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THE "MACEDONIAN QUESTION"  
AS A BALKAN PROBLEM IN THE 1940s

The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyse the "Macedonian question" in the framework of Balkan politics in the 1940s. During this period one can note two distinct phases: In the first phase April 1941 - October 1944 there was a struggle for supremacy in Yugoslav Macedonia between the Bulgarian authorities and the Yugoslav and Bulgarian communist parties. The second phase November 1944-summer of 1948 was dominated by Tito's ambitions for a South-Slav federation which greatly complicated the international situation in the Balkans and it was closely related to the problem of the territorial claims of the Balkan states.

Upon the German invasion of the Balkans in April 1941, Bulgaria was allowed to take from Yugoslavia her Macedonian lands and from Greece the eastern part of Macedonia and western Thrace. Central and western Macedonia were occupied by Germany and Italy. The Bulgarian authorities made every effort to absorb the Greek and Yugoslav territory and treated them as if annexed permanently.

In the Bulgarian occupied territory the Greek population was being decimated by mass murders and forced migrations. This movement started with the arrival of the Bulgarian troupes and their objective was not to convert the local population, since there were few Slavs, but to eliminate it and replace it with Bulgarian colonists. In August 1941, as a result of the Bulgarian persecutions, the first guerrilla units appeared in eastern Macedonia under the name «Ελευθερία» and undertook to resist the invaders. In the end of September, however, the Bulgarians provoked a popular revolt in Drama, Doxato and Kavalla, which ended in massacres of the Greek population while 30,000 persons fled only to Thessaloniki: Reliable sources indicate that 15,000 Greeks were killed and over 200,000 people were forced to flee from the region<sup>1</sup>. The plan of the Bulgarian government was to make eastern Macedonia and

1. National Archives of the United States, Department of State Records (DSR), 868.00/1132. Berry to Department of State, Rome, 17 November 1941.

western Thrace predominantly Bulgarian in population and to insure the final attribution of the territory to Bulgaria<sup>2</sup>.

The Bulgarians, also, tried to extend their control to western and central Macedonia. Their first objective was the proselytization of the small number of slavophones who lived in the area at the time of the German invasion and had openly shown pro-Bulgarian sentiment<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, armed bands of Bulgarian sympathizers terrorized the Greek population. Although the Germans condemned the Bulgarian activities they did not allow the Bulgarians to extend their authority in the area. Indicative of the resistance that the Greek population put against the Bulgarian activities is the fact that only about 14,700 persons took Bulgarian identity cards in order to take advantage of the Bulgarian offer that only Bulgarians would receive foodstuffs donated by the international Red Cross<sup>4</sup>.

Contrary to the opposition that Bulgaria faced in Greek Macedonia, the Bulgarians in the occupied Yugoslav Macedonia were greeted initially with great enthusiasm as historical ties united the population. The general policy of the Bulgarians was to win over the population and absorb the occupied area. This, however, proved unsuccessful as the Bulgarian authorities acted like conquerors and were corrupt and incompetent administrators<sup>5</sup>. At the same time a bitter struggle started between the Yugoslav and the Bulgarian communist parties over the right to control Yugoslav Macedonia, with the local communist party aligning itself with the Bulgarians. The Yugoslav partisan leaders, faced with a dual challenge by the Bulgarian authorities and communists in Macedonia, tried to get control of the region with the organization of armed resistance. The situation changed in favor of the Yugoslavs as the Germans attacked the Soviet Union and the Comintern called in August 1941 for risings to aid the Soviet cause<sup>6</sup>. At this point, it was difficult for the weak Bulgarian party to organize partisan activities that would be directed against Bulgarian soldiers. In this situation the more militant Yugoslav organizers were able to launch the first actions, and in the fall of 1941 partisan detachments were formed under Lazar Kolishevski's direction. Their efforts, however, met with an early disaster as the Bulgarian forces

2. For a detailed account see Evangelos Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, Thessaloniki 1964, pp. 102-106.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

5. Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2, Cambridge 1983, p. 255.

6. Elisabeth Barker, *Macedonia*, London 1950, pp. 87-88.

managed to break the party organization and crush the first partisan units<sup>7</sup>.

