Lately, the Macedonian Republic at the Southern-most section of Yugoslavia voted for independence. The action may be another nail driven into the coffin of Yugoslavia but it can also signal the end of the deceptive tranquility imposed on this volatile region for the past forty years.

Unlike Croatia where the lines of contention are fairly well defined, in Yugoslav Macedonia the rivaling forces are much more complex. Conflicting loyalties of intertwined minorities and old dreams and reawakened ambitions by outsiders could turn the area into a caldron of trouble that may spill across today's frontiers.

Tito's Creation

The Macedonian Republic came into existence in November 1945 when Tito created the federal state of Yugoslavia replacing the unitary state that had been formed at the end of World War I. The area, the size of Vermont, was made into one of Yugoslavia's six republics, with its capital in Skopje.

For the past forty years the Serbian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Moslem, and Greek inhabitants have lived side by side in an uneasy peace with those who claim allegiance to a Macedonian nationality. The weakening if not yet the complete breakdown of central authority has reopened the gates of potential conflict.

The trouble starts with the name itself. Ancient Macedonia, the birthplace of Alexander the Great did not extend much to the north into the area now occupied by the Macedonian Republic. It was much later, in 146 B.C. that the Romans established a province under the name of Macedonia, which included most of what is today northern Greece, part of Albania most of the area occupied by the present Republic of Macedonia and some of western Bulgaria as well. For the Romans, Macedonia was only a geographic region not related to a particular ethnic group. Alexander's true Macedonians has dwindled in numbers and in the following centuries the Roman province of Macedonia was inhabited by various tribes originating north of the Danube. Today, Macedonia is a geographic term referring to an area which since 1913 has been divided mostly between Greece and Serbia.

The present day "Macedonians" are mostly of Slavic origin speaking a slavic idiom which is mixture of Serbian and Bulgarian, with no linguistic or ethnic relation to the ancient Macedonians who were Greek in terms of language, culture, art, and race, as shown by the archaeological excavations.

Target of Territorial Claims

If it were only a matter of semantics and historiography, the potential for violence might have been negligible. But the area is also the target of territorial ambitions by covetous neighbors. As of now, the Greeks appear to be satisfied with the part of Macedonia they control. They have clearly stated that they have no territorial claims on the Yugoslav part of Macedonia. But they are particularly incensed by statements coming out of Skopje speaking of a greater Macedonia extending to the Adriatic and the Aegean. Any attempt in the future by an independent Republic of Macedonia to foment trouble into the Greek section of Macedonia will be resisted strenuously by Athens.

While the Greeks may have no claims on the section of Macedonia awarded to Serbia after the Balkan Wars, the Bulgarians and the Albanians not only oppose the grandiose aspirations of Skopje but they have claims of their own on the present territory of the republic. This is especially true of Bulgaria. As of now, however, Sofia facing serious internal problems shows no interest in rekindling the old rivalries. But things can change.

Old Memories of Glory

A century ago, most of the area of the old Roman and Byzantine province of Macedonia was under Ottoman rule. When at the beginning of this century, Ottoman control over the area began to weaken, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs resurrected old memories of imperial glory and sought to reestablish their rule on the area.

The Greeks presented a more ancient title going back to Philip II and Alexander, not to mention the more recent title coming from the Byzantine control over the area five centuries earlier.

The Bulgarians went to the tenth century when under king Simeon and later King Samuel, and again in the thirteenth century under Ivan Asen II, came to control the area all the way from Bulgaria to the Adriatic.

The Serbs on their part claimed that Macedonia was theirs because in the fourteenth century the Serbian King Stefan Dunsan overran Macedonia and was crowned Emperor and Autocrat of the Serbs and the Byzantines, Bulgars, and Albanians in the town of Skopje. In the Balkans, history is not thought of merely as a record of past events. It comes to the fore as an overpowering reality shaping the present.

Potential Sources of Conflict

During the first decade of this century the rivals did not limit themselves to historical debates. They fought each
other with savage intensity. In the end the claims were settled on the battlefield. Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria joined forces in the first Balkan War (1912) and expelled the Ottoman empire. But then Bulgaria attacked her former allies and in the second Balkan War (1913) Greece and Serbia defeated Bulgaria and divided the area of Macedonia mostly between them. The borders established at that time remain valid to this day.

Bulgaria was unhappy with the outcome. During the Second World War, Sofia attempted with the aid of Nazi Germany to redraw the frontiers in her favor. The effort failed and at the end of the war the old frontiers were reestablished.

Many Bulgarians continue to dispute the existence of a “Macedonian” nationality (as do the Greeks). They claim that the Slavo-Macedonians are actually Bulgarians and that most of the part of Macedonia currently occupied by the republic—what the Bulgarians call Macedonia of Pirin—belongs to Bulgaria. At this moment formal statements from Bulgaria do not put forward such claims and this at this moment is a hopeful sign.

The sizable Albanian minority is another source of potential trouble. Kosovo, the autonomous province to the north of the Macedonian Republic is inhabited mostly of ethnic Albanians and has already caused serious problems to Belgrade. The Albanians in the republic (some 250,000 in a population of 1,550,000) together with their kinsmen in Kosovo and those in Albania proper—which has a long frontier with the republic—could resort to violence especially if an independent republic adopts a more oppressive policy toward them.

Macedonia has also a sizeable Moslem minority. Already Turkey has taken steps to increase her influence in the area by stressing religious and cultural ties.

The Greeks fear that, in their rivalry with Turkey over Cyprus and the Aegean, Ankara may use the Moslems in Yugoslav Macedonia to foment trouble and encourage unrest among the Moslems in the Greek province of western Thrace.

Finally, the Serbs may not remain indifferent to this week’s vote for independence. Serbia regards Macedonia of Pirin an integral part of Serbia. Most Serbs consider the Republic of Macedonia an artificial structure created by Tito. If they have resorted to the use of force to keep Croatia from leaving the fold—a republic with much more valid claims to independence—will they accept Macedonian independence and the virtual truncation of traditional Serbia? The current tranquility may be attributed to the reluctance of Belgrade to open another front to the south, and possibly to the belief that the Macedonian Republic is too poor and too weak to really try it on its own.

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