Chapter 3

Refugees as Tools of Irredentist Policies in Interwar Bulgaria

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The expulsion of entire populations from their native lands because of their ethnicity is a practice probably as old as humankind itself. From the nineteenth century onwards, however, although the appropriation of arable land and houses remained a major incentive, the removal of ethnic groups occurred for ‘modern’ reasons. Nationalism had become the main motivation, or at least a commonly accepted rationalization.

Gellner (1993, p. 1) defines nationalism as ‘primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’. This implies that all members of the nation—which in Eastern Europe, as a rule, is an ethnic nation—should live within the borders of their own nation state. A corollary of nationalism is irredentism, a foreign policy that aims at incorporating within the national territory any adjacent areas that are populated—if only partly—by co-ethnics. The ‘congruence’ of nation and state also supposes an ethnically homogeneous population within the state’s borders: ethnic groups differing from the dominant one are removed through assimilation, ethnic cleansing (a particular variant of which appears to be population exchanges), and—in extreme circumstances—genocide. With the nationalist state concept prevailing, minority rights are given reluctantly.

Irredentism and the (mis)treatment of minorities are interdependent in yet another way: a policy aiming at the elimination of minorities is often inspired by the fear of irredentist aggression on the part of the neighbouring state(s), while steps taken to eliminate the minority enhance the irredentism of the neighbouring state(s)—now presented as a protective measure—rather than diminish it. The assignment of minorities’ rights is facilitated, or complicated, if both states contain minorities of each other’s populations, in which case the minorities are treated more or less as hostages or potential objects for bargaining. In a similar way, refugees after having found shelter in their ‘own’ nation state, are often instrumentalized by

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the governments of these states to support claims on parts of the territory of the state from which the refugees were expelled.

After World War I, population exchanges were generally considered to be an appropriate way to ethnically homogenize a population, to eliminate problems of minorities, and to avoid territorial conflicts. From the point of view of political science, international relations, and diplomacy, population exchanges in a number of instances did indeed substantially contribute to improved relations between states, as they removed at least the ethnic component of territorial conflicts.¹

However, the idea that a lost territory was originally inhabited by ‘our people’ has continued to incite strong emotions of being wronged and to increase the support of ‘revanchist’ and ‘revisionist’ parties which have often been tempted to stir them up whenever induced by domestic or international political threats or opportunities.

This chapter investigates some aspects of how within Bulgaria in the interwar period, in spite of all sincere human concerns about the deplorable fate of the refugees, the ‘refugees question’ (*bežanskijat vāpros*) was (ab)used in order to serve an irredentist and revisionist foreign policy that met nationalist aspirations rather than the refugees’ real needs. In Bulgaria, owing to the harsh treatment meted out at the Paris Peace Conference (Treaty of Neuilly) in 1919, nationalist frustrations and revanchism were particularly strong. Nevertheless, Bulgaria was not an isolated case. Similar emotions existed, for instance, in Greece concerning Northern Epirus and in Albania concerning Kosovo. After depicting Bulgaria’s national frustrations about the territories it lost or failed to acquire and the massive influx of refugees from these territories, this chapter proceeds to examine the strategies that subsequent Bulgarian governments, instrumentalizing the refugees and their organizations, applied to undo the suffered injustices.

3.1 Early Population Exchanges

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, forced migrations often occurred with the consent, or even insistence, of what we are now used to calling ‘the international community’, that is, the Great Powers or respected international organizations. After World War I, the League of Nations monitored implementation of not only minorities’ rights, but also treaties and conventions concerning population exchanges.

¹ Currently, international law experts, economists, sociologists, and anthropologists are more sceptical about the benefits of population exchanges. Evidently, from a moral perspective, nowadays they are totally unacceptable. Population exchanges cause immense suffering not only because people had to leave their native lands where their ancestors were buried, along with loss of immovable properties and most of their belongings, but also because their adaptation to a new and often hostile environment was a traumatizing experience (see e.g. Clark 2006 and the ‘assessments of Lausanne’ in Hirschon 2004, pp. 9–12; for the legal aspects of population exchanges, see Barutčiski, ‘Lausanne Revisited’ in the same volume).

