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The Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization (MYSRO) 1922–1927: A New Moment in Macedonian Struggle¹

Dmitar Tasić

In June 1927, the Yugoslav press reported on a series of spectacular arrests that were happening throughout the country. They were closely connected with the ongoing security crisis in the southern parts of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia).² However, this time the people being arrested were not heavily armed *komitajis*³ of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) which, since the end of the First World War, had continued to challenge Yugoslav (Serbian) rule over Macedonia by smuggling in numerous armed bands (*chete*) from Bulgaria and by maintaining field organizations throughout Macedonian villages and towns. It turned out that a new generation of IMRO supporters had just stepped in; this time they were senior high school and university students, and what is most interesting, they were of both sexes. The IMRO's struggle ceased to be a male thing in which mothers, sisters and daughters had played only passive or supporting roles.

The reason for this was that the period after the end of the First World War had brought numerous changes in the operations of the IMRO compared to the period of Bulgarian-Serbian-Greek rivalry over Ottoman Macedonia (1903–1912).⁴ One of these changes was increasing involvement, or a desire

1 This paper is the result of a project of specific research "Paramilitaries in the Balkans after the First World War – continuation of old and initiation of new conflicts and rivalries" supported by the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové in the year 2019.

2 The Yugoslav state was founded on 1 December 1918 under the name "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes". However, after the introduction of royal dictatorship in 1929, its name was changed to "Kingdom of Yugoslavia".

3 A popular term for members of the IMRO's paramilitary wing. *Komitaji* literally means "member of a committee".

4 While the history of the IMRO before the Balkan Wars has been the subject of various studies in both Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia/Macedonia, the post-Great War history of the organization can be accessed through monographs, articles, and memoirs relating to leading political figures of the movement as well as contemporary historical events and processes; Vasil At. VASILEV, *Pravitelstvo na BZNS, VMRO i B'lgaro-Yugoslavskite otnosheniya* [The BANU Government, the IMRO and Bulgaro-Yugoslav Relations], Sofiya 1991; Zoran TODOROVSKI, *Avtonomističката VMRO na Todor Aleksandrov 1919–1924* [The Autonomist IMRO of Todor Aleksandrov 1919–1924], Skopje 2013; Kostadin PALESHUTSKI, *Makedonskoto osvoboditelno dvizhenie sled P'rvata svetovna vojna (1918–1924)* [The Macedonian Liberation Movement After the First World War (1918–1924)], Sofiya 1993; IDEM, *Makedonskoto osvoboditelno dvizhenie 1924–1934* [The Macedonian Liberation Movement 1924–1934], Sofiya 1998; Dmitar TASIĆ, *Rat posle rata. Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca na Kosovu i Metohiji i u Makedoniji 1918–1920* [The War After the War. The Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in Kosovo and Metohija and in Macedonia 1918–1920], Beograd 2008; Peter SHANDANOV, *Bogatstvo mi e svobodata. Spomeni* [Freedom is my Fortune. Memoirs], Sofiya 2010; Veselin YAANCHEV, *Armija, obshchestven red i vatrešna sigurnost mezhdu voynite i sled tyaaah 1913–1915, 1918–1923* [The Army, Public Order and Homeland Security Between the Wars and After, 1913–1915, 1918–1923], Sofiya 2014; Georgi BAZHDAROV, *Moite spomeni* [My Memoirs], Sofiya 1929, URL: <http://www>.

for increased involvement, on the part of numerous members of the Macedonian war youth generation. While after the First World War one part of this generation (individuals born around 1900, who were too young to have participated in the struggle over Macedonia, the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the First World War) chose to join the paramilitary component of the IMRO, another, consisting mostly of senior high school and university students, decided to form a secret organization which would support the IMRO cause through activities aimed at gathering intelligence data and by maintaining the spirit of the movement. This is how the Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization – MYSRO was formed (Македонска младинска тајна револуционерна организација – ММТРО in Macedonian or Македонска младежка тајна револуциона организација – ММТРО in Bulgarian).

In Yugoslav (and contemporary Serbian) and Macedonian historiography throughout the existence of socialist Yugoslavia, research focused mainly on the communist movement and its youth component – the Union of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije* – SKOJ).⁵ Only recently have youth sections of other political parties and movements become a topic of interest. As elsewhere, most of the active participants in the youth sections of different political movements and parties were usually university students.⁶ Unlike in Yugoslavia and Macedonia, the topic of MYSRO has attracted a certain attention among Bulgarian historians. One of the reasons is the fact that some of the actual members of MYSRO as well as participants in and witnesses to the MYSRO affair continued their lives in Bulgaria after the Second World War. This resulted in the publication of various studies and edited memoirs.⁷

promacedonia.org/gb/gb_3_2a.html [last retrieved: 28.8.2018]; Ivan MIKHAILOV, Spomeni 2. Osvoboditelna borba 1919–1924 [Memoirs 2. The Liberation Struggle 1919–1924], Louvain 1965; IDEM, Spomeni 3. Osvoboditelna borba 1924–1934 [Memoirs 3. The Liberation Struggle 1924–1934], Louvain 1967; Rodolphe Archibald REISS, La question des comitatjjs en Serbie du Sud, Beograd 1924.

- 5 Milica DAMJANOVIĆ, Napredni pokret studenata Beogradskog univerziteta [The Progressive Movement of the Belgrade University Students], Beograd 1966; Slavoljub CVETKOVIĆ, Napredni omladinski pokret u Jugoslaviji 1919–1928 [The Progressive Youth Movement in Yugoslavia 1919–1928], Beograd 1966; Miroljub VASIĆ, Revolucionarni omladinski pokret u Jugoslaviji 1929–1941 [The Revolutionary Youth Movement in Yugoslavia 1929–1941], Beograd 1977; Jovan MARJANOVIĆ (ed.), Zbornik radova o studentskom i omladinskom revolucionarnom pokretu na Beogradskom univerzitetu [Collection of Papers on the Student and Youth Revolutionary Movement at Belgrade University], Beograd 1970; Dobrica VULOVIĆ (ed.), Beogradski univerzitet u predratnom periodu i revoluciji [Belgrade University during the Interwar Period and the Revolution], Beograd 1983.
- 6 Đorđe STANKOVIĆ, Studenti i Univerzitet 1914–1954: ogledi iz društvene istorije [Students and University 1914–1954: Essays on Social History], Beograd 2000; Dragan TEŠIĆ, Klub studenata Jugoslovenske radikalne zajednice ‘Slovenski jug’ na Beogradskom univerzitetu 1935–1941 [The Students’ Club of the Yugoslav Radical Association ‘Slavic South’ at Belgrade University 1935–1941]. In: Istorija 20. Veka [History of the 20th Century] (1993), 1/2, p. 53–71; Desimir TOŠIĆ, Jedno viđenje studentskih političkih kretanja pred Drugi svetski rat – lične beleške iz 1941. godine [A View on Students’ Political Actions on the Eve of the Second World War – Personal Notes from 1941]. In: Tokovi istorije [Currents of History] (2006), 3, p. 229–265; Rade RISTANOVIĆ, Ideološka orijentacija članova Kluba studenata JRZ Slovenski jug [The Ideological Orientation of the Members of the YRA Students’ Club ‘Slavic South’]. In: Tokovi istorije [Currents of History] (2016), 1, p. 143–164.
- 7 Dimităr GYUZELEV, Zhertvite na skopskiya studentski proces’ [The Victims of the Skopje Stu-

