicate issue would divide Macedonia's nationalists and the leaders of AVNOJ and later of Yugoslavia, including Tito, for years: through the war, its revolutionary aftermath, the Civil War in Greece, and the Soviet-Yugoslav dispute. For while Tito and the KPJ hoped for unification of Macedonia within Yugoslavia, they thought it a maximal aim. For them, liberation of Yugoslavia, preservation of its territorial integrity, and the regime's stability were the primary concerns, which they would not risk for the sake of Macedonian unification. Independently minded Macedonian nationalists, Communist and non-Communist, considered unification their principal aim—within Yugoslavia, if that country would help, or outside it, with aid from other supporters.

In any event, NOV i POM's manifesto of October 1943 was historically significant for the Macedonians. It was the first comprehensive declaration of aims in the effort for national liberation. It bore the names of the entire top leadership of the Macedonian movement. It helped legitimize the Communist-led struggle among the overwhelmingly patriotic but non-Communist population; it convinced doubters that the movement sought first and foremost Macedonians' liberation and creation of a new Yugoslavia. Finally, it affected Macedonians' thinking and developments in Aegean and Pirin Macedonia. The second session of AVNOJ, meeting in Jajce, Bosnia, on 29–30 November 1943, confirmed the manifesto's most significant promise: it proclaimed the new federal Yugoslavia, with Macedonia equal to five other federal units.

What form would the new republic take? Four months earlier, on 2 August 1943, the Prespa meeting of the KPM's central committee had agreed to prepare for the Macedonian equivalent of AVNOJ—the Anti-Fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM). Sometime between the appearance of the NOV i POM's manifesto (in the first half of October) and the second session of AVNOJ (late November)—most probably in early November—the KPM's central committee created its organizational council (Iniciativen odbor). That body included senior leaders of the national struggle and until August 1944 acted as the government of Macedonia. In the spring and early summer of 1944, it organized the first elections of village, town, and district National Liberation Councils (NOOs) and selection of delegates to the first session of ASNOM on 2 August.

In the first half of 1944, especially in wintry January through March, the Macedonian army and partisan units undertook some of the most difficult operations of the war. They fought large-scale clashes with the Germans, the Bulgarian army and police, and *četnik* units of Draža Mihailović, leader of the Serbian nationalist resistance. They expanded the liberated territories in western Macedonia, reached the Greek border in the south and contacted the EAM-ELAS in Aegean Macedonia, and began freeing areas in central and eastern Vardar Macedonia, all the way to the Serbian border. These successes made possible the historic first session of ASNOM.

The gathering took place on 2 August 1944—anniversary of the Ilinden Uprising of 1903—in the St. Prohor Pčinški monastery near Kumanovo, in the liberated territory in the northeast. Some 115 delegates and guests attended, including S. Vukmanović-Tempo, delegates from the Serbian liberation movement, and heads of the American and British military missions to Macedonian supreme headquarters.

This conclave—the so-called Second Ilinden—represented the culmination of the long and difficult road to statehood. It proclaimed the People's Democratic Republic of Macedonia in federal Yugoslavia, declared itself its constituent assembly, assumed full legislative and executive powers, and began to build the new state. It approved previous decisions and actions of supreme headquarters and the organizational council, guaranteed basic human rights for all citizens and national rights for minorities, proclaimed Macedonian the official language and 2 August the national holiday, set up a legislative commission and a commission to investigate enemy acts, and elected representatives to

AVNOJ. Finally, it chose a presidium of 22 members to perform all legislative and executive tasks until the next, the second session of ASNOM.²⁰ The presidium's first president was Metodija Andonov-Čento (1902–1957).

Čento was an exceptional political figure. He was not a Communist Party member; he was a businessman from Prilep. He was a high-profile and popular Macedonian activist in his native city and before the war had been a representative and candidate on the electoral list of the United Opposition. Yugoslav authorities arrested and imprisoned him in 1939 and in 1940; the occupiers interned him in Bulgaria in 1941 and in 1942. On 1 October 1943, he crossed into liberated territory and joined the armed struggle. Although he was not a member, party leaders gave him a position at supreme headquarters of NOV i POM because of his popularity among the masses. Later he headed the organizational council for the first session of ASNOM and was a Macedonian delegate to the second session of AVNOJ in November 1943. He was the most charismatic Macedonian leader and the most open and vocal proponent of national unification. In short, he was the most independent-minded and popular national wartime leader, and for that he would pay a heavy price at the end of the war.²¹

Greek and Bulgarian Macedonia (1941–1944)

The Macedonian question was from the outbreak of war much more than a Serbian/Yugoslav issue, concerning as it did Greek and Bulgarian Macedonia and neighboring states. The first session of ASNOM in August 1944 and its formal establishment of the Macedonian republic within Yugoslavia had far-reaching repercussions throughout the Balkans, but its impact was direct and immediate among Macedonians in Greece and Bulgaria, as we now see.

