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TERRORISTS & FREEDOM FIGHTERS



Terrorists And Freedom Fighters

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Terrorists and Freedom Fighters

"'Unbounded' morality ultimately becomes counterproductive even in terms of the same moral principles being sought. The law of diminishing returns applies to morality." Thomas Sowell There's a story about Robespierre that has the preeminent rabble-rouser of the French Revolution leaping up from his chair as soon as he saw a mob assembling outside. "I must see which way the crowd is headed," he is reputed to have said: "For I am their leader." http://www.salon.com/tech/books/1999/11/04/new_optimism/ People who exercise violence in the pursuit of what they hold to be just causes are alternately known as "terrorists" or "freedom fighters". They all share a few common characteristics: 1. A hard core of idealists adopt a cause (in most cases, the freedom of a group of people). They base their claims on history - real or hastily concocted, on a common heritage, on a language shared by the members of the group and, most important, on hate and contempt directed at an "enemy". The latter is, almost invariably, the physical or cultural occupier of space the idealists claim as their own.

2. The loyalties and alliances of these people shift effortlessly as ever escalating means justify an ever shrinking cause. The initial burst of grandiosity inherent in every such undertaking gives way to cynical and bitter pragmatism as both enemy and people tire of the conflict. 3. An inevitable result of the realpolitik of terrorism is the collaboration with the less savoury elements of society. Relegated to the fringes by the inexorable march of common sense, the freedom fighters naturally gravitate towards like minded non-conformists and outcasts. The organization is criminalized. Drug dealing, bank robbing and other manner of organized and contumacious criminality become integral extensions of the struggle. A criminal corporatism emerges, structured but volatile and given to internecine donnybrooks. 4. Very often an un-holy co-dependence develops between the organization and its prey. It is the interest of the freedom fighters to have a contemptible and tyrannical regime as their opponent. If not prone to suppression and convulsive massacres by nature - acts of terror will deliberately provoke even the most benign rule to abhorrent ebullition. 5. The terrorist organization will tend to emulate the very characteristics of its enemy it fulminates against the most. Thus, all such groups are rebarbatively authoritarian, execrably violent, devoid of human empathy or emotions, suppressive, ostentatious, trenchant and often murderous.

6. It is often the freedom fighters who compromise their freedom and the freedom of their people in the most egregious manner. This is usually done either by collaborating with the derided enemy against another, competing set of freedom

fighters - or by inviting a foreign power to arbitrate. Thus, they often catalyse the replacement of one regime of oppressive horror with another, more terrible and entrenched. 7. Most freedom fighters are assimilated and digested by the very establishment they fought against or as the founders of new, privileged nomenklaturas. It is then that their true nature is exposed, mired in gulosity and superciliousness as they become. Inveterate violators of basic human rights, they often transform into the very demons they helped to exorcise. Most freedom fighters are disgruntled members of the middle classes or the intelligentsia. They bring to their affairs the merciless ruthlessness of sheltered lives. Mistaking compassion for weakness, they show none as they unscrupulously pursue their self-aggrandizement, the ego trip of sending others to their death. They are the stuff martyrs are made of. Borne on the crests of circumstantial waves, they lever their unbalanced personalities and project them to great effect. They are the footnotes of history that assume the role of text. And they rarely enjoy the unmitigated support of the very people they proffer to liberate. Even the most harangued and subjugated people find it hard to follow or accept the vicissitudinal behaviour of their self-appointed liberators, their shifting friendships and enmities and their pasilaly of violence.

In this series of articles, I will attempt to study four such groups which operated in the tortured region of the Balkans. I will start with the IMRO (VMRO) in Macedonia and Bulgaria, proceed to Serbia and its union with death ("Union or Death", aka the Black Hand), study the Ustasha in detail and end with the current mutation of Balkan spasms, the KLA (UCK).

Return

Macedonia to the Macedonians

"Two hundred and forty five bands were in the mountains. Serbian and Bulgarian comitadjis, Greek andartes, Albanians and Vlachs... all waging a terrorist war"

Leon Sciaky in "Farewell to Salonica: Portrait of an Era"

"(Goce Delcev died) cloak flung over his left shoulder, his white fez, wrapped in a bluish scarf, pulled down and his gun slung across his left elbow"

Mihail Chakov, who was nearby Delcev at the moment of his death, quoted in "Balkan Ghosts" by Robert D. Kaplan

"I will try and tell this story coldly, calmly, dispassionately ... one must tone the horrors down, for in their nakedness, they are unprintable..."

A.G. Hales reporting about the Illinden Uprising in the London

"Daily News" of October 21, 1903

"The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization directs its eyes neither to the West, nor to the East, nor to anywhere else; it relies primarily on its own powers, does not turn into anybody's weapon, and will not allow anybody to use its name and prestige for personal and other purposes. It has demonstrated till now and will prove in the future that it establishes its activities on the interests and works for the ideals of struggling Macedonia and the Bulgarian race." TODOR ALEXANDROV, The Leader of the IMRO from 1911 to 1924

The Treaty of Berlin killed Peter Lazov. A Turkish soldier first gouged his eyes out, some say with a spoon, others insist it was a knife. As the scream-imbued blood trickled down his face, the Turk cut both his ears and the entirety of his nose with his sword. Thus maimed and in debilitating agony, he was left to die for a few days. When he failed to do so, the Turks disembowelled him to death and decapitated the writhing rump.

