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Anarchists in the Macedonian Revolutionary Movement

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1994

The Ottoman government became aware of the existence of the IMRO in 1897. This forced the revolutionary organization to commence prematurely with a kind of guerilla warfare that was more in the tradition of Balkan *hayduks* and *klephts*. Each district committee set up its own combat unit (*cheta*). It was hoped that by carrying out appropriate actions against rival national organizations as well as against the institutions of the Ottoman state, the morale and discipline within the IMRO would be improved, but also that this kind of warfare would render the propagation of its ideas and goals among the rural population more effective.¹

By 1903 two strong tendencies had crystallized within the Macedonian movement. The Bulgarian nationalist majority was convinced that if the IMRO would unleash a general up-

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¹ Pandev, 'Četnideskijat institut na VMORO' [The Guerilla Institute of the IMRO], *Problemi na političeskata istorija na Bŭlgarija 1878-1944* (Sofia, 1979), pp. 72-94.

rising simultaneously in Macedonia and in the *vilâyet* Edirne, Ottoman power would collapse. The left-wing revolutionaries led by Gotse Delchev, on the other hand, warned against the risks of such an insurrectionary course. A failure would jeopardize the whole organization. Delchev championed instead the intensification of terrorism against selected targets – sabotaging railways, kidnapping foreigners, assassinating prominent members of society.

The genesis of this anarchism goes back to a group of Bulgarian and Macedonian students in Switzerland who moved in Russian émigré circles and came into contact with Bakunin's ideas. In 1898 they founded the Macedonian Secret Revolutionary Committee and began to publish a periodical with the title *Otmüştenie* (Revenge). The group demanded full political autonomy, but rejected the idea of a peasant uprising. All peoples in Macedonia should join the struggle for freedom. In other words, the passive Muslim population should be integrated into the liberation movement, which was directed against the regime of the sultan and not against the Muslim population. The anarchists virtually declared war on Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian nationalism in Macedonia.²

In early 1903 the anarchists became active, and events took a different turn. A small group of young men, known as the 'gemidzhii', had established contacts with Delchev, the leader of the left-wing within the IMRO.³ But in April 1903, when they perpetrated a series of bombing attacks in Thessaloniki, they

² See the programme of *Makedonskijat taen revoljucionen komitet*, printed in *Zbornik na dokumenti za sazdanje an makedonskata driavnost (1893–1944)* (Skopje, 1970), pp. 23–4. See also Stefan Troebst, 'Anarchisten aus Bulgarien in der makedonischen national-revolutionären Bewegung (1896–1912)', in W. Gesemann et al. ed., *1300 Jahre Bulgarien*, vol. ii, part 1, (Neuried, 1981), pp. 95–114.

³ Krste Bitovski, 'Gemidžiite i nivnite odnosi so Gotse i co makedonskata revolucionema organizacija' [The Gemidžii and their relations with Gotse and with the Macedonian national revolutionary movement], *Gotse Delchev i makedonskoto nacionalno revolucionemo dviienje* (Skopje, 1973), pp. 113–23.

were acting on their own. A French passenger liner was sunk, and the Banque Ottomane Impériale was blown up.⁴ Just like the IMRO the anarchists, too, hoped by such terrorism to induce the Powers to intervene directly in Macedonia. This, however, was not to be the case. In fact, European public opinion turned briefly against the Macedonian cause. *The Times* wrote on 4 May 1903:

The calculation of the Committees is as stupid as it is nefarious. Their object, as they have all along acknowledged, is to compel Europe to intervene and liberate Macedonia from the Turks. They first sought to attain it by exasperating the Turks into wholesale massacres of the fellow Christians whom it is their professed purpose to deliver. They have hitherto failed, in spite of the many murders and other crimes they have instigated against the Muslims, in provoking retaliation upon a scale which would lend colour to an effective 'atrocities campaign' in the European Press. They have therefore fallen back ... upon a second method of appealing to Europe, which they are now pursuing simultaneously with their original plan. They have determined to attack European life and property, and the dynamite outrages in Salonica inaugurate their efforts.

The importance of the Salonica bombings in the history of the Macedonian liberation movement must be seen rather in the fact that the IMRO was forced to react, advancing the date for the general uprising to St Elias Day (*ilinden*), 2 August 1903, even though the preparations were still incomplete.

⁴ P. Satev, *V Makedonija pod robstvo. Solunskoto süzakljatie (1903 g.) Podgotovka i izpülnenie* [In Macedonia in bondage. The conspiracy of Thessaloniki in 1903. Its preparation and execution] (Sofia, 1968). The author was a member of the anarchist group of 1903.