In the Southern Balkans, there were three major such population exchange agreements: the Treaty of Constantinople (1913) between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (never fully implemented), the Convention between Bulgaria and Greece Respecting Reciprocal Emigration of Minorities of 27 November 1919 (signed at the same time as the Neuilly Treaty), and the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations added to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. As a result of ethnic cleansing and bilateral agreements in Macedonia and Thrace—the regions focused on in this chapter—during the period 1912–1924, large-scale demographic transformations occurred in what is now Greek Macedonia. On the eve of the Balkan Wars, the number of Bulgarians amounted to 119,000; after the Balkan Wars, 104,000 Bulgarians were left, further declining to 77,000 between 1920 and 1924. The number of Greeks increased from 513,000 to 1,277,000 over the period 1912–1924. In Western Thrace, the number of Bulgarians over the same period declined from 35,000 to 23,000, while the number of Greeks grew from 87,000 to reach 189,000. Finally, in Eastern Thrace the entire Greek population of 235,000 people disappeared and the number of Bulgarians shrank from 50,000 to 1,000. The fate of the Muslim population was even worse: the number of Muslims (Turks and Pomaks) in (Greek) Macedonia was reduced from 475,000 to 2,000 and in Western Thrace from 111,000 to 84,000; in Eastern Thrace the number of Muslims grew from 223,000 to 370,000.²

The economic and social disruption and human tragedies caused by these coerced demographic changes were all the more painful as Macedonia and Thrace already had a history of ethnic cleansing. By the time of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877–1878 (known in Bulgaria as the War of Liberation), more than half a million Turks had been expelled not only from the Principality of Bulgaria, but also from the Ottoman autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia, both created by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin (McCarthy 2001, p. 48). Although the Treaty envisaged the return of the refugees, covertly the temporary Russian administration and the Bulgarian authorities tried hard to prevent their homecoming. The aim was twofold—ethnic homogenization and appropriation of real estate (Statelova 1983, p. 126). From the areas that had remained under Ottoman rule after the war (Macedonia and the southern and eastern parts of Thrace), a limited number of Bulgarians—mainly intellectuals—emigrated to independent Bulgaria. However, they thought of themselves as political activists in exile rather than as refugees. The suppression of the 1903 Ilinden Insurrection in what is now the Republic of Macedonia resulted in the emigration to Bulgaria of about 30,000 people, fearing Ottoman retaliations (Dragostinova

² See Pallis (1925). The numbers are cited here merely to give an idea of the magnitude of the demographic change: like all Balkan statistics, they are potentially controversial. As a rule, Orthodox Christians belonging to the Bulgarian Exarchate are considered to be Bulgarians, and Orthodox Christians belonging to the Patriarchate of Constantinople are classified as Greeks, although these categories are not entirely congruent. In addition, Bulgarians in Macedonia are now regarded as Macedonians by many historians. In the period under consideration, however, they are most often recorded as Bulgarians (e.g., in Pallis' study, in the *Carnegie Report* (Carnegie 1914), and elsewhere. Since we intend only to give an idea of the size of these migrations, we do not take into consideration smaller ethnic groups such as Armenians, Jews, and Vlachs.

2006, p. 553). The Greek population in Bulgaria, living predominantly on the Black Sea coast in the cities of Plovdiv (Philippopolis) and Asenovgrad (Stenimachos) and the surrounding villages, was discriminated against and harassed from the very beginning of the existence of the Bulgarian state (Nazarska 1999)—although this was no more serious than that experienced by ethnic minorities in other Balkan countries. In 1906, the Greek population in Burgas, Pomorie (Anchialos), and in other coastal cities fell victim to a pogrom, intended as retaliation for Greek attacks on Bulgarian villages in Macedonia (Avramov 2009).

During the First Balkan War (1912–1913), all belligerents (Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia) embarked on ethnic cleansing of the Muslim populations (Turkish, Albanian, and Pomak) in the conquered areas of the Ottoman Empire: 87,000 of the 2,315,000 living there were expelled (McCarthy 2001, p. 92). During the Second Balkan War (1913), the newly-formed alliance (Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia, now joined by Romania and the Ottoman Empire) against Bulgaria targeted mainly the Bulgarian population in the territories they occupied. In Eastern Thrace about one third of the Bulgarian population was massacred by the Ottoman army (Dragostinova 2006, p. 553). The Treaty of Constantinople between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, of September 1913, provided for a mutual exchange of the Bulgarian and Turkish populations within a 50 km zone on both sides of the border, but it was not implemented because of the outbreak of World War I.

The expulsions did not stop after August 1913 when the Treaty of Bucharest was signed, concluding the Second Balkan War. Although no clause envisaging a population exchange was included in the treaty, the expulsions eventually took the character of a *de facto* population exchange. The Bulgarian authorities forced Greeks and Turks in the areas under Bulgarian rule—the Pirin region of Macedonia and especially Western Thrace—to emigrate. On the other hand, many Bulgarians had to leave the Southern Dobrudža, assigned to Romania, and Eastern Thrace, which was reincorporated into the remnants of the Ottoman Empire.³ Smaller numbers of Bulgarians from Greek (or Aegean) and Serbian (or Vardar) Macedonia also kept on arriving.

