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The Struma Incident: Refugees, Wartime Diplomacy, and Türkiye's Neutral Struggle

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Abstract   The Struma incident of 1941-1942 represents a tragic and complex episode during World War II, highlighting the intersection of geopolitical maneuvering, humanitarian crises, and wartime demands. This study examines Türkiye's role in the Struma crisis, where a vessel carrying 769 Jewish refugees from Romania sought passage through Turkish waters to reach Palestine. Despite Türkiye's neutral stance in the war and its humanitarian efforts, the incident underscores the limitations of international politics and strategic interests. The British government's refusal to issue visas for Palestine, coupled with pressure from both the Allied and Axis powers, placed Türkiye in a precarious position. Turkish decision-makers navigated this crisis with a focus on national security and neutrality while attempting to address the dire conditions aboard the Struma.

This paper also examines the crisis management processes employed by Turkish authorities, highlighting their efforts to balance humanitarian concerns with the strategic imperatives of wartime diplomacy. The complex decision-making environment requires careful consideration of international pressures and domestic stability. Furthermore, this analysis explores how the Struma incident influenced subsequent policies and practices in handling refugee crises, emphasizing the need for robust international cooperation and clear protocols in managing such humanitarian emergencies. Ultimately, the Struma tragedy serves as a poignant case study in the broader context of crisis management, international diplomacy, and refugee protection during times of global conflict.

Keywords   Türkiye · Jewish · Crisis Management · the Second World War · Struma

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The Struma Incident: Refugees, Wartime Diplomacy, and Türkiye's Neutral Struggle

The Struma disaster is a poignant chapter in Jewish immigration history. With the ascent of Nazi power in Germany, Jewish migration to Palestine surgeda a surge in Jewish migration to Palestine occurred. During World War II, many Jews sought refuge in Palestine from Nazi persecution. Concurrently, Jews in Romania sought escape from the Nazis and sought refuge in Palestine. However, their journey aboard the dilapidated Struma ship, which had been purchased for passage, became a difficult ordeal for the 769 passengers. Despite the ship's ailing engine, the ship reached the shores of Istanbul in December 1941. On board, three major issues plagued the passengers: the ship's malfunctioning engine hampered the journey to Palestine, health crises arose, and British authorities withheld necessary visas for entry into Palestine. Turkish authorities attempted to address these challenges, facilitating engine repairs and providing medical aid. Diplomatic efforts were fervently pursued to secure visas for the passengers (Directorate of State Archives Republican Archives, [hereafter BCA], 30.10/171.185.21). Nevertheless, the British government's stance, influenced by German pressure, posed a diplomatic dilemma for Türkiye.

One of the unaddressed foreign policy crises in Türkiye's history is the 1942 Struma Disaster. This tragedy garnered extensive media coverage for months and sparked numerous scholarly investigations. Studies by Çetin Yetkin (Yetkin, 2000), Douglas Frantz, and Catherine Collins (Frantz and Collins 2016) offer detailed analyses of the incident, delving into British and German policies, Arab reactions to Jewish refugees, the condition of the Struma ship, and the passengers' struggles. Additionally, research by Çağrı Erhan (Erhan, 2020) explores why Türkiye did not accept these individuals as refugees. However, there is an urgent need to assess the event through the lens of crisis management and analysis, especially considering the potential ramifications for Türkiye's neutrality during World War II. Turkish decision-makers faced a challenging dilemma, as a misstep could have drawn Türkiye into the conflict. This article aims to elucidate how the Struma incident evolved into a crisis and the decision-making process followed by the Turkish authorities to resolve it. This study aims to analyze (1) the Turkish authorities' perception of the problem, (2) the priorities of decision-makers, (3) their behavior during the decision-making process and (4) the crisis management techniques employed. The "Struma Crisis" unfolded suddenly, necessitating swift decisions from authorized personnel, deviating from routine practices, and carrying significant risks of future relations. Therefore, it is imperative to categorize this event as a crisis and evaluate it accordingly.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Decision-Making and Crisis Management in Foreign Policy

Various scholars have offered different definitions of crisis, reflecting distinct perspectives and priorities. Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld characterized crisis as "a change in type and/or an increase in intensity of disruptive, that is, hostile verbal or physical, interactions between two or more states, with a heightened probability of military hostilities" (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 2003, pp. 4–5). In contrast, Charles F. Hermann defined crisis as a "high threat," "short time," and "surprise" (Hermann, 1972, p. 187). Hermann's perspective emphasizes the elements of urgency and unpredictability inherent in crises. As Hermann (2001, p. 182) stated, different definitions of crisis not only indicate definitional differentiation but also express different levels of analysis and alternative theoretical and practical concerns (Hermann, 2001, p. 182).

Crisis management has indeed emerged as a crucial area of focus for states, particularly during the Cold War. The increased risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union underscored the necessity of understanding and effectively managing crises. Academic studies on decision-making processes gained traction during this period, emphasizing their importance in averting conflicts and resolving crises. Crisis management entails a structured and systematic approach to address and mitigate situations characterized as "crises." Crisis management is a systematic process that includes several key components. First, decisions must be made methodically, step by step, considering all available information and potential outcomes. Once the decision has been reached, the next step is to assemble a team capable of effectively implementing the outcome. The team should be well-coordinated and equipped with the necessary resources to execute the plan. Additionally, as the situation unfolds and the results of the implementation become apparent, agile and responsiveness is crucial. This may involve making new decisions promptly based on the evolving circumstances and ensuring that the crisis is managed effectively and efficiently (Vergiliel Tüz, 2014, p. 83).