The Ottomans granted independence to Bulgaria in the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano unwillingly, following a terminal defeat at the hands of a wrathful Russian army. The newly re-invented nation incorporated a huge swathe of Macedonia, not including Thessaloniki and the Chalcidice Peninsula. Another treaty followed, in Berlin, restoring the "balance" by returning Macedonia to Turkish rule. Turkey obligingly accepted a "one country, two systems" approach by agreeing to a Christian administration of the region and by permitting education in foreign languages, by foreign powers in foreign-run and owned schools. Then they set about a typical infandous Ottoman orgy of shredded entrails, gang raped corpses of young girls and

maiming and decapitation. The horrors this time transcended anything before. In Ohrid, they buried people in pigsty mud for "not paying taxes". Joined by Turks who escaped the advancing Russian armies in North Bulgaria and by Bosnian Moslems, who fled the pincer movement of the forces of Austro-Hungary, they embarked on the faithful recreation of a Bosch-like hell. Feeble attempts at resistance (really, self defence) - such as the one organized by Natanail, the Bishop of Ohrid - ended in the ever escalating ferocity of the occupiers. A collaboration emerged between the Church and the less than holy members of society. Natanail himself provided "Chetis" (guerilla bands) with weapons and supplies. In October 1878, an uprising took place in Kresna. It was duly suppressed by the Turks, though with some difficulty. It was not the first one, having been preceded by the Razlovci uprising in 1876. But it was more well organized and explicit in its goals. But no one - with the exception of the Turks - was content with the situation and even they were paranoid and anxious. The flip-flop policies of the Great Powers turned Macedonia into the focus of shattered national aspirations grounded in some historical precedent of at least three nations: the Greeks, the Bulgarians, and the Serbs. Each invoked ethnicity and history and all conjured up the apparition of the defunct Treaty of San Stefano. Serbia colluded with the Habsburgs: Bosnia to the latter in return for a free hand in Macedonia to the former. The wily Austro-Hungarians regarded the Serbs as cannon fodder in the attrition war against the Russians and the Turks. In 1885, Bulgaria was at last united - north and formerly Turk-occupied south - under the Kremlin's pressure. The Turks switched sides and allied with the Serbs against the spectre of a Great Bulgaria. Again, the battleground was Macedonia and its Bulgarian-leaning (and to many, pure Bulgarian) inhabitants. Further confusion awaited. In 1897, following the Crete uprising against the Ottoman rule and in favour of Greek enosis (unification), Turkey (to prevent Bulgaria from joining its Greek enemy) encouraged King Ferdinand to help the Serbs fight the Greeks. Thus, the Balkanian kaleidoscope of loyalties, alliances and everlasting friendship was tilted more savagely than ever before by the paranoia and the whims of nationalism gone berserk.

In this world of self reflecting looking glasses, in this bedlam of geopolitics, in this seamless and fluid universe, devoid of any certainty but the certainty of void, an anomie inside an abnormality - a Macedonian self identity, tentative and merely cultural at first, began to emerge. Voivode Gorgija Pulevski published a poem "Macedonian Fairy" in 1878. The Young Macedonian Literary Society was established in 1891 and started publishing "Loza", its journal a year thereafter. Krste Misirkov, Dimitrija Cupovski, the Vardar Society and the Macedonian Club in Belgrade founded the Macedonian Scholarly-Literary Society in 1902 (in Russia). Their "Macedonian National Program" demanded a recognition of a Macedonian

nation with its own language and culture. They stopped short of insisting on an independent state, settling instead for an autonomy and an independent church. Misirkov went on to publish his seminal work, "On Macedonian Matters" in 1903 in Sofia. It was a scathing critique of the numbing and off-handed mind games Macedonia was subjected to by the Big Powers. Misirkov believed in culture as an identity preserving force. And the purveyors and conveyors of culture were the teachers. "So the teacher in Yugoslavia is often a hero and fanatic as well as a servant of the mind; but as they walked along the Belgrade streets it could easily be seen that none of them had quite enough to eat or warm enough clothing or handsome lodgings or all the books they needed" - wrote Dame Rebecca West in her eternal "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon" in 1940. Goce Delcev (Gotse Delchev) was a teacher. He was born in 1872 in Kukush (the Bulgarian name of the town), north of Thessaloniki (Salonica, Solun, Saloniki). There is no doubt about his cultural background (as opposed to his convictions later in life) - it was Bulgarian to the core. He studied at a Bulgarian gymnasium in Saloniki. He furthered his education at a military academy in Sofia. He was a schoolteacher and a guerilla fighter and in both capacities he operated in the areas that are today North-Central Greece, Southwestern Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia. He felt equally comfortable in all three regions. He was shot to death by the Turks in Banitsa, then a Bulgarian village, today, a Greek one. It was in a spring day in May 1903. The death of this sad but steely eyed, heavily moustached youth was sufficient to ignite the Ilinden uprising three months later. It erupted on the feast of Saint Illiya (Sveti Ilija). Peasants sold their sacrificial bulls - the fruits of months of labour - and bought guns with the proceeds. It started rather innocuously in the hotbed of ethnic unrest, Western Macedonia - telegraph wires were cut, some tax registers incinerated. The IMRO collaborated in this with the pro-Bulgarian organization Vzhovits. In Krusevo (Krushevo) a republic was proclaimed, replete with "Rules of the Macedonian Uprising Committee" (aka the "Constitution of the Uprising").