Introduction

One of the phenomena that marked the period after the Great War throughout Europe was increased political and (para-)military activism among the so-called “war youth generation”. These were young men and women born around 1900 whose adolescence overlapped with the turbulent events of the Great War and subsequent revolutions and civil wars. Their increased activism or desire for it was related to the “painful transition from war to peace”.⁸ Members of the “war youth generation” shared a common drive for activism no matter where they ended up. The same things occurred in paramilitary formations and movements in Germany, Austria or Hungary; in the newly founded Fascist movement in Italy; in nationalist organizations in Yugoslavia such as ORJUNA (Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists – *Organizacija jugoslovenskih nacionalista*), SRNAO (Serbian Nationalist Youth – *Srpska nacionalna omladina*) or HRNAO (Croatian National Youth – *Hrvatska nacionalna omladina*),⁹ as well as in the respective communist parties and the international communist movement in general. This came about as a result of several factors. The first was the missed opportunity to prove themselves on the battlefields of Europe, because just as they reached the required age the war was over. Second, and equally important, was the post-war status of their respective countries: vanquished or victorious, which directly influenced the creation of different cultures. In Germany, Austria, Hungary, and partly in Croatia, the shame of defeat led to the creation of a “culture of defeat”. In Italy, the unsatisfactory outcome of the war, in terms of the failure to achieve territorial expansion, gave rise to a sense of “mutilated victory” which, among other things, directly influenced the creation of the Fascist movement. In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, on the other hand, the victory that had been won and the fulfillment of the “liberation and unification” of all Southern Slavs, which had been Serbia’s principal war aim, needed to be protected from numerous internal and external foes, so the nationalist organizations, especially ORJUNA, “needed to remain mobilized

dents’ Trial], Skopje 1942; Dimit’r GOTSEV, *MLadezhkite natsionalno-osvoboditelni organizatsii na makedonskite b’lgari 1919–1941* [The Youth National Liberation Organizations of Macedonian Bulgarians 1919–1941], Sofiya 1988; Kosta ČRNUSHANOV, *Prinos k’im istoriyata na Makedonskata mladezhka tayna revolyoutsionna organizatsiya* [Contribution to the History of the Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization], Sofiya 1996; Georgi MARKOV et al. (ed.), *Almanah na b’lgarskite natsionalni dvizheniya sled 1878* [Almanac of Bulgarian National Associations after 1878], Sofija 2005.

- 8 Robert GERWARTH, *Fighting the Red Beast: Counter-Revolutionary Violence in the Defeated Countries of Central Europe*. In: Robert GERWARTH/John HORNE (ed.), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, Oxford 2012, p. 52–70, at p. 54; see further Ulrich HERBERT, “Generation der Sachlichkeit”. Die völkische Studentenbewegung der frühen zwanziger Jahre in Deutschland. In: Frank BAJOHR/Werner JOHE/Uwe LOHALM (ed.), *Zivilisation und Barbarei. Die widersprüchlichen Potentiale der Moderne*. Detlev Peukert zum Gedenken (Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte 27), Hamburg 1991, p. 115–144; Martin GÖLLNITZ, *Der Student als Führer? Handlungsmöglichkeiten eines jungakademischen Funktionskorps am Beispiel der Universität Kiel* (Kieler Historische Studien 44), Ostfildern 2018, p. 42 f.
- 9 On post-First World War patriotic, veteran and paramilitary organizations in Yugoslavia and their activism and goals, see: John Paul NEWMAN, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building 1903–1945*, Cambridge 2015.

and under arms in order to fully realize liberation and unification, which was being jeopardized by the state's many post-war enemies."¹⁰ As was the case of young members of similar organizations elsewhere in Europe, in these circumstances young members of groups such as ORJUNA were able to compensate their lack of experience "in the trenches" with increased activism. They were also able to acquire a sense of wartime camaraderie and prove themselves in violent clashes against their enemies, that is, opponents of Yugoslav unification, such as the Croatian Peasant Party – HSS (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*), the Croatian Party of Rights – HSP (*Hrvatska stranka prava*), also known as Frankists, or against Yugoslav communists.

In this sense, young supporters of the Macedonian national revolutionary movement after the First World War, IMRO, did not differ from their counterparts throughout Yugoslavia and Europe. They shared the frustration caused by the missed chance to fight and die a heroic death on the battlefield, as well as by defeat and the loss of Macedonia, meaning its ending up (again) under Serbian/Yugoslav rule. However, what was different from other contemporary examples in Europe was a long tradition of activism, especially among the young members. Essentially, young intellectuals, particularly teachers and young officers, had formed the Macedonian organization. By the 1920s, tens, if not hundreds of young IMRO members, fallen for the cause, had already become heroes in the organization's Pantheon and role models for the new generations.

The Macedonian revolutionary movement

The history of the Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization (MYSRO) begins several decades earlier, with the creation of a national revolutionary movement in Ottoman Macedonia. The principal aim of the Macedonian revolutionaries was achieving autonomous status for this part of the Ottoman Empire's European possessions. The formation and actions of the Macedonian national revolutionary movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the subsequent interference of the Balkan Christian states became integral parts of the so-called "Macedonian Question". By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, on several occasions the Macedonian Question had troubled international relations in the Balkans and attracted international attention. For decades it remained "on the table" in the complex tangle of Serbian-Bulgarian and Greco-Bulgarian relations: through the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, the Great War, the interwar period, the Second World War as well as during the Cold War. The Macedonian Question outlasted all the turbulent changes of the Cold War period and the violent dissolution of the Yugoslav state in the 1990s, maintaining

10 NEWMAN, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War*, p. 153.

its prominent place in complex intra-Balkan relations into the twenty-first century.¹¹

The “object” of interest of so many players at the time, Ottoman Macedonia, interestingly never existed as an entity under that name.¹² In its full extent, Ottoman Macedonia consisted of three *vilayets* or provinces of the Ottoman state – Salonika *vilayet*, its central and largest part; Kosovo *vilayet*, lying to the north; and the third, Monastir *vilayet*, in the south-west.¹³

Initially, among other things, the Macedonian Question was the issue of the territorial division of Ottoman Macedonia between Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria. By the end of the nineteenth century, each of these Balkan nation-states had initiated its own “Macedonian struggle”, which in its early stages resembled a missionary endeavour more than a military one. Through cultural and relief associations such as the Bulgarian St. Cyril and Methodius Committee, the Serbian St. Sava Society and the Greek National Society, the three Balkan Christian nations strove to expand their influence and spread nationalist propaganda, while simultaneously denying the existence of a separate and authentic Macedonian Slav nation. Cultural, educational and humanitarian actions were backed by historical, ethnographic, and linguistic proofs and claims.

The event that announced the beginning of the reshaping of the existing order in Ottoman Macedonia was the creation of an autonomous Slavic-speaking Orthodox ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the Bulgarian Exarchate, in 1872. This effectively meant a reform of the existing *millet* system (*millet* being the Turkish word for “nationality”), under which religion had been the main or sole criterion for distinguishing different groups within the Ottoman Empire. With the appearance of the Bulgarian Exarchate, beside the existing *Rum millet* that encompassed the Empire’s Orthodox Christians, a new *Bulgar millet* was introduced.¹⁴

11 On different aspects (and different perspectives) of the Macedonian Question see: Nadine LANGE-AKHUND, *The Macedonian Question, 1893–1908*. From *Western Sources*, New York 1998; Kostadin PALESHUTSKI, *Makedonskiyat v'pros v burzhoazna Jugoslaviya 1918–1941* [The Macedonian Question in Bourgeois Yugoslavia 1918–1941], Sofiya 1983; IDEM, *Jugoslavskata komunisticheska partiya i makedonskiyat v'pros, 1919–1945* [The Yugoslav Communist Party and the Macedonian Question 1919–1945], Sofiya 1985, URL: http://www.promacedonia.org/kp_ju/kp_ju_sydyr.html (last retrieved: 28.8.2018); Ivan KATARDŽEV, *Makedonsko nacionalno pitanje 1919–1930* [The Macedonian National Question 1919–1930], Zagreb 1983; Nikola ŽEŽOV, *Makedonskoto prašanje vo jugoslovensko-bugraskite diplomatski odnosi (1918–1941)* [The Macedonian Question in Yugoslav-Bulgarian Diplomatic Relations (1918–1941)], Skopje 2008; Nadežda CVETKOVSKA, *Makedonskoto prašanje vo jugoslovenskiot parlament medu dve svetski vojni* [The Macedonian Question in the Yugoslav Parliament Between the World Wars], Skopje 2000; Andrew ROSSOS, *Macedonia and the Macedonians. A History*, Stanford 2008, ch. 8–14; Ririta Petrovna GRISHINA (ed.), *Makedonija – Problemy istorii i kul'tury* [Macedonia – Historical and Cultural Issues], Moskva 1999; Institut za nacionlna istorija (ed.), *Makedonija vo dvacetioti vekot* [Macedonia in the 20th Century], Skopje 2003; Institut za nacionalna istorija (ed.), *Makedonskiot identitet niz istorijata* [Macedonian Identity in History], Skopje 2010.