In international policy analyses, crises are divided into two groups. 1) macro crises: international system crises and sub/regional system crises. 2) micro crises: crises at the actor level (foreign policy crises/ international crises) (Şener, 2021, pp. 370–71). Brecher posits that each international crisis can be examined through four interconnected phases: onset, marking the initial stage of the crisis; escalation, characterized by heightened disruption and an increased probability of military conflict; de-escalation, the inverse process of escalation involving a gradual reduction of tensions; and impact, which refers to the aftermath of crisis termination, analogous to the post-crisis phase in actor-level analysis (Brecher, 2008, p. 10).

Foreign policy crises are also classified and divided into types. In this context, the types of foreign policy crisis are examined in six categories. These categories are: i) According to the number of actors party to the crisis (Unilateral, bilateral, multilateral); ii) According to the way the crisis occurs (progressive, sudden, protracted, dormant); iii) According to the intention of the party creating the crisis (designed, legitimacy, indirect, accident); iv) According to the nature of the event that caused the crisis (Humanitarian, military-security, political, diplomatic, legal, economic); v) According to the impact of the event that created the crisis (National security, security dilemma, status uncertainty, reflection, adaptation); vi) Depending on the outcome of the crisis, those that cause a change in relationships and those that do not cause a change in relationships (Creating new problems, status quo ante, solving the problem, not solving the problem) (Şener, 2021, p. 372).

Crisis management is commonly understood as the concerted actions undertaken by relevant stakeholders to both mitigate the escalation of existing tensions toward armed conflict and safeguard fundamental values, priorities, security, and interests. Decision-makers manage crises, particularly during phases of escalating tensions, striving to avert military conflict. The efficacy of decision-makers in making sound judgments and implementing optimal choices under stress and time constraints exemplifies their proficiency in crisis management (Şener, 2021, pp. 378–79).

History of Jewish Migration: Struggle for "Eretz Yisrael"

While Jews originally inhabited the Palestine region, historical events, such as Babylonian and Roman rule, compelled them to disperse to other parts of the world. Roman persecution particularly catalyzed this dispersion, leading Jews to migrate across North Africa, Anatolia, and Europe, initiating what became known as the diaspora (Armaoğlu, 1991, p. 9). However, wherever they settled, Jews often faced discrimination and

were relegated to second-class citizenship. This lack of acceptance and opportunity prompted waves of migration, notably from Western European countries, including Belgium in 1261, England in 1290, France in 1394, Spain in 1492, and Portugal in 1496. In search of refuge and better prospects, many Jews sought shelter in Eastern Europe or the Ottoman Empire (Laqueur, 2008, p. 54).

During the Renaissance and Reformation eras, the condition of Jews in Europe remained largely unchanged. However, with the onset of the Enlightenment in Europe, particularly the French Revolution, in 1789, there was a notable improvement in their status. The principles of equality, fraternity, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided Jews with more legal, religious, and economic opportunities than before. Despite this progress, European prejudice against Jews persisted to some extent. While secularism created a more favorable environment for Jews, the rise of nationalism in Europe posed new challenges. In subsequent years, anti-Semitism began to resurface in European countries such as France, England, Germany, Austria, and Poland. It became increasingly clear that an important issue concerning Jews had emerged in Europe that required resolution. Anti-Semites viewed Jews as a disruptive element to the ethnic and racial homogeneity of their respective countries. Europeans realized that assimilation or exile was not a viable solution to the Jewish question, leading to the consideration of resettling them elsewhere. Two options emerged for Jewish settlement: Uganda and Palestine. Since Uganda was not favored by the Jewish community, Palestine became its primary choice. The idea of settling Jews in Palestine was also accepted by European powers, particularly because Palestine was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, which was seen as "the sick man" of Europe at the time (Ahituv, 2006, pp. 301–401).

Theodore Herzl emerged as a prominent figure in this movement, advocating for establishing a Jewish state. In his seminal work, "The Jewish State" (Der Judenstaat), published in 1896, Herzl articulated his vision for a solution: the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine (Herzl, 1988). According to Herzl, the first step toward realizing this vision was the organization of all Jews worldwide. In his book, he proposed that Jews should form a cohesive nation and establish their own state. Herzl asserted that Jews possessed the necessary characteristics for nationhood and statehood, framing the Jewish issue not as a social or religious matter but as a national one (Herzl, 1988, p. 76).

Although Herzl's ideas initially faced resistance, the first Zionist Congress convened in Basel, Switzerland in 1897, marking a significant milestone in the Zionist movement. The decisions made at this congress made the territories of Palestine a target for Jewish settlement. Under Herzl's leadership, the Jewish community approached Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamit II, proposing Jewish settlement in Palestine in exchange for assistance with the Ottoman Empire's debts. However, when the sultan rejected this offer, Herzl realized that the British might be able to help resolve their predicament (Armaoğlu, 1991, pp. 17–21).