The situation in Yugoslav Macedonia remained unchanged until the beginning of 1943 when the Yugoslavs again attempted to organize a resistance movement in Macedonia. Tito and the other partisan leaders, by this time, had decided to solve the Macedonian problem with the eventual union of all Macedonia (Yugoslav, Bulgarian and Greek) within the framework of a federal Yugoslavia<sup>8</sup>. The theory was that all Slav-speakers in the three Macedonian provinces were not Bulgarians nor Serbs but ethnic "Macedonians" and had the right to win their freedom within the Yugoslav federation.

To implement this new policy Svetozar Vukmanović-Tempo was sent to Yugoslav Macedonia to assure the local population that in the future Yugoslav state they would have autonomy and could use their own language freely. Since the nationalists in the area were thoroughly disillusioned with the Bulgarian occupation forces, this approach won much support. Moreover, in the summer of 1943 Tempo came into contact with partisan leaders in Greece, Albania and Bulgaria and informed them of the Yugoslav plan for the post-war solution of the "Macedonian question" without making, any reference to any territorial changes in Macedonia<sup>9</sup>. Specifically Tempo proposed the creation of a Balkan General Staff which would coordinate the activities of the partisan units. Slavo-Macedonians would be permitted to form their own political organizations and armed units, which should be able to cross the frontiers and operate in the neighboring countries<sup>10</sup>. Tempo's major objective was to transform the Bulgarian-oriented Slavophones into Slavo-Macedonians who would achieve their unity with the acquisition of Bulgarian and Greek territory.

The leadership of the EAM/ELAS resistance movement in Greece rejected the idea for a Balkan General Staff, but permitted the organization of the Slavo-Macedonians into a Slav National Liberation Front (SNOF) and the creation of special Slavo-Macedonian armed units within the ranks of ELAS<sup>11</sup>. These units caused a great deal of trouble to ELAS throughout 1944 and in October of that year ELAS units were forced to attack the SNOF formations which withdrew into Yugoslav Macedonia<sup>12</sup>.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

8. Robert Lee Wolff, *The Balkans in our Time*, New York 1967, pp. 215-216.

9. Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in Southeast Europe in the Second World War*, London 1976, p. 188.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 197. Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, p. 121.

12. Kofos, p. 127.

Following the departure of the Germans (end of October 1944) western and central Macedonia came under Greek control. However, eastern Macedonia and western Thrace continued to be under Bulgarian occupation and only after strong British protest to the Soviets did the Bulgarians evacuate the area<sup>13</sup>.

After the Greek government returned to Athens demanded that parts of southern Bulgaria and possibly of Yugoslavia be ceded to Greece. These claims, coupled with Tito's desires to create a unified Macedonia by annexing portion of Bulgarian Macedonia and Greek Macedonia to the People's Republic of Macedonia, complicated greatly the "Macedonian question"<sup>14</sup>. Until the autumn of 1944 the territorial issue concerning Bulgaria and Yugoslavia appeared to be simply whether Greek claims to an expansion of the Greek frontiers would be fulfilled. After that date, however, even the restoration of the pre-war Greek frontier began to be called in question. There were numerous statements of Yugoslav officials declaring that the autonomous state of Macedonia would include Thessaloniki and Greek territory as far as the Nestos River<sup>15</sup>. Also, they rejected Greek claims, to either Yugoslav or Bulgarian Macedonia and in turn accused Greek officials of persecuting "our Macedonians" in "Aegean Macedonia"<sup>16</sup>.

Tito, by the end of 1944, hoped to solve the Macedonian problem by annexing Pirin Macedonia and arranging a federation with Bulgaria. This automatically posed a grave threat to Greek Macedonia and moreover the powerful influence of Yugoslavia in the Albanian Communist Party gave promise that eventually the Yugoslavs could transform Albania as well into a Federal Republic<sup>17</sup>.

