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**76. THE BALKAN WARS AND THE ROOT OF THE CONTEMPORARY NATIONALISM:
THE ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GEOGRAPHY**
(GÜNÜMÜZ ULUSÇULUK FİKRİNİN KÖKENİ OLARAK BALKAN SAVAŞLARI: ETNİK-
DİNİ COĞRAFYA)

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Abstract

The Balkan Wars created an enduring impact on the geographic notion of the Balkans and the adjacent regions. As it gave a final blow to the old notion of “European Turkey,” the hitherto “Near East” was to be divided into the two conceptually different regions: the Balkans and the Middle East. The wars rendered the former a dubious part of “civilized Europe” and the latter an uncontested member of “barbarian Asia.” Moreover, the Balkans and the Middle East changed their intra-regional conceptual maps in the way that were suitable to the new political reality. For example, Serbs enlarged their ethnic boundary further to the South, claiming that Kosovo was the “Old Serbia,” and (Vardar) Macedonia – “Southern Serbia.” The Bulgarian reaction to this ethno-geographic revision was to divide Macedonia into two parts: the Pirin, an integral part of Bulgarian territory, and (Vardar) Macedonia – a multi-ethnic zone worthy of autonomy. At the same time, they dropped the age-old claim to Eastern Thrace for the convenience of military cooperation with Turkey. For the Turks, the wars created the impact that forced them to give up “Rumeli” and to see Anatolia as their “anavatan (motherland).” Such expedient onomastics eventually took roots on the contemporary notion of nationalist geography.

Introduction

The Balkan Wars marked a watershed that divides the old pattern of nationalist thoughts from the new, more enduring, and pertaining to the contemporary ideas, as they contributed much in molding the prototypes of friend/enemy categories of the Balkan peoples. The Serbian-Hellenic mental alliance that has frequently been mentioned since the start of the Yugoslav wars of succession can be traced back its origins to the fact that the two countries shared victors of the Balkan Wars than the often claimed but misleading supposition of spiritual tie of the Orthodox Christianity. In the same vein, the sympathies expressed clandestinely by the Bulgarians to Croats and Albanians during the Yugo crisis can be better explained as a side effect of anti-Serb sentiment that the nation has harbored since the end of the Second Balkan War.

As is often discussed, the historical origins of hostilities between particular sets of the Balkan peoples focus on the imagined landscapes of “national territory.” It may be true that they were shaped after the memories of medieval kingdoms, but the very image of lost territories was the product of modern historiography that consolidated during the interwar period. As Roumen Daskalov has showed us, taking an example of the Bulgarian historians,¹ the historiography of the Balkan states

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¹ Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans, Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival*, (Bu-

has been affected much by the political consideration of particular time. Therefore, the political reality created by the Balkan Wars could not give any effects on the shaping of imagined landscapes of the Balkan peoples.

In fact, the territorial changes after the Balkan Wars have long-enduring effect on the mutual sentiment of the peoples. The deeply rooted antagonism between Albanians and Serbs derives from the dispute over the ownership of Kosovo that became latter's possession after the Balkan Wars. The same was true for the Albano-Greek rivalries that have much connotation with the domination of Epirus. It may be without saying that the possession of Vardar Macedonia was the main source of the discord between Bulgarians and Serbs. If one looks at the picture from the different angle, it can be deduced that Serbs and Greeks began to sympathize with each other, as they took the lion's share as a result of the wars. On the other hand, the parties who could not secure the gains that they had deemed to be deserved started to harbor the sentiment of loss. From what ground, however, arises the sense of loss and gain?

Serbs, Greeks and Montenegrins had good reason to satisfy themselves with gains as they succeeded in securing the territory wider than had dreamed before the war. Bulgarians who had apparently harbored discontent indeed enlarged their territory to one third. Albanians, likewise, felt the sense of loss, but they succeeded in getting their coveted aim, national independence. On the other hand, Turks, who had lost majority of their territory in Europe, do not seem to feel the sense of fatal loss. The question why the leaders of future Turkish national movement -the Ittihadists- could so easily do away with the nostalgia of the Balkans and instantly focused their attention to Anatolia as the homeland of Turks, in spite of the fact that the majority of them were natives of Southern Balkans, is still left open. One can not deny, however, that the majority of contemporary Turks have since long lost any stronger sense of territoriality than the one that was, for example, expressed in the serial TV drama, "Elveda Rumeli." Quite contrary, the Bulgarian affinity for Macedonia does not seem to outdate. I would like to address this question why Bulgarians continue to look at Macedonia as a part of their legitimate territory by focusing on the discourses produced by the VMRO, the undisputed champion of nationalist causes at the time of the Balkan Wars.