The exchange of letters between British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour and Jewish Banker Walter Rotschild in 1917 marked a significant turning point in the establishment of a Jewish state. With the conclusion of World War I and the victory of the British and its allies, the Jewish population in the region began to increase. The British government, under the Balfour Declaration, expressed support for Jewish migration to the region (Shapira, 2012, p. 76). This support was crucial in facilitating Jewish immigration because the British controlled Palestine at that time. However, the increasing influx of Jewish immigrants led to tensions with the Arab population in the region. In 1936, Arab protests erupted against British policies and Jewish migration, prompting the British government to reassess its policy. Consequently, British authorities imposed restrictions on Jewish migration to Palestine. Despite these restrictions, Jewish immigrants continued to attempt to

reach Palestine through illegal means, underscoring the determination of the Jewish community to establish a homeland in the region (Wagner, 2014, pp. 698–726).

Jewish Immigration and Türkiye during the Second World War

The Jewish community faced increasingly difficult times when the Nazi Party, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, gained control of Germany. Hitler's anti-Semitic policies presented new challenges, particularly for the British who governed Palestine at the time. Despite many Jews opting to relocate to other countries, some chose to settle in Palestine. The number of Jews immigrating illegally to Palestine had been significant during the postwar period, but it surged even further when conflict erupted a few months later. According to studies, 6,323 Jews arrived in Palestine between July and September 1939 (Armaoğlu 1991, p. 62). This influx of Jewish immigrants was met with disapproval from both the Arab population and the British government in Palestine. In response, the British authorities implemented strong measures to curb the exodus of Jewish immigrants to the region.

Indeed, Zionism was significant not only as a political objective for the Jewish people but also as a strategic endeavor aligning with the political and economic interests of England. Following World War I, the British sought to maintain control over key routes leading to their colonies, particularly the Suez Canal. Securing the Suez Canal and its surroundings was vital for England, especially given the challenges it faced in ensuring the security of this crucial waterway. Establishing a Jewish state in the region could serve the dual purpose of fulfilling Jewish aspirations for statehood while also bolstering British interests by enhancing stability and control over strategic territories, including the Suez Canal (Ediz, 2016, p. 146).

Indeed, tensions between British authorities and the Jewish community in Palestine escalated because of the issue of illegal immigration. The British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine led to clashes between Jewish groups and British forces in the region (Armaoğlu, 1991, p. 62). Meanwhile, Jewish aspirations for an independent state in Palestine received significant support from US leaders such as Roosevelt and Truman. Both presidents expressed sympathy for the Zionist cause and advocated for establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Their support provided a boost to the Zionist movement and furthered the momentum toward the creation of a Jewish state (Arı, 2007, p. 214).

The escalating threat of Nazi persecution in Europe deeply concerned the Jewish Agency, which sought to ensure the security and well-being of Jewish people and was responsible for transporting refugees from Istanbul to Palestine (The Detroit Jewish Chronicle and the Legal Chronicle, 6 March 1942, p. 4). To find a safer environment, many Jewish individuals migrated to Palestine, and Türkiye emerged as a significant transit country due to its geopolitical position. Despite British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine through limited immigration certificates, the desire to reach Palestine persisted among Jewish migrants. Türkiye served as a crucial transit point for Jewish individuals escaping Nazi persecution to Palestine. Recognizing the importance of organizing and facilitating this migration through Türkiye, Haim Barlas, the representative of the Jewish Agency, arrived in Türkiye to coordinate and oversee these efforts (Bali, 2003, p. 344–45).

Haim Barlas encountered numerous challenges in his efforts to facilitate Jewish migration through Türkiye, particularly due to Türkiye's policy of neutrality during World War II and restrictions on the establishment of organizations like his. Additionally, the geopolitical landscape shifted as Nazi rule expanded across Europe, leading to changes in migration routes and Turkish policies. Initially, Romania became a transit country for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, as Italy closed its harbors to Jews. The Romanian

government allowed Jewish refugees, primarily from Germany and Austria, to pass through its territory unhindered, as they desired to maintain their independence from Nazi influence (Çelik, 2019, p. 40). On October 22, 1940, Portugal also prohibited Jewish individuals from passing through their country, further complicating migration routes (Shaw, 1993, p. 400). Furthermore, with the Nazi invasion of France, Yugoslavia, and Greece, the Mediterranean route for Jewish migration became untenable. Türkiye, seeking to maintain its neutrality and fearing Nazi invasion after the collapse of Greece, prohibited the passage of refugees through its Black Sea and Mediterranean borders. Despite these challenges, Barlas succeeded in changing Turkish policy with the assistance of his contacts in Türkiye. He sought to provide guarantees to Turkish authorities to alleviate concerns about violating Turkish neutrality (Shaw, 1993, p. 258).

