

MPO – 90 Years of Struggle for a Macedonian state

Dr. Lubomir Todorov

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I am truly delighted to be in Fort Wayne tonight and I am really honored by the opportunity to address the MPO Convention on its 90th anniversary.

Tonight I would like to talk about the MPO, its origins and its glorious path, the uniqueness of its ideas and its continuing purpose.

The reason why we are gathered tonight is the creation of the MPO - an event that happened here in Fort Wayne 90 year ago, whose memory, spirit and ideas bring us together. How did it all happen? Let me start with a brief overview of the MPO's origins and the major milestones.

As we know, after half a millennium of Ottoman occupation, the 20th century for Macedonia began with the glorious and tragic Ilinden Uprising, which was followed by two Balkan Wars, several local uprisings, and a devastating World War I, that brought a new tragedy to Macedonia, which was now divided between the three Balkan Christian states. In 1919 the situation in Macedonia was devastating. Tens of thousands of people were forced to leave Aegean Macedonia under Greek rule and Vardar Macedonia under Serbian rule, and to immigrate mainly to Bulgaria, and to the United States and Canada.

As a result of these events, in 1919 the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) was resurrected and united with a new clearly defined ideal – the creation of a free, independent and united Macedonian state, and its leader, Todor Alexandroff, was the first to promote this concept for the just solution of the Macedonian Question.

According to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* published in 1980, "Immigrants from Macedonia came to the United States in significant numbers during the early years of the 20th century. Until World War II almost all

of them thought of themselves as Bulgarians and identified themselves as Bulgarians or Macedonian Bulgarians.” The same source estimates that “between 1903 and 1906 about 50,000 Macedonian Bulgarians immigrated to the United States.”

The idea of creating an organization of Macedonian immigrants in the US and Canada that would fight in a legal way for the freedom of Macedonia was conceived immediately after the WWI. In 1922, the MPO was founded by the bravest of these people, most of whom took part in the Ilinden Insurrection.

Although most MPO members were of Bulgarian-Macedonian heritage, their aim was to create in their motherland Macedonia, a unique state in the Balkans where all the nationalities, including their own, would be free to develop. This Macedonian policy of tolerance and mutual respect, learned through many years of hardship, was unique for the Balkans, where the majority rarely showed any mercy for the minority.

This visionary idea, best summarized by the slogan “Macedonia for the Macedonians”, became an ideal, the motivation and the driving force for the people of Macedonia. The MPO became its finest promoter and for the next 90 years, it has been the only organization in the world to continuously preserve and uphold these original ideals of the Macedonian Liberation Movement.

Actually, the formation of the MPO began a year earlier with the creation of local MPO chapters in some of the largest centers of Macedonian immigration in the US. On November 6, 1921 a Macedonian organization “Prilep” was founded in Steelton, Pennsylvania, with 30 members. On November 21, 1921, in Fort Wayne, Indiana the Macedonian Political Organization “Kostur” was founded. By the end of 1921, the Macedonian-Bulgarian organization named “Prilep” was founded in Youngstown, Ohio. (This organization was renamed MPO Todor Alexandroff in 1924.) On March 1, 1922, a Macedonian organization “Pirin” was founded in Dayton, Ohio. On April 22 1922, on the initiative of Kosta Popoff, another MPO chapter named “Independence” was founded in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. In the first half of 1922, the Lerin brotherhood of Indianapolis was reorganized as a local Macedonian Political Organization. In May and June 1922 MPO “Fatherland” was founded in Detroit. It’s interesting to note that 250 people attended the first

meeting and 50 became members, who elected their leaders Andrey Kostoff, Atanas Filipoff, Hristo Spiroff, Simo Balkoff, Tom Panas, Lambro Nikoloff and Lazar Kocheff. After that, MPO "Ilinden" was founded in New York and "Balkanski Kray" in Lansing, Michigan.

In the second half of 1922, the local MPO chapters agreed to hold a congress and form a union, and a group led by Lazar Kiselincheff was charged with the task of drafting the charter of the new united organization. The document was completed by mid-September and the first congress of the MPO - Macedonian Political Organization took place on October 1 1922 in Fort Wayne, IN. The MPO chapters from New York, Detroit, Stilton, Duquesne, Youngstown, Indianapolis, Gerry and Lansing sent their delegates, while the organizations in Springfield and Cincinnati sent telegrams with their support for the unity of all organizations.