This document dealt with the liberation of Macedonia and the establishment of a Macedonian State. A special chapter was dedicated to foreign affairs and neighbourly relationships. It was all heart- achingly naive and it lasted 10 bloody days. Crushed by 2000 trained soldiers and horse bound artillery, the outnumbered 1200 rebels surrendered. Forty of them kissed each other goodbye and blew their brains out. The usual raping and blood thick massacres ensued. According to Turkish records, these ill-planned and irresponsible moments of glory and freedom cost the lives of 4,694 civilians, 994 "terrorists". The rape of 3,000 women was not documented. In Northwestern Macedonia, an adolescent girl was raped by 50 soldiers and murdered afterwards. In another village, they cut a girl's arm to secure her bracelets. The more one is exposed to these atrocities, the more one is prone to subscribe to the view that

the Ottoman Empire - its halting and half hearted efforts at reform notwithstanding - was the single most important agent of retardation and putrid stagnation in its colonies, a stifling influence of traumatic proportions, the cause of mass mental sickness amongst its subjects. As is usually the case in the bloodied geopolitical sandbox known as the Balkans, an international peacekeeping force intervened. Yet it was - again, habitually - too late, too little.

What made Delcev, rather his death, the trigger of such an outpouring of emotions was the IMRO (VMRO in Macedonian and in Bulgarian). The Illinden uprising was the funeral of a man who was a hope. It was the ululating grieving of a collective deprived of vengeance or recourse. It was a spasmodic breath taken in the most suffocating of environments. This is not to say that IMRO was monolithic or that Delcev was an Apostle (as some of his hagiographers would have him). It was not and he was far from it. But he and his two comrades, Jane (Yane) Sandanski and Damyan (Dame) Gruev had a vision. They had a dream. The IMRO is the story of a dream turned nightmare, of the absolute corruption of absolute power and of the dangers of inviting the fox to fight the wolf. The original "Macedonian Revolutionary Organization" (MRO) was established in Sofia. The distinction between being a Macedonian and being a Macedonian-Bulgarian was not sharp, to use a polite understatement. The Bulgarians "proper" regarded the Macedonians as second class, primitive and uncultured Bulgarian relatives who inhabit a part of Bulgaria to the east. The Macedonians themselves were divided. Some wished to be incorporated in Bulgaria, the civilized and advanced society and culture. Others wanted an independent state - though they, too, believed that the salvation of such an entity - both demographic and financial - lies abroad, with the diaspora and benevolent foreign powers. A third group (and Delcev was, for a time, among them) wanted a federation of all states Balkan with an equal standing for a Macedonian polity (autonomy).

The original MRO opted for the Bulgarian option and restricted its aims to the liberation and immediate annexation of what they solemnly considered to be a Turkish-occupied Bulgarian territory. To distinguish themselves from this MRO, the 6 founders of the Macedonian version - all members of the intelligentsia - added the word "Internal" to their name. Thus, they became, in November 1893, IMRO. A measure of the disputatiousness of all matters Balkanian can be found in the widely and wildly differing versions about the circumstances of the establishment of IMRO. Some say it was established in Thessaloniki (this is the official version, thus supporting its "Macedonian"-ness). Others - like Robert Kaplan - say it was in Stip (Shtip) and the Encyclopaedia Britannica claims it was in ... Resen (Resana). Let it be clear: this author harbours no sympathy towards the Ottoman Empire. The IMRO was

fighting for lofty ideals (Balkan federation) and worthy goals (liberation from asphyxiating Turkish rule). But to many outside observers (with the exception of journalists like John Sonixen or John Smith), the IMRO was indistinguishable in its methods of operation from the general landscape of mayhem, crime, disintegration of the social fabric, collapse of authority, social anomie, terror and banditry.