Haim Barlas expressed his gratitude to President Refik Saydam and the Turkish government for their efforts in granting visas and permissions for Jewish individuals to travel to Palestine through Türkiye under the law dated 03.10.1940 (BCA, 30.10/99.641.7). This gesture of appreciation was conveyed through a letter, which likely indicated the significance of Türkiye's role in facilitating Jewish migration. It is noteworthy that Türkiye's decision to permit this activity occurred despite the country's strong opposition from Great Britain and the Vatican. This opposition stemmed from concerns about potential Arab reactions against their nationality and interests. Despite these challenges and pressures, Türkiye chose to allow Jewish migration through its territory, underscoring the country's commitment to humanitarian principles and its willingness to navigate complex international dynamics (Shaw, 1991, p. 257). For example, in mid-1941, a small boat carrying 20 Jewish passengers arrived off the coast of Istanbul. After its engine failed and the Romanian captain decided not to continue the journey, the boat was repaired and a new captain was assigned before being dispatched to the Mediterranean by Turkish authorities (BCA, 30.10/206.407.31).

In contrast to many European countries that either aligned with Germany or closed their borders to Jewish refugees, the Turkish government chose a different approach, guided by international protocols and humanitarian concerns. After careful deliberation, Turkish authorities granted permission to establish an office specifically for Jewish migrants and facilitate their transit passages (BCA, 30.18.1.2/91.57.4; BCA, 30.18.1.2/91.66.8; BCA, 30.18.1.2/92.85.19; BCA, 30.18.1.2/92.87.14). Among those passengers, there were also 450 Jewish children from Germany along with their 40 teachers (BCA, 30.18.1.2/92.85.7).

Subsequently, in the following months, a significant number of Jewish individuals residing in various European countries sought transit visas from the Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry. These applications were submitted both individually and collectively, indicating the widespread need for safe passage through Türkiye as part of their journey to seek refuge elsewhere (Kodal, 2012, pp. 1911–15). Consequently, Barlas worked diligently to reassure Turkish authorities and navigate the complex geopolitical landscape to facilitate Jewish migration through Türkiye.

Struma Incident

As evidenced by the documents, the Turkish government predominantly approved transit visa requests from Jewish immigrants but also rejected some for various reasons. Additionally, Jewish individuals were permitted to stay in Türkiye for a certain period, reflecting Türkiye's efforts to provide assistance within its capabilities. However, despite Türkiye's best efforts to assist Jewish people, certain challenges remained beyond its control due to the international political environment (Shaw, 1991, p. 257).

One such example is the Struma incident, which illustrates the limitations faced by Türkiye in addressing the plight of Jewish refugees. The Struma incident involved a ship carrying Jewish refugees that sank into the

Black Sea in 1942, resulting in significant loss of life. Despite Türkiye's willingness to help, the complexities of international politics and the constraints imposed by external powers prevented Türkiye from preventing or resolving the tragedy. This incident serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by both Jewish refugees and the countries that sought to aid them during this tumultuous period.

The joining of Romania with Nazi Germany in November 1940 marked a dark period for the Jewish population in Romania, with instances of torture and killings occurring across the country, including the massacre of 4,000 Jews in Jassy (Iaşi) (Sarı, 2021, p. 196). The escalation of racist laws in Romania during the early 1940s compelled many Jewish individuals to seek refuge in Palestine through Türkiye.

This situation created a new income opportunity for certain individuals, with advertisements widely appearing in newspapers, including announcements related to the Struma ship (Bali, 2003, pp. 346–47). Pandelis, a Greek businessman, sold tickets to Jewish people at high prices, misleading them by showing pictures of the transatlantic Queen Mary (Yetkin, 2000, p. 65). However, upon arrival at the ship, passengers discovered the grim reality: the Struma was an old vessel dating back to 1830 that was not suitable for human transportation and lacked essential rescue equipment and facilities. Originally used as a cargo ship on the Danube River, primarily for animal transportation, the Struma did not possess a license to carry passengers. Nevertheless, this issue was circumvented through the bribery of officials in Romania (Yetkin, 2000, pp. 47–49).

Despite the inhuman conditions and dangers posed by the vessel, Jewish refugees were left with limited options due to Nazi pressure and the closure of other routes to Palestine. The policy of the British government toward Jewish refugees also contributed to the dire situation, leaving people with no choice but to pay exorbitant prices for passage on unsafe ships (Frantz and Collins, 2016, p. 63). Additionally, Pandelis promised to secure passengers' visas by traveling to Türkiye via train before Struma arrived on the Turkish shores. Unlike other illegal ships, the Struma was perceived as legitimate, further adding to the desperation of Jewish refugees seeking safe passage to Palestine (Bali, 2003, p. 347).

On December 12, 1941, the Struma vessel departed from the port of Constanza in Romania with 769 Jewish passengers who had fled Romania to escape the advancing Germans. Their destination was Türkiye, with the goal of reaching Eretz Yisrael (the Promised Land) (The Detroit Jewish News, 1965). However, the journey was fraught with difficulties. Struma encountered security nets after passing the signal area at the entrance of the Bosphorus, and it was subsequently rescued by a military guide and towed to the Büyükdere control area on December 15, 1941. The ship was quarantined, and a yellow flag was raised (Bali, 2003, p. 349).

Meanwhile, the Turkish authorities initiated an investigation into the cause of the ship's malfunction. Given that faults were discovered not only in the engine but also in other parts of the ship, it was suspected that the malfunctions may have been deliberate. Considering this possibility, the Ministry of Transport sought guidance on how to repair the ship. Instructions were issued to the Istanbul District Port Authority Technical Administration to expedite the repair work to make the ship seaworthy as soon as possible. Concurrently, efforts were underway to secure entry for Jewish passengers into countries willing to accept them. This dual approach involved both repairing the ship for continued travel and negotiating with other nations for the safe resettlement of the passengers (BCA, 30.10/171.185.21).