The first person to address the Congress was Atanas Stefanoff, president of MPO "Kostur" of Fort Wayne. In his speech, he described the tragic fate of their enslaved brothers in Vardar and Aegean Macedonia and called for the unification of all Macedonian immigrants into a powerful patriotic organization. The delegates elected Mihail Nikoloff as chairman of the First MPO Convention and Kosta Popoff became vice-chairman. On October 2, 1922, all the delegates supported the idea of creating a free, independent and united Macedonia and elected the first Central Committee of the MPO: Atanas Stefanoff of Fort Wayne was elected the first president of the MPO Central Committee, Trayan Nikoloff of Indianapolis became the vice president, Mihail Nikoloff of Fort Wayne became interim secretary, Atanas Lebamoff of Fort Wayne became the Treasurer, while Pavel Angeloff of Chicago was elected an advisor. The first MPO Convention adjourned on the afternoon of October 4, 1922. No dances or other social events were held, and after this historic meeting the delegates went to a local MPO restaurant.

That's how the MPO was founded in the fall of 1922. And the rest is history.

Five Periods of MPO history

There are five quite distinct periods in the history of the MPO: 1922-1924 - The Founding years; 1924-1934 - The Golden Period; 1934 -1944 - The only organization in the world working for a free and independent Macedonia; 1944 – 1991 - Post WWII period and 1991 – present – The creation of the Republic of Macedonia.

The first MPO period is from its foundation until 1924. During this period the first Convention was prepared and held. The Central Committee's first members started fulfilling their tasks. A tradition for the MPO convention to be held over the Labor Day weekend was established. The political course of the MPO was not yet well defined in this period.

The third Convention of the MPO was crucial for the future of the organization. It took place in Fort Wayne in 1924. Jordan Chkatroff, from the Macedonian National Committee in Bulgaria was present as the guest at the congress. It's important to mention that Jordan Chkatroff, originally from Prilep, was a member of the Macedonian Student Organization "Vardar" in Sofia and a prominent member of the IMRO. He arrived in the US in August on 1924, at the request of Todor Alexandroff, who was assassinated only a few weeks later. Chkatroff was elected secretary of the MPO Central Committee and for the next three years he worked diligently to build the solid foundations of the MPO that have sustained it until these days. Under his leadership MPO's Central Committee established its permanent headquarters in Indianapolis. The 3rd MPO Convention elected Pandil Shaneff as the president of the Central Committee and Tashe Popcheff as treasurer. They remained in these offices without interruption until the beginning of World War II.

The second stage in MPO's development involves the period between 1924 and 1934. At the end of 1926 the Central Committee paid 15,000 US dollars for the printing press of a disbanded Russian newspaper from New York, which enabled MPO to publish a paper in the Bulgarian language. The 4th MPO Convention decided that the name of the MPO paper would be **Makedonska Tribuna**, or the **Macedonian Tribune**. The newspaper's first issue appeared on February 10, 1927.

Chkatroff was instrumental in providing the MPO with a number of outstanding Macedonian patriots, all of whom were members of the Macedonian Student Organization "Vardar" in Sofia and who were active in the IMRO, such as Boris Zografoff, Assen Avramoff, Petar Atzeff and Luben Dimitroff. They provided political stability and a clear path for the MPO for decades to come.

The first editor of the **Macedonian Tribune** was Boris Zografoff. In 1927 the MPO's Central Committee sent him an official invitation and asked him to come from Sofia to the US to become the newspaper's editor. He served as editor for 3 years. The 9th MPO Convention in Youngstown in 1930 appointed Luben Dimitroff as editor, who also lived in Sofia, Bulgaria at the time. In 1931 Dimitroff arrived in the United States and remained the editor of the **Tribune** until his death in 1962. During that period, the Tribune became the most popular Macedonian newspaper in the world.