As most of the refugees considered their stay in Bulgaria to be temporary, they preferred to establish themselves in proximity to the areas they had abandoned—along the borders, in the Pirin region of Macedonia, around the city of Petrič, and in Western Thrace (Dragostinova 2006, p. 557). The Bulgarian authorities gave them shelter in the houses left by the expelled Greeks and Turks. There is no doubt that the establishment of the refugees in the border zone also served the strategic aim of creating an overwhelmingly Bulgarian population in these vulnerable areas. As Dragostinova (2006, p. 558) points out, ‘while bureaucrats rationalized such decisions with the urgency to secure land for the refugees, no doubt these policies aimed

³ The May 1913 *Treaty of London*, concluding the First Balkan War, had fixed the western border of the Ottoman Empire along the line Enos-Midyé, ceding most of Western Thrace to Bulgaria. With the *Treaty of Bucharest*, the Ottoman Empire re-acquired eastern Thrace as far as Edirne in the north and the River Marica (Evros, Meriç) in the south.

at ridding strategic territories (especially the Burgas and Kărdžali areas near the Turkish and Greek borders) of distrustful ethnic and religious minorities’.

Although Bulgaria, like the other Balkan nations, was reluctant to engage in a new military conflict, ultimately the opportunity offered by the Central Powers to revise the ‘injustices’ imposed by the Treaty of Bucharest turned out to be irresistible for a frustrated irredentist nation. In 1915, Bulgaria occupied Southern Dobrudža and Serbia (the region of Niš, Kosovo, and Macedonia). This new state of affairs allowed for the return of many of the refugees to their native lands. The persecutions of the local (non-Bulgarian) population, in which the squads of the Internal Macedonian-Adrianopolitan Revolutionary Organization (IMARO) had a large role, resulted not only from an irredentist policy, but also from the revengefulness of the expelled and returned populations. Irredentist aspirations, frustration about lost properties and sorrow for the victims were feelings that would reinforce one another for years to come.⁴

3.2 Demographic Consequences of World War I and the Peace Settlements

The war ended in a catastrophe for Bulgaria’s allies and consequently for Bulgaria. The Macedonian front was broken, and the Bulgarian army had to retire to the North. The territories that Bulgaria had annexed during the war now had to be evacuated. Western Thrace, occupied by British and French forces, remained under the control of the Entente Powers. Bulgaria risked losing this area, which was economically of the utmost importance because of the profitable tobacco culture and, especially, because of the harbour of Dede Ağaç (Alexandroupolis), which provided the country an outlet to the Mediterranean.

At the peace conference in Paris, Bulgaria was treated harshly. The Treaty of Neuilly, signed on 27 November 1919, forced Bulgaria not only to renounce the territories occupied during the war, but also to cede four small areas on its western border to the newly-formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (after 1929, Yugoslavia). The treaty came with the Convention between Bulgaria and Greece Respecting Reciprocal Emigration of Minorities, which introduced the first large-scale population exchange in the Balkans. About 35,000 Greeks left Bulgaria for Greece, reducing the Greek presence in Bulgaria from 1.0 to 0.1%. Depending on sources, between 42,000 and 66,000 Bulgarians, mainly from Greek Eastern Macedonia, emigrated to Bulgaria—joining the much larger number of Bulgarian

⁴ The Internal Macedonian-Adrianopolitan Revolutionary Organization (IMARO) fought for the liberation and annexation to Bulgaria of Macedonia and ‘the region of Adrianople’, which meant Thrace. In 1919, it was transformed into the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO).

refugees from Yugoslav Macedonia.⁵ The Treaty of Neuilly stipulated that Bulgaria cede Western Thrace to the Entente Powers, which administered it as a protectorate in anticipation of a final decision on its status. After the Entente Powers had entrusted the administration of Western Thrace to Greece, harassment by Greek officials forced Bulgarians—many of them for the second time—to flee and look for shelter in Bulgaria. The 1920 Conference of San Remo assigned Western Thrace to Greece. Subsequently, most of the Bulgarians in Western Thrace left for Bulgaria.

In addition to the territorial losses, Bulgaria had to pay huge reparations to Greece and Yugoslavia. Moreover, it was not allowed to have a proper army, and it was kept in diplomatic isolation as a country suspected (with good reason) of pursuing a revisionist foreign policy. A number of practicalities, including an agreement on the protection of the cultural rights of the 'Slavophone' population in Greece and its monitoring by the League of Nations, were settled in the September 1924 Kalfov-Politis Agreement (named after both countries' ministers of foreign affairs). The Greek parliament, however, did not ratify the agreement. The December 1927 Mollov-Kafandaris Agreement, endorsed by the League of Nations in January 1928, regulated the financial aspects of the expropriation of Bulgarian immovable properties in Greece and Greek immovable properties in Bulgaria. It led to a new, last wave of emigrants, mainly from Greece to Bulgaria.