Like the KPJ in Yugoslavia, in Greece the KKE was the only political party to recognize Macedonian national identity and have a public policy on the national question. And, like its Yugoslav counterpart, it organized and led its country's most powerful resistance movement, the National Liberation Front (EAM), and its military arm, the Greek Popular Liberation Army (ELAS). While maintaining its commitment to social revolution, like the KPJ, the KKE also defended the traditional national interest of Greece. It attracted many non-Communist patriots and planned to seize power after liberation.

At the beginning of the war, the KKE paid no particular attention to the Macedonians. The sixth and the seventh plenums of its central committee, in June and September 1941, respectively, called on all citizens to fight the occupiers, but they did not mention the minorities. The eighth plenum, in January 1942, and the All-Greek Conference of the KKE, in December 1942, went further. They urged Macedonians to join Greeks in a common effort with Bulgarians and Serbians against the fascists and for Soviet victory, as well as for their own national and social liberation. Many Macedonians joined the EAM-ELAS; according to official KKE information, 6,000 served in its regular units and 20,000 in its reserves.²²

However, the KKE and EAM-ELAS faced stiff competition for Macedonians' allegiance. After years of neglect, oppression, and repression, this predominantly peasant people felt alienated from the Greek state. It was difficult for them to show loyalty to it or to believe vague promises of equality in a future "people's Greece." Many responded instead to the Italian, German, and Bulgarian occupation authorities and to Mihailov's VMRO, which promised them liberation from Greek rule in a "free," "autonomous," "independent," or "united" Macedonian state. Such propaganda and coercion appealed to their traditional and profound distrust of Greeks; as we saw above, these bodies armed many villages and recruited and equipped paramilitary bands, the so-called *komiti*, or *kontračeti*, to fight on their side.

By 1943, however, the KKE and EAM-ELAS faced much stronger competition. Overshadowing these rightist and largely non-Macedonian influences were powerful events in the Vardar region, which influenced the Aegean partition. Many people, including loyal members of the KKE and followers of EAM-ELAS, were in awe of the region's apparent autonomy within Tito's movement in Yugoslavia. Moreover, they savored its clearly Macedonian character. It had its own supreme headquarters and a Macedonian partisan army with Macedonian officers; it used Macedonian as the language of command and a Macedonian flag; it propagated openly national liberation of all Macedonians and, more quietly, national unification.

This situation stood in sharp contrast to practice in Greece, where, as Captain P. H. Evans, SOE, wrote: "ELAS . . . have always officered their *Macedonian* units with *Greeks* and this made a bad impression on the Slavophone Andartes in ELAS. It has made them feel, as the civilians also feel, that the millennium announced by EAM/ELAS, with the Slav

Macedonians enjoying equal privileges and full freedom, is just a sell-out after all; *Greece* will go on excluding them from state posts, from promotion in the army and so on.”²³

With the Yugoslav example inspiring them, Macedonian leftists began to demand a liberation movement in Aegean Macedonia. This stance, as well as recognition of their right to self-determination, as Yugoslav practice showed, was invaluable for drawing Macedonians into the Communist-led Balkan resistance.

However, the KKE rejected all such proposals. Its leaders feared that raising the Macedonian question in Greece would alienate Greeks from the KKE and EAM-ELAS. Nonetheless, from then on and throughout the Civil War (1947–49), the KKE sought to maintain and enhance its support among Greeks while attempting to conciliate Macedonians. Since divisions were so deep and reconciliation was so difficult, Greek Communist leaders manipulated the issue to assist their own party. Whenever the KKE needed Macedonians’ support, it paid lip service to their demands and made halfhearted concessions without giving up control over them. When it no longer required their support, it cancelled the concessions and downplayed their demands and the Macedonian problem in Greece.

In 1943, relations between EAM-ELAS and smaller groups in the nationalist resistance deteriorated dramatically. After ELAS fought with units of the National Republican Greek League (EDES) in early autumn—the so-called first round of the Civil War—the Communists courted the Macedonians in order to draw them away from Bulgarian influence and into their own ranks. In September 1943, ELAS created a Macedonian unit, Lazo Trpovski. In October, the KKE reluctantly sanctioned a Slav-Macedonian National Liberation Front (SNOF) and its military arm, the Slav-Macedonian National Liberation Army (SNOV), under the direct authority of EAM-ELAS.

