

## XIV. Macedonia in the Maelstrom of World War II

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The decade ushered in by the outbreak of World War II, in September 1939, began with many circles in Macedonia persuaded that this new European war would, like all preceding ones, change the map of the region: this, indeed, was why the countries in the area had hastened to side themselves with the alliance of Great Powers they thought would best serve their national interests. The 1934 Balkan Entente between Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey, which was intended to neutralise the menace represented by Bulgaria's revisionist policy, had languished; for it had soon become clear that Bulgaria could only threaten the regional territorial status quo as the ally of a great European power. This possibility had progressively paralysed and in the end rendered the pact ineffective, since, with Bulgaria allied to either of Europe's great revisionist powers, Italy and Germany, it offered no security to any of its signatories. Of the parties to it, Greece and Turkey appeared to be leaning towards the emerging Anglo-French front against the Axis powers, Yugoslavia was moving towards reconciliation with Bulgaria while at the same time extending a hand of friendship towards Italy, and Romania was turning towards Germany, partly out of necessity but partly also because of the similarity of their regimes.

Bulgaria, refusing to accept the territorial arrangements that had come out of the treaties signed after the Second Balkan War and World War I, or to abandon its expansionist designs at the expense of its neighbours, accepted the blandishments of Italy and Germany, which wanted to use it in order to advance their own aspirations in the region, and abandoned itself to the inventions and balancing acts of King Boris, a monarch who was an exceptionally skilled opportunist. Bulgaro-Macedonian irredentism and its armed wing, the *Komitadji*, held Bulgarian politics hostage and undermined all attempts at formulating and exercising a foreign policy based on rational analysis of all the objective facts. Bulgaria in 1939 appeared to be rushing headlong into yet another opportunistic involvement in a new war, and yet another crushing defeat.

Greece, faced with the opportunism of Yugoslavia, the aggressive irredentism of Bulgaria and the unreliable support of Turkey, had to rely essentially on its own forces to preserve the northern territories it had acquired. Official British support, as expressed in April 1939 with the simultaneous guarantees offered by Britain and France to Greece and Romania, covered the country's national independence against attack from, chiefly, Germany and Italy, but did not provide for the talks between the two countries that the Greek Government wanted, in order to avoid any British Government treaty obligation towards Greece on the country's northern borders.

The ethnological situation in Macedonia after twenty years of forcible or voluntary transfers of populations between the three countries that had, with ethnic homogeneity as their primary objective, liberated the region, reflected their separate aspirations. Greek Macedonia, after the evacuation of 380,000 Muslims and more than 100,000 Slav-Macedonians and the resettlement of 640,000 Greek Asia Minor and Pontic refugees, displayed an ethnic mix very different from the period of the Balkan Wars. This ethnic mix was the product of a national choice. So too, to a considerable degree,

was the ethnic mix in Yugoslav Macedonia, although the Serbianisation campaign had not, despite the expulsion of the Greek Vlachs, produced the desired results. Bulgarian Macedonia, finally, had been further “Macedonised” with the resettlement of the majority of the Slav-Macedonians from Greece who had emigrated to Bulgaria in the wake of the Treaty of Neuilly (1919). Greece and Yugoslavia had tried to structurally integrate the parts of Macedonia they had, respectively, liberated, but only Greece had succeeded in doing so. Bulgaria, by contrast, made the Macedonian part of its territory an open and ‘military’ frontier, which was expected in due course to facilitate its absorption of the Greek and Yugoslav parts of Macedonia.

As in World War I, Macedonia was unsurprisingly once again the apple of discord between Greece, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. With some variations the three countries repeated their same roles, while Germany continued as before to intervene in favour of the Bulgarians and Britain in favour of the Greeks; but new factors were complicating the situation and making analogies with the period of the Great War untenable or misleading. Two new factors, Communism and Fascism, had been introduced into the equation alongside the nationalism of that earlier period, and these intensified the ethnic clashes in Macedonia. Communism, particularly, had a catalytic influence on political developments, largely because it was the vehicle of ethnic aspiration, and as such deceived all those who believed that nationalism was yielding its place to it. In the case of the Slav-Macedonians, Communism was the womb from which their nation emerged.

In September 1939, however, when Europe had for the second time skipped gradually into total war, all this seemed like Utopian fantasising. Everything indicated that this crisis, like so many others in the past – the Ethiopian crisis of 1935-1936, the Munich crisis of 1938 –, would end with a settlement of the differences between the parties involved. Moreover, news of the events that were shaking the rest of Europe reached the interested countries either through a firmly controlled press or, more likely, in the form of rumours. The intervening years and events, and especially the triumph of the principles and institutions of liberal democracy and the defeat of Fascism as a system of government in Europe, make it difficult now to reproduce the atmosphere in which public opinion was then shaped.

Also difficult to discern today are certain realities that have since, and particularly in recent years, been much explored and that explain the ferocity of the passions aroused by the war and the events that succeeded it. Such realities are the slow incorporation of the numerous and then distinct communities of refugees created by the Great War, especially on the Greek side of the border, the friction between the refugees and the Slav-Macedonians, again on the Greek side of the border, the fear kindled in extremely broad strata of society by communist action, since the communist parties of the day were committed to the overthrow of the existing social order, and the concomitant broad consensus for the suppression of their activity. The repressive measures against communism, which were the result of the anti-communist regimes of the time – totalitarian and other – in the general area, favoured displays of excessive zeal on the part of the instruments of public order, usually with the forbearance of the political authorities. In this climate of friction between native-born and incomers, these repressive measures and the excessive zeal with which they were carried out created the impression of a persecution, not only of the dissenting communist Slav-Macedonians, but of the Slav-Macedonians in general. This impression has recently been cultivated by post-modernist historiography, despite the fact that the available sources do not support such an inference. In contrast to other dictatorships in the area, that of Ioannis Metaxas in Greece (1936-1941) never applied – or even formulated – a policy of ethnic cleansing.