All together, in the period from October 1912 to December 1926, the Bulgarian authorities officially recognized 253,067 people as refugees. Together with the refugees who left Macedonia after the Ilinden Insurrection and those who for some reason were not officially recognized as refugees, their total amounted to 280,000.⁶ Some 48% of them originated from Greece (Aegean Macedonia, and Western Thrace), 28% from the Ottoman Empire (Eastern Thrace, and Asia Minor), 12.5% from Yugoslavia (Vardar Macedonia and the western districts) and 11% from Romania (Southern Dobrudža) (Dragostinova 2006, p. 553). Given the huge number of casualties in the Balkan Wars and World War I, the territories lost after the wars, the economic and social consequences of the massive immigration of refugees, and the psychological impact of the military defeat, the Bulgarian qualification of the events as a 'national catastrophe' seems justified. The strong feeling of being wronged explains to a large extent the way Bulgarian governments dealt with the refugees: they were to help to undo the injustices that the nation had suffered, the more so as they were directly involved.

⁵ According to Poulton (1995, p. 86), between 52,000 and 72,000 Slavs, depending on the source, emigrated from Greece to Bulgaria. Kofos (1964, p. 27) writes that only 42,000 Slav Macedonians left Greece between 1912 and 1926. According to figures produced by the League of Nations, quoted by Lithoxou (1992, p. 60), no fewer than 66,132 Slavs emigrated to Bulgaria only as a result of the Convention (that means from 1920 onwards).

⁶ The refugees were registered with the aim of obtaining a foreign loan and their number might therefore be inflated. Aleksandăr Cankov, who was prime minister from 1923 to 1926 and must have been well informed, claims that 'for propaganda reasons, the number of refugees was greatly exaggerated. Actually, their number was between 50,000 and 60,000' (Cankov n.d., p. 321). However, as he personally was not in favour of a foreign loan, and moreover his successor and rival Andrej Ljapčev was credited with having obtained the loan, Cankov probably deliberately underestimated the numbers.

3.3 Instrumentalizing the Refugees

The Bulgarian authorities from the very beginning (that is, from the Second Balkan War onwards) ‘used’ their immigrants and refugees⁷ in the same way as did the other Balkan nations—namely, to populate deserted or economically important areas, or to change the ethnic composition of the population of certain areas in order to create an overwhelming Bulgarian majority, especially in precarious border areas. Refugees from Eastern Thrace and Macedonia were particularly encouraged to settle in Western Thrace, where there was a considerable presence of Greeks, Turks, and Pomaks: the last, though Bulgarian-speaking, were also distrusted. As has already been mentioned, this settlement policy was successful, because refugees preferred to look for shelter in areas adjacent to those they were expelled from (anticipating an opportunity to return) and because there were plenty of houses, emptied by Greeks and Turks expelled by the Bulgarians. Here, the territorial interests of Bulgaria coincided with concern for the everyday necessities of the refugees. However, an additional reason for Bulgarian refugees to settle in Western Thrace seems to have been that in this newly-acquired area, the power of the corrupted Bulgarian administration was apparently less oppressive (Grebenarov 2006, p. 41).

The refugees were also used as an argument for Bulgaria’s irredentist claims at the 1919–1920 Paris Peace Conference and later, at the ensuing conferences of San Remo and Lausanne in 1920 and 1923, respectively. Although Bulgaria belonged to the camp of the defeated and could harbour few illusions about the generosity of the victors, its ambitions were considerable: Bulgaria claimed not only the whole of Macedonia and Western Thrace, but also Eastern Thrace up to the line of Enez-Midyé (Kosatev 1996, p. 62). The Ottoman Empire, which had not survived World War I, must have looked to the Bulgarians a defenceless prey. As long as no final decisions on new borders were made, the refugees were mobilized to support these claims.

Of course, the refugees were not only a tool in international politics, but also a heavy financial and social burden. Providing urgent humanitarian aid to the refugees required resources that Bulgaria did not possess; certainly it was unable to properly shelter the refugees and offer them jobs within a short span of time. Most refugees were poor, as they had been able to take with them only a small proportion of their belongings, and were in great need of aid. Most of them were peasants, but arable land was scarce in Bulgaria. While the Bulgarian authorities did their best to help the refugees, they did not hurry to settle them definitively, as this could have produced the impression that Bulgaria was prepared to accept the territorial

⁷ Properly speaking, Bulgarians and Greeks who left their native lands for Bulgaria and Greece respectively, as a result of the Treaty of Neuilly, were not refugees but emigrants, as the population exchange was ‘voluntary’ in principle. Indeed, many Bulgarians did not leave, especially in Western Macedonia; similarly for many Greeks in the coastal cities in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, in most cases, emigration had a compulsory character, which justifies to some extent the use of the term ‘refugees’. However, we use the term here without the dramatizing and mythologizing connotations that the words ‘*prosfiyes*’ and ‘*bežanci*’ have in Greek and Bulgarian.

curtailing and that the refugees would never return to their homes. Actually, the refugees themselves wished to return, and this would also have relieved the Bulgarian state budget and served the aim of continuing the presence of a Bulgarian population in the claimed territories.