12 Nadine LANGE-AKHUND, *Nationalisme et terrorisme en Macédoine vers 1900*. In: *Balkanologie IV* (2000), 2, p. 1–11, p. 2.

13 LANGE-AKHUND, *The Macedonian Question*, p. 13.

14 Mark BRONDICH, *The Balkans. Revolution, War, and Political Violence since 1878*, Oxford 2011, p. 27–29. The Greek-led Ecumenical Patriarchate strongly opposed the creation of the Exarchate on the grounds that it prioritized nation over religion – a phenomenon also known as the heresy

The next important landmark was the appearance of the autonomous Bulgarian state in 1878. It entered the historical scene after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, as a result of yet another Russian victory over the Ottomans. However, according to the decisions of the Congress of Berlin in 1878, which was convened to revise the provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano signed earlier that year,¹⁵ Macedonia remained an integral part of the Ottoman state. Meanwhile, in just ten years, from 1885 until 1894, the overall number of Exarchate schools in Macedonia increased from 150 to 400.¹⁶ In order to respond to the rise of Bulgarian influence in Ottoman Macedonia, Greeks and Serbs began similar activities.¹⁷

However, when Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks added a military aspect to their enterprise by sending armed bands across the border, “its ideological character predisposed it to political violence”¹⁸. The aim of these bands was simple: they were supposed to protect their own priests, teachers, churches and schools and to spread their influence among those parts of the Macedonian population that were still undetermined or under the influence of rival organizations and their propaganda.¹⁹

This (para-)militarization of the “Macedonian struggle” corresponds to a phase beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century with the creation of two organizations whose aim was the liberation of Macedonia from Ottoman rule. The first of these was the Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organization (IMARO), founded in Salonika in 1893 by several young intellectuals, most of them teachers in Exarchate schools in Macedonia. Their main goal was actual implementation of Article 23 of the Treaty of Berlin, which envisaged administrative reforms in the European provinces of the Ottoman state aimed at full political autonomy for two regions (Macedonia and Adrianople-Thrace).²⁰ These reforms were deliberately hampered by sultan Abdul Hamid, who, throughout much of his extremely conservative and anti-reformist reign (1876–1908), managed to block their implementation.

of ethnophiletism. After locally conducted referendums, twenty-five out of seventy-four Orthodox dioceses in the Ottoman Balkans opted for the Exarchate.

15 The Treaty of San Stefano (named after a village outside Constantinople) was signed between the Russian and Ottoman Empires on 3 March 1878, and envisaged the creation of a huge autonomous Principality of Bulgaria. The Balkan states and European Powers strongly objected to the treaty, which led to its revision at the Congress of Berlin later that year. “Greater Bulgaria” as envisaged by the Treaty of San Stefano became yet another of the maximalist nationalist projects in the Balkans.

16 LANGE-AKHUND, *The Macedonian Question*, p. 32.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 33. In order to spread their influence, Serbian activists decided to follow the example and methodology of their Bulgarian counterparts. However, after the experience with the Exarchate, the Ottoman authorities offered Serbia only educational autonomy. Nevertheless, by 1900 there were already 210 Serbian schools operating in Ottoman Macedonia as well.

18 BIONDICH, *The Balkans*, p. 68 f.

19 On Serbian action in Ottoman Macedonia, see: Stanislav KRAKOV, *Plamen četništva [Blaze of Chetniks]*, Beograd 1930; Vasilije TRBIĆ, *Memoari I i II [Memoirs I and II]*, Beograd 1996; Ilija TRIFUNOVIĆ BRČANIN, *Trnovitim stazama [On Thorny Paths]*, Beograd 1933; Vladimir ILIĆ, *Srpska četnička akcija 1903–1912 [Serbian Chetnik Action 1903–1912]*, Beograd 2006.

20 LANGE-AKHUND, *Nationalisme et terrorisme*, p. 4.

In 1895, however, Macedonian emigrants in Bulgaria founded a second organization, initially named the “Macedonian Committee”. Within the year, it changed its name to “Supreme Macedonian Committee”. Its aim of supporting the IMARO was somewhat aggressive, influenced by Bulgarian aspirations to Macedonia as well as by the fact that significant numbers of Bulgarian army officers and civil servants were of Macedonian origin (approximately one third).²¹ Immediately after its creation, the Supreme Committee began sending groups of armed men to Macedonia, hoping to instigate massive popular revolt. Their appearance and actions caused serious Ottoman reprisals against the local Christian population.²²

Although both organizations profited from mutual contacts and cooperation, primarily in terms of military training provided by members of the Supreme Committee in return for knowledge of local circumstances, which was the specialty of IMARO members, their main difference concerned the final goal of their struggle – the status of Ottoman Macedonia. Simply put, the Supreme Committee favoured unification of Macedonia (the three *vilayets* of Skopje, Monastir, and Salonika) with Bulgaria, while the IMARO advocated the political autonomy of Macedonia, which could evolve into independence and end in a federation with other Southern Slav states.²³ In addition, the two organizations could not agree on the issue of an uprising in Macedonia. On the eve of the twentieth century, the IMARO was opposed to a major uprising while the Supreme Committee insisted on it.²⁴ Despite the objections of IMARO leaders, after intense propaganda activities and at the insistence of the Supreme Committee, the uprising began on Ilinden (the feast of St. Elias), 2 August 1903. Its centre was the small town of Kruševo in Monastir vilayet. The insurgents managed to assemble some 25 000 fighters, but despite initial successes they failed to spread the insurgency to other parts of Macedonia. After a battle with insurgent forces on 12 August, Ottoman troops sacked Kruševo. This was the end of so-called Kruševo Republic, but insurgents continued guerilla resistance until October, when the rising was finally over. During its course, Ottoman troops destroyed 201 villages with 12 400 houses, while 4 694 people died in battle, 70 835 became homeless and 30 000 sought refuge in Bulgaria.

Despite the failure of the uprising, both organizations continued to be present in Ottoman Macedonia. They now focused on their Greek and Serbian rivals, and until the Young Turk revolution in 1908 clashes between Bulgarian, Serbian, and Greek paramilitaries became increasingly intense. After the Great War, however, conflict between the two factions would result in a complete schism followed by bloody showdowns and vendetta campaigns.

21 John D. BELL, *Peasants in Power. Alexander Stamboliyski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union 1899–1923*, Princeton 1977, p. 89.

22 LANGE-AKHUND, *The Macedonian Question*, p. 47 f.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 102–115.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 118–130.