The war that was raging in Northern Europe eventually reached the South; and when Italy attacked Greece through Albania into Epirus and Western Macedonia,

Greece's allies, Yugoslavia and Turkey, to no one's surprise remained neutral. The fighting on Greece's north-western frontier, in conjunction on the one hand with the communist activity among the country's Slav-Macedonians and on the other with the pro-Bulgarian sentiments prevailing in Greek Macedonia's Slav-Macedonian pockets, especially in view of Bulgaria's obvious inclination towards the Italo-German Axis, worsened the already tense situation in the region.

It is not easy today to reconstruct those times, for want of specific information; but some idea of the situation can be gleaned from certain official actions. Western Macedonia was a war zone – as indeed, in view of the clear threat from Bulgaria, was the whole of Macedonia. As a result, the Greek military and administrative authorities proceeded, for security reasons, to evacuate from the frontier districts to the interior the Slav-Macedonian communists and/or pro-Bulgarians whose loyalty they felt to be doubtful. The exact number of these displaced Slav-Macedonians is not known, nor is it possible to distinguish them from another category of Slav-Macedonians displaced at about the same time, namely the fathers and adult brothers of Slav-Macedonian conscripts who defected to the Italians. The number of these defectors is not known, nor are the reasons for their defection. The Italians wanted to believe it was because they were stirred by Italian promises of autonomy once the Italians had occupied Greece. There are reports, after the occupation of Greece by the Italians and the Germans, of some hundreds of Slav-Macedonian prisoners of war held in various parts of the country in whom the Bulgarian authorities in Greece took an interest. The Bulgarians considered the Slav-Macedonians in Greece to be Bulgarians, and tried to persuade their allies to entrust to them their protection in occupied Greece<sup>1</sup>.

The displaced Slav-Macedonians, communists for the most part but also the male relatives of Slav-Macedonian defectors, as well as the defectors themselves, joined the Slav-Macedonian communists who had been exiled by the Metaxas government for their beliefs. All these people, together with the traditionally pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians of Macedonia, formed hotbeds of intense disaffection against the Greek authorities and were willing collaborators with the Bulgarians, Italians and Germans throughout the Occupation. The flattery and promises of the occupation authorities, in conjunction with such material benefits as food, animal feed and scholarships to study in Bulgaria or Bulgarian-occupied Yugoslav Macedonia, did not go unrewarded: several thousands of Slav-Macedonians were enticed into collaboration and repudiation of Greece, as will be explained below.

One consequence of the fall of Greece and Yugoslavia to the Axis forces in April 1941 was the partition of Macedonia into occupied zones and zones of covert sovereignty. Germany occupied Greek Central Macedonia, west of the river Strymon and east of Grevena and Kastoria, a broad corridor essential for unimpeded communications with the Aegean, the Peloponnese, Crete and North Africa. Germany had no territorial designs on Greece, but occupied this area for the purposes of unobstructed conduct of the war in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Covert territorial designs on Greece were held by Italy, which annexed the western part of Greek Western Macedonia and the Albanian-speaking part of Yugoslav Macedonia to the newly-hatched Italian protectorate of Albania, with the intention of incorporating the country into its intended post-war Empire, the "Third Rome" of the Italian Fascists. Less veiled, however, were Bulgaria's intentions for the future of Macedonia. Bulgaria then and later considered Greek Macedonia and Western Thrace to be an organic part of "historical" Bulgaria and, together with Yugoslav Macedonia, an inseparable part of the "new" post-war Bulgaria. Germany, which did not let Bulgaria annex Greek Macedonia and Thrace officially while the war was still in progress, so as not provoke the wrath of Greece, left its ally considerable freedom of action in the occupied lands, which Bulgaria claimed to

have “liberated” from the Greek and Serbian “yoke”. It is worth noting in this regard that Bulgarian historians, now as then, use the term “presence” in referring to the Bulgarian occupation of those countries.

The Bulgarian occupation of parts of Greek and Yugoslav Macedonia and the freedom of action allowed the Bulgarian liaison officers in the allied garrisons in the rest of Greek Macedonia increased the ambitions of many pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians and further fuelled the passions and the suspicions and the fears of everyone in those regions. The retreat of the Greek resistance before the German advance in Northern Greece in April 1941 and the concomitant collapse of the Greek front in Albania, in conjunction with the withdrawal to Southern Greece of public officials who had been serving in the northern provinces, and particularly in Thrace and Macedonia, created a climate of insecurity among the population that emboldened opportunists of all sorts, not least the Slav-Macedonians and Vlachs.

The appearance of Italian occupation forces in the Vlach villages of Pindus and Western Macedonia in general was welcomed by many Vlachs, who hastened to offer their services as guides and interpreters in exchange for various benefits, which the Italians, in the interests of facilitating their work, had no reason to refuse. One of the most active of these renegade Vlach adventurers was Alcibiades Diamantis of Samarina (Pindus), an erstwhile pro-Romanian now turned pro-Italian. Diamantis undertook to promote among the Vlachs of the Pindus massif the cause of an Italian-inspired Vlach autonomy under the aegis of mighty Rome, in the form of the stillborn “Principality of Pindus”. This vision did not win many converts: most Vlachs failed to be moved by the promises of the adventurer from Samarina, on the one hand because they knew him as an opportunist and on the other, and more decisively, because they were not disposed to reject the Greek homeland they had played such an important part in creating during the age of the Modern Greek Enlightenment. Some 2000 Vlachs were, however, persuaded to form the notorious “Roman Legion”, a political organisation led by Diamantis (and following him another Vlach adventurer, Nikolaos Manousis, a lawyer with his own band of armed followers) and a sort of militia at the service of the Italian military detachments that carried out raids on the villages in search of food and arms<sup>2</sup>.