Negotiations about a Bulgarian-Yugoslav federation started in December 1944, on Yugoslav initiative, but nothing concrete developed as Bulgaria refused to become merely the seventh republic in Tito's Federal Yugoslavia, after Pirin Macedonia had been united with the Yugoslav Macedonian Republic. The Bulgarians were willing to allow the development of a common national consciousness in Bulgarian and Yugoslav Macedonia but they could not agree on the Yugoslav federation plans on terms other than absolute

13. Basil Kondis, *Η αγγλοαμερικανική πολιτική και το ελληνικό πρόβλημα: 1945-1949*, Thessaloniki 1984, pp. 38-39.

14. For a detailed account see Kondis, *Η αγγλοαμερικανική πολιτική*, passim.

15. National Archives of the United States, Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Research and Analysis Report No. 2662, Washington, 8 February 1945.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Wolff, *The Balkans in our Time*, p. 314.

Bulgarian-Yugoslav parity<sup>18</sup>. As differences on the question of parity could not be overcome, the initial plans for federation were shelved in the beginning of 1945 with the explanation that Great Britain and the United States were opposed to them<sup>19</sup>.

The American and the British governments with considerable apprehension followed the situation and the statements in favor of an autonomous Macedonia and the creation of a federation. Although the British would welcome a federation between all the Balkan states including Turkey, they would not favor an exclusive union or federation between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria because it would isolate Greece and endanger her position as a Balkan state. Moreover, they opposed to the inclusion of any territories belonging to either Bulgaria or Greece to the Macedonian Federal Republic on the ground that such regions were "Macedonian"<sup>20</sup>. On its part the American government considered that the terms "Macedonian nation", "Macedonian state" or "Macedonian national consciousness" did not have any national or political meaning, while they opposed any revival of the "Macedonian question" in any way relating to Greece<sup>21</sup>. American intelligence sources reported that the Yugoslavs would not dare invade Greece but they would encourage the Slavo-Macedonians to rise against the Greek government hoping to convince world public opinion that the region was principally Slavic and should be connected with Yugoslavia<sup>22</sup>.

Despite that Tito had temporarily dropped the question of federation with Bulgaria and the matter of Pirin Macedonia, he continued to make demands for Greek Macedonia. On June 21 the Belgrade newspaper "Politika" referred to Greek Macedonia as Yugoslav just as all other Yugoslav federal units<sup>23</sup>. Also, in the Potsdam Conference the Yugoslav government had submitted a memorandum describing the "Macedonians of the Aegean" as co-nationals<sup>24</sup>. In the summer and fall of 1945 public statements indicating the Yugoslav desire to incorporate Greek Macedonia into the People's Republic of Macedonia appeared with increasing frequency. In late 1945, Tito went

18. *Ibid.*

19. Barker, *British Policy in Southeast Europe*, p. 203.

20. DSR 740.000/1-245, British Embassy to Department of State, Washington, 2 January 1945.

21. Kondis, *Η αγγλοαμερικανική πολιτική*, pp. 108-109.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Politika*, 21 June 1945 as quoted in the *New York Times*, 22 June 1945.

24. Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, p. 151.

so far as to announce that Yugoslavia would never deny the right of the Macedonian people to unite<sup>25</sup>.

Records of this period leave no doubt that Yugoslavia sought to revive and promote a separatist movement among the Slavo-Macedonians in Greece. This put the Greek Communist Party in an awkward position. In general, the Greek left did not support Yugoslav machinations in Greek Macedonia. The official view of the party was opposed to an independent Macedonian state.

In the beginning of 1946, after the return of Georgi Dimitrov from Moscow to Bulgaria, the question of the Bulgarian-Yugoslav federation was again brought up. Dimitrov made it clear that the solution of the "Macedonian question" was "not in the division of Macedonia, not in a struggle over it, but in respect for the will of its people, the majority of whom have obtained freedom and equality in the framework of federated Yugoslavia"<sup>26</sup>.

The position of Dimitrov was openly criticized by the opposition Social Democrats who thought that a free federation could only be formed between independent equals. Despite the fact that the leaders of the Bulgarian communist party faced great opposition within and outside the party, they were forced to make great concessions on the Macedonian question, which were favorable to Yugoslavia. At the 10th Plenum, 9-10 August 1946, the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party decided the future union of Pirin Macedonia in the People's Republic of Macedonia and to accept a series of measures concerning the cultural autonomy and development of national consciousness of the Macedonian population<sup>27</sup>.