For the more radical Macedonian leaders, this was clearly but a first step: they hoped that SNOF-SNOV would become a movement for national liberation—autonomous, perhaps even independent of EAM-ELAS, with its own organization, leadership, and command structure throughout Aegean Macedonia. Such a movement, with a program of self-determination, would appeal to most Macedonians.

In fact, even the SNOF-SNOV won immediate acceptance and widespread support among Aegean Macedonians. The KKE wanted only an obedient and subservient, token instrument to draw Macedonians into

the EAM-ELAS and thus away from the various “free” and “autonomous” Macedonian bands that the Bulgarians and Germans supported. It was not willing to tolerate, let alone accept as partner, an authentic, leftist Macedonian liberation movement with popular mass following and an independent power base. While the movement was still organizing, party leaders severely curtailed its independence, restricting and hindering its activities, and they suppressed it in April–May 1944. They ordered the arrest of some of its top figures, but eighty partisans under Naum Pejov fled to join the Macedonian army in Vardar Macedonia.²⁴

In the summer, the KKE had once again to conciliate the Macedonians. A temporary solution emerged with the help of Macedonian leaders in Yugoslavia when the KKE promised to permit separate Macedonian units within the ELAS. However, it allowed only two battalions—the Edessa (Voden) in June and the Kastoria (Kostur)-Florina (Lerin) in August. It tightly controlled their activities and restricted their numbers. As the secretary of the party’s Macedonian bureau confessed cynically: there would be two bands “so that the Slav Macedonians are not deceived by an eventual plot by the Bulgarians.”²⁵

Tense relations reached a crisis by October, when, facing liquidation, the two Macedonian battalions revolted and crossed into Vardar Macedonia. The flight of the two units, which included the most prominent Macedonian leftists, represented an open break between the Communist-led resistance and the Macedonians in Greece. The rebels enjoyed mass support, which troubled KKE leaders. They denounced the rebels as traitors, komitadjis, kontračetniks, and instruments of the Gestapo and the “intelligence service.”

The Macedonians in turn accused the KKE and EAM-ELAS of Greek chauvinism and opportunism and refused further cooperation unless the KKE corrected its policy on the Macedonian question and met their demands. The rebels wanted separate units; a Macedonian national front with representation in the central committee of EAM; Macedonian institutions; local self-government; and freedom to conduct their own propaganda and education, even on subjects such as Macedonian self-determination and unification. Until then, “the Macedonian national fighters will not subordinate themselves to dictatorship and discipline of EAM-ELAS; [they] will carry on an independent policy and struggle for national justice.”²⁶

This split, which also chilled KKE-KPJ relations, occurred at an awkward moment for EAM-ELAS: on the eve of the so-called second

round (December 1944–January 1945) in Greece's Civil War. The Greek left's defeat in the Battle of Athens by the British, who had the support of the previously discredited Greek right, and its acceptance of the humiliating Varkiza Agreement on 12 February 1945 only widened the rift. Macedonian leaders in Greece and victorious Communists in Yugoslavia considered Varkiza a shameful capitulation.

The wartime situation of Macedonians in Pirin (Bulgarian) Macedonia differed entirely from that of their conationals in Yugoslavia and Greece. As a signatory of the Tripartite Pact of 1936 allying Germany, Italy, and Japan, Bulgaria was an Axis ally and therefore not an occupied land. Consequently, Bulgarians did not suffer the deprivations—existential, political, economic, cultural, and so on—that the peoples of the conquered and occupied countries underwent. Bulgaria made large territorial acquisitions in Macedonia—virtual fulfillment of the dream of San Stefano—and it gained economically at least for as long as its allies, especially Germany, were winning on the battlefields and providing a stable market for Bulgaria's expanding output.

Under such circumstances, the resistance in Bulgaria was very modest in comparison with that in occupied Greece and Yugoslavia. The first armed bands emerged after the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Communists organized and led most of them; the entire resistance depended almost totally on the Communist underground. The Communists retained effective control of the bands even after mid-1942, when they set up the Fatherland Front (OF), a leftist coalition, together with the Social Democrats, the left-wing Agrarians, and the intellectuals and military officers of the elitist Zveno group.²⁷

The aims and tactics of the Bulgarian resistance were equally modest. Party leaders, most of whom had spent the 1920s and 1930s in Moscow and would remain there throughout the war, decided that "classical" conditions for an armed partisan uprising did not exist in their homeland and therefore called on members to engage solely in sabotage and diversionary activities.