From Steven Sowards' "Twenty Five Lectures on Modern Balkan History, The Balkans in an Age of Nationalism", 1996 available HERE: <http://www.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lect11.htm> "Meanwhile, the Tanzimat reforms remained unfulfilled under Abdul Hamid's reactionary regime. How effective had all these reforms been by the turn of the century? How bad was life for Christian peasants in the Balkans? In a 1904 book called 'Macedonia: Its Races and Their Future', H. N. Brailsford, an English relief worker, describes lawless conditions in Macedonia, the central Balkan district between Greece, Serbia, Albania and Bulgaria. In the areas Brailsford knew, the authorities had little power. He writes: 'An Albanian went by night into a Bulgarian village and fired into the house of a man whom he regarded as an enemy. ... The prefect...endeavored to arrest the murderer, but [his Albanian] village took up his cause, and the gendarmes returned empty-handed. The prefect ... marched upon the offending village at the head of three hundred regular troops. ... The village did not resist, but it still refused to give evidence against the guilty man. The prefect returned to Ochrida with forty or fifty prisoners, kept them in gaol for three or four days, and then released them all. ... To punish a simple outbreak of private passion in which no political element was involved [the prefect] had to mobilize the whole armed force of his district, and even then he failed.'

Robbers and brigands operated with impunity: 'Riding one day upon the high-road ..., I came upon a brigand seated on a boulder ... in the middle of the road, smoking his cigarette, with his rifle across his knees, and calmly levying tribute from all the passers-by.' Extortionists, not police, were in control: "A wise village ... [has] its own resident brigands. ... They are known as rural guards. They are necessary because the Christian population is absolutely unarmed and defenceless. To a certain extent they guarantee the village against robbers from outside, and in return they carry on a licensed and modified robbery of their own.' Self-defense by Orthodox peasants was dangerous: 'The Government makes its presence felt ... when a 'flying column' saunters out to hunt an elusive rebel band, or ... to punish some flagrant act of defiance ... The village may have ... resented the violence of the tax-collector ... [or] harboured an armed band of insurgents ... or ... killed a neighbouring civilian Turk who had assaulted some girl of the place ... At the very least all the men who can be caught will be mercilessly beaten, at the worst the village will be burned and some of its inhabitants massacred.'

It was not surprising that peasants hated their rulers. 'One enters some hovel ... something ... stirs or groans in the gloomiest corner on the floor beneath a filthy blanket. Is it fever, one asks, or smallpox? ... the answer comes ..., 'He is ill with fear.' ... Looking back ... , a procession of ruined minds comes before the memory—an old priest lying beside a burning house speechless with terror ... a woman who had barked like a dog since the day her village was burned; a maiden who became an imbecile because her mother buried her in a hole under the floor to save her from the soldiers ... children who flee in terror at the sight of a stranger, crying 'Turks! Turks!' These are the human wreckage of the hurricane which usurps the functions of a Government.' Four things are worth noting in Brailsford's account as we consider the prospects for a reform solution to Balkan problems. First, revolutionary politics was not the foremost issue for the Christian population: nationalism addressed the immediate problems in their daily lives only indirectly, by promising a potential better state. Second, loyalties were still local and based on the family and the village, not on abstract national allegiances. If criminal abuses ended, the Ottoman state might yet have invented an Ottoman "nationalism" to compete with Serbian, Greek, Romanian, or Bulgarian nationalism. Third, villagers did not cry out for new government departments or services, but only for relief from corruption and crime. The creation of new national institutions was not necessary, only the reform of existing institutions. Fourth, and on the other hand, mistrust and violence between the two sides was habitual. So many decades of reform had failed by this time. The situation was so hopeless and extreme that few people on either side can have thought of reform as a realistic option." During the 1890s, IMRO's main sources of income were voluntary (and later, less voluntary) taxation of the rural population, bank robberies, train robberies (which won handsome world media coverage) and kidnapping for ransom (like the kidnapping of the American Protestant Missionary Ellen Stone - quite a mysterious affair). The IMRO developed along predictable lines into an authoritarian and secretive organization - a necessity if it were to fight the Turks effectively. It had its own tribunals which exercised - often fatal - authority over civilians who were deemed collaborators with the Turkish enemy. It must be emphasized that this was NOT unusual or unique at that time. This was the modus operandi of all military-organized ideological and political groups. And, taking everything into account, the IMRO was fighting a just war against an abhorrent enemy. Moreover, to some extent, its war was effective and resulted in reforms imposed on the Sublime Port (the Turkish authorities) by the Great Powers of the day. We mentioned the peacekeeping force which replaced the local gendarmerie. But reforms were also enacted in education, religious rights and tolerance, construction, farm policy and other areas. The intractable and resource-consuming Macedonian question led directly to the