The action of the Legion, and particularly of its armed members, created serious problems, less for the victims of the raids, however, than for the Vlachs themselves, because it sowed suspicion and hatred within the Vlach communities, and because in the traditional world of that age the actions of some members of a community exposed the entire community as jointly responsible. Old passions, dating from the time of the activity of Romanian agents seeking to rally the Vlachs of Macedonia to their side, combined with displeasure at certain measures taken by the Greek Government and the military authorities during the active phase of the war against the Italians and the Germans, such as the requisitioning of draught animals and feed for the requirements of the war, predisposed some Vlachs to ally themselves with the Italians, whose objectives were twofold: to use these collaborators for their own purposes and to disunite the local population and render its subjugation an easier task.

The autonomist action of the Vlachs of the Legion was confined to the Italian zone of occupation, a clear indication of its non-indigenous nature, and was moreover short-lived: the Legion was dissolved in 1942, and the following year, with the capitulation of Italy, its most active members sought refuge in the cities, in Greece or in Romania, where many of them later joined the communist regime imposed with Soviet assistance after the war. After the liberation of Greece, the most active members of the autonomist movement were tried as war criminals in Larisa, mostly *in absentia*, and given heavy sentences. The treacherous actions of many of these Vlach autonomists

were largely forgotten, however, in the Civil War that followed; and some of them, indeed, actively sided with the government in its fight against the communist guerrillas.

More serious, from every point of view, was the pro-Bulgarian activity among the Slav-Macedonians in Greek and, chiefly, Yugoslav Macedonia. The Bulgarian army of occupation entered what was then called "Vardar Province" and later the "People's Republic of Macedonia" (now the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) as a liberating force and was accepted as such by much of the Slav population. In Greek Macedonia, by contrast, at least in the part of it that the Bulgarian army entered in 1941, and where it remained, the response of the Slav-Macedonians was limited, and for the Bulgarians rather disappointing. Bulgarian expansionism was better received at that time in those parts of Greek Macedonia, like the frontier districts of Kastoria, Florina and Pella, which still had pockets of Slav-Macedonians where pro-Bulgarian sentiments continued to flourish. There were two principal reasons for this limited response to the Bulgarian military and political presence in Greek Macedonia, in contrast to the response to the similar presence in neighbouring Yugoslav Macedonia: first, the small proportion of Slav-Macedonians in Greek Macedonia and, second, the effective Hellenisation, both in language and in convictions, of the overwhelming majority of the Slav-Macedonians in Greece.

The progressive adoption of the Greek language by the Slav-Macedonians in Greece, at least from the time of the Modern Greek Enlightenment, and the unquestionably Greek sympathies of most of their number when their loyalties were tested during the harsh contest between the Greeks and the Bulgarians to determine their leanings, were indisputable facts; and they severely hampered the penetration of the propaganda disseminated by Bulgarian authorities and agents among the Slav-Macedonians in Greece. In Yugoslav Macedonia, by contrast, Bulgaria's political and military authorities found fertile soil for their action, mainly since the assimilation of the Slav-Macedonians, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population, had not been as successful as it had in Greek Macedonia.

The difference in the scale of the response to the Bulgarian presence in the principal parts of Macedonia, the Greek and the Yugoslav, was evident in the degree to which the Slav-Macedonians collaborated with the occupying forces of those two provinces. In Greek Macedonia, whether in the Bulgarian-occupied eastern section or the German-occupied centre or the Italian-occupied west, only a small fraction of the Slav-Macedonians collaborated, whereas in Yugoslav Macedonia much of the Slav-Macedonian population collaborated with the Bulgarian occupying force.

There was also a significant difference in the resistance against the Axis occupation forces in these two Macedonian provinces. In Greek Macedonia more Slav-Macedonians rallied from the outset to the side of the resistance organisations and fewer to the occupation forces, while those who did collaborate with the occupying forces did so largely on account of those same resistance organisations. In the Slav-Macedonian pockets of Greek Macedonia communist resistance action broke out far more rapidly than the corresponding resistance action in Slav-Macedonian Yugoslav Macedonia, mainly because in Greek Macedonia the communist movement was not burdened with the thralldom attached to the corresponding movement in Yugoslav Macedonia, where the local communist leadership had since 1940 been placed under Bulgarian tutelage.

In Yugoslav – or, more correctly, Serbian – Macedonia, there was no local communist party; the local communists were members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In the spring of 1940, and with the approval of Josip Broz Tito (who had just taken over as Secretary-General of the Central Committee of the CPY), Giorgi Dimitrov sent Metodija Šatorov from Moscow, the headquarters of the Communist

International, to Serbian Macedonia. Šatorov was a member of the Communist Party of Bulgaria and a former member of the international branch of IMRO – IMRO (United), as it was known. In October of that same year (1940), the Yugoslav communists under Tito recognised the right of the Slav-Macedonians of Serbian Macedonia to equality within a federation of South Slav peoples. This recognition, as was to be expected, fostered the growth of “Macedonianism” among the country’s Slav-Macedonians; but this “Macedonianism” did not favour Bulgaria<sup>3</sup>.

Serbian influence appeared to be waning in Serbian Macedonia, and Bulgarian influence waxing stronger: the Bulgarian troops that had entered the country in April were welcomed with obvious enthusiasm by the Slav-Macedonian population. The Bulgaro-Macedonian refugees that had fled there earlier had paved the way for the Bulgarian army. Subsequent developments did not, however, vindicate Bulgarian expectations. The Albanian-speaking districts of Tetovo, Gostivar, Dibra, Strounga and Ochrid were assigned to the Italo-Albanian zone of occupation, the districts of Monastir and Skopje, the two Slav-Macedonian provinces, were separate administrative entities, while of Greek Macedonia only the eastern section was occupied by the Bulgarian army, but without being annexed to Bulgaria. The ‘liberation’ of Macedonia proclaimed by Bulgaria before the war, and the main reason why it had joined in on the side of Italy and Germany, remained an unfulfilled promise. In addition, the senior Serb employees in Serbian Macedonia’s public services were now being replaced by Bulgarians, who did not conceal their contempt for the Slav-Macedonians. The Serbs’ endeavour to Serbianise the country was replaced by the Bulgarians’ endeavour to Bulgarise it. The initial enthusiasm of Ivan Mihailov’s pro-Bulgarian branch of IMRO gave way to disappointment and obvious disenchantment. In Greek Eastern Macedonia, the Bulgarian occupation authorities imposed a regime designed to Bulgarise the country by force, by persecuting the Greek population and attempting to attract Bulgarians or Bulgaro-Macedonians from Bulgaria; but they were essentially unsuccessful. They derived little benefit from the latter measure, while the former hardened the endurance of the Greeks and favoured the growth of armed resistance in the region. Soon, however, as the fortunes of war seemed to favour the forces fighting against the Axis, the situation began to change in Macedonia as well.