Nationalist rhetoric of Macedonia before the Balkan Wars

Bulgarian nationalists living in the Ottoman territory gathered at Thessaloniki on March 15, 1895. It was the first general congress of "Bulgarian Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Committees."² At the congress, the delegate discussed the primal objective of the organization: Whether it should pursue immediate incorporation into Bulgaria or autonomy. Although all the members dreamed of the first option, the majority supported the latter, as they recognized the sobering reality that Bulgarians did not constitute the overwhelming majority in the two regions. They thought it premature the instant merger with Bulgaria, and emphasized the necessity of nationalist propaganda. As a result, the statute adopted by the congress stipulated the aim of the organization as "to gain full autonomy for Macedonia and the Adrianople province."³ The article 2 of the statute postulated as

dapest & New York: CEU Press, 2004).

² Константин Пандев, Националноосвободителното движение в Македония и Одринско, 1878-1903, (София: Наука и Изкуство, 1979), 92.

³ The author translated "Одринско" into Adrianople province that correspond to the Ottoman Thrace and the Rhodope mountains. The original Bulgarian text is published several times. The author used the version published by Tsocho Bilyarski and Iva Burilkova in their book: Вътрешната Македоно-одринска революционна организация (1893-1919 г.) Документи на Централните ръководни органи, Vol. 1, Part 1, (София: Университетско издателство «Св. Кл. Очридски», 2007), 127. The English translation is available in the following book. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, *Macedonia, Documents and Material*, (Sofia: BAN, 1978), 419-420.

follows: "For the achievement of this aim they must arouse a feeling for self-defense among the Bulgarian population of the areas mentioned in Article 1 [i.e. Macedonia and the Adrianople province], to disseminate revolutionary ideas among it through the press or by word of mouth, and to prepare for and raise a general uprising."⁴ We can confirm the Bulgarian characteristic of the organization by the following expression of the article 3: "Membership is open to any Bulgarian, irrespective of sex, who has not compromised himself in the eyes of the community by dishonest and immoral actions, and who promises to be of service in some way to the revolutionary cause of liberation."⁵

The organization modified the statute in 1902 in the effect to further conceal its Bulgarian nature. The primal objective now regulated as follows: "The Secret Macedonian and Adrianople Revolutionary Organization has its aim to incorporate into a single body all the discontent elements in Macedonia and the Adrianople province, irrespective of nationality, for the sake of the full political autonomy of the two regions mentioned by way of revolution." The membership was open to "any Macedonian or Adrianopolitan who has not compromised himself in the eyes of the community by dishonest and immoral actions, and who promises and undertakes to be of service to the revolutionarily liberation endeavor."⁶

The modification had the intention to incorporate non-Bulgarian elements for the planned general uprising, but the expected effect did not felt at the time of the insurrection of 1903. During the event known as the general uprising of St. Elija's day, the rebels could find support exclusively among the Christian population who had Bulgarian affinity. The Muslims in general, and even the Christians who had Greek or Serbian affinity turned against on the guerillas and cooperated with the Ottoman authorities.⁷

The bitter failure led to the rift in the organization. The fraction, known as the Serres group, asserted the autonomist strategy, and supported the hitherto program that had downplayed the Bulgarian nature. On the contrary, the right wing activists sought more direct cooperation with the Bulgarian government, and favored the rapprochement with the Supreme committee – a nationalist organization mainly composed of Bulgarian officers of Macedonian origin. In the hope to fill the crack and to revitalize the organization, VMRO convened its congress at the Rila monastery toward the end of September 1905. The congress generally favored the claims of the Serres group, and the modified constitution adopted there did not change the Article 1 that regulated the primal objective, i.e. political autonomy. At the same time, however, special concern was shown for the smoothing the contradictions with the Supreme committee. The VMORO chair, Damian Gruev, sent a letter to Ivan Tsonchev, the Supremist leader, asking to disband the committee voluntarily and to merge into VMORO. Tsonchev accepted the offer.⁸