During the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the First World War, members of the Macedonian national revolutionary movement, especially *komitaji* fighters, maintained a high level of activism either by joining the Bulgarian regular army or by remaining in the IMRO's paramilitary structures (Adrianople had in the meantime been dropped from the organization's name). In both capacities, they participated in the Bulgarian war effort either as regular soldiers or as members of anti-guerrilla detachments. After the Great War, the IMRO continued to function following its old charter. The organization's main asset was the considerable number of experienced and battle-hardened *komitajis*, who, although most of them had already been involved in some form of military action since the beginning of the twentieth century, were ready to continue their struggle. They were recruited from the ranks of Macedonian emigrés in Bulgaria. The IMRO's main stronghold was in the southwest of Bulgaria, in Pirin Macedonia (Petrich County), or as they preferred to call it, the "part of Macedonia under Bulgarian rule". Up until 1934 and the final ban of the IMRO, this was the *komitajis'* "state within the state".²⁵

According to its leaders at the time, under the new circumstances brought about by the creation of the Yugoslav state, the IMRO was to assume part of the duties and tasks previously performed by functionaries of the Exarchate, that is, IMRO revolutionaries were to replace its priests and teachers.²⁶

However, compared to that under the Ottoman state, the situation in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was far better in terms of possibilities for education for the younger generation.²⁷ Beside numerous high schools for young Macedonians, there were also three Yugoslav universities where they could earn a degree: in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, as well as possibilities of doing so abroad, primarily in Switzerland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Also, in 1920 the new state founded a Faculty of Philosophy, which was the first institution of tertiary education in the Macedonian capital, Skopje.²⁸ It was among students of these universities that the ideas both of supporting the IMRO cause and of creating an entirely new secret organization were born.

25 Dimitar TVULEKOV, *Obrecheno rodolyubie. VMRO v' pirinsko 1919–1934* [Doomed Patriotism. The IMRO in Pirinsko 1919–1934], Blagoevgrad 2001, URL: http://www.promacedonia.org/dt/dt1_1.html (last retrieved: 28.8.2018).

26 Decho DOBRINOV, Todor Aleksandrov i vazstanovanieto na VMRO sled parvata svetovna vojna (1918–1924 g.) [Todor Alexandrov and the Reestablishment of the IMRO after the First World War (1918–1924)]. In: 100 godini Vatreshna makedono-odrinska revolyutsionna organizatsiya [One Hundred Years of the Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organization], Sofiya 1994, p. 145–156, p. 146–147. Maintaining a Bulgarian national spirit in Yugoslav Macedonia was to be achieved by both revolutionary and legal means: by guerrilla actions, assassinations of Yugoslav government officials, and sabotage of government buildings, but also by participation in public political life as well as by appealing to international institutions.

27 On the place of Macedonia within the interwar Yugoslav state see: Vladan JOVANOVIĆ, *Jugoslovenska država i Južna Srbija 1918–1929* (Makedonija, Sandžak i Kosovo i Metohija u Kraljevini SHS) [The Yugoslav State and South Serbia 1918–1929 (Macedonia, the Sanjak, and Kosovo and Metohija in the Kingdom of SCS)], Beograd 2002; IDEM, *Vardarska banovina 1929–1941* [Vardar Banovina 1929–1941], Beograd 2011; IDEM, *Slike jedne neuspele integracije: Kosovo, Makedonija, Srbija, Jugoslavija* [Image of an Unsuccessful Integration: Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Yugoslavia], Beograd 2014.

28 JOVANOVIĆ, *Jugoslovenska država i Južna Srbija*, p. 333.

Formation of the Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization

The first to suggest the creation of a national revolutionary youth organization were Georgi Bazhdarov and Nikola Velez, who at that time were students from Macedonia studying in Vienna. As early as 1921, Todor Alexandrov, one of the prominent leaders of the IMRO and a member of the central committee, approved its creation and its charter.²⁹ However, actual steps to found the organization were only taken during 1923, and it began to function in 1924. Initially, Macedonian students were organized in Vienna. Following the traditions of the IMRO (and other Balkan secret societies and organizations), they all pledged an oath in front of a crossed revolver and knife (the symbolic meaning of which was well known – whoever committed treachery would be punished by death either by revolver or by knife).³⁰ According to the organization's charter, membership was restricted to students in senior high school classes and universities. There was a strong emphasis on the connection with the IMRO and on respecting its goals and traditions. Membership in the MYSRO was to terminate with the end of education, when its members would be transferred to the IMRO. By maintaining high moral standards such as obedience, honour, modesty, virtue, righteousness (with debauchery and drunkenness absolutely forbidden and severely punishable), the ultimate goal of the organization was to prepare new "generations of fighters for the liberty of Macedonia".³¹

Practically at the same time, Macedonian students studying in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Subotica and Skopje applied to their respective university authorities to be allowed to form charitable student associations whose main aim would be to support poor students coming from Macedonia. The authorities objected to the creation of such associations for several reasons: in general, they were extremely suspicious of any mention of the term "Macedonia", because the official policy was that these areas were known as South Serbia. The second reason was that the students had made the peculiar demand that only native students from Macedonia could be members of these associations (not children of colonists and civil servants living in Macedonia).³²

In order to maintain secrecy, the organizational structure was based on cells of five members (pentads), with only the head of each cell maintaining contact with the leadership and being acquainted with the existence of other pentads. Soon, throughout Macedonia, there were around 40 pentads with some 190 members.³³ In addition, other cells existed outside Macedonia, both in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and abroad, primarily at university centres. For example, in Zagreb there were 54 organized Macedonian students.³⁴

29 Makedonska mladezhka tajna revolucijona organizatsiya (MMTRO): MARKOV et al. (ed.), *Almanah*, p. 167.

30 ČRNUSHANOV, *Prinos k'm istoriyata na Makedonskata*, p. 26 f.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 27–30.

32 GOTSEV, *Mladezhkite natsionalno-osvoboditelni organizatsii*, p. 17 f.

33 *Ibidem*, p. 18 f.

34 ČRNUSHANOV, *Prinos k'm istoriyata na Makedonskata*, p. 33.

Members of the MYSRO were involved in several different kinds of activities. Apart from mandatory regular meetings every two weeks at which members of local branches talked, analysed and planned their actions, exchanged news etc., other organized activities were celebrations of name days or of national holidays such as St. Cyril and Methodius,³⁵ parties with singing and dancing during the winter months, and meetings with veterans and participants of the Macedonian struggle. Although the MYSRO was a secret organization, its members regularly carried out various public activities disguised as excursions and field trips. Their main goals were expanding the organization's base, and again, maintaining a Bulgarian national spirit. Singing popular songs and dancing national dances were considered just as important as reading national literature. In addition, this was a convenient way to create an environment in which young girls would avoid any involvements with Serbs, especially romantic ones.³⁶

Beside acting as promoters of IMRO ideas and causes and as guardians of the Bulgarian national spirit, MYSRO pentads were involved in practical activities such as maintaining clandestine channels for carrying messages, dissemination of literature, IMRO newspapers and pamphlets. In order to provide young Macedonians with opportunities to read and to be informed, two channels were established for the regular supply of the necessary literature, maintaining contacts with student groups abroad as well as with authorized representatives of the IMRO. One of these ran from Vienna via Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade to Skopje, while the second began in Trieste and continued from Ljubljana by the same path to Skopje. Student members of the MYSRO from these places used to transport this kind of material whenever they returned home to Macedonia.³⁷

Challenges

According to the testimonies of MYSRO activists, one of the biggest challenges was the procurement of literature with pro-Bulgarian national and patriotic content needed for the national upbringing of young Macedonians. Most public and school libraries had been purged of such literature after 1918 with the introduction of the Yugoslav education system. What was left were books, textbooks and journals in private possession, but their public use and display was severely punishable as dissemination of Bulgarian propaganda.

In connection with this, links that the MYSRO group in Zagreb had established with local proponents of Croatian separatism proved especially valuable. Macedonian students there encountered a warm welcome from those parts of

35 Although this was a church holiday dedicated to the Apostles to the Slavs, St. Cyril and Methodius, who are also known as the Salonika brothers, in Bulgaria it was considered a national holiday. Bulgarians claimed, and still claim, that the Salonika brothers were not Greeks but Bulgarians.

36 ČRNUSHANOV, Prinos k'm istorijata na Makedonskata, p. 39f.