A catalytic new factor now made its appearance in the country: resistance against the occupier, and particularly communist-driven resistance. In Greek Macedonia this resistance, shaped by different local factors, displayed different characteristics from region to region. In Eastern Macedonia, the resistance against the Bulgarian occupation authorities was universal, in the sense that there was no collaboration with them, although the resistance organisations were from the beginning divided into two camps, one communist and the other anti-communist.

It was in Greek Eastern Macedonia that one of the first resistance actions in Greece took place: a serious uprising against the Bulgarian occupation authorities in and around Drama in September 1941. This insurgency, which was organised and instigated by members of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) without the approval of the central party organisation, ended in a bloodbath at the hands of the Bulgarian military forces, which displayed such savagery and seemed to be so well-prepared to put down the revolt as to raise questions, both then and later, about the possibility of official involvement in its outbreak. The insurgency was used by the Bulgarian occupation authorities as a heaven-sent opportunity to eliminate or exile the Greek population from the villages and cities of the area. Doxato, Drama and many villages paid heavily for the uprising, so heavily that one might reasonably wonder whether the Bulgarian authorities were not in fact aware of what the communist conspirators were planning. There is,

however, no evidence to support this hypothesis, nor can events or developments be judged by their outcomes: *cui bono* is not an infallible guide.<sup>4</sup>

In the same year a similar provocation in the German-occupied zone, in Mesovouno in the district of Eordaia, was put down with the same harshness but on an incomparably smaller and more geographically limited scale. In Mesovouno, as in Doxato and Drama, local members of the KKE launched premature revolutionary action, independent of the plans and purposes of the central party organisation. One of the consequences of these insurgencies and the harshness with which they were suppressed was to delay communist resistance action in both regions and allow anti-Communist guerrilla groups to emerge and become established. They also proved that the most effective way to drive hesitant villagers into the mountains was to provoke harsh reprisals from the occupation authorities.

In the rest of Greek Macedonia, both the German-occupied middle zone and the Italian-occupied western zone, the resistance activity of the Communist National Liberation Front (*Ethniko Apeleutherotiko Metopo*, or EAM) resistance acted as a catalyst, since it was accompanied by an attempt to enlist all guerrilla groups, communist or otherwise, into EAM's military wing, the National People's Liberation Army (*Ethnikos Laikos Apeleutherotikos Stratos*, or ELAS) and to eliminate those who refused. This was not unreasonably interpreted as paving the way for EAM's political predominance in the regions it sought to control through ELAS, with the relentless persecution of dissenters, the appointment of politically well-affected communal councils, commissariats and people's courts and the control of all information.

Once EAM (that is, the Communist Party and the smaller left-wing parties that had agreed to support it for the sake of its goals) had become aware of the extent of the response to its patriotic calls for the liberation of the country from its occupiers, it added a new objective: a kind of socialist revolution in the countryside. Until then primarily a party of the workers, the KKE did not estimate very highly the prospects of a rural revolution carried out mainly by peasants. The disruption of the rural economy and of legitimate Greek power, in conjunction with the subversive climate cultivated by external exhortations and fostered by persecutions and hardships, generated centrifugal forces that released young men and women from the constraints of the traditional and conservative rural society of the day. Most of the young men and women who enlisted in EAM guerrilla groups and eventually in ELAS were not communists: the communists comprised only a tiny minority of the members of the communist-run "liberation army". Most of them took to the mountains and enlisted in guerrilla bands in order to avoid persecution, either driven by patriotism or for revenge on personal or family adversaries. In situations of political disorder and easy departure from legality, it is not easy to determine the motives of those who joined the guerrilla groups acting in the country's mountain villages, nor indeed is this of much importance.

These young villagers, especially those from mountain regions, enlisted and served in ELAS because EAM had, besides the mechanism to mobilise and retain them, clear (if not transparent) objectives. EAM also had an attractive patriotic liberation discourse: unlike the bourgeois parties, which had in the past supported or tolerated illiberal and oppressive regimes, EAM carried no such baggage. Its patriotic discourse on the one hand enticed and on the other concealed the unavowed aim of the Greek Communist Party to seek, by blackmailing its political opponents or eliminating them physically or politically, a significant share of, or absolute, power after the Liberation. In those days of major upheavals, tremendous sacrifices and runaway expectations, this aim was not or did not appear to be unrealistic or unattainable: the declarations of the Allies who were fighting against the Axis, especially those from the politically and mo-

rally all-powerful Soviet Union, the Holy See of world Communism, favoured EAM's bid for power.

The dynamic projection of EAM by its communist officers as the only reliable and effective resistance force was, as we have said, catalytic. Many guerrilla groups joined ELAS; many others were dissolved by ELAS, and their members either retired from action or escaped to the Middle East; while yet others refused either to join ELAS or to disband, but used every means to try to retain and preserve their independence, usually with little success. The armed reaction to attacks by ELAS units against guerrilla groups that sought to retain their independence opened the way for acceptance of discreet tolerance or even protection on the part of the occupation authorities. In many cases, a combination of anticommunism and the mutual benefits deriving to the anti-EAM guerrilla groups and the occupation authorities from a common front against ELAS units facilitated the occasional collaboration of the opponents of that organisation. It must, however, be stressed that the political cadres of some resistance organisations, such as the Defenders of Northern Greece (*Yperaspistai tis Voreiou Ellados*, or YBE), which later became the Panhellenic Liberation Organisation (*Panellenia Apeleutherotiki Organosis*, or PAO), were not initially motivated by anti-communism.