The dispute between the Left and Right wings continued after the congress. It was centered on the administration of the organization, its ultimate goal, and the means employed to attain it. December 1906, deputies gathered in Sofia for another general congress. Shortly before that, the head of VMORO, Damian Gruev was killed in a skirmish. It contributed the Right wing's victory in the congress. The resolutions of the Rila congress were modified at the cost of the Leftists. The Serres group denied the validity of the Sofia congress, and convened another congress. As a result, VMORO split into two organizations: one with the center in Serres, another with its center in Skopje and

⁴ Вътрешната Македоно-одринска, 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷ Любомир Панайотов, "Македония и Одринска Тракия след Илинденско-Преображенското въстание,, в кн. Българска Академия на Науките, Институт по История, История на България, Vol. 8, (София: ГАЛ-ИКО, 1999), 124-127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 135-137.

Bitola. March 1908, a congress was convened in Kyustendil by the initiative of the Skopje fraction.⁹ The congress adopted new regulation that reinforced the centralizing nature of the organization. It also emphasized the alliance with Bulgarian government. The declaration adopted by the congress had the following clause. “The congress dare not deny the legitimate right of Bulgaria to consider the fate of its people living in Turkey.”¹⁰

Shortly after the Kyustendil congress, the organization had to face further difficulties. July 1908, the Committee of Union and Progress succeeded in reviving the Ottoman constitution, and the Ottoman Bulgarian nationalists, both leftists and rightists, had to take a pose to abandon the illegal activities they had hitherto called as “revolutionary.” The two fractions transformed themselves into legal political parties and competed the Bulgarian votes for the Imperial parliament. The leftist National Federation Party, led by Yane Sandanski, sought effective cooperation with CUP. On the other hand, the rightist Union of Bulgarian constitutional clubs emphasized the Bulgarian national rights.¹¹

The peaceful cohabitation between the CUP regime and the Ottoman Bulgarian nationalists could not last long, however. Toward the end of 1909, radicals began to resume terrorist activities, and they got momentum the following years. Parallel to the process, Christian Balkan states brought together for the preparations of Balkan War. The fractions of VMRO realized the necessity to taking advantage of the situation, and sought the way of resurrection of the organization. During February 1911, the most prominent two groups (the Kyustendil congress group and Bulgarian National Macedonian Adrianople Revolutionary Organization) agreed on the unification.¹² The revived VMRO had explicit Bulgarian characteristics. The organization would accept only Bulgarian members.¹³

The Changes of Nationalists' Rhetoric during the Balkan Wars

When the First Balkan War broke out, VMRO transformed itself an auxiliary formation of the Bulgarian Army, known as the Macedonian Legion, and gave full support to the Bulgarian government. The instructions given to its members described the war as “the sacred battle for the liberation of our fatherland Macedonia as well as for its fully incorporation into Greater Bulgaria.”¹⁴ The overt disclosure of the Bulgarian characteristic can be seen in the letter presented to Bulgarian King Ferdinand in the name of Central Committee of Internal Macedonian and Adrianople Revolutionary Organization, dating from December 6, 1912. “The ultimate goal of the insurrectionist battles organized by our population in Macedonia and the Adrianople province was the liberation of our enslaved fatherland and to make possible for entire Bulgarian people to live peaceful cultural life. Our dream – the dream of Bulgarian people – has come true, and no people would be happier than us, if the beam of liberty shines every corner of ethnic Bulgaria under a Bulgarian flag.” The same document explains the hitherto endeavor of VMRO has been done for “one and the same goal to completely safeguard the Bulgarian Macedonia for Bulgarians intact.”¹⁵

In this way, VMRO shook completely off its former mask of autonomist, and claimed itself as the consistent and zealous advocator of the Bulgarian national cause.

⁹ Ibid., 138-140.