reform of Turkey itself by the Macedonia-born officer Ataturk. And it facilitated the disintegration of the Ottoman empire - thus, ironically, leading to the independence of almost everyone except its originators. The radicalization of IMRO and its transformation into the infamous organization it has come to be known as, started after the Second Balkan war (1913) and, more so, after the First World War (1918). It was then that disillusionment with Big Power politics replaced the naive trust in the inevitable triumph of a just claim. The Macedonians were never worse off politically, having contributed no less - if not more - than any other nation to the re-distribution of the Ottoman Empire. The cynicism, the hypocrisy, the off-handedness, the ignorance, the vile interests, the ulterior motives - all conspired to transform the IMRO from a goal-orientated association to a power hungry monstrosity. In 1912 Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece - former bitter foes - formed the Balkan League to confront an even more bitter foe, the Ottoman Empire on the thin pretext of an Albanian uprising. The brotherhood strained in the Treaty of London (May 1913) promptly deteriorated into internecine warfare over the spoils of a successful campaign - namely, over Macedonia. Serbs, Greeks, Montenegrins and Romanians subdued Bulgaria sufficiently to force it to sign a treaty in August 1913 in Bucharest. "Aegean Macedonia" went to Greece and "Vardar Macedonia" (today's Republic of Macedonia) went to Serbia. The smaller "Pirin Macedonia" remained Bulgarian. The Bulgarian gamble in World War I went well for a while, as it occupied all three parts of Macedonia. But the ensuing defeat and dismemberment of its allies, led to a re-definition of even "Pirin Macedonia" so as to minimize Bulgaria's share. Vardar Macedonia became part of a new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later renamed Yugoslavia). These political Lego games led to enormous population shifts - the politically correct term for refugees brutally deprived of their land and livelihood. All of them were enshrined in solemn treaties. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) led to the expulsion of 375,000 Turks from Aegean Macedonia. 640,000 Greek refugees from Turkey replaced them. Each of the actual occupiers and each of the potential ones opened its own schools to indoctrinate the future generations of the populace. Conflicts erupted over ecclesiastical matters, the construction of railways and railway stations. Guerilla fighters soon realized that being pawns on this mad hatter's chessboard could be a profitable vocation. The transformation from freedom fighters to mercenaries with no agenda was swift. And pecuniary considerations bred even more terror and terrorists where there were none before. In the meantime, Greece enacted a land reform legislation in "Aegean Macedonia" - in effect, the confiscation of arable land by thousands of Greek settlers, refugees from Turkey. Much of the land thus "re- distributed" was owned by Turkish absentees, now refugees themselves. But a lot of land was simply impounded from its rightful, very much present and very

Macedonian owners. The Serb authorities coerced the population to speak the Serb language, changed Macedonian names to Serb ones in brutally carried campaigns and imposed a corrupt and incompetent bureaucracy upon the suffering multitudes.

IMRO never gave up its proclaimed goal to liberate both occupied parts of Macedonia - the Aegean and the Vardar ones. But, as time passed and as the nature of its organization and operation evolved, the perfunctoriness of its proclamations became more and more evident. The old idealists - the intellectuals and ideologues, the Goce Delcev types - were removed, died in battle, or left this mutation of their dream. The IMRO insignia - skull and crossbones - linked it firmly to the Italian Balckshirts and the Nazi brown ones. The IMRO has developed into a fascist organization. It traded opium. It hired out the services of its skilled assassins (for 20 dollars a contract). It recruited members among the Macedonian population in the slums of Sofia. Finally, they openly collaborated with the Fascists of Mussolini (who also supported them financially), with the Ustashe (similarly supported by Italy) and with the Nazis (under Ivan Mihailov, who became the nominal quisling ruler of Vardar Macedonia). It was an IMRO man ("Vlado the Chauffeur") who murdered King Alexander of Yugoslavia in 1934. All this period, the IMRO continued to pursue its original agenda. IMRO terrorists murdered staff and pupils in Yugoslav schools in Vardar Macedonia. In between 1924-34, it killed 1,000 people. Tourists of the period describe the Yugoslav-Bulgarian frontier as the most fortified in Europe with "entanglements, block houses, redoubts and searchlight posts". Throughout the twenties and the thirties, the IMRO maintained a presence in Europe, publishing propaganda incessantly and explaining its position eloquently (though not very convincingly).

It was not very well liked by both Bulgarians and Macedonians who got increasingly agitated and exhausted by the extortion of ever increasing taxes and by the seemingly endless violence. But the IMRO was now a force to reckon with: organized, disciplined, lethal. Its influence grew by the day and more than one contemporary describes it as a "state within a state". In Bulgaria it collaborated with Todor Alexandrov in the overthrow and murder of the Prime Minister, Alexandur Stamboliyski (June 1923) and in the appointment of a right wing government headed by Alexandur Tsankov. Stamboliyski tried to appease Yugoslavia and, in the process, sacrifice inconvenient elements, such as the IMRO, as expediently as he could. He made too many powerful enemies too fast: the army (by cutting their inflated budget), the nationalists (by officially abandoning the goal of military expansion), the professional officers (by making them redundant), the Great Powers (by making THEM redundant as well) and the opposition (by winning the elections handsomely despite all the above). By signing the Treaty of Nis (allowing Serb forces the right of

hot pursuit within Bulgarian territory), he in effect sealed his own death warrant. The IMRO teamed up with the Military League (an organization of disgruntled officers, both active duty and reserve) and with the tacit blessing of Tsar Boris and the forming National Alliance (later renamed the Democratic Alliance), they did away with the hated man.