37 GOTSEV, Mladezhkite natsionalno-osvoboditelni organizatsii, p. 19.

Croatian society that objected to unification and to the Yugoslav state in general. These were mainly members of the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), popularly known as Frankists after one of their founders, Josip Frank. This was in accordance with overall policies of the IMRO, which sought to establish contact and cooperation, if possible, with all players who shared their anti-Yugoslav/Serbian attitudes. Frankist allies assisted the MYSRO in activities related to smuggling revolutionary literature and press from abroad, by carrying it and keeping it hidden from police searches. Also, Frankists provided assistance to MYSRO and IMRO members whose cover was blown by Yugoslav police to leave the country and escape either to Austria or Hungary through clandestine channels.³⁸

In one special sense, the entire MYSRO affair was very significant not only for Macedonia, but for the Balkan region as a whole. With the appearance of the MYSRO, the “Macedonian struggle” ceased to be an exclusively “male affair”, reserved for heavily armed guerrilla fighters in picturesque uniforms, with shiny rifles and long beards. Female students were already involved in its founding and in the functioning of its first pentads, but in 1926, on the initiative of MYSRO activists and of a pro-active group of Macedonian female students, a new organization was formed exclusively for young women who wanted to actively participate in national revolutionary work: the Secret Cultural-Educational Organization of Macedonian [female] Bulgarians or SCEOMB (Тайна културно-просветна организација на македонските бугарки - ТКПОМБ). Unlike the MYSRO, it was not restricted to high school and university youth – any literate Macedonian woman who wanted to contribute to the national upbringing of young generations was eligible to become a member. Secrecy was mandatory following the experiences and pattern of the MYSRO, with the exception that instead of pentads, the basic units were groups of seven. The emphasis was on maintaining Bulgarian national spirit among children through different activities aimed at preserving the Bulgarian language and tradition against assimilation attempts by Serbian and Greek authorities, such as learning the Bulgarian alphabet, reading Bulgarian books, singing songs etc. Soon, the women of SCEOMB managed to create a network throughout Yugoslav Macedonia and in certain parts of Greek Macedonia. Throughout its existence during the interwar period, this female organization managed to preserve its secrecy and was never uncovered by the Yugoslav security apparatus.

How far this organization was willing to go could be seen from its charter. For example, Article 15 forbade any member to marry a Serb or Greek. If they somehow did find themselves in a marriage with a non-Bulgarian, they were obliged to “preserve their children for the Bulgarian nation”. Furthermore, at any opportunity they were required to influence Macedonian girls to avoid

38 ČRNUSHANOV, Prinos k'm istoriyata na Makedonskata, p. 40, p. 52.

marriages with foreigners.³⁹ Female activism was a novelty within the Macedonian national revolutionary movement after the First World War. Beside cultural-educational activities, it also included some more drastic forms. For example, in May 1925, in the Viennese Burgtheater, Mencha Karnicheva managed to kill Todor Panitsa, one of the leaders of the federalist faction of the IMRO. She was tried but acquitted of all charges. She returned to Bulgaria as a hero. Later that year she married Ivan Mikhailov, one of the IMRO's leaders. Karnicheva was another typical representative of the war youth generation. She was born in 1900 in Macedonia, but emigrated to Bulgaria after Ottoman troops sacked her birthplace of Kruševo while quelling the Ilinden Uprising in 1903. She joined the IMRO in 1918 and remained a member until her death in 1964.⁴⁰

A recurring issue throughout the existence of the MYSRO was its relation to non-intelligentsia, that is, young people outside the higher education system. During public events such as picnics and excursions, MYSRO members got in touch with other young people from Macedonia, primarily young labourers. Although the MYSRO charter was explicit as to who was allowed to join, many young Macedonians who were not high school or university students, such as apprentices, salespeople, craftsmen, postal and railway workers, and simple labourers, were involved in both public and secret MYSRO activities. Moreover, students were generally absent from their birthplaces most of the year, and once they graduated, it happened that some of them, such as teachers, engineers, physicians, and pharmacists, were assigned to positions in various places throughout Yugoslavia, not necessarily in Macedonia. Thus the organization was forced to rely on non-intelligentsia. This proved extremely important because their participation helped successfully resolve many crises within the organization. They rendered assistance in hiding members who had been targeted by the security apparatus or who needed to be extracted to safety abroad through clandestine channels. Their allegiance also proved valuable when the MYSRO organization was uncovered or in crisis, at which times they, according to testimonies of MYSRO members, preserved the spirit of the organization.⁴¹

Affinity to public activism was as strong among the non-intelligentsia as that of high school and university students, and often led to their direct engagement in revolutionary activities. This happened from time to time because, despite the existence of the secret youth organization, IMRO traditions continued to inspire young individuals, members of the “war youth generation”, to suicidal acts of bravery. For example, during the summer of 1923 an assassin

39 GOTSEV, *Mladezhkite natsionalno-osvoboditelni organizatsii*, p. 28.

40 ČRNUSHANOV, *Prinos k'm istoriyata na Makedonskata*, p. 99.

41 For more on Karnicheva and her life, see: Ivan MIKHAILOV, *Spomeni 3. Osvoboditelna borba 1924–1934* [Memoirs 3. The Liberation Struggle 1924–1934], Louvain 1967, p. 171–259.

was dispatched to Prague, where he was supposed to kill Rayko Daskalov, the Bulgarian ambassador to Czechoslovakia and one of the champions of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, whose government had been overthrown in the bloody coup d'état of 9 June. Being out of the country, Daskalov avoided the misfortune of his comrades, but the IMRO was determined to fulfill its earlier promise and kill him. On 26 August 1923, the young IMRO member Yordan Tsitsonkov from the Macedonian town of Štip assassinated Daskalov. On 27 August, IMRO leader Todor Alexandrov issued a circular note to "All *voivods* in Macedonia" that "a young idealist" had killed Daskalov and that IMRO supported his action.⁴² To show its appreciation, the organization provided Tsitsonkov with financial aid and his family was taken care of while he was incarcerated.⁴³

Dimitar Stefanov was another member of the war youth generation who became famous when, on 24 December 1924 in Milan, he succeeded in an attempt to assassinate Petar Čaulev, another prominent IMRO leader who had been sentenced to death because of his transgressions.⁴⁴ Stefanov was born in 1901 in Štip, a town in Macedonia with very strong connections to the IMRO. After the First World War, he decided to escape to Bulgaria where he worked as a butcher. He was an ideal candidate for this act: young and full of eagerness to prove himself. In 1926, he was tried and acquitted of all charges but one – illegal possession of a firearm.⁴⁵ He returned to Bulgaria as a hero and managed to survive all subsequent troubles within the organization. He died of natural causes in socialist Yugoslavia.

Several days after Stefanov's successful attempt, on 30 December 1924, 21-year-old Kiril Grigorov, a poor Macedonian refugee who wanted to become a member of the IMRO by performing an act of outstanding bravery, managed to assassinate Stoyan Mishev, a famous renegade and leader of the federalist IMRO faction. One year earlier, Mishev had been proclaimed a traitor and sentenced to death after defecting and entering Yugoslav service. Although initially he was able to escape, Yugoslav police captured Grigorov near the Bulgarian border. He was tried and sentenced to death. Alongside other IMRO assassins with similar beliefs, like Yordan Tsitsonkov, the organization celebrated Grigorov as its ultimate hero and martyr.⁴⁶

In the summer of 1926, a meeting was organized in Trieste between several prominent members of the MYSRO and two plenipotentiaries of the IMRO Central Committee. Its main goal was to resolve several issues and differences which had surfaced. It turned out that, as time went by, the IMRO was losing

42 ČRNUSHANOV, *Prinos k'm istorijata na Makedonskata*, p. 64 f.

43 National library St. Kliment and Methodi (NBKM), Sofiya, Bulgarian historical archive (BIA), 405, AJ2, p. 3, IMRO no. 524, 27 August 1923.

