

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MACEDONIA

Ancient Macedonia, the land of Philip and Alexander, stretched on the north along the lines drawn between Achris - Krousovo - Velessa - Stromnitsa - Meleniko - Nevrokopi Rodope Mountains, to the west along Achris - Voion - Pindos Mountains, and to the south and east to the boundaries of present-day Macedonia.

The available historical sources mention that Karanos was the first king of Macedonia. In about 800 BC, starting from Eordea, Karanos conquered the surrounding area and established his capital at Aeges, today's Edessa. According to the legend he was led there by wild goats. Later, during the time of King Archelaos, 413-339 BC, the capital was moved to Pella, which was a sea port.

During the time of King Philip II, 359-336 BC, the Greek city-state of Macedonia became one of the great powers of Europe. King Philip II was successful in uniting the Greek city-states under a Pan-Hellenic Union which was essentially the Greek nation as we know it today. Philip II in 337 BC and his son Alexander in 335 BC were chosen as the Commanding Generals of all Hellenes except the Lacedaemonians in the Council of Korinth. Alexander, known as Alexander the Great, 336-323 BC, while the Commander General of all Hellenes, conquered most of the known world of his time, spreading the Greek language and tradition in the lands he conquered. The Greek Macedonian Empire was preserved by the descendants of Alexander until 168 BC, when the Romans conquered all the territories. Even then, however, the Greek language and culture continued to be the predominant influence. During the reigns of Diocletian, 284-305 AD and Constantine the Great 306-337 AD, the new political and social systems imposed great changes in the Roman Empire. In the East these were characterized by, among other things, the great decline of Latinity and the triumph of Hellenism. Constantinople, founded in 324 AD, quickly emerged as the Rome for the Eastern and Balkan Roman Empire. Byzantium was established in the third century AD as the Hellenic center of the Roman Empire.

Macedonia was invaded in several forays from the north, from the third to the fourteenth centuries AD. As a result of these invasions, the Bulgarians were given the area of Moisia, the present Bulgaria, which until that time was a province of the Byzantine Empire. The Serbs also had attempted periodic invasions since their appearance in the southern Balkans, in the ninth century. During this time the Ottoman Empire was organizing and by the fifteenth century, Thessaloniki (1430) and Constantinople (1453) followed the rest of the Balkans and Asia Minor by falling in the hands of the Turks.

During the Turkish Occupation, Macedonia preserved its Greek identity, in perpetuity, through Greek language, religion and culture. Greek schools were allowed to open and function in Thessaloniki, Kozani, Siatista, Naoussa, Veroia and Serres, as was the case in the rest of Greece. When the Turkish rule made this impossible, schools functioned secretly in the churches. The southern Balkan peoples of Albania, Serbia, and Bulgaria, however,

were not as fortunate since they were under total domination with the imposition of the Ottoman religion and culture.

With the declaration of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, Macedonia, as well as the rest of Greece, found itself ready for the uprising. The battles at Chalkidiki, Vermio and Olympos as well as other skirmishes kept the Turkish troops occupied quelling the liberation trend. Finally, the Turkish commanders brought great numbers of troops in order to defeat the klephts and the armatoli in Northern Greece. As the Ottoman Empire found the winds of freedom sweeping throughout Greece, it retreated on a northeastern direction towards present-day Turkey. Macedonia, however, was to remain under Turkish domination for another one hundred years. In the meantime, many uprisings in enslaved Macedonia ended in failure due to the lack of revolutionary organization, and the magnitude of the Turkish troops. The most significant of these was the uprising of 1854. Of all the uprisings this one offered the most hope for the freedom of Macedonia. The Greeks were well organized and had a great following, while the Turks had been significantly worn down by the thirty odd years of revolution since 1821. This time, however, the Turks found allies in England and France, whose involvement in the Crimean Wars necessitated a Turkish alliance. As a result, this uprising was also squelched.

At this time, under the protection and support of Russia, the Slavs aimed to spread the Slavic influence in Macedonia. The St. Stephen Agreement of 1878 between Turkey and Russia, created an enormous region for Bulgaria, which encompassed all of Greek Macedonia. This incited the Litohoro and Kolyndro uprising of February 1878. This uprising also failed for the same reasons as the ones which came before it. Fortunately, however, the Berlin Accord of 1878 nullified the terms of the St. Stephen Agreement, but did not stem the Bulgarian ambitions for territorial expansion. The Bulgarian "Macedonian Committee" with the help of its armed forces spread terror throughout Macedonia by assassinating community leaders, teachers and members of the clergy in Greek Macedonia.