The YBE, which first appeared in 1941 in Central Macedonia, was a typical example of a resistance organisation that was attacked by ELAS, had units disbanded, and essentially faded away when its officers abandoned the field. The name of the defunct organisation was adopted and used, in the lowlands around Kozani, and especially in the district of Eordaia, by local anti-EAM bands that constituted a sort of militia tolerated or supported by the German occupation authorities. The region of Kozani, traversed by many important roads, was naturally of particular interest to the German military authorities, which, in order to secure and retain absolute control over this important communications hub, were disposed to tolerate such auxiliary armed forces, although they often created more problems than they were supposed to be solving.

An incomparably more serious issue was created in Greek Western Macedonia (and also in Central Macedonia) by the pro-Bulgarian attitude of some of the Slav-Macedonians. In March 1943 there appeared, first in the Italian-occupied district of Kastoria and later in the neighbouring German-occupied districts of Florina and Pella, bands of armed Slav-Macedonians acting as local militia in the service of the occupation authorities. Extremely able and active Bulgarian liaison officers in the various German and Italian garrisons played an effective role in attracting Slav-Macedonians and enlisting them in these militias. One of these, Anton Kalchev, from the village of Spelaia in the Kastoria district, was very active in the formation of the Slav-Macedonian militia of Kastoria, the infamous *Okhrana*, or "Axis-Bulgarian-Macedonian Committee", and in arming its members, the *Komitadji*.

From the information available it would appear that, although - given the different provenances and uncertain validity of the sources - the total number of *Komitadji* is impossible to determine, they comprised a small but appreciable portion of Greece's Slav-Macedonians. Pro-Bulgarians or children of pro-Bulgarians for the most part, but also many opportunists whose aspirations fed on the irregular political situation, plus a fair number who advanced real or supposed persecution on the part of the local authorities as motives, agreed to be armed by the occupation authorities against the guerrillas of the resistance organisations. Many old pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians, vestiges of the pro-Bulgarianism surviving in the Slavophone enclaves of Greek Macedonia from the time of the great national conflicts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, had never accepted Greek

sovereignty in the region and were led by events to the conviction that their districts would be ceded to Bulgaria.<sup>5</sup>

Nor is it easy for the historian to distinguish between cause and effect in the matter of the arming of the Slav-Macedonians in Greece by the occupation authorities. In the Kastoria district, in March 1943, this coincided with a spell of serious resistance activity in the neighbouring district of Boion. This resistance activity seems to have been one, if not the chief reason, for the occupation authorities' decision to resort to arming the Slav-Macedonians who appeared ready to repudiate Greece in favour of Bulgaria. Similarly, little is known of the role played in the formation of the Slav-Macedonian militia by Slav-Macedonians like Naoum Peïos, from the village of Gavros in the Korestia district, or Ioannis Skois, from Argos Orestikon, who were in Sofia in the early days of the occupation and belonged to Bulgaro-Macedonian irredentist organisations. These and other pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians from the district, it should be noted, maintained contact with leading communists like Andreas Tzimas, a Vlach from Argos Orestikon. When, in July 1941, after he and others had been liberated from Acronauplia on July 1, Tzimas and the other Greek Communist Party cadres who formed the core of the party's Central Committee attempted to link up with the Communist International, they tried to send as a liaison to Skois another Slav-Macedonian from Argos Orestikon, Telemachus Ververis, who ended up, in the spring of 1943, in what was then Serbian Macedonia negotiating with Sfetozar Vukmanović-Tempo, Tito's envoy to the region with broad military and political powers relating to a joint headquarters for the communist organisations in Yugoslavia, Greece, Albania and Bulgaria and the communist parties' manifesto for the self-determination of the "peoples" of Macedonia after its liberation<sup>6</sup>.

This episode is indicative of the confusion reigning in Macedonia with regard to the objectives of and relations between the different parties involved. Those who put themselves forward as representatives of organisations, movements or undefined communities *de facto* advertised or intimated only part of their plans and goals. Tito and the leaders of his communist guerrilla movement put forward, from a position of strength in the southern Balkans, liberal positions like self-determination in order to attract to their side the pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians of Serbian, primarily, but also of Greek Macedonia. The self-determination for the "peoples" of the Macedonia professed by the Yugoslav communists was essentially the position of the Communist International and the Balkan Communist Federation from 1924 to 1935, which called for a "single and independent" Macedonia, now reformulated in terms echoing the Atlantic Charter of 1941.

Like their Bulgarian comrades, the Greek communists were in a position to appraise the Yugoslav Communists' bid for leadership in the desired settlement of the Macedonian question, and they rejected it; but they could not afford a breach with the Yugoslavs. Tito and his movement had been pushed into centre stage by the Allies fighting against the Axis, while the Greek and Bulgarian communists had been left in the shadows. The Greek communists, indeed, were isolated from the other communists in the region, and particularly from the Soviets, while relations with the English were anything but "comradely".