As the malfunction on the Struma ferry persisted and the British continued to refuse entry to Jewish immigrants into Palestine, the on-board situation deteriorated, leading to nutritional and health issues. Concerns about immigrants' well-being were reported to the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, highlighting the dire circumstances and the potential for mass fatalities due to epidemics and cold weather.

An urgent action was recommended to bring the passengers ashore (BCA, 30.10/124.881.6). In response to the crisis, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee proposed to the Turkish authorities to accommodate the refugees in a camp and offered to cover all associated expenses. However, Turkish authorities were reluctant to set a precedent and consequently prevented most passengers from disembarking, allowing only nine individuals to leave the ship (Guttstadt, 2012, p. 202).

Meanwhile, the Jewish Agency attempted to persuade the Palestinian Government to issue sufficient certificates for Struma passengers. However, the Turkish government reiterated its stance that Türkiye was only a transit country and not a destination for refugees, further complicating efforts to find a solution for the stranded passengers (The Detroit Jewish Chronicle and the Legal Chronicle, 6 March 1942, p. 4). On February 23, 1942, it was decided that the only option left for the Struma ferry was to leave the Black Sea. The Istanbul Governorship was instructed to tow the ship to sea with a tugboat and to prevent its return to the Bosphorus. As a result, the Struma was launched into the Black Sea, propelled by an Alemdar engine provided by the Ministry of Transport (BCA, 30.10/171.185.21). Unfortunately, tragedy struck when the ship was at sea. It encountered a Russian submarine, resulting in its sinking (Kodal, 2012, p. 1920). For many years, the cause of Struma's sinking has remained unknown. Speculation were circulated, including the possibility of a ship striking a sea mine or being hit. Additionally, there were suggestions that the desperate passengers deliberately sabotaged the ship in an act of despair (The Detroit Jewish Chronicle and the Legal Chronicle, 20 March 1942, p. 12).

International Environment, Jewish Immigration and Türkiye's Stance

Türkiye's foreign policy during the interwar period was characterized using a cautious approach aimed at maintaining neutrality and balance despite growing tensions in Europe. Concerned about developments following World War I, Türkiye sought to avoid conflict entanglement and pursued alliances to counter emerging threats, particularly from Germany and Italy. To this end, Türkiye joined the League of Nations and played a leading role in the establishment of regional alliances such as the Balkan Pact and the Sadabat Pact. These initiatives aimed to strengthen Türkiye's position and foster stability in the region, while efforts were made to cultivate relations with major European powers like England and France (Balcı, 2021, pp. 81–85).

However, Türkiye faced challenges that tested its foreign policy stance, particularly concerning the Arab-Jewish conflict and the rise of Nazi Germany. The Arabs, opposed to Jewish immigration to Palestine, supported Nazi Germany, which was led by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haji Amin al-Husseini. Despite his efforts, internal divisions among the Arabs and their inability to forge political unity weakened al-Husseini's influence against Zionist leaders like Weizmann. In 1941, al-Husseini sought support from Hitler, aligning with Nazi Germany's ambitions in the Caucasus and the Middle East. In turn, Hitler planned to collaborate with the Arabs as part of his strategy to expand into the region. These geopolitical dynamics posed significant challenges to Türkiye's foreign policy, forcing it to navigate complex relationships and balance competing interests to safeguard its own security and interests (Armaoğlu, 2018, pp. 163–64). On the other hand, the defeat of the French against the Germans during World War II compelled the Turkish government to maintain a neutral stance and to preserve good relations with Germany. When Germany entered Bulgaria on March 1, 1941, the two countries became neighbors along the Thrace border. Despite Hitler's assurances of non-aggression in a letter to İnönü, he attempted to persuade Turkish authorities to join the war on Germany's side (Sarı, 2021, p. 199). The German threat was the first concern of Turkish policymakers.

The second concern was The British administration. Notably, represented by Sir Harold McMichael, the High Commissioner for Palestine and Jordan, took a stringent stance against Jewish immigration to Palestine during World War II, largely in response to Arab discontent. McMichael maintained close communication with London to prevent Jewish refugees from seeking refuge in Palestine, fearing that it would exacerbate tensions in the Middle East and garner sympathy for Germany, potentially inciting Arab revolts (Frantz and Collins, 2016, pp. 139–139).

To enforce these policies, the British sought to intercept ships carrying Jewish refugees in the Turkish Straits, aiming to deter unauthorized immigration (Kuzgun, 2021, p. 295). However, the British faced challenges not only from the Arab population but also from the Jewish community, particularly due to the large influx of unauthorized Jewish immigrants. According to Jewish sources, approximately 37,000 unauthorized Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine in May 1939. The British administration's restrictions on illegal immigration sparked conflict with the Jewish community, leading to tensions and disagreements. These conflicts underscored the complex dynamics at play in the region during this period, with competing interests and pressures shaping British policies and relationships with both Arab and Jewish communities (Armaoğlu, 1991, p. 62).