¹⁰ Вътрешната Македоно-одринска, Vol.1, Part 2, 854.

¹¹ Войн Вожков, “Македония и Одринско след Младотурската революция през 1908., в кн. Българска Академия на Науките, Институт по История, История на България, Vol. 8, (София: ГАЛ-ИКО, 1999), 143-147.

¹² Зорка Първанова, “Възобновяването на въоръжаната борба и възстановяването на ВМОРО., в кн. Македонски научен институт, Национално-освободителното движение на македонските и тракийските Българи, 1878-1944, Vol. 3, (София: МНИ, 1997), 255.

¹³ Вътрешната Македоно-одринска, Vol.1, Part 2, 1000.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1038.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1042.

During the First Balkan War, Bulgarians fought mainly in the Thracian front, and succeeded in occupying huge area both in the East and South. The zone of Bulgarian occupation covered the entire Western Thrace, the Rhodope mountains, as well as the Eastern Thrace, including Edirne, up to the very outskirts of Istanbul. As a result, Bulgaria got direct access both to the Aegean and Marmara seas. Moreover, Bulgaria got another important spoil in the West –the Pirin Macedonia. The great success, however, could not satisfy the land thirsty of Bulgarian nationalists.

To the eyes of conservative Bulgarian leadership, its share in Macedonia was unduly small, and they began to protest that Serbs and Greeks betrayed pre-war agreement of territorial distribution. At this phase, VMRO gave strong support to the maximalist groups in the establishment (king and general staff). Not only they expressed vocal support, but provided them with the rhetoric justifying the war with Serbia and Greece. VMRO sent a petition to the Prime Minister, Ivan Geshov, and tried to persuade him to take steps to counteract against the Serbian and Greek occupation policy.¹⁶

The petition first describes the church struggle as the aspiration of cultural unification of Bulgarians. Then, it claims the endeavors of the 19th century “National Revival” aimed at the resurrection of Bulgarian kingdom within its “ethnic boundaries.” The alleged historical aspiration of Bulgarians came true with the San Stefano peace treaty by which “all Bulgarian lands formed one political units.” The cancelling of San Stefano Bulgaria was not only a temporal frustration of Bulgarian national self-determination, but opened the way of renewed hardship. The Ottomans escalated their oppression to destroy the hope of Bulgarian unification. Greeks, realizing the Slav danger, embarked on the policy of political and spiritual dismembering of Macedonian Bulgarians. Serbs also turned their eyes on Macedonia. “Thus, all the peoples surrounding us opposed our cultural and political unification. As a result of this policy, the suffering of that part of Bulgarian people, which was not yet liberated, became unbearable. The Macedonian Bulgarians, not able to react against the violence within the bond of law, resorted to underground activity, and laid the foundations of the revolutionary organization. Along with its legitimate defense the latter aimed at achieving the direct and indirect political unification of all Bulgarians by means of the autonomous stage. Because, as we know, Mr. Prime Minister, the principle of autonomy was a way of saving the integrity of Macedonia.” As the result of its endeavor, the Macedonian autonomy had almost reached at realization, thus the way was paved for political unification with Bulgaria. But, the Balkan War changed the situation. Macedonian Bulgarians had expected the victories of Bulgarian Army would finally realize the national unification. “But the moment of the greatest joy marked also the beginning of a terrible anguish for the Bulgarian people.” Serbs and Greeks have occupied two third of Macedonia. “The temporary occupation of Bulgarian lands by Serbs and Greeks is not in itself a threat in an allied war such as the present war. What is actually worrying our people is the way the allies behave toward the Bulgarian population in the area occupied by them... The Greeks are trying to Hellenize the Bulgarian districts held by them... The Serbs are doing the same. They are also trying to Serbianize the Bulgarian regions taken by them, and to take steps showing that they do not intend to withdraw from them either... All these regions, which are being occupied by the Greeks and Serbs have made and continue to make costly sacrifices for the unification of the Bulgarian people.” Therefore, the Bulgarian government had to support them by all the means at its disposal.