3.4 Refugees Serving State Interests

Three main concerns—providing humanitarian aid to the refugees, securing their return to their native countries and contributing to the realization of the territorial ambitions—were dealt with by the post-war Bulgarian governments in close collaboration with the refugees' organizations. The refugees from Macedonia and Eastern Thrace had already united in 1912 in 'brotherhoods' (*bratstva*), organized on the basis of the places of origin of their members. These brotherhoods had elected a common Executive Committee (EC), with Aleksandăr Protogerov, the leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), as chair. The EC wholeheartedly supported the policy of the Bulgarian government. After the Bulgarian invasion in the Serbian-annexed part of Macedonia in October 1915, the EC provided intelligence to the Bulgarian military. Members of the brotherhoods were offered important functions in the army and the civil administration in the occupied regions (Grebenarov 2006, p. 21). The brotherhoods themselves became superfluous as soon as the refugees were allowed to return to their native lands.

One month after the defeat of Bulgaria at the Macedonian front, the brotherhoods were re-established. During their first meeting in mid-October 1918, they elected a delegation which was to present the concerns of the refugees to the Peace Conference in Paris. (Such a delegation was not and would not be invited; it could only have informal meetings.) The standpoints that the delegation had to defend were also discussed. It was decided that the delegation would plead for the unification of Macedonia with Bulgaria and for preservation of Western Thrace as a part of the Bulgarian state. If this turned out to be unachievable (as it soon did), the delegation would demand preservation of the territorial integrity of Macedonia, as a protectorate of the Entente Powers or the League of Nations (Grebenarov 2006, pp. 22–46). In the very worst case, the delegation would beg for continuation of the mandate of the Entente Forces in Western Thrace, with strong guarantees that the area would be transferred neither to Greece nor to Turkey (Kosatev 1996, pp. 82–83).

The constituent conference of the Union of Macedonian Brotherhoods (UMB), which was to elect a new EC, on 22 November 1918, is illustrative of the way the organization and the Bulgarian state cooperated. The chair of the former EC, Protogerov, was not a candidate for the chairmanship of the UMB. As the leader of the IMRO, he preferred to have his hands free to proceed to violent actions if necessary, without compromising the Bulgarian government, which tried hard to soften the standpoints of Athens and Belgrade (Grebenarov 2006, p. 27).⁸ Palešutski believed

⁸ In Serbia, Protogerov had been indicted as a war criminal, which rendered him an inappropriate representative of the Macedonian refugees at the Peace Conference in Paris.

that 'the quick creation of the EC immediately after the defeat at the southern Front in September 1918 was due to one single reason—the attempt of the Bulgarian state policy to link at any price the cause of the Bulgarian Macedonians with that of Bulgaria' (Palešutski 1993, p. 12). The government obviously used the organization for its own aims. Although at the conference in October 1918 brotherhoods of all political tendencies were invited, the government was reluctant to cooperate with the so-called 'Group of Serres', consisting of supporters of the late Jane Sandanski, which was quite influential in Serres, Thessaloniki, and Strumica. The 'Group of Serres' was in favour of an independent multi-ethnic Macedonian state, organized as a federation after the Swiss model. It enjoyed the support of a considerable number of refugees, but understandably the government, aiming at the annexation of Macedonia, was less enthusiastic. In addition, the group's eagerness to resort to violent action if the demands were not met, did not fit in with the cautious diplomacy of the government (Grebenarov 2006, pp. 25–26).

In October 1918, the government also established a Commission for the Housing, Feeding, and Distribution of the Refugees from Macedonia and the Region of the Morava River (eastern Serbia), answerable to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Emil Sprostranov, Secretary of the UMB, was elected chair of the Commission. However, the Commission apparently was responsible in the first place for the payment of salaries to teachers and priests in Vardar Macedonia, and of agents sent out to gather information about cases of maltreatment of the local Bulgarian population and movements of the Entente armies. Again, the interests of the state seem to have weighed more than the fate of the refugees. In December 1918, a liquidation commission was founded, accountable to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Public Health Services. This commission offered immediate humanitarian aid to the refugees and helped them 'return to their homes' (Grebenarov 2006, pp. 33–34). However, since all these commissions and organizations (including the IMRO) worked closely together, obtaining urgent humanitarian aid—and eventually housing and arable land—greatly depended on whether the claimant supported the (radical) political standpoints of these organizations (Dragostinova 2006, p. 563).

By the end of December 1918, a conference of the UMB approved of the functioning of the EC and proclaimed the UMB as the only body representing 'the legal Macedonian cause in Bulgaria'—an implicit refutation of the standpoint of the 'Group of Serres'. Discussing the position of the UMB vis-à-vis the Bulgarian government, the conference gave total freedom to the leadership as far as fund-raising was concerned (Grebenarov 2006, pp. 34–35). As the Bulgarian state was the main sponsor of the UMB, the organization in practice soon became financially dependent on the government and was obliged to support state policy. One should keep in mind, however, that state policy greatly reflected Bulgarian public opinion insofar as the Bulgarian claims on Macedonia and Western Thrace were concerned.