Struma Crisis and Türkiye's Crisis Management Process

In this international political climate, Türkiye's primary foreign policy objective was to avoid involvement in the Second World War. However, the influx of Jewish immigrants from Europe and the use of Türkiye as a transit country presented significant challenges for the Turkish government. The crisis surrounding the Struma ship exemplifies one such challenge that placed Türkiye in a difficult position. The onset of the Struma crisis coincided with news of its departure from Constanta, marking the beginning of a period of crisis for Türkiye. This event underscored the complexities of Türkiye's foreign policy during the wartime era, as it navigated between its commitment to neutrality and its humanitarian obligations despite mounting pressure and challenges.

The Struma crisis was instigated by the actions of the German and British states, whose political conflict left Türkiye in a precarious position due to its geopolitical location. Throughout the war, Türkiye generally adhered to a neutral policy. Although this stance allowed Türkiye to avoid direct involvement in the conflict, it also presented challenges, particularly concerning the treatment of Jewish refugees. Although Türkiye did not participate in the war, it faced pressure to align its policies regarding Jewish refugees with the preferences of Germany and England. Consequently, Türkiye permitted the transit passage of Jewish refugees with valid permits for Palestine but refused entry to those lacking sufficient funds or visas for their intended destinations. This decision aimed to avoid provoking Germany and England, underscoring Türkiye's cautious approach to the crisis (Resmî Gazete, Number: 3960, 15 July 1938, pp. 10279-10283.)

The Struma crisis can be categorized as a political crisis, as Türkiye's protection of Jewish immigrants aboard the ship risked straining relations with Germany (Sarı, 2021, p. 199). The Turkish government, cognizant of its military limitations, carefully managed the crisis to minimize damage, navigating between British pressure and the German threat. Ultimately, Türkiye's handling of the situation reflected its pragmatic approach to foreign policy, prioritizing its national interests while seeking to mitigate potential repercussions from the conflicting interests of major powers.

The actions and proposals made by McMichael regarding the Struma ship highlighted the complexities faced by Turkish decision-makers during the crisis. When informed of the ship's impending arrival,

McMichael recognized Türkiye's obligations under the Montreux Treaty, which prohibited the blocking of legal or illegal refugee ships. As a solution, he suggested that Turkish authorities stop the ship for health screening upon arrival. If the ship proceeded despite these measures, McMichael proposed that the British navy attempt to tow it to the nearest Turkish port (Frantz and Collins, 2016, pp. 138–39). This suggestion reflected British officials' concerns about the potential consequences of allowing the ship to reach Palestine, namely, the encouragement of further migration from the Balkans (Shaw, 1993, p. 282).

The British stance on the issue presented a challenging scenario for Turkish decision-makers, complicating their response to the Struma incident. This unexpected crisis forced Turkish authorities to navigate between their obligations under international treaties, humanitarian concerns and the geopolitical implications of their decisions. In doing so, they grappled with the delicate balance of safeguarding Türkiye's interests while managing competing demands and pressures from various stakeholders involved in the crisis. In times of international crisis, individuals leading a country play a crucial role in decision-making processes and crisis management. These leaders are responsible for defending national interests, navigating challenges, and determining strategies and allocation of resources.

During the Struma crisis, Türkiye was governed by a single-party government led by the Republican People's Party. The key decision-makers included President Ismet İnönü, Prime Minister Refik Saydam, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Şükrü Saraçoğlu. İnönü, also known as the National Chief, possessed extensive state experience, having played a pivotal role in the Turkish War of Independence and maintaining Türkiye's neutrality during World War II. Although the leader overseeing crisis management remained the same, the unique circumstances of each crisis necessitated tailored responses. Effective crisis management relies on well-functioning mechanisms and a developed corporate culture to ensure accurate and timely information dissemination. In the case of the Struma crisis, Türkiye sought comprehensive information about the ship's situation.

Although the Council of Ministers served as the institutional decision-making body, decisions were typically made with the prime minister's approval after consulting relevant units rather than through consensus or majority vote. Various ministries, including the Ministry of Transport, were involved in the decision-making process, contributing to the production of detailed reports and informed decision-making. This collaborative approach enabled Türkiye to effectively manage the crisis and mitigate potential risks to national security.

In fact, the Struma incident can be characterized as a unilateral crisis. In this type of crisis, only one side perceives the situation as a "crisis" and takes responsive actions. For the passengers on the Struma, attempting to reach Palestine through the Turkish Straits to find safety under British control, the incident became a significant crisis for Turkish decision-makers. This was due to the lack of necessary permission from England and the complex conditions imposed by the ongoing war.

In this situation, Türkiye faced a unique challenge. The crisis did not directly involve other countries as parties; rather, Türkiye had to navigate the complexities. The country was forced to make decisions that balanced national security, national interests and priorities, and humanitarian responsibilities. The culmination of this crisis management was the difficult decision to send the Struma back to the Black Sea (Aksu, 2018, p. 73). This incident illustrates the challenges inherent in unilateral crises, where a nation's leaders must address a situation under significant external pressures and internal constraints. The Turkish government's decision-making process during the Struma crisis exemplifies the intricate balance required to navigate such delicate international situations.