Andreas Tzimas, who had forestalled the understanding reached between Ververis and Tempo and scotched their agreement to issue to their brother Communist parties in Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria a manifesto guaranteeing the "peoples" of Macedonia the right to self-determination after the Liberation, explained with disarming frankness after the war the reason why the Greek communists had avoided denouncing the provocation of their Yugoslav comrades in the matter of Macedonia: "We realised very early

on that we were going to have to deal with an English intervention in Greece. In that struggle we would have had no hope of winning without the backing of the guerrilla forces of our neighbours and without reinforcements from them. As things turned out, contact with and help from the Soviet Union was only possible through our neighbouring countries. Those were the chief problems on our minds, and only secondarily co-ordinating resistance action".<sup>7</sup> The Yugoslav communists promised their Greek comrades "help" in the expected clash with the English in order to encourage this conflict and thus keep the English in Greece busy, so that the Yugoslavs could go ahead with their plans, in Northern Greece and the rest of the region, unhindered. As will be explained in more detail in the next chapter, the involvement of the English and in general of the Western Allies in Greece's civil war favoured the ascendancy of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, which is why Eastern Europe's communist leaders not only did not discourage the Greek communists from clashing with the English but with promises of assistance actually encouraged them to do so. The maintenance of political disorder in Greece in the end contributed to the imposition and entrenchment of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

An important role in restoring the impaired position of the Greek Communist Party in Western Macedonia after the massive arrests of local officers by agents of the Metaxas government in 1938 and 1939 was played by party cadres from Acronauplia on 1 July 1941, mediated by the Bulgarian Embassy, as already noted. This, moreover, was the main reason for their release, at the recommendation of members of the party's Politburo, like Ioannis Ioannidis, who were held in the same camp. Many of the freed communists were Slav-Macedonians from the districts, chiefly, of Kastoria and Florina. These Slav-Macedonians were expected to revive the faltering communist machine in the region, but their arrival was accompanied by no more than the good wishes of the Greek communist leadership. The Greek communist leaders may from time to time have shown themselves to be inefficient tacticians and strategists, but they were not naïve, and they could appreciate that the motives behind the Bulgarians' interest in the Slav-Macedonian communists held in Acronauplia and their decision to have them released were not purely philanthropic. Commentary on the matter, which has been studiously avoided by all the senior Greek Communist Party officials who knew anything about the episode or were involved in it, is therefore superfluous.

The Bulgarian authorities in Greece knew that they were releasing communist Slav-Macedonians, but they calculated that their presence in Western Macedonia would be useful to Bulgaria as well as to the Greek communists. The Slav-Macedonians freed were of course communists, but they came from regions with pockets of pro-Bulgarian sentiment and were potential channels of communication with the pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians of those parts. The role of these Slav-Macedonians in the setting up of the *Komitadji* militia forces is unknown: the Bulgarian liaison officers may have by-passed them. What is known, however, is their contribution to the efforts of the communist resistance organisations to draw the Slav-Macedonians, "misled" by the Axis, into the their ranks on both sides of their borders. In Greek Western Macedonia this programme of enticement was implemented, formally, by the Slav-Macedonian National Liberation Front, or SNOF, which was founded for that purpose in the autumn of 1943 but whose action was carried out essentially in the summer and autumn of 1944, in view of the withdrawal of the German forces from Greece. By that time, however, the "misled" Slav-Macedonians of Greece had massively adopted the "Macedonianism" emanating from the newly-instituted People's Republic of Macedonia in Yugoslavia.

From the spring of 1943 to the end of the autumn of 1944 at least five distinct rival groups fought over the Slav-Macedonians in Greek and Serbian Macedonia: a) the leaders of the Yugoslav communist resistance, which was promoting the "Macedonisa-

tion” of the communists of Serbian Macedonia; b) the representatives of the Bulgarian Government, who were promoting the identification of the Slav-Macedonians with Bulgaria; c) the cadres of Ivan Mihailov’s organisation, who were acting independently of the Bulgarian authorities but were serving Bulgarian interests; d) the leaders of the Slav-Macedonians in Greece, who followed a basically timeserving policy, preserving channels of communication with the “Macedonianists” of Serbian Macedonia, the representatives or agents of the Bulgarians and the local Greek communist leadership; and e) the Greek communist leadership, which through the local branch of ELAS expressed displeasure at the acts of the Slav-Macedonian “Macedonianists” while at the same time through EAM displayed a toleration of them that was inexplicable at the time. As it later became clear, the explanation for the difference in attitude to the Protean metamorphoses of the Slav-Macedonian leaders in Greece and their final adherence to “Macedonianism” lay in the following peculiarity of the situation in the region in which the ELAS units were active: The ELAS 9<sup>th</sup> Division, which was deployed in the districts of Boion, Kastoria and Florina and which drew its strength, both officers and men, mainly from Greek-speaking Boion, sought to crush the pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonian pockets in Kastoria and Florina, which supported the *Komitadji* militia and undermined the local ELAS sermons on liberation. The attack by a 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade detachment in May 1943 against the village of Lakkomata in the district of Kastoria, which was the seat of a strong *Komitadji* group, revealed the intentions and objectives of the local ELAS. EAM, on the other hand, through Tzimas, who sought close relations with the Yugoslav communist resistance movement, urged conciliation and tolerance towards the Slav-Macedonian *Komitadji*. After the ELAS attack on Lakkomata, Tzimas imposed tolerance of *Komitadji* action on the local ELAS, with the object of alliance with the Yugoslav Partisans. This decision came from high-ranking KKE officials and was respected by ELAS, which was *de facto* advancing the liberation of the country more than the political plans of EAM and the KKE for its future. In places, ELAS units were reacting to local provocations that undermined the political plans of EAM and the KKE, which as a result deemed this corrective intervention on the part of high-ranking KKE officials necessary to prevent damage to the party’s long-term and largely unexpressed political goals.<sup>8</sup>

The situation in Yugoslav Macedonia was more complex and more confused, on account of the region’s peculiar relationship with Bulgaria, which we have already noted. The Communist Party of Bulgaria, although it was obliged to differ from the Bulgarian Government on the issue of the Bulgarian military presence in Yugoslav Macedonia and hastened to censure the Bulgarian administration, avoided condemning the union of the region with Bulgaria promised by the Bulgarian Government or supporting the slogan of self-determination for the “peoples” of Macedonia in the framework of a federal Yugoslavia. IMRO (United), the 3<sup>rd</sup> International-aligned organisation supported by the Yugoslav communist resistance movement, was naturally already active in the Bulgarian-occupied zone of Yugoslav Macedonia, but so were many pro-Bulgarian organisations as well as a branch of Draža Mihailović’s pro-Serbian organisation. The Albanian-speaking zone was the arena of the Albanian organisation Balli Kombëtar.