Following the murder, the IMRO was given full control of the region of Petrich (Petrich). It used it as a launching pad of its hit and run attacks against Yugoslavia with the full - though clandestine - support of the Bulgarian Ministry of War and Fascist Italy. From Pirin, they attacked Greece as well. These were exactly the kind of international tensions the murdered Prime Minister was keen to terminate and the IMRO no less keen to foster. In the meanwhile, Alexandrov came to an end typical of many a Bulgarian politician and was assassinated only a year after the coup d'etat. The decade that followed did not smile upon the IMRO. It fragmented and its shreds fought each other in the streets of Sofia, Chicago- style. By 1934, the IMRO was a full-fledged extortionist mafia organization. They ran protection rackets ("protecting" small shop- owners against other gangs and "insuring" them against their own violence). Hotels in Sofia always had free rooms for the IMRO. The tobacco industry paid the IMRO more than a million British pounds of that time in six years of "taxation". Robberies and assassinations were daily occurrences. So were street shoot-outs and outright confiscation of goods. The IMRO had no support left anywhere.

In 1934, it was disbanded (together with other parties) by Colonel Kimron Georgiev, the new Prime Minister of Bulgaria and a senior figure in the Zveno association of disgruntled citizenry. His rule was brief (ended the next year) but the IMRO never recovered. It brought its own demise upon itself. Colonel Velcev (Velchev), the perpetrator of the coup, was swept to power on the promise to end all terrorist activities - a promise which he kept. The modern Republic of Macedonia is today ruled by a party called VMRO-DPMNE. It is one of a few political parties to carry this name and the biggest and weightiest amongst them by far. It is founded on the vision and ideals of Goce Delcev and has distanced itself from the "Terrorist-IMRO". The picture of Delcev adorns every office in both Macedonia and Bulgaria and he is the closest to a saint a secular regime can have. In 1923, the Greeks transferred his bones to Bulgaria. Stalin, in a last effort to placate Tito, ordered Bulgaria to transfer them to Macedonia. Even in his death he knew no peace. Now he is buried in his final resting place, in the tranquil inner yard of the Church of Sveti Spas (Saint Saviour). A marble slab bearing a simple inscription with his name under a tree, in a Macedonia which now belongs to the Macedonians.

Return

The Black Hand

"I live and shall die for federalism; it is the sole salvation for the monarchy, if anything can save it." Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria

The IMRO was a populist organization established by intellectuals (as such groups often do) but staffed by peasant, lumpenproletariat and dwellers of the slums formed by Macedonian refugees all over the Balkans and especially in Sofia. Its members swore allegiance on a bible and a gun - two universally potent symbols. The nationalist-terrorist movement which bore the improbable by-name of "The Black Hand" was no such thing. It was elitist - only members of the officer corps and government officials could join. But the two shared an ethos and methods of operation. The IMRO sought to liberate the parts of Macedonia which were under Greek and Serb control - and the Black Hand (official name: "Union or Death") sought to do the same for Serbs under Ottoman or Habsburg rule. The Black Hand was the precursor of the Great Serbia dream. But whereas the IMRO - at least until 1913 - did not enjoy the support of the state and its mechanisms, the Black Hand was, for a long time, the long arm of the Serb government and the Serb state. To the generation of post-Yugoslavia it is a familiar story. In human affairs, the dream of a Greater Serbia is no less a recurrent nightmare than the numerable German Reichs and Serbia erupted upon the world stage no less frequently and regularly than its northern equivalent. Serbia, Montenegro and Russia fought a war against Turkey in an effort to capitalize on a Serb peasants' revolt in Bosnia in 1875. The latter were mightily and rather inhumanly oppressed by the local Moslem nobility (enmity has long roots in the Balkans). It was a holy war for the protection of holy (Orthodox) mother church. It was this conflict that led to the Turkish capitulation embedded in the San Stefano Treaty of 1878. It was not the first time that Balkan borders were re-drawn but, with the creation of Bulgaria, extending all the way to lake Ohrid, a few taboos were broken. A new state was created, Russia was introduced as a major player and the Sick Man of Europe (the Ottoman Empire) was in death throes. It also generated a new problem, the Macedonian one. The treaty of Berlin sought to restore the balance but to no avail. The inexorable germination of the nationalistic ideal has commenced. When the Treaty placed Bosnia-Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian administration and allowed Habsburg garrisons to camp inside Serbia (effectively severing it from Montenegro) - the seeds of discontent blossomed into the evil flowers of violence. No one cared what the local populace had to say. The Austrian brought roads and railways and modern mining and forestry and industry to this hitherto European backwater. Reversing the Ottoman infliction was no mean feat. Yet, the Austrians

chose to rule by division, to motivate through hate and to buy the love of their subjects rather than to earn it.