44 Zoran TODOROVSKI, *Todor Aleksandrov*, Skopje 2014, p. 217.

45 Katerina TODOROVSKA, *Petar Čaulev*, Skopje 2014, p. 183–196.

46 MIKHAILOV, *Spomeni* 3, p. 169.

its ability to assess the real situation in Macedonia because of its diminishing presence on the ground, which in turn was due partly to new Yugoslav security measures and partly to conflicts between IMRO factions. The MYSRO representatives tried to explain and point out changes that had occurred, how the IMRO had lost its potential for successful cultural-educational activity, and how insisting on following rules and regulations to the letter could put the whole system in jeopardy. These issues included the engagement of non-intelligentsia youth and the assistance which the MYSRO was obliged to provide to the IMRO in its actions, especially terrorist ones. The latter was especially important since, by doing so, the MYSRO was putting itself at risk of being discovered by Yugoslav police authorities. For their part, the two plenipotentiaries of the IMRO were categorically against the MYSRO's proposition that it be allowed to set up its own autonomous governing body, something like the central committee. According to them, the IMRO and MYSRO would lose unity of action. Nevertheless, the meeting resulted in shipments of new literature as well as in the creation of new clandestine channels.

Because of this failure to resolve most of the issues, a new meeting was scheduled for autumn. This time it was to take place in Bulgaria and include Ivan Mikhailov, the leader of the IMRO himself. According to their testimonies, Mikhailov, being much closer to the age of the MYSRO representatives (he was then in his 30s), was able to better understand them.⁴⁷ This meeting resulted in changes to the MYSRO's structure and amendments to its charter. One novelty was the division of Macedonia into so-called "revolutionary districts", whose heads were directly responsible to the IMRO Central Committee. A special pentad was formed to maintain contact with the latter as well as to continue importing revolutionary literature and press into Macedonia. Additionally, this pentad was responsible for gathering intelligence on the overall situation in Macedonia, on new measures of the local regime, the economic situation, on renegades (members of the IMRO who defected to the Yugoslav side and entered its service), and on opposing agitation by leftist elements such as the federalist faction of the IMRO.⁴⁸

The trial

In order to understand what happened to the MYSRO in 1927, we need to consider the state of security in Yugoslav Macedonia at the time. Although the IMRO continued to infiltrate armed bands into Macedonia, the situation there was quite different from that under Ottoman rule. The security issues in the Yugoslav south after the First World War in relation to the IMRO's *komitaji* action led to the introduction of a series of measures that contributed to re-

47 MIKHAILOV, Spomeni 3, p. 147–155.

48 CRNUSHANOV, Prinos k'm istoriyata na Makedonskata, p. 74–85. However, Mikhailov did not mention this meeting in his memoirs.

ducing the room for *komitaji* bands to manoeuvre. During the 1920s and early 1930s, additional police and army forces were brought in, new gendarmerie precincts and border posts were built, new funds were allocated for intelligence activities, and even a new paramilitary formation was created: the Organization against the Bulgarian Bandits.⁴⁹ The MYSRO affair occurred at a moment when police authorities in the Yugoslav south were on full alert because of a series of incidents – for example, a year earlier in July 1926, in Bitola (Monastir) a group of IMRO assassins had killed Spasoje Hadži-Popović, a prominent “national worker” and editor of the local journal *Južna zvezda* (Southern Star).⁵⁰ In addition, almost simultaneously with the MYSRO affair, in May 1927 police had managed to discover and arrest a large group of IMRO members and supporters in Resen, a small town in south Macedonia in the vicinity of Bitola. This case and the subsequent trial had attracted considerable attention in the Yugoslav public.⁵¹

When on 29 May 1927, a student and member of MYSRO named Dimitar Gyuzelev was arrested in Skopje, this was a result of the security measures described above. In this particular case, it was intelligence work that made the difference – a certain Jovan Gavrilović, a post office employee, had denounced Gyuzelev to police after he had recruited him for the MYSRO. Several other MYSRO members from Skopje were arrested as well, and as a result of their interrogation, a wave of arrests began throughout Yugoslavia. The number of those arrested is variously given as between 40 and 70, however only 20 were indicted. The trial was scheduled for December, and in the course of six months more and more new details from the investigation appeared in the Yugoslav press. The indictments were based on signed confessions, on evidence discovered in the search of Gyuzelev’s apartment such as the organization’s charter, various literature and press, and written instructions for gathering intelligence data, and on the testimony of Jovan Gavrilović. The prosecution insisted that the MYSRO was an integral part of the IMRO, which made the defendants eligible for trial under the Law on the Protection of Public Order and the State. The defense, on the other hand, was based on serious breaches of legal procedure committed during the interrogations, notably the use of torture. Under cross-examination, the defendants persisted in denying any involvement in anti-state and clandestine activities, or they tried to incriminate MYSRO members who were out of reach of the Yugoslav police, either because they had already been abroad or because they had fled there after the initial arrests.⁵² Several prominent lawyers had been engaged including Ante Pavelić, a

49 ČRNUSHANOV, *Prinos k'm istorijata na Makedonskata*, p. 104.

50 Archive of Yugoslavi (AJ), 37 Collection of dr. Milan Stojadinović, 37–22/326 (Report in English).

51 Đorđe VASILJEVIĆ, *VMRO i Srbija 1893–1934* [IMRO and Serbia 1893–1934]. In: *Catena Mundi II* (1992), p. 27–31, at p. 30.

52 MIKHAILOV, *Spomeni* 3, p. 294–300.

member of the Croatian Party of Rights and deputy in the national parliament, later head of the Second World War fascist creation called the Independent State of Croatia. In his memoirs, Pavelić did not say much about his role as defense attorney for the arrested MYSRO activists. Written long after the events, his testimony is overburdened with his own political attitudes and experience. Inclined to exaggerate, Pavelić gave a short introduction on the political situation related to the IMRO's struggle against the "Belgrade rulers". He was much more focused on emphasizing his own cultural and civilizational superiority over the "medieval atmosphere" that prevailed in the court and town of Skopje.⁵³ *Hrvatsko pravo*, the newspaper of Pavelić's party, published his speech from the Skopje court proceedings on 10 December 1927.⁵⁴

The sentencing took place on 10 December. Gyuzelev and Shopov were sentenced to 20 years, Netsev to 15, Shkatrov to 10 years and Fukarov, Gichev, Bozdov, Svetiev, and Andreev to five years each. The other eleven were acquitted of all charges.⁵⁵ On appeals, both the Appellate and the Supreme Court confirmed the verdict of the Skopje court.

Aftermath

During the investigation and preparations for the trial, the situation in Macedonia became even more unstable. On 5 October 1927 in Štip, two IMRO assassins were able to kill General Mihailo Kovačević, the commanding officer of the local divisional district. This incident caused serious unrest throughout the country. Yugoslav patriotic associations organized rallies and protests during the days surrounding the general's funeral. The assassins, however, did not succeed in reaching safety across the Bulgarian border. Pursuing authorities were able to track them down and cut off their escape. What followed was an epic gunfight after the assassins (again members of the war youth generation) refused to surrender. Both were killed, thus adding their names to a long list of IMRO martyrs.⁵⁶

However, within weeks after the final verdict was passed in the case of the Macedonian student members of the MYSRO, an event occurred that demonstrated the strong and deep impact of the entire affair and the court proceedings on local society. On 13 January 1928 in the Skopje city centre, a young Macedonian woman named Mara Buneva fired several shots in broad daylight and killed Velimir Prelić, a legal official at the Skopje prefecture – one of the civil servants most deeply engaged in fighting the IMRO in Yugoslav Macedonia. A former participant in Serbian chetnik action in Ottoman Macedonia and a veteran of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the First World War, Prelić was

53 Vreme [Time], 7 to 11 December 1927; Politika, 7 to 11 December 1927.

54 Ante PAVELIĆ, *Doživljaji II* [Experiences II], Madrid 1998, p. 149–155.

55 *Hrvatsko pravo* [Croatian Right], 10 December 1927.