The founding in March 1943, at the instigation of Tito’s lieutenant, the very active Tempo, of the Communist Party of Macedonia was an act that played a determinant role in political developments in the broader general region. The Secretary of the Central Committee, Lazar Kolichevski, and its members were former members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and were directed by Tito through Tempo. The promotion of “Macedonianism” as an ethnic ideology of the Slav-Macedonians and the dimly discernible defeat of the Axis and, naturally, of Bulgaria contributed to the growth of the communist-driven and Tito-controlled resistance in Yugoslav Macedonia and to the

formation of a new and autonomous political entity. It was not yet certain whether the architect of the future People's Republic of Macedonia would seek, apart from the promised union of the "Macedonian people" and of the three parts of Macedonia, to incorporate it into Yugoslavia, into a broader union of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia or into a Soviet-style Balkan federation. *De facto*, however, the leaders of the Slav-Macedonian "Macedonianists" were drawn towards its incorporation into a federal Yugoslavia. The "Yugoslav" solution to the Macedonian Question was adopted in November 1943 by the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia in the Bosnian town of Jajce, while the irredentist perspective of the new political entity was confirmed by the selection of two former cadres of the Communist Party of Bulgaria, Dimitar Vlachov and Vladimir Poptomov, as representatives of Greek Macedonia and Bulgarian Macedonia respectively<sup>9</sup>.

As expected, the Yugoslav communists' decision regarding the future of Macedonia was opposed by the Bulgarian communists, who raised the old IMRO call for a "single and independent Macedonia", a position that was considered "safe" and appropriate to Bulgaria's interests, a defensive position on the part of the Bulgarian communists against the hegemonistic policy of their Yugoslav comrades. The Greek communists made some objections to moving away from the Communist International 1935 call for "equality for all nationalities" in Macedonia, but not very convincingly, since they too, like the Bulgarian communists, were in a minority compared to their Yugoslav comrades. The Yugoslav communists, with their generally accepted liberal principle of national self-determination and their control of the leadership of the Communist Party of the Macedonian "people", promoted the national positions of Yugoslavia in the budding political structure.

In Greek Macedonia the Slav-Macedonian National Liberation Front, the resistance organisation of the Slav-Macedonians that was expected to become a magnet for those "misled" people who shared a language with the *Komitadji*, played the role, as its founders should have expected, of a channel for the transmission of "Macedonianism" to the Slavophone pockets in that area and did not in the end become the EAM of the Slav-Macedonians in Greece, as the KKE cadres who decided to allow it to come into being hoped it would. Ioannis Ioannidis, who assumed the responsibility for this decision, continued to argue that he gave his consent in good faith, that is, without suspecting that SNOF would act as an agent of Macedonism in Greek Macedonia. It is very probable that high-ranking KKE cadres – Tzimas and/or Ioannidis – *post facto* supported views that were not made public at the time when these momentous decisions were being made, with the result that many cadres in Greek Macedonia were not aware of the reasons for the tolerance displayed towards the *agents provocateurs* of Macedonianism nor, naturally, who was responsible for it.<sup>10</sup>

When in the spring of 1944 SNOF action in promoting Macedonianism in Greek Macedonia became apparent, the local cadres of the KKE hastened to disband the organisation, which allowed the opponents of the KKE to denigrate the party and argue that the Greek communists were bringing about the cession of Greek Macedonia to Greece's northern neighbours. Highly opportunistic Slav-Macedonian agents of Macedonianism like Naoum Peños, who had initially succumbed to the allure of pro-Bulgarian *Komitadji* action, were arrested and held for a short time by ELAS units, but were released after the intervention of high-ranking Yugoslav Partisans. This was followed by the formation of two Slav-Macedonian brigades, on the mountains of Vitsi and Kaimakchalan respectively, once again by decision of high-ranking KKE cadres, Ioannidis certainly and possibly others.<sup>11</sup>

The “misled” Slav-Macedonians joined these Greek Slav-Macedonian units virtually *en masse*: within just a few months the flower of the pro-Bulgarian *Komitadji* of Kastoria, Florina and Pella had enlisted in the new brigades, which were ELAS units only in name. In reality they were units harbouring former pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians, who through Macedonism found themselves in the same camp as those who were expected to prevail after the withdrawal of the occupation forces from the region. Communist National Front members and pro-Bulgarian *Komitadji*, now enthusiastic “*Makedonci*” one and all, repudiated both ELAS and Greece and went over, in October 1944, to the new People’s Republic of Macedonia, the metropolis of communist-driven Macedonianism. The Slav-Macedonian brigades were a Pool of Siloam that cleansed the former pro-Bulgarian Slav-Macedonians from the stigma of collaboration. They were welcomed enthusiastically into the new entity to the north of the Greek border by Tito’s communist Partisans, while Tito himself launched the first of a series of bitter denunciations of Greece’s supposed persecution of the “Macedonians” in Greece that would punctuate the years of Greece’s civil war. The first such “persecution” took place in October 1944, when the ELAS command in Macedonia tried to move the disruptive Slav-Macedonian brigades away from the Greek-Yugoslav border and the pockets of Slavophones, where they were acting as agents of Macedonianism. Elias Dimakis, or Gotse, commissar of one of these brigades, and other Slav-Macedonian leaders, all members of the KKE, refused to comply with the orders of their superior officers and abandoned Greek Macedonia, just as freedom was dawning for that country, which had paid such a terrible price in blood.

