

# PART TWO

## NATIONAL AWAKENING

(c. 1800–1913)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman empire was still a great power. Its territorial possessions presented an imposing façade. It controlled most of North Africa, Asia Minor, and the Middle East and all of the Balkans south of the Danube and west of the Pruth river. Behind the façade, however, lay the “sick man of Europe”: an empire that had been in decline for a couple of centuries and was falling further and further behind the great powers of Europe politically, economically, and militarily. The central government in Istanbul had lost effective control over large parts of its territory to ambitious individuals who acted as independent rulers. Internally, the theocratic state lacked any semblance of modernity: it remained a conglomeration of diverse religious communities (*millets*), of a range of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groupings, which lacked a centralized and efficient bureaucracy, a common state ideology and legitimizing doctrines, common interests, and a vision of a common future to hold them together.

During the nineteenth century, enlightened statesmen—sultans or high imperial officials who admired the example of the West—moved to the fore. They became conscious of the empire’s problems and sought far-reaching reform to modernize it and reverse its decline. All the attempts at reform—most important, those of the Tanzimat period (1839–80)—however, failed because of the determined opposition of the Muslim ruling elite, which was suspicious of the West and had vested

interests in the antiquated system. Consequently, the empire continued to decline until its final collapse and partition after the Great War.

The empire's continued decline complemented the rise of nationalism among its Christian peoples. Democratic, liberal, and nationalist ideas began to filter into the Balkans from the west in the late eighteenth century. Members of the still-small but growing middle class and the emerging intelligentsias of the Balkan peoples felt alienation from the Ottoman status quo and rejected it. Ottoman backwardness and decline provided fertile ground especially for the spread of nationalist ideas, whose acceptance further undermined Ottoman rule and legitimacy in the Balkans.

In the nineteenth century, nascent national movements in the region claimed to represent their respective people. In all cases, the ultimate aim was struggles for liberation and establishment of independent national states. And, largely as a result of interventions by the great powers, they were successful. An autonomous Serbian principality came into existence in 1815, an independent Greek kingdom in 1830, an independent principality of Montenegro in 1857, and an autonomous Romanian principality in 1861.

The Congress of Berlin of 1878 declared Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania independent kingdoms. It also sanctioned establishment of an autonomous Bulgarian principality, which in 1885 annexed Eastern Rumelia and in 1908 declared its complete independence and received recognition as a kingdom. The conclave in Berlin also authorized Austria-Hungary to garrison the sanjak of Novi Pazar separating Serbia and Montenegro and to occupy, but not to annex, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The provinces' formal annexation took place 30 years later, in 1908. The Berlin gathering disregarded Greece's territorial claims, but in 1881, at a conference in Constantinople/Istanbul, the great powers and the Ottoman government agreed to award Greece nearly the whole of Thessaly and the district of Arta in Epirus.

Consequently, in the aftermath of the 1878 congress, the Ottoman empire retained sovereignty in the Balkans only over the center of the peninsula, between newly formed Greece, Montenegro, Novi Pazar, Serbia, and Bulgaria—lands that stretched from the Adriatic in the west to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea in the east. The area included Epirus, Albania, and Kosovo in the west, Macedonia in the center, and Thrace in the east.

Bordering Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia, the Macedonian lands were

the most important and desirable. All three neighbors chose to claim them and their people, and already by 1870 competition for the hearts and minds of the Slavic-speaking majority there was under way. The struggle, which began as a war of propagandas, of educational, cultural, and religious institutions, became before 1900 a war of armed bands and, during the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, a war of standing armies. Its main victims were the Macedonians themselves, and its inescapable outcome was conquest and partition of their land by force of arms in the Interallied, or so-called Second Balkan War in 1913.

For various reasons, which I discuss in chapter 6, the national awakening of Macedonia's Slav-speaking majority, who adopted their land's name as a national name and symbol, lagged behind that of their neighbors. The first, or Slav phase in the Macedonian awakening began in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. And by the 1860s, there was clear evidence of the formation of a distinct Macedonian consciousness and identity, of Macedonian nationalism. As I mentioned above, however, by then the neighboring states were competing for Macedonia and the hearts and minds of its people, and that struggle affected the future growth of Macedonian consciousness.

Unlike other nationalisms in the Balkans or in central and eastern Europe more generally, Macedonian nationalism developed without the aid of legal, political, church, educational, or cultural institutions. Macedonian movements not only lacked any legal infrastructure, they also lacked the international sympathy, cultural aid, and, most important, benefits of open and direct diplomatic and military support accorded other Balkan nationalisms. Indeed, the nascent Macedonian nationalism, illegal at home in the theocratic Ottoman empire, and illegitimate internationally, waged a precarious struggle for survival against overwhelming odds: in appearance against the Ottoman empire, but in fact against the three expansionist Balkan states and their respective patrons among the great powers.

The development of Macedonian nationalism under Ottoman rule reached its high point with the ill-fated Ilinden Uprising (2 August, St. Elias's Day) of 1903, which became and remains the focal point, the most cherished source, of national mythology and pride. A decade after its bloody suppression, Macedonian patriotism and nationalism suffered their most devastating blow: partition of the land and its people, which Macedonian patriots and nationalists sought so desperately to prevent, and from which they would never entirely recover.