They befriended the Moslem landlords and pitted the Serbs against each across a denominational divide. This volatile state of affairs was only aggravated by the abolition in 1881 of the Military Frontier, which brought hundreds of thousands of Serbs into the remit of an increasingly and virulently nationalistic Croatia. The Hungarians used this to their advantage by fanning Croat-Serb hostility. After all, they had a historical account to settle with the Serbs who quashed an Hungarian rebellion not 40 years before (in 1848-9) and were awarded with the half autonomous Duchy of Vojvodina, an integral part of the Kingdom of Hungary. The Ausgleich of 1867 (which divided the loot between Austria and Hungary) deprived Vojvodina of its autonomy. The Magyars rushed back in with German and Austrian settlers and immediately embarked upon a massive campaign of forced assimilation. Thus, as Vojvodina prospered with roads and railways and large commercial farms ("the breadbasket of the empire") - it became more hate-riven and explosive. In the Balkans, affluence and commerce seem only to encourage envy and belligerence and neighbourly relations are no barrier to mutual slaughter. A self-appointed "guardian of all Serbs", the Serbian state willingly engaged in agitation and confronted both other ethnicities and the Dual Monarchy in its quest to safeguard the well-being, welfare, prosperity and equal treatment of the Serbs, all noble goals, no doubt.

Yet instability is contagious, a lesson not learn by Serb politicians. Even as the Bosnian uprising was in progress, King Milan stuck an Austrian knife unto its back. He agreed to not foment rebellion in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in return for a free hand in Macedonia and some export concessions for some agricultural produce. In 1885, he acted upon his grandiosity to disastrous outcome. Four years later, he abdicated in disgrace. Not till 1893 was order restored in the person of King Alexander whose most important act was marrying his concubine, Draga Masin in 1900. They were both massacred in June 1903 by disgruntled officers in their own palace and that was the end of one dynasty (the Obrenovic's) and the beginning of another (the Karadjordjevic's). A young officer, a member of the general staff of the army, by the name of Dragutin Dimitrijevic ("Apis" - the "Holy Bull" was his endearing nickname, or, perhaps, the bee, from the Latin root, as Petrovic, the attache to the Serbia legation in London has it in "Black Hand Over Europe" by Heneri Pozzi) planned it all in 1901. Remember this name, his role in our history has only just begun. As is usually the case, the honeymoon looked both passionate and auspicious. The new King was of the reforming kind and keen on economic progress and wealth formation. Regretfully, his implementation fell short of his intentions. Serbian agriculture lagged behind its

more commercialized and industrialized competitors, the population grew relentlessly and rural debts buried the semi-feudal rustic peasantry under its increasing burden.

It is against this background of mounting and mercurial discontent that the "Black Hand" was formed. Attesting to the spreading of the rot throughout the Karadjordjevicean state, was its cancerous metastasis through all levels of the army and the government. Apis the regicide was appointed chief of intelligence of the general staff, no less. He later confessed to planning the murders of King Nicholas of Montenegro, King Constantine of Greece, the German Kaiser and King Ferdinand of Bulgaria. How much of it was Balkan delusions and how much reality is still open to debate - but the man relished death and firmly believed in its transforming and catalysing powers. The Black Hand became a state within a state (a feat later emulated by the IMRO). Those bureaucrats and politicians not already members of the shady outfit, obeyed its express or perceived wishes out of terror, more imagined than exercised. The army was entirely in thrall. The accelerated advance of Dimitrijevic through the ranks serves proof of the growing influence of his cankerous outfit. He became professor of tactics at the Military Academy where he taught subversion and terror more than military strategy. By 1913, he was chief of intelligence, as we mentioned and by 1916 he was attained the rank of colonel at the age of 40. Though formally established only in 1911- the Black Hand cast its shadow long before. It engaged mostly in propaganda and in the seeding of armed bands in Macedonia prior to the two Balkan wars. Its biggest achievement was probably the inception of numerous revolutionary cells among the Serbs of Bosnia. The longer and more thorough the meddling, the more the languid relationship between Austria and Serbia deteriorated. The former imposed tariffs on the exports of the latter in an aptly named "Pig War". As Serb subversion intensified in Bosnia, Austria annexed it and Herzegovina outright discarding the pretence of autonomy it has maintained. Stymied in one border - the Serbs reverted to another. The Ilinden uprising ignited Slav imagination. Serbia has long hungered after its slice of a dismembered Macedonia and Thrace in a banquet attended by both Bulgaria and Greece. But the fresh atrocities - not devoid of religious and ethnic dimensions - endowed the whole endeavour with an aura of a holy war. This delirium was further stoked by the apparent disintegration of the Ottoman Empire following the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908. Yet, in its drang nach suden, Serbia found itself once more entangled with the Austrians who had their own designs on Macedonia and Novi Pazar. The risk of losing Kosovo and Metohija was very real and the conflict assumed the robes of a crusade, both cultural and religious. To the Serbs the very maintenance of their self-identity and civilization was at stake. This was the background to the onslaught of the Balkan Wars.