The delegates of the 5th MPO Convention in 1927 voted to establish an MPO Information Bureau in New York, and appointed Lazar Kiselincheff and Chris Nizamoff to carry out this task. The main purpose of the Bureau was to follow articles related to Macedonia in the US press and to provide answers and comments to any misrepresentation of the Macedonian question. The representatives of the MPO Information Bureau met with prominent American and Canadian journalists, politicians, and scientists to provide them with first-hand information on the situation in Macedonia. They also were very active at numerous academic and human rights conferences, delivering lectures on Macedonia. In the late 30's Chris Anastasoff became the head of the MPO Information Bureau, which later moved to St. Louis, and was renamed The MPO Press Bureau. Anastasoff stayed active with the Bureau until his death in 1984.

Chris Anastasoff wrote a number of research papers and books on Macedonia and became the most prominent MPO scholar and journalist. The Information Office made an enormous impact on the promotion of the Macedonian Cause.

The third period in MPO's active life encompasses the period between 1934 and 1944. This was the continuation of the Golden years for the MPO. The economic progress after the Great Depression resulted in significant improvement of MPO's financial status. Annual donations for the local MPO Chapter exceeded \$15,000.

The total value of the MPO's real estate property at the time was estimated to be about \$200,000. At that time, in 1940 to be precise, the popular red **Macedonian Almanac** was published due to the diligent work of the secretary of the MPO Central Committee Peter Atzeff.

In 1934, the IMRO and all other legal Macedonian immigrant organizations were banned in Bulgaria so, the MPO remained the only Macedonian organization in the world to keep the original Ilinden ideals alive for the next 55 years.

After the World War II, the 4th period in MPO's history began. The entire tragedy of the new division of Macedonia was fully realized for the first time in the 1950's. The three parts of Macedonia ended up under three different, mutually antagonistic political systems – Pirin in the Soviet bloc, Aegean in NATO, and Vardar under Tito's reformist communism.

During those challenging times, the leaders of the MPO and especially Peter Atzeff and Luben Dimitroff were the people who deserve the most credit for keeping the MPO independent and clearly focused on the fight for Macedonian freedom.

In those days, a Macedonian-American People's League (MPL), a leftist organization, founded in 1930's and financially supported by the Soviet Union, was active and acted aggressively against the MPO. MPL later supported the creation of the People's Republic of Macedonia within communist Yugoslavia and favored the establishment of Communist regimes and ban of private property rights throughout Eastern Europe. Finally, because of its pro-Communist stance, the Macedonian People's League was branded a subversive organization by the U.S. government, its activities were prohibited, and it was finally disbanded in 1948. The leaders of MPL went back to communist Bulgaria and became highly placed officials there. In 1959 the Macedonian-American People's League was politically resurrected in Canada under the name United Macedonians.

The MPO continued its steady fight for a free, independent and united Macedonia until 1990, when the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe brought a glimmer of hope for Macedonian freedom. The post-communist freedom came first to Bulgaria, where by 1990 most of the legal Macedonian organizations were reestablished. They sent, for the first time after half a century, their

representatives to the 1990 MPO Convention, led by Maria Koeva, daughter of the legendary Todor Alexandroff.

The 5th period of MPO history begins in 1991, after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia, and with the creation of the Republic of Macedonia. In 1991 Vardar Macedonia voted for independence from Yugoslavia, and the Republic of Macedonia emerged as a free and independent state.

Role of the MPO for the recognition of RM as an independent state was enormous. During the next several years the MPO aggressively pressed for recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by the US government and the entire world community.

While Bulgaria became the first country in the world to recognize the Republic of Macedonia, Greece blocked the recognition of Macedonian independence at the European Union level.

In September of 1992, the MPO took the lead by sponsoring the Forum on Macedonian Unity. At the Forum the leaders of the MPO, United Macedonians of Toronto and the representatives of IMRO-DPMNE sign the first joint appeal for world recognition of the Republic of Macedonia.

In December of 1992, the MPO coordinated efforts to bring humanitarian aid to the Republic of Macedonia. In 1994 MPO Central Committee made several trips to Washington, urging the US government to recognize Macedonia. For that reason MPO Central Committee decided to have the 1995 Convention in Washington, D.C. and invites Jane Kirkpatrick, former US Ambassador to the UN to address the convention.