56 Vreme [Time], 11 December 1927.

known for his dedication to eradicating the Macedonian revolutionary movement. Immediately after killing Prelić, Buneva tried to commit suicide; she was mortally wounded and taken to a hospital, where she died a few hours later. Subsequent investigation showed she had no accomplices and had acted as a “lone wolf”. She became one of the most celebrated IMRO martyrs. Surviving MYSRO members commemorated her with a plaque during the Bulgarian occupation of Skopje in the Second World War, near the site of the killing.⁵⁷ For several reasons, her act became the climax of this generation’s involvement in the IMRO struggle. She was a member of the “war youth generation” (born in 1901) and acted on her own although inspired by the deeds of others, and finally and most importantly, she was a woman. As stated earlier, her behaviour represented a new moment in what used to be an exclusively male domain.

As for the MYSRO members who went on trial in 1927, several years later most of them were pardoned and released from custody. In the Yugoslav kingdom (as elsewhere), it was customary to declare amnesties on the occasion of public holidays, such as the king’s birthday, or important events such as a royal marriage or the birth of an heir to the throne. On 1 December 1931, the anniversary of the proclamation of the creation of Yugoslavia (1 December 1918), king Alexander Karadorđević declared an amnesty under whose terms seven of the nine sentenced were pardoned – Gyuzelev, Shopov, Netsev, Gichev, Bozdov, Svetiev, and Andreev; while Shkatrov and Fukarov were exempted from the amnesty terms and had to remain in prison.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 had marked a new stage in the struggle of pro-Bulgarian nationalists from Macedonia. Whether their goal was an autonomous Macedonia or its unification with Bulgaria, they needed to adjust to new and somewhat harsh realities. While their actions in the Greek part of Macedonia weakened, in the Yugoslav part they evolved and took on new features and shapes. Beside the IMRO, which continued with its traditional forms of organizing during the 1920s, a new organization appeared, taking over significant parts of traditional IMRO roles. The appearance of the Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization can be seen as a response to the social and political changes that took place in Macedonia after its incorporation into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Increased possibilities for Macedonian youth to continue their education in several Yugoslav university centres constituted an advance compared to Ottoman times. However, with this came fear of assimilation, which for some of them acted as a mobilizing factor. Although raised and educated on

57 MIKHAILOV, Spomeni 3, p. 341–362. Ipokrat Razvigorov was born in 1900 and Iliya Lilinkov in 1902. Both were from one of the most prominent IMRO centres: Novo Selo, near Štip.

58 ČRNUSHANOV, Prinos k'm istoriyata na Makedonskata, p. 146 f.

a Bulgarian nationalist agenda and IMRO revolutionary traditions, they had missed the opportunity to join the struggle and make personal contributions during the turbulent period from 1912 to 1918 because they were too young. Now, in post-Great War circumstances, members of this “war youth generation” wanted to demonstrate their valour to the world. The IMRO used this energy for its own purposes and sponsored the creation of the MYSRO, seeing it as the nursery of a new generation of Macedonian fighters.

Another difference between the MYSRO and their predecessors in the IMRO was that the former were open to female activism, which considering Balkan circumstances and traditions was a huge step forward. Besides participating in MYSRO activities, female members created their own organization, the SCEOMB, focusing especially on young Macedonian women and their role in national revolutionary activities. However, both the MYSRO and the SCEOMB were as extremist as the IMRO itself in the ways they promoted nationalism. Maintaining the Bulgarian national spirit became imperative to the extent that even the charters of the organizations forbade relations with non-Bulgarians. The MYSRO was certainly a revolutionary organization, in view of its methodology and actions, but it cannot be described as progressive. It was yet another Balkan-style secret organization inspired by similar nationalist organizations from Europe’s nineteenth century. Despite the attempts to categorize them as “progressive youth”, their agenda was a continuation of the promulgation of Balkan nationalist megalomania with its emphasis on ethnicity, purity, national exceptionalism, etc. Behind their concerns for minority rights loomed a Balkan-style ideology of “blood and soil”. With their beliefs, views and attitudes they remained stuck in the past, becoming yet another promoter of post-Great War revisionism.

However, there is rarely a black-and-white picture in history. The situation in Yugoslav Macedonia during the interwar period is just another example of that phenomenon. Although throughout the period between the two World Wars the Yugoslav state authorities officially expressed their determination to introduce modern administration, based on rule of law and strong and reliable state institutions, the situation on the ground during the 1920s in the areas they were pleased to call “Old and South Serbia” was actually quite the opposite. Corruption on all levels, combining ancient client-based relations inherited from the Ottomans with new loyalties based exclusively on party affiliation, in practice prevented or hampered the development of these territories as well as the whole Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes into a modern and stable state.⁵⁹ One of the main reasons lay in the unwillingness of Serbian

59 During the first years of Macedonia’s existence within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, different analyses were already warning of misconduct by state officials on all levels – army, police, local administration, as well as wrong practices that could (and eventually did) alienate the local indigenous population. See: Archive of Yugoslavia (AJ), Ministry of Foreign Affairs 334 (Ministarstvo inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije 334) – 8 – 108-161.

political parties, and primarily the Radical Party, to relinquish control over “South Serbia” to anyone else. For Radical Party officials, the south represented a vast pool of votes as well as a playground for personal enrichment, and nothing more. No wonder, then, that instead of solving the pressing security issues by “winning the hearts and minds” of the locals through the rule of law and strengthening the institutions of a modern state, local officials decided to continue with shady policies more convenient for the unstable Ottoman times than for a European state that clearly expressed, at least on paper, its ambitions for modernization. This provided fuel for IMRO supporters in the region to continue with their actions. In the years that followed, each new terrorist attack in Macedonia resulted in a violent response from the authorities, adding new cycles to the existing vicious spiral of violence.

Dmitar Tasić, *La Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization (MYSRO), 1922–1927: una nuova fase nella lotta macedone*

Gli eventi che portarono nel 1927 ai procedimenti giudiziari contro la *Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization* (MYSRO) rientrano in un più ampio processo di trasformazione e adattamento tattico alla nuova realtà seguita alla prima guerra mondiale del movimento rivoluzionario dell'*Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization* (IMRO). A prescindere dalla fragilità dello stato jugoslavo e dalla sua incapacità, durante il primo decennio della sua esistenza (1918–1928), di garantire stabilità e sicurezza nelle sue regioni meridionali (Macedonia, Kossovo e Metochia), certamente esso non poteva essere paragonato allo stato ottomano. In tali aree, infatti, dal 1903 al 1912 la Macedonia ottomana era stata terreno di scontro aperto tra le organizzazioni paramilitari rivali greche, bulgare e serbe. I trattati di pace di Parigi del 1919 confermarono gli esiti della seconda guerra balcanica del 1913. Gran parte della Macedonia ottomana venne divisa tra la Grecia e il neonato stato jugoslavo – ufficialmente chiamato Regno dei Serbi, Croati e Sloveni – e solo una piccola parte fu annessa alla Bulgaria.

Potendo contare su un notevole sostegno in tutta la regione e superato rapidamente il trauma della sconfitta bulgara nella prima guerra mondiale, l'IMRO rinnovò la propria presenza e attività nelle aree macedoni annesse alla Jugoslavia e alla Grecia, anche se su scala relativamente ridotta rispetto alla fase precedente alle guerre balcaniche del 1912–1913. Mentre l'introduzione di nuove misure di sicurezza da parte delle autorità jugoslave fece lentamente tramontare la stagione delle bande armate che scorrazzavano nei villaggi macedoni, scen-

deva in campo una nuova generazione di macedoni filo-bulgari, determinata a unirsi alla lotta. Erano rappresentanti della cosiddetta *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, nata intorno al 1900, la quale, come in altre parti d'Europa, aveva "perduto l'occasione" di partecipare alla guerra. Alcuni di questi giovani aderirono alla componente paramilitare dell'IMRO ma, a differenza dei loro predecessori, trovarono nel dopoguerra l'opportunità di elevare il proprio status sociale continuando la propria formazione in varie università sia nel Regno dei Serbi, Croati e Sloveni sia all'estero.