In 1904, a systematic guerrilla effort on the part of the Macedonians with considerable ammunition and troops from the free Greeks started the Macedonian Struggle, which ended in 1908 with the "Young Turk" movement in Turkey. Many glorious figures emerged from the Macedonian Struggle, among them Pavlos Melas (a.k.a. by the klepht name of Mikis Zesas), Germanos Karavangelis, Ion Dragoumis, Kapetan Kotas, Lambros Koromilas, Constantine Mazarakis, Telos Agras, et al. The eventual union with free Greece saved Macedonia from falling in the hands of the Slavs during the Balkan Wars (1912-13).

With the Bucharest Accord in 1913, and the Treaty of Neuilly in 1918, Macedonia was finally granted freedom and joined Greece. Only a small strip of territory along the northern borders remained under the domination of the Bulgarians, while a small portion of the original territory on the northwest up to Korytsa was given to Albania. Although there were no significant territorial differences, the new borders became the cause of deep resentment in the years following the end of the Balkan Wars. The Greek speaking Macedonians in the Bulgarian zone were subjected to systematic annihilation by the authorities. Many of them had fled as refugees into free Greece. This segment was quickly replaced by Bulgarians in a deliberate attempt to make the area predominantly Bulgarian. The situation was similar in Serbia.

In the period before 1904, slogans such as “Macedonia for Macedonians” and “Autonomous Macedonia” were coined. These slogans were silenced when it appeared that Macedonia would become part of Bulgaria and Serbia. They resurfaced when it became evidence that Macedonia had become part of Greece after 1919. During the course of the Treaty of Bucharest, Eleftherios Venizelos, while Prime Minister, was instrumental in the agreement of the exchange of populations. Realizing that there was flight by the Greeks from Bulgaria to Greece, and Bulgarians from Greece to Bulgaria, Venizelos took the initiative to propose the exchange. He hoped that this exchange would at least diffuse the ethnic aspects of the non-Greek claims, and the Greek-Bulgarian dispute would finally end. With the approval of, and under the auspices of the Allies, Bulgaria signed the agreement. The situation was of course complicated by the fact that many Greeks from the Turkish occupied Thrace, Asia Minor and Pontos, came to Greece as refugees, while the Bulgarian speaking minority from the area of Nestos and Axios crossed over to Bulgaria. The situation in the northwestern border with Serbia was a bit different. Here the Slav-speaking peoples had been traditionally divided in their ethnic loyalties. Some identified themselves as Slavs, and they crossed the borders while others, despite their language, considered themselves Greek, and stayed behind. The ethnic mix in all of Macedonia was therefore altered, if one took into account the Greek refugees of Eastern Thrace, Asia Minor and Pontos and the Slavic speaking minority that elected to remain.

In the 1920's the leaders of the newly formed Soviet Union were anxious to spread their influence and so exploited every source of political or social unrest within their perceived sphere of influence, in the hopes of spreading the revolution. Bulgaria seemed the ripest of the Balkan countries for an experiment. The Comintern therefore adopted the Bulgarian views on the “Macedonian Question,” aiming to attract the disaffected masses of Bulgarian refugees. This seemed to bear fruit, and the idea for a “Macedonia for Macedonians” became the cause of the Yugoslav Communist Party as well. The Greek Communist Party soon joined ranks with their brothers to the north. World War II put the matter to rest, since other more serious matters concerned the states of Eastern Europe during the Nazi onslaught. The question arose again when the government of Cvetkovic and the Regent Paul joined the Axis and demanded, and received in return, Thessaloniki. This agreement was thwarted with the coup of Simovic in March, 1941, when Yugoslavia shared with Greece the fate of the German occupation. Bulgaria, however, had remained loyal to the Axis and was, therefore, accorded all of the Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Greek Macedonia and Greek Thrace. During the war, the Bulgarian occupation army carried out a policy of “Bulgarization” with the same authority, force and cruelty that they had used in the past. Once the war was over, it was Yugoslavia's turn to find itself in a favorable position regarding Axis occupied territories, since they had fought on the Allied side. Thus, with the pendulum in full swing, it was Yugoslavia's turn to enjoy the domination of Bulgarian Macedonia. In complicated negotiations in 1945, it was agreed for Bulgaria to forego all claims for a Bulgarian Macedonia, and Yugoslavia to do the same, but both to strive for the creation of a Socialist Republic of Macedonia. These agreements were suspended in 1948; however, when the USSR revived the Bulgarian claims for a Bulgarian Macedonia, following the fall of Tito from Soviet grace.