The resistance was more extensive in the Pirin region than elsewhere in the country. In the interwar years, the traditional parties, including the Communists' OF partners, had hardly any following in the Pirin region. Mihailov's VMRO controlled the political right and center. After its dissolution in 1934, its disorganized followers continued to support the authoritarian government and, during the war, the pro-Fascist re-

gime. Only the Communist Party (BKP), most of whose Macedonian followers also belonged to the VMRO (ob.) and its auxiliaries, represented the organized opposition in Pirin Macedonia. Between the world wars, it enjoyed a greater following in the region than in other parts of Bulgaria and had a solid underground network there. Moreover, unlike elsewhere in Bulgaria, the Communist resistance had a Macedonian dimension. Both the BKP and the VMRO (ob.) advocated the Comintern platform—a united Macedonia in a Balkan Communist federation. A successful outcome—a Communist revolution and takeover of power—would result in a united Macedonia as an equal partner in a reconfigured Balkans.

The region's first partisan units appeared shortly after Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, under leading activists of the former VMRO (ob.). By the end of 1942, they operated throughout Pirin Macedonia. The success of the Allies, particularly the Red Army, in 1943, and new contacts with Communist-led movements in Yugoslavia and Greece inspired them. In the final year of the war, they consolidated into larger fighting detachments and intensified their diversionary attacks on police, military targets, and public buildings; obstructed the regime's requisitioning of foods and livestock; and punished people who closely identified with the regime.²⁸

Macedonians in a New Balkans (1944–1949)

There is no doubt that the national liberation movements—AVNOJ in Yugoslavia and EAM-ELAS in Greece—aided in the liberation of their countries. Yet Allied successes in France and Italy, and the Soviet advances in Poland and southeast Europe, were the decisive factors. Communists ruled in most of the Balkans at war's end. Macedonians had their new Yugoslav republic, but potential unification with Pirin Macedonia went nowhere after the Soviet-Yugoslav break in 1948. In Greece, British intervention in 1944–45 and American in the Civil War (1947–49), which conflict cost Macedonians there dearly, swayed that contest toward the extreme right, which triumphed in 1949.

The Red Army crossed the Pruth River in early spring 1944, and Romania capitulated on 23 August 1944. The Red Army's push into the Balkans provoked the collapse of the Axis-dominated regime in Sofia. The Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria on 5 September, and three

days later the Red Army entered the country. That same night, the Communist-dominated Fatherland Front (OF) seized power in Sofia. Moreover, the Red Army's inexorable march westward through the peninsula threatened the Germans' only escape route, through the vital Morava-Vardar valley and the Salonika–Skopje–Belgrade railway.

The Germans began evacuating Greece in September 1944. By early October, when the first British units landed in Greece, the Germans were in full retreat. On 14 October, the British reached Athens, which ELAS already controlled. In the following two weeks, as the Germans retreated north, ELAS units attacked them constantly and took one town after another.

By early autumn 1944, most of rural Vardar (Yugoslav) Macedonia was free. The National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments—three army corps with nine divisions—took the principal towns about mid-October. In the eastern and southeastern areas, they had help from units of the Bulgarian army. The resistance liberated Strumica on 5 November, Štip on the eighth, and Kumanovo on the eleventh. Pelagonia and the lake district fell at the same time: Prilep on 2 November, Bitola on the fourth, Resen on the fifth, and Ohrid on the eighth. The Germans fought back with far greater determination in the battle for Veles, a transportation junction on the Vardar. After two days of heavy fighting, the liberators took the city on 11 November. That advance opened the way for them to Skopje, soon to be capital of the Macedonian republic, where German units made up more than a division. Skopje became free on 3 November. From there, fighting moved toward Tetovo, which capitulated on 19 November. After the liberation of Macedonia, units of the National Liberation Army continued north toward Kočanik and Kosovo and helped free the rest of Yugoslavia.

The ending of the Axis occupation of Macedonia and the end of the war—the fourth in modern times by neighbors for control of the country—did not resolve the perennial Macedonian question. The general outline of the postwar political settlement came from the Allied powers, particularly Britain and the Soviet Union.