Col pieno appoggio della centrale dell'IMRO di Sofia, studenti universitari e di scuole superiori confluirono nella MYSRO, organizzazione segreta in stile balcanico, ispirata alle consimili organizzazioni nazionali molto diffuse nell'Europa ottocentesca. Tuttavia, mentre i loro precursori potevano essere considerati espressione di una "gioventù progressista", il programma della MYSRO non era altro che la continuazione della megalomania nazionalista balcanica, basata sui concetti di etnicità, purezza, identità nazionale etc.

Un altro aspetto che differenziava l'MYSRO dai predecessori era l'apertura all'attivismo femminile, certamente una novità rispetto alle tradizioni balcaniche. Non solo vi erano donne all'interno della MYSRO, ma fu anche fondata un'organizzazione strettamente femminile, la *Secret cultural-educational organization of Macedonian* (SCEOMB). L'obiettivo era di coltivare lo spirito nazionale bulgaro e preservare la lingua e la tradizione bulgara dalle politiche di assimilazione messe in atto dalle autorità jugoslave/serbe e greche. In breve tempo entrambe le organizzazioni costruirono le proprie infrastrutture in Macedonia e all'estero.

La MYSRO operava tuttavia in una situazione diversa rispetto al passato: le classiche azioni delle bande paramilitari dell'IMRO venivano lentamente sostituite da azioni terroristiche individuali, come l'assassinio di funzionari jugoslavi, attacchi a luoghi pubblici etc. Prima o poi la sua esistenza era destinata ad essere scoperta dalla polizia. Nel 1927 si verificò un'ondata di arresti dopo che una delle cellule della MYSRO fu scoperta a Skopje. Le indagini successive disgregarono gran parte della rete organizzativa, costringendo molti membri a fuggire all'estero o a darsi alla clandestinità. Il loro esempio ispirò comunque all'azione molti appartenenti alla *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, in gruppi organizzati o come "lupi solitari"; per questo, sia durante che dopo i processi alla MYSRO, continuarono a verificarsi numerosi attentati contro alti funzionari dello stato jugoslavo.

Dmitar Tasić, *Die Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization (MYSRO) 1922–1927: eine neue Phase im mazedonischen Kampf*

1927 kam es zu einer Verhaftungswelle und anschließend zu Gerichtsprozessen gegen die *Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organization (MYSRO)*. Die dafür ausschlaggebenden Aktivitäten der MYSRO sind in einen größeren Zusammenhang der Transformation und Anpassung an die neuen Gegebenheiten der Nachkriegszeit von Seiten der *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO)* einzuordnen. Wie fragil der jugoslawische Staat und wie instabil die Sicherheitslage in seinen südlichen Regionen (Makedonien, Kosovo und Metohija) auch war, unterschied sich das neugegründete Jugoslawien dennoch stark vom osmanischen Reich. Die südlichen Territorien des osmanischen Mazedonien waren von 1903 bis 1912 heiß umkämpft worden; in diesen Konflikten zwischen griechischen, bulgarischen und serbischen paramilitärischen Organisationen ging es um die kulturelle und militärische Vorherrschaft in dieser Region. Die Pariser Friedensverträge von 1919 bestätigten die Situation, die sich nach dem Zweiten Balkankrieg von 1913 ergeben hatte: Der Großteil des osmanischen Mazedoniens wurde zwischen Griechenland und dem neugegründeten jugoslawischen Staat – offiziell Königreich der Serben, Kroaten und Slowenen – aufgeteilt und nur ein kleiner Landstrich dem bulgarischen Staat zugeschlagen.

Die bulgarophile IMRO besaß eine bemerkenswerte Unterstützung in der gesamten Region und konnte, nachdem sie den Schock der bulgarischen Niederlage nach 1918 wieder abgeschüttelt hatte, im jugoslawischen und griechischen Teil Mazedoniens erneut mit der Organisation ihrer Mitglieder und der Planung ihrer Aktivitäten beginnen, wenn auch in verhältnismäßig geringerem Ausmaß als noch vor den Balkankriegen. Setzten die neuen Sicherheitsmaßnahmen des jugoslawischen Staates den bewaffneten Banden, die makedonische Dörfer durchstreiften, auch ein Ende, so war in der Zwischenzeit eine neue pro-bulgarisch ausgerichtete mazedonische Generation herangewachsen, die eifrig am Kampf teilnehmen wollte. Sie müssen als Vertreter der sogenannten Kriegsjugendgeneration verstanden werden, also jener Generation der zwischen 1900 und 1910 Geborenen, die ein gesamteuropäisches Phänomen darstellte und sich dadurch auszeichnete, dass sie ein aktives Kriegserlebnis vermisste und politische Gewalt als legitimes Mittel der Meinungsäußerung favorisierte. Einige von ihnen engagierten sich im paramilitärischen Organisationsgefüge der IMRO; im Gegensatz zu ihren Vorgängern ergriffen sie aber nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg die sich ihnen bietende Gelegenheit, ihren sozialen Status durch ein Studium an einer der Universitäten in Jugoslawien oder im Ausland aufzuwerten. Mit der vollen Unterstützung der IMRO-Zentrale in Sofia vereinigten sich Schüler und Studierende in der MYSRO, einer weiteren für den Balkan typischen Geheimorganisation, die sich an ähnlichen, im 19. Jahrhundert in Europa weitverbreiteten nationalen Organisationen anlehnte.

te. Während ihre Vorläufer als Teil der progressiven Jugend betrachtet werden können, zeichnete sich das Programm der MYSRO insbesondere durch balkan-nationalistischen Größenwahn aus, wobei Herkunft, Reinheit oder nationale Überlegenheit zentrale Werte darstellen.

Die MYSRO unterschied sich von ihren Vorgängern u.a. darin, dass sie weiblichem Aktivismus gegenüber offen war, wodurch sich die neue radikale Jugend Mazedoniens von älteren Traditionen des Balkans abgrenzte. Obwohl Frauen auch reguläre Mitglieder der MYSRO waren, gründeten sie zusätzlich eine ausschließlich weibliche Geheimorganisation, die *Secret cultural-educational organization of Macedonian* (SCEOMB), deren Ziel darin bestand, den nationalbulgarischen Geist aufrechtzuerhalten und die bulgarische Sprache und Tradition gegenüber Assimilierungsversuchen von seiten jugoslawischer/serbischer bzw. griechischer Obrigkeiten zu bewahren.

Neu war auch das Umfeld, in dem die MYSRO operierte: Die klassischen Aktionen der paramilitärischen Einheiten der IMRO wurden allmählich durch individuelle Terroraktionen ersetzt, worunter beispielsweise die Ermordung jugoslawischer Funktionäre oder Angriffe auf öffentliche Plätze fielen. 1927 kam es schließlich zu einer großen Verhaftungswelle, nachdem zuvor in Skopje eine Zelle der MYSRO ausgehoben worden war. Die darauffolgenden polizeilichen Untersuchungen zerstörten das MYSRO-Netzwerk beinahe vollständig und zwangen zahlreiche Mitglieder ins Exil oder in den Untergrund. Ihr Beispiel aber inspirierte viele Angehörige der Kriegsjugendgeneration zu Aktionen in organisierten Gruppen oder als „einsame Wölfe“, sodass es während und nach den MYSRO-Gerichtsprozessen zu etlichen Anschlägen auf jugoslawische Führungsträger kam.