The recognition of the "Macedonian" character of the Pirin region by the Bulgarian communists caused great reaction in Bulgaria. There still existed a form of an opposition which was very critical of the developments in Macedonia. The Bulgarian leadership was accused of betraying the national Bulgarian ideals with the recognition of the "Macedonian nationality". Very illuminating are the views of Tsola Dragoicheva, member of the central Committee of the BCP, who wishing to justify the position of the Bulgarian government notes: "I should like to emphasize that the pressure exercised by Yugoslavia at that time was excessive, at a time when Bulgaria, still treated as a former satellite of Hitlerite Germany, had to shoulder some consequences of the defect; at that time a peace treaty had not yet been made. Skilfully

25. Barker, *Macedonia*, p. 117.

26. Dimitar Mitrev, *Pirin Macedonia*, Skopje 1962, p. 63.

27. Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, p. 160. Paul Shoup, *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question*, New York 1968, p. 151.

manoeuvring in a situation difficult for Bulgaria, the Yugoslav leadership succeeded in imposing its national conception of the organization of Macedonia. We then had no alternative but to agree to some undesirable, illegal concessions: precisely of such a nature were the decisions on the Macedonian question adopted at the 10th Plenum in 1946, at variance with the will of the Party and the people and contravening the principles of truth and justice"<sup>28</sup>.

It is probable that the Bulgarians made the concessions in Pirin Macedonia in order to have the support of Tito at the Paris Peace Conference. At this point, the Bulgarians not only contended that Greece's claim for the readjustment of the Greek-Bulgarian frontier was unfounded, but they presented a counter claim on the Greek province of western Thrace, proposing that article 1 of the Bulgarian Peace Treaty be amended in such a way as to re-establish the Greek-Bulgarian border as it had been in 1941<sup>29</sup>. The Bulgarians argued that they needed an outlet to the Aegean Sea. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia supported the Bulgarian demand and found it perfectly justified<sup>30</sup>.

The Yugoslavs, on their part, besides supporting the Bulgarian claims, intensified their attacks against the Greek government trying to show that Greece had no rights over Macedonia, that they could not remain indifferent to the persecutions of the "Macedonians" in Greece and to their right to unite themselves with their brothers in Yugoslavia. At the Paris Peace Conference, on 6 September 1946, Yugoslavia called for the unification of Macedonia, which amounted in substance to a Yugoslav claim of Greek Macedonia<sup>31</sup>. The official posing of the Yugoslav claim to Greek Macedonia caused great concern to American and British officials, who thought this claim, coupled with the Bulgarian demand for western Thrace was a well designed Soviet plan to place the Soviet Union in a more strategic advantage on the Aegean side of the Turkish straits. It is evident that the "Macedonian question", besides being a Balkan problem, had become a threat for the entire Middle East. The Americans considered Greece the weakest link in the chain of threatened countries in the area, thus for Washington the most important aspect of the Macedonian problem was its relation to the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Greece<sup>32</sup>.

28. Tsola Dragoicheva, *Defeat to Victory*, Sofia 1983, p. 430.

29. Kondis, *Η αγγλοαμερικανική πολιτική*, p. 180.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Volume 3, *Paris Peace Conference Proceedings*, Washington 1970, pp. 380-381.

32. DSR 868.00/7-2847, Department of State to Embassy at Athens, Washington, 28 July 1947.

The American and British concern about the unification scheme became more acute after the Tito-Dimitrov agreements at Bled in August 1947<sup>33</sup>. It is clear that although Bulgaria and Yugoslavia agreed to create the conditions for the Union, the Bulgarians thought this had to wait until after the federation, but they consented that Yugoslavia could carry an active program of cultural propaganda in the Pirin region. With the initiative of Tito in November, a Yugoslav-Bulgarian Treaty of Friendship Collaboration and Mutual Assistance was signed. At this point, it became apparent that federation was not about to take place.

The matters of Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation remain something of a mystery as to why the Bulgarians were willing to agree even to the principle of federation. It has been suggested that Dimitrov was uncommitted whether to accept Yugoslav leadership in the Balkans, but tried to maintain friendly relations with Belgrade by carrying on negotiations for union in order to gain time, while carefully guarded Bulgarian interests, especially in respect to Macedonia. No Bulgarian government could afford to give up Pirin Macedonia without getting something in return. It is very probable that Bulgaria was willing to cede Pirin Macedonia only in return for territorial compensation, which would have given her an outlet through Greek territory to the Aegean<sup>34</sup>.