In July of 1996, the MPO President Col. Boris Chaleff met with President Clinton and Vice-President Gore, and appealed for an early NATO admittance of the Republic of Macedonia. In September of 1997 Ambassadors of the Republic of Macedonia attended an MPO convention for the first time. In July of 1998, the first Macedonian Ambassador to the US visited the MPO headquarters in Fort Wayne. The presence of Christopher Hill, the first US Ambassador to Macedonia, made the 1998 MPO convention in Cincinnati triumphant. At the 1999 MPO

Convention in Toronto, the Prime Minister of Republic of Macedonia was the keynote speaker.

Over the following years, the MPO Conventions hosted the US Ambassador to Macedonia and the Macedonian Ambassador to Washington, and the members of the MPO Central Committee met with President George Bush at the White House. By presenting the US President with first-hand views of the oldest Macedonian-American immigrants and their century-old aspirations, the MPO pressed President Bush strongly and convincingly to recognize the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name, which he finally did in his historic decision of 2004.

And today we celebrate the 90th anniversary of this great organization by remembering all the people who contributed to its success. The list of people is too long to mention, but I would like to say few words about their ideas that made the MPO so unique.

The uniqueness of MPO ideals

Why is the MPO so unique and what makes it so different from all the other Macedonian organizations in the world? What is the reason for its longevity and the purpose and place in the Macedonian history?

There is no better way of understanding the uniqueness of the MPO than by looking at the way its forefathers selected the name of the organization. In the distant 1922, after a lengthy and careful consideration, they chose to name their new organization - Macedonian Political (later Patriotic) Organization of the US and Canada.

Let's look carefully at each of the words in the acronym MPO so we can realize its meaning and importance, as we try to explain the uniqueness of this organization.

Firstly, the MPO is Macedonian.

Being a Macedonian organization is directly related to the definition of the term Macedonian, which has been a cause for numerous misunderstandings, both intentional and unintentional, over the last 50 years.

What is a Macedonian for the MPO? It's a person of any ethnic background who was born in the geographic region of Macedonia or whose origins are from the geographic region of Macedonia. This is very similar to the definition of the terms American or Canadian. The term Macedonian represents all the people of Macedonia regardless of their ethnic or religious origins.

To use the MPO terms - a Macedonian is a citizen of a free, independent and united Macedonian state. That's why "Macedonia for the Macedonians" means a Macedonian state that belongs to all its citizens, regardless of their ethnic background.

Secondly, MPO is patriotic.

In the original name of the MPO the second word was political, which meant that the ideal of its members was creation of a political entity – a free, independent and united Macedonian state. After the WWII the word Political was replaced with Patriotic.

Patriotic, which incidentally is a word of Greek origin, means that the members of the organization are working for the interests of their fatherland, in this case liberation, independence and unification of Macedonia. So, the MPO is not an ethnic organization. It's neither an ethnic Macedonian nor an ethnic Bulgarian organization. It's a patriotic organization of all the people from Macedonia whose ideal is a free, independent and united Macedonia.

As the second editor of the Macedonian Tribune Assen Avramoff used to put it: When you meet another Macedonian don't ask him "What are you?" but ask him "What are you for". If he or she is for a free, independent and united Macedonia, than that person belongs in the MPO, regardless of his or her ethnic background.

At the same time, the fact that one declares himself or herself an ethnic Macedonian, an ethnic Bulgarian or an ethnic Greek doesn't mean that he or she is for a free, independent or united Macedonia. As we know, there were many Yugoslav-Macedonians whose ideal was Yugoslavia, or Bulgarian-Macedonians who ideal was united Bulgaria or Greek-Macedonians whose ideal is united Greece. Obviously, neither group has the same patriotic feelings or aspirations as the members of the MPO.

And that is fine, as there are number of organizations that are trying to unite all the Greeks (such as Pan-Macedonian Association), or all the ethnic Macedonians (such as the United Macedonians), or all the Bulgarians or all the Albanians. There are many such ethnic organizations in the world -- but there is only one MPO, a patriotic organization of all the people from Macedonia, regardless of their ethnicity, whose ideal is a free, independent and united Macedonia.