The “percentages agreement” to divide east central Europe into spheres of influence, which Winston Churchill offered and Josef Stalin graciously accepted in Moscow in October 1944, formalized the military situation and again left Macedonia in parts and the Macedonians separated. Britain maintained control of Greece, “the most important Balkan

country from the point of view of British interests,” and was determined to keep it and neighboring Turkey “within the British postwar sphere and to defend them against the possible or probable expansionist tendencies of a vast Soviet sphere of influence on their northern borders.”²⁹

In order to guarantee its own part of the bargain, Britain intervened militarily in Greece, which the Communist-led left had already practically liberated and now virtually controlled. The Greek left’s defeat by the British in the Battle of Athens in December 1944–January 1945, its acceptance of the Varkiza Agreement on 12 February 1945, and the rise to power of the extreme nationalist right devastated the national aspirations of the Macedonians in Greece.

The Churchill-Stalin bargain left Bulgaria, which the Red Army had already liberated and occupied, in the Soviet sphere of influence. Yugoslavia, which they were to share equally, was free now thanks mostly to the Communist-led national liberation movement and was under its control and administration and so at least nominally in Moscow’s sphere.

Although at war’s end Macedonia continued to belong to its three neighbors, Macedonians’ situation in the three partitions differed radically. In Greece, the British-installed reactionary government reverted to the prewar policy. It launched a violent campaign against the left, and Macedonians became primary targets of this so-called white terror. It victimized Macedonians partly because so many of them had supported the left—the EAM-ELAS—during the war, but mainly because they had raised national demands ranging from minority rights to outright separation from Greece.

In Bulgaria, the BKP, which led and dominated the Soviet-backed Fatherland Front (OF) government, recognized the separate national identity of the Macedonians, but had not yet determined the future of the Macedonians in Bulgaria and in Pirin Macedonia.

The Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, as we saw above, had in November 1943 recognized Vardar Macedonia as an equal republic and the Macedonians as a constituent nation. The first session of ASNOM (August 1944) had set up a Macedonian Communist government and administration—the People’s Republic of Macedonia.

The dramatic events of the war transformed the Macedonian question. Vardar (Yugoslav) Macedonia won not only national recognition, but also legal equality in the new federation. With the new Macedonian

state, Tito's victorious regime consolidated its dominant role in Macedonian affairs. It had won the support of activists, Communist and non-Communist, not only in Vardar but also in Aegean and Pirin Macedonia.

However, the activists' loyalty was not unconditional. Victory in Yugoslavia, the Red Army's successful march through eastern Europe, and the ascendancy of the Communist-dominated left made many activists see the new republic as the Piedmont of Macedonian unification, as the beginning of the national unification of Macedonia and the national unification of Macedonians. They rarely ever distinguished between the two options—unification of Macedonia and unification of the Macedonians. Greater Macedonia was their priority, and they expected the new Yugoslavia to spearhead the drive for its attainment.

Even before war's end, the confident leaders of victorious Yugoslavia began to impose their Macedonian solution on the weak and uncertain Communist-dominated Fatherland Front (OF) government of defeated Bulgaria. Throughout negotiations for a Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation, which began in November–December 1944 and climaxed with Tito and Georgi Dimitrov's meetings in Bled, Slovenia, in August 1947 and at Evksinograd, near Varna, in November 1947, Macedonia was the focus. The Yugoslavs sought to impose on the divided and hesitant Bulgarians the unification of Pirin Macedonia with the new Yugoslav republic or in a Yugoslav-dominated south Slav federation. Unlike some of his fellow leaders of the Bulgarian party and particularly leaders of the government's other parties, Communist leader and prime minister Dimitrov, both of whose parents were born in Macedonia, "was receptive to the proposed plan of unifying the constituent parts of Macedonia, and signed the Bled agreement of August 1947 between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria which was tantamount to union of Pirin and Vardar Macedonia. The agreement abolished entry visas and envisaged a customs union. However, Dimitrov opposed immediate formal union until after the proposed Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation had been realised. This proved something of a stumbling block as Tito wanted Bulgaria to join on a basis of equality with the other constituent republics of Yugoslavia (i.e., Serbia) while the Bulgarians wanted equal status with Yugoslavia."³⁰

Meanwhile, and in accordance with the Bled agreement, which had reconfirmed the resolution of the tenth plenum of the BKP's central committee in August 1946, Dimitrov's government was giving Pirin Macedonia virtual cultural autonomy. The resolution had stated the party's

general line on Macedonia—the right of other parts of Macedonia to unite with the Yugoslav republic—and declared that creating conditions for such unification, especially vis-à-vis the Pirin region, was the task not only of Macedonians but of Bulgaria's Fatherland Front and People's Federal Yugoslavia. In the interim, the BKP would move the Macedonians of Pirin culturally closer to the Yugoslav republic. To facilitate unification, it would popularize the standard Macedonian language and literature and the history of the Macedonian people; facilitate contacts and open the region's borders with the republic; and enhance the region's cultural autonomy and thus Macedonian consciousness there. The resolution called on all party members, especially in the Pirin region and among Macedonians elsewhere in Bulgaria, to support strengthening of the republic and preparations for merger in the context of Bulgarian-Yugoslav union.³¹