The fact that Bulgaria could not get western Thrace, together with the break that was to occur between Tito and Stalin in June 1948, marked the end of the efforts for a Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation.

Following Tito's expulsion from the Cominform, Yugoslavia saw her own territorial integrity threatened by a revival of the old Comintern plan for an independent "Macedonian state" associated with the Bulgarians. The Greek Communist Party, also, endorsed the plan, on 29-30 January of 1949 at the Fifth Plenum, when re-introduced the pre-1935 platform for an independent "Macedonian state" within a Balkan Federation of People's Republics. This decision exercised a strongly disruptive effect upon the fighters of the Democratic Army who, as Greeks, were not fighting for the establishment of an "independent Macedonia". Some of the Slavo-Macedonians may have welcomed the prospect of an "independent Macedonia", but these people had always been distrusted by the Greek majority.

It is very probable that this new policy for self determination for Macedonia and its appeal to Macedonian nationalism had as its objective to sup-

33. For details about the Bled Agreement see Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, pp. 161-164.

34. Shoup, *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question*, p. 131.



port the Soviet policy of war of nerves against Tito and aimed to use the Macedonian autonomist movement chiefly to subvert Tito. This view became clearer with the announcement on 1 March 1949 that the second NOF Congress would be held in March and it would announce the union of Macedonia into a complete, independent and equal Macedonian nation within the People's Democratic Federation of the Balkan peoples<sup>35</sup>.

This announcement alarmed Athens as did London and Washington. According to the British the whole plan "was sponsored from Moscow with possibly two objectives: (A) to aim at Tito by establishing under Dimitrov a hostile block in south Yugoslavia and (B) to give a pretext for the Slavs north of the Greek frontier to come over to fight for an autonomus state on Greek soil"<sup>36</sup>.

It is probable that the "Macedonian state", with Bulgaria resuming her traditional role might have been primarily a Soviet move against Tito, as an attack on the territorial integrity of Greece. However, soon it became apparent to Zachariadis and to NOF leadership that the move was not a very astute one and the second NOF Congress on 25-26 March failed to announce the formation of a united Macedonia, but reiterated the old position that the "Macedonian people" would be able to decide freely their own status after the victory of the democratic Army in Greece.

The ostensible purpose of the Congress had clearly been to settle the long standing differences between the Greek Communist Party and the Greek Slavo-Macedonians by giving them a share in the leadership of the Democratic Army. One may consider that this Congress was preparing the way toward the emergence of an independent Macedonian state as Slavo-Macedonians entered the Provisional government.

The Greek government, on its side, desiring to eliminate the threat that presented to the entire Balkan area the creation of a "Macedonian State", suggested to London and Washington that the western powers should undertake an operation against Albania namely for two reasons; to forestall the danger of setting-up a "Macedonian state" and to eliminate Albania as a base for the Democratic Army, thus making easier its defeat<sup>37</sup>. To the British and the Americans the possibility of action against Albania was a tempting suggestion but they feared that it would have brought them into direct conflict

35. Barker, *Macedonia*, p. 120.

36. Public Record Office, Foreign Office 371/78396/2820, Norton (British ambassador) to Foreign Office, Athens, 12 March 1949.

37. Kondis, *Η αγγλοαμερικανική πολιτική*, pp. 382-384.

with the Soviets. Nevertheless, with the defeat of the Democratic Army in August 1949 the threat of an "independent Macedonian State" ceased to exist.

In retrospect, throughout the 1940s the "Macedonian question" was a dominant factor in Balkan politics and it was used as a political lever for the advancement of the national interests of the powers involved with Yugoslavia taking the lead with the creation of the "Macedonian nationality". This artificial creation had profound effect in wartime and post-war developments in the Balkans as it created the necessary conditions for Yugoslavia to attempt to solve the "Macedonian question" to its own benefit. Thus, "Macedonian" unification advocated by the Yugoslavs would contribute to an expansion of their influence in the Balkans and it would strengthen Yugoslavia's claims that there existed such a thing as a separate "Macedonian nationality".