The petition intended to make pressure on the government appealing the moral obligation to support the Bulgarians living in the occupied zone. At the moment, the practical assessment of situation was dominant in the government. The cabinet was well aware of the military exhaustion of Bulgaria and could be satisfied with unexpected success in the East. To dissuade the pragmatists, VMRO had to assert that Macedonia could not be traded off with Thrace. So, they employed the rhetoric that

¹⁶ The original Bulgarian text is published by Bilyarski and BulirKOva. ВЪТРЕШНАТА МАКЕДОНО-ОДРИНСКА, Vol.1, Part 2, 1046-1048. An English translation can be found in the following book. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, *Macedonia*, 637-640.

Macedonia was from the onset the center of Bulgarian nationalism. The Macedonian Bulgarians were the direct and legitimate heirs of the centuries long movement of common Bulgarian aspiration – the national unification. Therefore, their suffering must be shared with the rest of Bulgarian nation. The rhetoric craftily fitted into the political propaganda that government had organized in the hope to mobilized nationalist sentiment of the population: the final war for Bulgarian unification.

The centrality of Macedonia in the Bulgarian nationalism was further emphasized when the Second Balkan War became imminent. In a declaration made public on May 16, 1913, VMRO asserted the importance of Macedonia using the following rhetoric. The first Bulgarian reading and writing as well as the translation of sacred religious texts appeared in Macedonia, as it was the birthplace of St. Cyril and Methodius, as well as their pupil St. Clements of Ohrid. Macedonia was both political and spiritual centers for Bulgarians, as the two capitals of old Bulgarian state – Ohrid and Prespa – and the Bulgarian spiritual center, the Ohrid Patriarchate were here. In the modern times, Macedonia continued to be cultural center as the first Bulgarian printing house and printed books were produced here. Macedonian Bulgarians were the most zealous and earliest participants in the struggle for the independent church – the common aspiration of entire Bulgarian nation. Moreover, the most recent expression of Bulgarian national sentiment was the St. Elias' day's uprising.¹⁷

Coupled with the centrality of Macedonia in the Bulgarian nationalism, a new phraseology come to the fore. On May 15, 1913, an appeal was made public by the name of United Macedonian Emigrants. The appeal claimed Macedonia a predominantly Bulgarian region, and strongly denounced the occupying policy of Serbia and Greece. According to their assertion, "The military and civil authorities in those parts of Macedonia which were taken by Greeks and Serbians very soon adopted hostile attitude toward the population... They immediately started to implement their old dreams by the most deplorable means, to force a whole people to renounce its name, its consciousness, its spiritual nature... That unheard-of violation of the conscience of the Bulgarians was accompanied by an overt and systematic spoliation of their property and violation of their family honor."¹⁸ The rhetoric and phraseology hitherto in the text are almost identical with the petition of VMRO to Ivan Geshov, we have examined above. What appeared new in the text was the following phrases. "Exposed to such cruel persecutions and plunder, the population was fully justified in considering its 'liberators' as even *crueler enemies* than the Turkish oppressors. [Italic is added.]"

The phraseology that Serbs and Greeks are much worse than the Turks, hereafter, frequently appear in political appeals asserting the Bulgarian nature of Macedonian population. For example, the protesting letter sent to foreign authorities contains the following phrases. "We soon realized that our sisters, wives, mothers living in the so-called liberated areas were exposed to humiliating insult by the hand of Serbs and Greeks, as well as that Macedonia was to be placed under a new and *more serious yoke* than that of Turkish terror. [Italic is added.]"¹⁹

As the pragmatic assessors feared, Bulgarian Army was totally defeated in the Second Balkan War. All the neighboring countries declared war against Bulgaria, and as a result, it had to concede south Dobruja to Romania, and return a part of Eastern Thrace to the Ottomans. Compared with these losses, territorial concession in Macedonia was much smaller. It must have been natural to reappear traditional hostility against Turks, as well as to occur strong resentment against Romanians who attacked Bulgaria dastardly from the rear. Such reactions appeared, but only partially. The dominant nationalist discourses after the war were those of vengeance against Greeks and Serbs, especially against the latter. In the

¹⁷ Вътрешната Македоно-одринска, Vol.1, Part 2, 1053-1054.