The Macedonians in Pirin Macedonia and in Bulgaria in general had in effect won the right to cultural autonomy. The Bulgarian census of December 1946 for the first time permitted Macedonians to declare their nationality. Macedonians organized their own educational and cultural societies and published their own newspapers and journals. *Makedonsko zname*, the newspaper of Macedonian émigrés in Bulgaria, and *Pirinsko delo*, that of the OF in Pirin Macedonia, were published in Macedonia and became mouthpieces of cultural autonomy.

The Bled agreement speeded up implementation of cultural autonomy. In August 1947, the Narodno sūbranie (parliament) in Sofia introduced the Macedonian language and national history in schools in Pirin Macedonia, and the government asked Skopje to send teachers and other qualified cultural workers to the region. Early in the autumn, a large group of teachers, professors, writers, and actors arrived there. At the same time, the Macedonian government organized special language centers for teachers from the Pirin region and accepted and funded students from there in its secondary schools and at the University of Skopje. These efforts were preparing the ground for introduction of Macedonian as the language of instruction in Pirin Macedonia.

Furthermore, cultural contacts and exchanges between the region and the republic increased markedly throughout the autumn and winter of 1947–48. The Macedonian national theater in Gorna Dzhumaja presented Macedonian plays. Macedonian bookstores, *Makedonska kniga*, opened in major towns, and exhibitions of Macedonian books and publications, with accompanying lectures, took place in towns and larger

villages. Prospects for cultural autonomy and even for unification with the republic appeared promising indeed.³²

Leaders of the KPJ and the Macedonian republic closely observed developments in Greece. They hoped that Communist victory there would pave the way for a Yugoslav resolution of the Macedonian question: Aegean Macedonia or its Macedonian-populated areas would unite with the Yugoslav republic or in a Yugoslav-dominated Balkan Communist federation that would include Greece.

As we saw above, during the wartime occupation, Yugoslavia, or rather the movement for national liberation in Vardar Macedonia, had helped rally Macedonians in Greece and their organizations behind the EAM-ELAS. The KKE and Macedonian activists in Greece had major differences. The KKE saw in Macedonian nationalism disloyalty to the Greek state; Macedonians saw in their Greek comrades' strong patriotism and nationalism a betrayal of their national rights. The split in autumn 1944 between the Macedonian leadership in Greece and the EAM-ELAS, British intervention and victory in the Battle of Athens (December 1944–January 1945), and the capitulation of the Greek left at Varkiza in February 1945 set back the Macedonian cause and Tito's designs.

However, the Yugoslav leaders remained confident that the KKE would depend on them in any attempt to seize power. But they also realized that the liberation of the Aegean Macedonians depended on the victory of the KKE—the only party in Greece that recognized their identity and existence. They were aware too that the KKE, to win, would need direct or indirect aid from Communist neighbors to the north, especially in Yugoslavia. Direct aid from Yugoslavia, where the Macedonians already had a republic, would not come unless the Greek Communists could win active support from Macedonians in Greece. These incompatible allies would have to fight together; the success of each depended on the other.

The Greek extreme right aimed its terror campaign after Varkiza especially hard against Macedonians. In addition to supporting EAM-ELAS, the Macedonians did not consider themselves Greek, so the fanatical right condemned them as “Bulgars,” “komitadjis,” “collaborators,” “autonomists,” “Sudetens of the Balkans,” and so forth and threatened to exterminate them.³³ And Macedonians suffered armed attacks on their villages, murders, arrests, trials, jail, and exile; confiscation of

property and movable equipment; burning of homes and villages; economic blockades of villages; forcible expulsions; discriminatory use of taxes and aid from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA); and restrictions on movement.

Macedonian activists, particularly the leaders who broke with the KKE and crossed into the republic in autumn 1944, realized the need to organize the Macedonians in Greece. With the undaunted encouragement and support of Skopje and Belgrade, in April 1945 they founded the Communist-led National Liberation Front (NOF) as a direct successor of the wartime SNOF and as a single, united organization of all Macedonians in Greece. The new body not only appealed to Macedonians who had sided with EAM-ELAS but also wished to draw in Macedonians, the so-called autonomists, whom occupation authorities had armed. The NOF sought and soon established a vast organizational network that reached all Macedonian-populated areas.