When it became obvious that the Paris Peace Conference was not inclined to meet the requests of the Bulgarian negotiators, the Bulgarian claims were adjusted. The government insisted on the incorporation of Macedonia and Western Thrace into Bulgaria, finally anchoring its last hope on the Fourteen Points of President Woodrow Wilson which proclaimed that state borders should be drawn as much as

possible along lines of nationality. However, in early 1919 at a new meeting of the UMB, the incorporation of Macedonia into Bulgaria was no longer explicitly mentioned; the ‘indivisibility’ (*nedelimost*) of Macedonia was instead emphasized. This compromise represented a move towards the standpoint of the ‘Group of Serres’, increasingly shared by the IMRO (Palešutski 1993, pp. 19–24). The idea of an autonomous Macedonia enjoyed growing popularity among the refugees, who were disappointed about the poor—if any—results achieved by the government and the EC of the UMB (Grebenarov 2006, p. 40). Incongruities between the government and the IMRO—with the UMB split in between—increased; this worsened as the IMRO drew closer to the communists, who were in favour of a federal solution to the national problems in the Balkans, with Macedonia as a separate federal unit. Their paths ultimately separated after the ‘unjust’ and ‘humiliating’ Treaty of Neuilly, which was entirely blamed on the government.

As the Treaty Conference had postponed a final decision on Western Thrace, the Bulgarian government concentrated on re-including the area within the borders of the Bulgarian state. Prime Minister Teodor Todorov, the leader of the Bulgarian delegation to the peace conference, transmitted to Georges Clemenceau, its host, a petition with the signatures of 31,176 family heads from Western Thrace, who demanded in the name of 166,650 Bulgarians the right to return to their native land and to live a peaceful life ‘as Bulgarians’ (Kosatev 1996, p. 69). This would have been possible only if Western Thrace was not transferred to Greece or Turkey. In either of these cases, the Bulgarian population would have been forcibly expelled or ‘encouraged’ to leave through administrative harassment. The Bulgarians proceeded the same way with the minorities on their own territory. Particularly ironical was the declaration of the representative of the Bulgarian Muslims in the Bulgarian parliament, Šefik bej Šefket Bečev, who recommended that Western Thrace be assigned to Bulgaria since ‘currently, in Greece, there was no one left of the hundreds of thousands of Muslims who used to live within the old borders of the kingdom’ (Kosatev 1996, p. 68). In 1913, Bulgaria itself had expelled most of its Turkish population and launched a campaign to forcibly convert the Bulgarian (speaking) Muslims (Pomaks) to Christianity (*Report* 1914, pp. 155–158). But the Bulgarian efforts were to no avail. The Entente Forces, which were in charge of administrating Western Thrace, in 1920 entrusted this task to Greek officials, who pressured the Bulgarians to leave.

3.5 The Last Options: Minority Rights

Finally, Bulgaria could do no more than insist on minority rights for those Bulgarians who had remained, and press for fair financial compensation for the property the refugees had lost. Here, too, Bulgaria failed. Minority rights were not respected in Greece or in Yugoslavia. Greece preferred the Bulgarians to leave the country and was not prepared to offer them rights which would only encourage them to stay. Moreover, it needed the emptied houses and abandoned lands to shelter and feed

the Greek refugees from Asia Minor. Greece even put pressure on the Greeks in Bulgaria to settle in Greece, not only to 'save' them for the Greek nation, but apparently also to avoid the bothersome demands of a reciprocal treatment of minorities (Dragostinova 2009, p. 192). Greece focused on building a Greek nation *within* the borders of the Greek state and in most cases seemed to reluctantly accept the loss of its 'lost fatherlands' (*chamenes patrides*), at least in Bulgaria and Turkey. What probably also played a role there was that Greece had no significant co-ethnic populations living in the areas bordering Bulgaria who could support possible claims. The 1924 Kalfov-Politis Agreement, providing among other things for schooling in the native language—the local Slav dialect, to be sure, not standard Bulgarian—was cancelled after the Greek parliament refused to ratify it. This resulted ultimately in another massive emigration of Bulgarians and Greeks to Bulgaria and Greece, respectively.

In 1923, the clauses on financial compensation for the refugees, provided in the Convention added to the Treaty of Neuilly, were extended to the property rights of the refugees from Eastern Thrace; however, the 1927 Mollov-Kafandaris Agreement on the practicalities, which resulted in a new, last wave of emigrants to Bulgaria, was extinguished in 1931, when Greece discontinued the payments. The 1925 Ankara Agreement between Bulgaria and Turkey stipulated that all Bulgarian estates on Turkish territory became the property of the Turkish state.