The reciprocal denunciations and accusations of provocative and “uncomradely” behaviour in the matter of the Greek Slav-Macedonians who had sided with the Axis and abandoned Greece in order not to face the consequences of their collaboration, were the visible side of a bitter rivalry for sovereignty in Macedonia. With the offer of national status for the Slav and other communities in Macedonia in the framework of a federal Yugoslavia, Tito sought to entice the populations not only of Serbian but also of Bulgarian Macedonia. Bulgarian communists like Dimitrov proposed resolving the Macedonian Question by incorporating a single unified Macedonia into a South Slav Federation of Bulgarians, Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, Montenegrins and “Macedonians”, in an attempt to keep in Bulgaria Bulgarian-Macedonians (and later “Macedonians”) like Vlachov, whose mutation was made more likely by the turn the war had taken against Bulgaria. Given the collective transmutation of these Bulgarian-Macedonians into Yugoslav-issue “Macedonians” when it became obvious that Bulgaria was going to be among the losers of the war, it is possible to assume that if Bulgaria had changed camps a year earlier many Bulgarian-Macedonians from Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek Macedonia would not have been in such a hurry to transform themselves into “Macedonians”. The invocation of Bulgarian misrule in Serbian Macedonia and of the oppression of the Slav-Macedonians in Greek Macedonia by the Metaxas government were a pretext of the eminently opportunistic Slav-Macedonian leadership, which was always ready to shuffle off the political liabilities for its complaisant collaboration with the Axis forces.

However, the creation of the new state and of the nation that it would house was in 1944 a fact and an inescapable reality. Product of communist processes and liberal principles, the new entity that came into being on 2 August 1944 with the name “People’s Republic of Macedonia” was not, of course, the fruit of a parthenogenesis, but had gestated within the Yugoslavia of the war years. Its new people, the “*Makedonci*”, were still a potential nation: without a past, it harboured the faith in a splendid future of those who undertook to mould it. Drawing upon the historic past of Macedonia, which had already been distributed among the nations that had taken shape in the region, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and Albanians, and borrowing from the languages that had evolved

among them, the nation-builders of the new state endowed it with a Slavic language as far as possible distinct from the Slavic tongues of its neighbours, and its “own” history and culture.

Bulgaria, the only country that could have stopped the establishment of the new nation and its ethnic state, given that their existence was prejudicial to vital Bulgarian interests, was absent from the process. When on 9 September 1944 Bulgaria at last capitulated and hastened to change camp, it was too late for effective intervention: the situation could no longer be turned around. Bulgaria was unfortunate in 1941, when it chose to ally itself with Germany; and it was unfortunate again in 1944, when came the hour of crisis and it was liberated by troops from the Soviet Union, which facilitated the entrenchment of a communist regime in the country.

The KKE, smallest of the three communist parties in the region that were involved in the question of the future of Macedonia after the war, found itself from the beginning in a difficult position, for the reasons already explained and for the additional reason that Greece was liberated not by the Soviet Union but by England. In October 1944, when Soviet troops were liberating Bulgaria and British troops were liberating Greece, it would have been logical for the Greek communist leadership to conclude that Greece would not become part of a communist Balkan Peninsula. On the contrary, however, many KKE cadres believed, moved by sincere passion rather than by objective analysis of the facts, that Greece would also in the end form part of a Soviet Balkans, in the framework of which the Macedonian Question would be resolved. The vague and Sibylline messages from the Soviet Union should logically have discouraged those KKE cadres who expected military support from the communist regimes in the Balkans. However, the encouraging messages from the Yugoslav communist regime seem to have had more weight in shaping the position of the KKE in the period between the Liberation and the armed confrontation with British troops and the forces at the disposal of the Greek Government that reached Greece from the Middle East. The KKE, although officially maintaining its pre-war position on the Macedonian Question with regard to the equality of all ‘nationalities’ of Macedonia, was not in a position to impose it on its brother communist parties in the region or indeed on many of its cadres who were active in Greek Macedonia.

## Notes

1. Cf. Ioannis Koliopoulos, *Leilasia Phronematon*, [*Plundered Loyalties*], vol. I, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Thessaloniki 1995, p. 33 ff.
2. Koliopoulos, *Plundered Loyalties*, vol. I, p. 44 ff.
3. Cf. Spyridon Sfetas, *I diamorphosi tis slavomakedonikis taftotitas* [*The formation of Slav-Macedonian identity*], Thessaloniki 2003, p. 147 ff. Cf. also Elizabeth Barker’s classic work, *Macedonia in the inter-Balkan relations and conflicts*, here cited from the translation by Anna I. Koliopoulou, Thessaloniki 1996, p. 143 ff.
4. Cf. Tassos Hatzianastasio, *Antartes kai Kapetanioi. I Ethniki Antistasi kata ti boulgariki katohi tis Anatolikis Makedonias kai tis Thrakis, 1942-1944* [*Bandits and Captains. National Resistance in Bulgarian-occupied Eastern Macedonia and Thrace*], Thessaloniki 2003.

5. A. I. Koliopoulou, *op. cit.*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 52 ff.
6. Andreas Tzimas, «Gramma sto Politico Grapheio, 22.6.1960» [Letter to the Politburo, 22.6.1960], in a collection of typewritten memoirs and letters by Tzimas selected by Alekos Papapanagiotou, who before his death entrusted them to the author of this study, 59-62 of the collection.
7. Tzimas, *op. cit.*, Replies to questions about the “National Resistance”, interview accorded by Tzimas to Papapanagiotou, 22-24.6.1977, 70.
8. *Ibid*, «Replies», 77-81.
9. Sfetas, *op. cit.*, p. 177 ff.
10. Yannis Ioannidis, *Anamneseis [Reminiscences]*, edited by Alekos Papapanagiotou, Athens 1979, pp. 246-7 and 519-520 note 55.
11. A. I. Koliopoulou, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 114 ff., with an extensive analysis of the action of SNOF.