The primary aim of NOF, as of SNOF, was self-determination and thus national liberation; for its Communist leaders, this could mean only ultimate unification with free Macedonia in Yugoslavia. However, in the conditions of post-Varkiza Greece and the Balkans in general, the NOF had to play down, or set aside until the victory of the Greek left, this maximal aim, which was anathema to all Greeks. Instead, it focused on safeguarding Macedonians in Greece, which goal the Communist-led left apparently supported. This minimal program remained its declared policy until its second congress in March 1949—that is, virtually until the end of the Civil War in Greece.

NOF leaders were fully conscious of their isolation in Greece and called repeatedly for collaboration with the Greek left. But a basis for cooperation did not exist; Varkiza had exacerbated the existing split. Macedonian leaders denounced the agreement because they were sure that the KKE could seize power only through armed struggle. The KKE, however, endorsed the accord and as a legal party embraced political struggle to win power in Greece. The two positions were not compatible and precluded meaningful cooperation. Hence, in the year and a half following Varkiza, the KKE and EAM, while protesting anti-Macedonian terror, also rejected the NOF, denouncing it as an “autonomist” and “fascist” tool of the “Intelligence Service” and equating it with the Bulgarian-sponsored wartime autonomist movement.³⁴

The KKE’s attitude toward the NOF, and the struggle for power in Greece, did not change as long as KKE leaders thought political victory

possible. The first indications of possible reorientation surfaced in late 1945 and early 1946, when KKE leaders recognized the NOF as “an anti-fascist organization of the Slav Macedonians” and called for Greek-Macedonian unity, which Varkiza had disrupted. Conciliation of the NOF intensified after 12 February 1946, when the second plenum of the central committee decided to begin preparations for a possible armed struggle.

These overtures set the stage for a formal rapprochement. The long, difficult discussions commenced in May 1946. Agreement finally emerged with the aid of Belgrade and Skopje on 21 November 1946. The accord did not fully satisfy either side. Under pressure probably from the KPJ, the NOF abandoned its demand for separate Macedonian units in the rebel army, the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), and left appointments and promotions to the KKE. However, the KKE made some concessions as well. It wanted to decapitate the NOF, to do away with its central leadership, and to take control of district and local organizations, as token instruments for mobilizing Macedonians. In the end, it had to accept the NOF’s right to retain its own central leadership, which meant *de facto* recognition of that group as the highest organ of the Macedonians in Greece.³⁵

The two sides concluded the agreement not because they trusted each other but because they needed and depended on each other to realize their respective ends—namely, seizure of power for the KKE and national liberation for the NOF. Although the NOF was no longer voicing it openly, the KKE suspected that its real aim remained self-determination and unification of Aegean Macedonia, or at least of those areas with Macedonians, with the Yugoslav republic. The KKE distrusted the NOF’s leaders, and past experience inspired the NOF’s leaders to question the KKE’s Macedonian program and, above all, the sincerity of its leaders. It is unclear how each side hoped to tackle the challenge that the other posed after the common struggle. However, NOF leaders probably counted on Yugoslav support, while the KKE hoped to neutralize the NOF as a factor in future relations with Yugoslavia.

In any event, the Macedonians of Greek Macedonia made a critical contribution to the Communist side during the Civil War in Greece. They bore the brunt of the war. They inhabited central and western Aegean Macedonia, which bordered on Yugoslavia and Albania and was site of the heaviest fighting, including the decisive battles. Throughout the Civil War, this area served as a base for the political and military

operations of the so-called democratic movement. The KKE and its military arm, the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), both maintained headquarters there. The area also embraced the so-called liberated territories—lands under DSE control that formed its home front and supplied or were expected to supply most if not all of the provisions. As one participant and close observer stated: “[They] were turned into military workshops for the DSE, where everyone, young and old, male and female, served the needs of the DSE.”³⁶

Even more notable was the Macedonians’ contribution to the fighting strength of the left. Throughout the struggle their participation in the ranks of the rebel army was high, far out of proportion to their relatively low numbers in the Greek population. Their estimated representation in the DSE ranged from more than a quarter in April 1947 to more than two-thirds in mid-1949. According to Colonel C. M. Woodhouse, chief of the British Military Mission to occupied Greece, “they numbered 11,000 out of 25,000 in 1948, but 14,000 out of less than 20,000 by mid-1949.”³⁷ In the most critical theaters, they constituted an even higher percentage. As early as October 1947, they made up three-quarters of the manpower of the command of central and western Macedonia. Vasilis Bartzotas, a member of the Politburo and political commissar of DSE general headquarters, paid a tribute to “this heroic people [which] gave everything . . . ; it sacrificed its children, its property, its homes. Every household has a wounded or a dead [member].”³⁸

Tito became the principal patron of the Greek Communists in their struggle for power. The Yugoslavs not only offered moral support but helped rally the Macedonians to the Communist side. They also became the crucial source of practical aid. They provided food, transport facilities, and use of camps, arms, artillery, and ammunitions. They hoped for a Communist victory in Greece for ideological reasons but perhaps primarily because they expected such a victory, and federation with Bulgaria, to pave the way for Yugoslav resolution of the Macedonian question—unification of Macedonia under Yugoslav auspices.