Bulgaria's insistence on its neighbours' respecting Bulgarian minority rights was without a doubt inspired by the intention of ameliorating the living conditions of the minority. In addition, it could help to prevent Bulgaria from having to cope with the financial burden of even more immigrants. However, it was also part of an irredentist policy, as Bulgaria's territorial claims were justified only as long as there was a Bulgarian population living there (Dragostinova 2009, pp. 186–187, 192). Emigrating to Bulgaria was considered an expression of Bulgarian consciousness; staying could also be such.

3.6 Keeping the Torch Burning

After the conclusion of the Treaty of Neuilly, attitudes towards refugees in Bulgaria somehow changed. Although the refugees continued to long for their lost native lands and Bulgaria did not accept the 'dictate' of Neuilly, Bulgarian governments adopted a more pragmatic approach to the problems. The Agrarian Union (AU) cabinets (1920–1923) under Aleksandăr Stambolijski took a number of well-intentioned but rather chaotic measures to provide the refugees with arable land. The idea that the refugees were potential AU voters might have been behind these measures as well. After a *coup d'état* ended the AU administration on 9 June 1923, the National Alliance cabinets under Aleksandăr Cankov (1923–1926) and Andrej Ljapčev (1926–1931) continued this same policy. Moreover, Ljapčev succeeded in obtaining an international loan to cope with the financial problems that the influx of refugees had caused. In general, Bulgarian historians consider the refugees' integration into

Bulgarian society as a success story. To some extent it was, given the enormous political, economic, and social problems that Bulgaria faced even without the refugees. The usual explanation is the patriotic satisfaction that the refugees experienced living in their own nation state and enjoying the hospitality of their fellow citizens (see, e.g., Dimitrov 1985). Dragostinova's (2009, pp. 198–202) assessment is more down-to-earth. Many Bulgarians—and, for that matter, Greeks—preferred to stay in their native lands and preserve their houses and fields without prioritizing their 'national identity'. Their new environments often regarded them as a threat. The image of the refugees grateful to settle in their 'own fatherland' and being brotherly welcomed by their co-nationals can be found in official discourses, but is in fact a nationalistic reduction of the many painful and contradictory emotions inevitably involved in compelled emigration. Briefly, the settlement of the Bulgarian refugees in Bulgaria caused the same problems as Karakasidou (1997) describes in her account of the fate of the Greek refugees from Asia Minor in Macedonia.

After Neuilly, Bulgaria attempted to normalize its relations with neighbouring states. This was cumbersome and risky, as the IMRO had resumed not only its terrorist actions in Greek and Yugoslav Macedonia, but also its assaults on Bulgarian politicians who displayed insufficient determination concerning the 'Macedonian question'. In June 1923, Stambolijski was killed by an IMRO squad. As members of the IMRO occupied powerful positions in the organizations providing aid and distributing houses and land to the refugees, the latter had no choice but to support, at least verbally, the IMRO policy and exploits, although—as already noted—they were probably more interested in improvement of their everyday living conditions (Dragostinova 2006, p. 563).

Stambolijski's successor, Cankov, who considered himself a nationalist and was thoroughly convinced of the righteousness of Bulgaria's claims on Macedonia and Thrace, describes in his memoirs how he tried to convince the IMRO leaders that violence in the given circumstances was inappropriate:

The Bulgarian people and the numerous Macedonian migrants in Sofia and the rest of Bulgaria could not help grieving about Macedonia, we could not forget her, the sufferings were immeasurable. But every reasonable man could understand that the old means of revolutionary struggle were not only outdated, but also dangerous. There was a common awareness that we should by no means provoke Yugoslavia, that means Serbia. From Macedonia itself a cry was given out against the squads which somehow continued to cross the border: 'Leave us alone; we are Bulgarians, but do not provoke the authorities lest they kill defenceless people'. (Cankov *n.d.*, p. 308)

However, the Bulgarian authorities did not try too hard to stop the activities of these squads, recruited mainly among the refugees. The IMRO was disbanded only in 1934—with an ease which suggests that the Bulgarian state had indeed tolerated its activities (Dragostinova 2006, p. 556). The Bulgarian governments, acting very cautiously on the international scene, took very few measures to make the refugees accept their fate and stop dreaming about returning to their native lands. Obviously, this was intentional. Politicians almost overtly kept the torch of irredentism burning. Bulgaria's neighbours were well aware of this covert agitation (Dragostinova 2009, p. 195).