Third, the MPO is American and Canadian.

A distinct value of the MPO is the fact that it is an American and Canadian organization representing the views of Macedonians in North America, the only Macedonians in the world to enjoy freedom and democracy throughout the 20th century. Only those Macedonians who lived outside of enslaved Macedonia had the real opportunity to freely voice their feelings, impartially, without fear or favor.

The MPO has always been about Macedonia and a portion of its people who in search for liberty came to North America, but who never forgot the desperate need for freedom in their old country. The founders of the MPO were Macedonian immigrants to the US and Canada, and they made one of the goals of the MPO to preserve their traditions in their new countries and also to strengthen the patriotic feelings of its members toward the US or Canada, respectively.

The MPO has always been an organization of unquestionable integrity, supported exclusively by the donations of its own people. It is the only Macedonian organization that was banned at the same time in Yugoslavia, Greece and communist Bulgaria for most of the 20th century. Every other Macedonian organization was supported, one way or another, by a foreign government, be it Yugoslav, Greek, Bulgarian or that of the Soviet Union.

The MPO was a potent voice of the only free Macedonians in the world working for the salvation of their brothers and sisters, who were prisoners in their own land. That is why the MPO became for the people in enslaved Macedonia, the free conscience of Macedonia, a distant but uninterrupted beacon of hope. That is how the MPO secured its place in the Hall of fame of the Macedonian Liberation Movement and became a real Macedonian icon.

The Future

As the MPO goes forward, there are several important roles that only this unique organization can play.

First and foremost, the MPO should work on preserving the values and traditions of our people in the US and Canada. The MPO has to work actively on bringing the old MPO families back into the MPO. That is one of the strategic priorities which will need a major effort and dedication.

Second, MPO should continue its support for the Republic of Macedonia, its independence, freedom and integration in the European Union. Today there is an independent state of Macedonian. We realize that the Republic of Macedonia was created only in one part of Macedonia and that it's not a united Macedonian state according to the MPO ideals. However, for the first time in the modern history there is an independent and internationally recognized Macedonian state, which is a tremendous achievement that deserves and needs support from all Macedonians around the world.

Also, we have to realize that most of the countries in the world today and especially in Europe, are not united or designed according the aspirations of their people. There is going to be a lot of overlap if we put together the maps of united Greece, united Albania, united Bulgaria, and united Serbia. We need to realize that the only way how all these unifications can happen simultaneously is in the united Europe. That is the most realistic and achievable way today of uniting Macedonia, which MPO should continue to strongly support as one of its main purposes as stipulated in the MPO Bylaws.

At the same time MPO should foster good relationship with numerous Macedonian immigrants in Bulgaria and their organizations, and serve as a bridge for resolving historic misunderstandings and promoting good relationship between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria. Bulgaria is a country with the largest number of Macedonian immigrants in the world, and according to the MPO's definitions they are all Macedonians. If Macedonians want to look for their relatives, they don't need to travel to Afghanistan in search

for the descedants of Alexander the Great. All they have to do is travel to Bulgaria, where there are more than 1 million people who can trace their origins to Macedonia. That's why the MPO can play a unique role in resolving the historic and cultural misunderstandings that are residues of the century-old divisions of Macedonia and its people.

But above and before all, MPO should reach back to its roots and to the numerous MPO families in the US and Canada who made this organization great. That is the base which will provide support for all the other activities.

One way of doing it is by preserving the MPO heritage and the ideas of its forefathers, the ideas that envisions freedom and justice for entire Macedonia. By knowing the MPO history we do not confine ourselves to the past, but rather prepare ourselves for the future.

Let us remember today the work, sacrifices and dedication of many known and unknown heroes of the MPO, and honor their 90 years-long struggle that brought us here tonight.

God bless the US and Canada, the countries that have hosted the MPO for almost a century and have enabled MPO members to freely preserve and promote MPO's unique values!

Let's do everything possible to support the MPO so that it can continue to preserve our tradition and promote the ideal of a free, independent and united Macedonia for all its citizens!

Thank you!