¹⁸ The original Bulgarian text is published by Bilyarski and Bulirkova. Вътрешната Македоно-одринска, Vol.1, Part 2, 1050-1053. An English translation can be found in the following book. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, *Macedonia*, 646-650.

¹⁹ Вътрешната Македоно-одринска, Vol.1, Part 2, 1094.

same vein, the irredentism over Dobruja or Thrace could not become the main stream, and the centrality of Macedonia continued to dominate the nationalist discourses.

The change of adjective of the internal organization symbolizes the nationalist sentiment dominant in Bulgaria those days. During the early winter of 1913, the organization changed its name as Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization. The reason was not disclosed officially, but it is obvious that the organization followed the advise of Ahmed Cemal Paşa. During November 1913, the VMRO leadership concluded an agreement with CUP on a joint struggle against Serbs and Greeks in Macedonia. At the occasion, Cemal requested to drop the adjective "Adrianople."²⁰ Hereafter, the organization did not revive its old name, and concentrated its activities in those parts of Macedonia ruled by Serbia and Greece.

The centrality of Macedonia in the thought of Bulgarian nationalist strongly consolidated when the opportunity of revenge against the Serbs appeared. After the First World War broke out in the summer 1914, Bulgaria suddenly became the focus of diplomacy among the warring parties. In the situation that Serbs were effectively fighting back the Austrian attack and the Ottoman sided with the Central Powers, the Bulgarian entry was crucial in the Balkan front. The Bulgarian participation into the Entente camp would have given catastrophic effect on the Ottoman Army. On the contrary, its entry into the Central Power would mean instant defeat of Serbs. Therefore, both camps offered utmost territorial reward to the Bulgarians. The Entente proposed a generous gain in the Eastern Thrace, up to Midie-Enoz line. It also offered a part of Vardar Macedonia, south-east from the line of Kriva Palanka-Ohrid, but only if Serbia would succeed in acquiring Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Adrian coast after the war. On the other hand, the Austria-Hungary and Germany promised unconditional annexation of entire Vardar Macedonia, and Aegean Macedonia in case Greece would side with the Entente. Bulgaria preferred the latter option, and joined the war as an ally of Central Powers.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the Balkan Wars was the turning point for the historical territoriality in the thoughts of Bulgarian nationalists. Before the war, the nationalists imagined the San Stefano Bulgaria as the frame of reference of unredeemed territories. Therefore, the Adrianople province weighed as much as Macedonia, and the nationalists propagated both of the two regions should be the target of gradual incorporation into the main land. As the regions were ruled by the Ottomans, the liberation of Christian lands from the barbarity of Muslim Turks was the common idiom of the nationalists rhetoric.

The First Balkan War brought about a drastic change in this conceptual map. Now, the regions of Adrianople province came under the Bulgarian rule, and the nationalists swiftly shifted their prerogatives to those parts of Macedonia that were under Serbian and Greek occupation. Macedonia suddenly came to the center of nationalists' discourses and was claimed to be the most sacred and indispensable core of the Bulgarian nationhood. The catastrophic result of the Second Balkan War even reinforced the rhetoric. Despite the fact that Bulgaria had to concede Eastern Thrace to the Ottomans, the sense of loss was not felt strongly. Instead of reviving the old hatred to the Turks, Bulgarian nationalists preferred to cooperate with the Ottomans in the hope to redeem Macedonia. Macedonia, especially its part occupied by the Serbs, was singled out as the lost territory, and Serbs, not Turks, were to be imagined as sworn enemies and the worst oppressors. The nationalists who had carried out their activities under the slogan of free Macedonia and Adrianople province instantly dropped the latter adjective, and redefined themselves as the Macedonian autonomists. The change gave them

²⁰ Валентин Китанов, Аспекти на политическите отношения на ВМОРО с Турция, 1903-1914 г., (Благоевград: Неофит Рилски, 2009), 193.

the ground on which they could claim as the sole champion of the Bulgarians national cause, and accordingly, they could make their voice felt, much stronger than ever, in the Bulgarian foreign policy. In this way, the centrality of Macedonia consolidated, and it was to dominate the ethno-religious geography in the mind of Bulgarian people for many years to come.

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