Serbia collaborated with the more potent of its potential enemies (Greece, Bulgaria) in the Balkan League. To cleanse the Balkans of all Turks was the explicit goal of hush-hush treaties and clandestine encounters. The hidden agenda bespoke of Austria. The initial triumphs against the Turkish army (reversing a trend three centuries old) lent an air of inevitable invincibility and divine justice to the whole endeavour. It is interesting to mention that it was little Montenegro which was the first to declare war in almost all Balkan conflicts. Whether as Serbian proxies or because of the contentious nature of the Montenegrins remains unclear. Whatever the case may be, a second war among the winners of the first left Serbia with its agenda fulfilled and with its territory almost doubled. It gained part of the Sandzak, all Kosovo and Metohija and the bulk of Macedonia. Its tax paying population increased by half as much in less than two years. Had it not been for Austria's minacious insistence, Albania would have never been born on Serb occupied territory. The creation of this (artificial, so the Serbs felt) Albanian state deprived Serbia - alone among the victors - from access to the sea. It had another cause for paranoid delusions and deepening sense of victimization at the hands of vast conspiracies. Relegated to the geopolitical sidelines, denuded of their conquests, coerced by a Big Power, the Serbs felt humiliated, stabbed in the back, discriminated against, inferior and wrathful. Frustration breeds aggression we are taught and this true lesson was never more oft-repeated than in the Balkans.

The raging rivalry between an eastward-bound Austria and a defiant Serbia was bound to boil over. The Black Hand was there to provoke the parties into a final test of strengths and willpower. Dame Rebecca West voices her doubts regarding the true intent of the Black Handers in their involvement (which she does not dispute) in the events that followed. Based on all manner of circumstantial evidence and the testimonies of mysterious friends of furtive conspirators she reaches the conclusion that they did not believe in the conspiracy to which they lent their support. The Black Hand went along with the planning and execution of the assassination of Archduke, heir to the throne Franz (Francis) Ferdinand in 1914, disbelieving all the way both the skills and the commitment of the youthful would be assassins. Perhaps so. Yet there can be little doubt and, indeed, there is no dispute that The Black Hand was introduced to a cabal of plotters called "Mlada Bosna" (Young Bosnia), headed by one Illich and that this introduction was effected by the 22 year old influential Bosnian revolutionary Gacinovic (Gachinovich) who lived in Lausanne in Switzerland. The Black Hand Ciganovic (Tsiganovitch) made contact with one Gavrilo Princip and Chabrinovich and together with another Bosnian, Tankosic (Tankosich). The latter - a self proclaimed sharpshooter - immediately set about testing the sniping skills of his

co-schemers in a secluded wood. With the mild exception of Princip, they were no good.

Despite this disheartening display of incompetence (Princip claimed at his trial to have aimed at a general sitting next to the Archduke), the Black Hand equipped them with bombs (of the wrong kind, points West correctly), pistols and suicidal Prussic acid (which didn't work). They were smuggled to Sarajevo by two collaborating border guards. As opposed to rumours, Gavrilo Princip was not a member of the Black Hand, nor was the Black Hand involved in his training. Moreover, the connection between Mlada Bosna and Crna Ruka (Black Hand) was made only a short time before the eventful June 28, 1914. It was a challenge and on Serbia's national day at that. The Austrians were elated having been handed the excuse to educate Serbia and cut it to size. They issued an ultimatum and the rest is the history of the first truly global conflict, the First World War. In 1917, in a surprising turn of events, Alexander, the Commander in Chief of the Expatriate Serbian Army in collusion with the Serb premier, Nikola Pasic, arrested Apis and 200 of his collaborators, thus shattering the Black Hand irreversibly. It is always surprising how really brittle and vulnerable these apparently invincible organizations of terror are. The IMRO, after having terrorized Bulgaria for decades and decimated its political elite, was reduced to rubble, bloodlessly, in a matter of a few weeks in 1934.

The same happened with the omnipotent and all-pervasive Black Hand. It vanished in a whimper. In May 1917, Dragutin Dimitrijevic (Apis) was executed together with 2 or 6 of his Black Hand colleagues. Finally it was death, not union that caught up with them. The trial was closed to the public, opaque and hurried. The King apparently believed - or claimed he did - that the prisoners conspired on his life. West testifies in her great opus "Black Lamb Grey Falcon" that transcripts of the trial were banned and that it was forbidden to mention the mere historic fact either in speech or in print. The members of the Black Hand lived secretly and dies mysteriously and meaninglessly. But the Black Hand - like the IMRO - was a child of the times. The Balkans was perceived to be the gate to the crumbling Ottoman Empire, The coveted prizes were not dirt poor Macedonia or Albania. It was the stepping stone and the springboard that they represented to much vaster territories, to the riches of the orient, to the exotic realms of Asia. All Big Powers and would be Big Powers engaged in the pugilistics of self-positioning. The demise of the Ottomans was imminent and this imminence exerted subtle but verifiable pressure on all the participant in this grubby grabbing game. Additionally, in this fin de siecle, all involved felt doomed. The rumblings of counter-revolutionary Russia, the drang nach Osten of Austria - all were attempts at self re-definition and self- preservation.

Perhaps this explains the outlandish and disproportionate reaction of Austria to the needling of Bosnian terrorism. assertive minorities constituted a direct threat to the very cohesion of Empire. And Serbia blocked the hitherto unhindered path to eastern territories - depriving Austria of lebensraum and raison d'etre. Faced with a limiting event horizon, Austria imploded like a black hole, unto itself. The driving force behind it all was really Austria and its growing existential angst. It struck a modus