Stalin stopped both the south Slav federation and Macedonian unification. As we saw above, in 1941 the Soviet Communist Party sided with the KPJ on Macedonia. Later Stalin endorsed the initial moves toward a Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation. As the war wound down, however, he began to suspect Tito, who, unlike other eastern European Communist leaders, enjoyed an independent base of power at home and did not depend on Moscow.

Stalin's distrust must have grown after the war with Tito's persistent independence in foreign relations. As Phyllis Auty has noted, this stance "endangered the fundamental basis of Soviet foreign policy and challenged the communist theory that had been used to cloak Russia's national aims."³⁹ Stalin feared that a Yugoslav-Bulgarian or a Balkan federation centered in Belgrade could easily challenge Soviet hegemony in the Balkans, throughout eastern Europe, and in the international Communist movement. Consequently, Stalin vetoed the plans for federation at the end of 1947 and, with the outbreak of the historic Soviet-Yugoslav dispute in the spring of 1948 and the Cominform's expulsion of Yugoslavia on 28 June 1948, destroyed any chances the Communist left had in the Civil War in Greece. Macedonian unification died in the ashes of the Stalin-Tito conflict—the first cold war dividing the Communist bloc.

The Cominform reintroduced the interwar Comintern program on Macedonia—a united Macedonian state in an illusory future Balkan Communist federation. This approach mirrored the ideals and dreams not only of the SNOF and the NOF, but also of earlier Macedonian patriotic and nationalist leftists. Yet Stalin acted only out of expediency. The Cominform reembraced the old slogan exclusively as short-term propaganda, for tactical gains, and as an integral part of its campaign against Tito's Yugoslavia. Stalin turned Macedonia into an instrument of his anti-Yugoslav endeavors.

Although the KKE did not declare its support for the Cominform resolution right away, it was obvious that it would follow the Bulgarian example and side with Stalin and his party. Both parties were subservient to Stalin, and the Cominform resolution emboldened Bulgarian and Greek Communist leaders who resented Tito's overbearing tactics as well as his work for a Yugoslav solution on Macedonia.

Thus, after its expulsion from the Cominform in June 1948, Yugoslavia worried about its own survival. Macedonian unification was not a priority; Yugoslavia left the NOF and the Macedonians in Greece to their own devices. The KKE's alienation of Yugoslavia, its sole major patron, and Yugoslavia's gradual withdrawal of support decided the fate of the KKE and its struggle in Greece. The victory of the U.S.-supported Greek nationalist right and the capitulation of the left a year later, in 1949, also eviscerated the national aspirations of the Macedonians in Aegean Macedonia.⁴⁰

The dramatic events of the Second World War and its revolutionary aftermath in the Balkans transformed the Macedonian question. To be sure, the Macedonians failed to achieve national unification, and those in Aegean (Greek) and Pirin (Bulgarian) Macedonia did not even win lasting official recognition.

After the Communist defeat in the Civil War, the pro-Western royalist government in Athens equated expressions of Macedonianism with Communism, which became illegal in Greece. It denied even more vociferously than before 1939 a Macedonian identity and national minority and continued to call Macedonians in the republic “Serbs” or “Skopjans.”

Communist Bulgaria found itself in an even more awkward situation. Despite having recognized a separate Macedonian identity, accepted Macedonian cultural autonomy in the Pirin region, and endorsed in principle Macedonian unification, after Yugoslavia’s expulsion from the Cominform Bulgaria reverted to the traditional royalist position. It negated the existence of a Macedonian national identity and claimed all Macedonians as Bulgarians.

However, the Macedonians of Yugoslav (Vardar) Macedonia, the largest Macedonian group, won not only national recognition but also legal equality within the new, Communist-led, federal Yugoslavia. They became a constituent republic and Macedonian one of four official languages. Federal Yugoslavia claimed the role of champion of all Macedonians, enjoyed a dominant say in Macedonian affairs until its collapse in 1991, and placed Bulgaria and Greece on the defensive.