The Struma crisis can indeed be categorized as both a unilateral and humanitarian crisis. Turkish decision makers found themselves in a difficult position, caught between the humanitarian needs of Jewish refugees and the political pressures of Nazi Germany and Britain. Despite the immense political pressure from Nazi Germany, Türkiye demonstrated a notable degree of resistance, particularly to humanitarian issues. Throughout World War II, Türkiye refused German demands to turn over Jewish refugees to internment in death camps, showcasing its commitment to humanitarian principles (Shaw, 1991, p. 256).

The dire conditions aboard the Struma underscored the humanitarian side of the crisis. On December 27, 1941, Romania sent a telegram to the Turkish government explaining that the ship could not return to Romania because it had left illegally. This communication further complicated Türkiye's position. Meanwhile, the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem reached out to the British authorities on January 19, 1942, seeking permission for Struma's Jewish passengers to enter Palestine. Unfortunately, no response was received. As the conditions on the Struma deteriorated, the health and well-being of its passengers became a pressing concern. Dr. H. Alataş, the deputy of health and social welfare, reported on February 4, 1942, that the refugees would need to be brought ashore to prevent mass casualties due to the increasingly unhealthy and dire conditions on the ship (BCA, 30.10/124.881.6). The Struma crisis exemplifies the complexity of managing a humanitarian crisis under severe political pressure. The Turkish government's actions highlighted the delicate balance required to navigate such situations in which humanitarian needs clash with geopolitical realities. Despite the tragic outcome, Türkiye's efforts to resist Nazi pressure and its attempts to manage the crisis within the constraints of the time are noteworthy.

The Turkish government indeed made significant efforts to address the humanitarian crisis surrounding the Struma ship, which arrived in Turkish territorial waters on December 15, 1941. These efforts aimed to find a resolution that balanced humanitarian concerns with the political and strategic interests of Türkiye. Upon the arrival of Struma, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly initiated diplomatic efforts to find a solution. On December 20, 1941, the Ministry informed various foreign representatives in Ankara, particularly focusing on the British Embassy, about the dire situation of the Jewish immigrants aboard the Struma. Given that Britain held the mandate over Palestine and was in a state of conflict with the Jewish population there, Türkiye emphasized that if Britain would grant visas to the immigrants, Türkiye would facilitate their journey to Palestine. The British response, however, was not favourable. British Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen reported that Britain did not wish to allow these immigrants into Palestine. Despite continued negotiations, only 70 children were granted permission to enter Palestine, reflecting Britain's strict immigration policy and concerns about worsening tensions in the region (Kodal, 2012, p. 1919).

Türkiye's position was further complicated by the legal constraints of the Montreux Straits Convention, which governed the passage of ships through the Turkish Straits. Türkiye communicated that it did not have the legal authority to unilaterally block or redirect the ship without violating international agreements. Despite these constraints, Türkiye expressed its willingness to help passengers continue their journey, provided they were given the necessary visas for Palestine (Çanak, 2015, p. 138). Throughout this crisis, the Turkish government sought to balance national interests with humanitarian responsibilities. The situation became a significant test for Turkish decision-makers, who had to navigate the complex interplay of international diplomacy, legal obligations and humanitarian needs. While Türkiye aimed to protect its national security and maintain its neutral stance during the war, it also made efforts to fulfill its humanitarian obligations within the constraints imposed by international law and the political realities of the time. The Struma incident highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of crisis management, particularly when

humanitarian concerns intersect with political and legal constraints. The Turkish government's actions demonstrate their commitment to seeking a humane resolution despite significant external pressures and limitations. Ultimately, Türkiye's attempts to resolve the Struma crisis reflect its efforts to act responsibly and compassionately, even in difficult international circumstances.

The Struma incident indeed placed Turkish decision-makers in an extremely challenging position, trying to balance political pressures from Britain, humanitarian concerns, and the legal and international constraints of the time. On February 10, 1942, Turkish authorities made a public press statement urging the British government to reconsider its stance on Jewish refugees aboard the Struma. This attempted to alleviate the political burden and shift responsibility to Britain. However, despite this call, British officials, including High Commissioner Sir Harold McMichael, remained steadfast in their refusal to allow immigrants to enter Palestine.

Further complicating the situation was a letter dated February 19, 1942, which introduced new diplomatic and legal hurdles. Despite the repairs, the ship was not permitted to continue to Palestine due to the British refusal to issue visas or alter their policy toward Jewish immigration. The captain of the ship was a Bulgarian citizen, and Bulgaria was allied with Germany, further complicating any decision involving the ship's movement. The Struma had been flagged under Panama, a country at war with the Axis, which added a layer of complexity to the ship's legal status (BCA, 30.10/171.185.21).

Given these complications, Turkish authorities decided to remove the ship from their territorial waters. On February 23, 1942, the Struma was towed back into the Black Sea (Kodal, 2012, p. 1920). Once in the Black Sea, the Struma, unable to continue its journey, faced an uncertain fate. Tragically, on February 24, 1942, the ship was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine, resulting in the loss of nearly all lives on board. This incident highlighted the tragic intersection of geopolitical maneuvering, wartime exigencies, and humanitarian crises.