Dimităr Hadžidimov (1875–1924), member of the ‘Group of Serres’ who joined the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1919 and in 1924 became a member of parliament, addressed the National Assembly as follows:

A complete and final solution to the refugees question will be achieved only when there are no refugees any more, when all or at least a majority of them will have the opportunity to freely return to their liberated countries, when they stop to be outcasts, when they escape once for ever their outcasts’ fate. It should be proclaimed and emphasized here, that, how badly the refugees in Bulgaria may be in need of a livelihood, of housing, of land and of means to exercise their crafts, in their hearts and souls never extinguishes and never will extinguish the burning desire to return to their hearths and homes. This ideal of them rises above all other worries they have as refugees, that means, their hope and belief that tomorrow or after tomorrow freedom will glow above their enslaved country represents the most precious in their refugees’ souls. (Dimov 1924, pp. 9–10)

As Dragostinova (2006, p. 562) remarks, ‘[t]he leaders pursued radical solutions to the national question, and as a result they framed the public debate in exclusively nationalist terms and served as brokers of nationalist ideology among the refugees and within broader society’.

By the end of the 1930s, when the political situation in Europe seemed to offer new opportunities for an irredentist policy, the refugees were among the most ardent supporters of Bulgarian revisionism. In 1940, on the verge of the Bulgarian occupation—or liberation, depending on the point of view—of Western Thrace one year later, Anastas Razbojnikov concluded his brief monograph on the ‘de-Bulgarization of Western Thrace’ by summing up the various elements of Bulgarian irredentism—the suffering and heroism of the people, the transformation of the ethnic composition of the Thracian population, and the pursuit of the natural resources of the region—and predicting the imminent ‘liberation’ of the area by Bulgaria. Obviously, none of the considerations or emotions of the immediate post-World War I period had faded:

I know that many youngsters from Western Thrace, who have grown up now, will think that the sufferings they underwent during their childhood are described here only insipidly; they will remember their lost parents and maybe will discover themselves and their dear ones on one of the scarce preserved photographs.

Of course, the sufferings and the expulsion of the Western Thracians deserve a more elaborated and complete investigation. Probably this will be done in the future. Maybe one of our writers will find in these sufferings—and in the displayed heroism—rich material for a precious work of art.

During the administration of General Scharpe, the Bulgarian population having fled already in considerable numbers, Western Thrace became a scarcely populated area; there were hardly 24.4 people per square kilometre. And her resources are so abundant!

How many people live now in Western Thrace? Where do they come from? We know very well that her current Christian population is foreign to her and she herself is also foreign to the Greeks from the Caucasus and Asia Minor who have settled there.

For nearly twenty years a black veil has covered Western Thrace. The settlers there await foreigners... They have never slept quietly. Their eyes are constantly staring to the north, where the curtain will be left and her people will enter in their native land. Really, the end of the all-Bulgarian tragedy is near. (Razbojnikov 1998, pp. 129–130)

3.7 Conclusion

During, and in the aftermath of, the Balkan Wars and World War I (that is, 1912–1927), Bulgaria's handling of its refugees and immigrants originating from neighbouring countries was essentially no different from the way Greece dealt with its refugees from Bulgaria and Turkey. First of all, they were considered to be martyrs for the cause of the nation and were cared for insofar as the difficult economic and social circumstances allowed. At the same time, they were involved in the ambitious project of building an ethno-culturally homogeneous nation. With their presence, they populated depopulated areas, homogenized ethnically mixed areas and served as a labour force. Bulgaria, though, pursued yet another policy.

Bulgaria was defeated twice. At the end of the Balkan Wars, it acquired much less territory than it had claimed; after World War I, instead of undoing what it considered to be an injustice, it had to cede parts of its already 'incomplete' territory to Greece and Yugoslavia. These two defeats and their unhappy consequences rendered Bulgaria a deeply frustrated country, eager to revise the 'dictates' that had been imposed on it. During the peace negotiations in Paris, Bulgaria 'used' the refugees to support its claims to the lost territories (Macedonia, Eastern Thrace) and to prevent the secession of areas claimed by its neighbours (mainly Western Thrace). It insisted on the return of the refugees—that was what the refugees themselves wished as well—or the right of the Bulgarian minorities to remain in their native lands. These demands, though supported by humanitarian considerations, equally served irredentist goals: a return of the refugees would increase the number of Bulgarians and actually justify the territorial claims. For that same reason, they were totally unrealistic. The refugees' organizations, initially created with the aim of providing humanitarian aid, were brought into play to defend the Bulgarian territorial claims abroad, although many refugees, apparently, were satisfied with solutions that enabled them to save their property rather than their national identity. Only when the territorial ambitions finally turned out to be unrealizable were measures taken to settle the refugees on a permanent basis and to provide them with housing and land. Subsequently, however, despite most Bulgarian governments' pragmatic foreign policy, aimed at normalizing relations with neighbouring countries, political leaders (often in opposition to the government) exploited the refugees' understandable frustrations to sustain a revanchist and revisionist mood among them and in Bulgarian society in general. By the end of the 1930s, when the political circumstances in Europe had radically changed as a result of the ascent of Nazi Germany, the Bulgarians were still hoping for a new chance to regain the claimed territories and for the refugees—or their children—to resettle in their lost homelands. However, many of them were to become refugees yet again—after World War II.

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