Table 1

Analysis of the Struma Crisis

Date	15 December 1941–24 February 1942
Parties	Türkiye
Third Actors	British; Nazi Germany; the Jewish Agency
Decision Makers	İsmet İnönü (President), Refik Saydam (Prime Minister), Şükrü Saraçoğlu (Foreign Minister)
Types of crisis	Bilateral, Humanitarian, Unexpected
Triggering Event	Passing through Turkish waters
Climax of a crisis	Rejection of Jewish visas by British authorities
Türkiye's Demands and Goals	Fixing the ship's engine, issuing visas to passengers, not allowing passengers into the country, and being neutral
Türkiye's Crisis Management Strategy	Negotiation and Adherence to Contractual Obligations

The decision was driven by several factors such as diplomatic pressure, legal constraints, and humanitarian concerns. First, the British government's intransigence on its immigration policy left Türkiye with limited options. Second, the Montreux Straits Convention and other international legal obligations limited Türkiye's ability to unilaterally decide the fate of its ships. Third, despite recognizing the dire humanitarian situation, Türkiye was constrained by its broader geopolitical and diplomatic context.

Conclusion

The Struma incident is a profoundly tragic episode in the annals of World War II and the broader history of Jewish migration during the Holocaust. This encapsulates the dire consequences of geopolitical maneuvering, wartime exigencies and humanitarian crises that arise when nations prioritize strategic interests over human lives. This complex incident, involving multiple actors and intricate political dynamics, underscores the moral and ethical challenges faced by countries like Türkiye, which found themselves in precarious positions during the war.

Türkiye's position during World War II was characterized by careful neutrality. Under the leadership of President İsmet İnönü, Prime Minister Refik Saydam, and Foreign Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu, Türkiye aimed to stay out of the conflict while managing delicate relations with both the Allied and Axis powers. This strategic stance was critical for Türkiye, given its geopolitical significance and the pressures exerted by neighboring belligerent states. The arrival of the Struma in Turkish waters on December 15, 1941, was a significant diplomatic challenge. The vessel, carrying 769 Jewish refugees who had fled Romania, symbolized the desperation and suffering of Jews seeking escape from Nazi persecution.

The British government, represented by High Commissioner Sir Harold McMichael, resoluted its policy of restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine, fearing that an influx of refugees would destabilize the region and inflame Arab opposition. Despite the harsh conditions aboard the Struma, British authorities refused to issue visas to its passengers, placing Türkiye in a difficult position. While sympathetic to the plight of the refugees, the Turkish government was also wary of antagonizing both Britain and Germany. This balancing act reflected Türkiye's broader foreign policy strategy during the war, in which maintaining neutrality and avoiding entanglement in the conflict were paramount.

Turkish decision-makers made several attempts to resolve the crisis humanely. They engaged in diplomatic efforts with the British and other nations to find a destination for the refugees, but these efforts were stymied by the intransigence of the British government and the complex international legal framework governing wartime maritime movements. The Montreux Straits Convention, which regulated passage through the Turkish Straits, further constrained Türkiye's actions. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aware of the humanitarian disaster unfolding on the Struma, proposed that Britain issue visas for Palestine, offering to facilitate the refugees' journey. However, this proposal was rejected, and only few children were eventually permitted to disembark.

Faced with mounting pressure, deteriorating conditions aboard the ship, the refusal of both Romania and Britain to accept the refugees, and the refusal of the captain to move the ship, Türkiye decided to tow the Struma out of its territorial waters into the Black Sea on February 23, 1942. This decision, driven by pragmatic considerations, led to a catastrophic outcome. On February 24, 1942, the Struma was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine, resulting in the deaths of almost all of its crew. This tragic incident underscored the lethal consequences of a world at war, where humanitarian needs were often overshadowed by strategic imperatives and national interests.

The Struma incident illustrates the profound dilemmas faced by decision-makers in Turkey during World War II. Despite their efforts to balance humanitarian concerns with geopolitical realities, the constraints imposed by international politics severely limited their options. Türkiye's cautious approach, driven by a desire to maintain neutrality and safeguard national security, led to difficult and often heartbreaking decisions. While Türkiye facilitated the transit of many Jewish refugees and resisted Nazi demands to hand

over Jews within its borders, the Struma tragedy remains a stark reminder of the limits of humanitarian intervention in a time of widespread conflict and moral crisis.

Beyond its historical significance, the Struma incident provides a compelling case study for crisis management theories. By applying these frameworks to the situation, we gain a deeper understanding of the strategic decision-making processes and the complexities involved in balancing humanitarian goals with national interests during times of crisis. The application of crisis management theories underscores the unique challenges faced by neutral nations during wartime, especially when decisions can have profound humanitarian consequences. The lessons learned from this tragic episode highlight the importance of effective crisis management, not only in wartime but also in contemporary discussions on international refugee protection and humanitarian intervention.

In conclusion, the Struma incident reflects the harsh realities of World War II and the difficult choices faced by neutral nations like Türkiye. This underscores the necessity of balancing national interests with humanitarian responsibilities and the tragic outcomes that can result when the international community fails to act decisively despite human suffering. The lessons of Struma continue to resonate, reminding us of the imperative to prioritize human lives and dignity in our global policies and actions.

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