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Mare Clausum: War and Diplomacy on the Black Sea, 1939 – 91

On February 23, 1942, a Soviet submarine (*ShCh-213*) attacked two vessels in the Black Sea, near the Turkish coastline. The first was a Turkish schooner (*Çankaya*), sunk by gunfire ten miles north of the Bosphorus. Captained by Lieutenant D. M. Denezhko, the *ShCh-213* was carrying secret orders to attack all neutral and Axis vessels to impede the delivery of strategic arms into the Black Sea. Less than 24 hours after the *Çankaya* incident, the *ShCh-213* torpedoed a second vessel, the *SS Struma*, which was chartered to carry Jewish refugees from Axis-allied Romania to British-controlled Palestine. After a series of engine failures, it had barely made it half-way through its voyage before anchoring in Istanbul with its 769 Romanian refugee passengers on board. When this 170-ton former yacht sank, it left behind only one survivor, making it one of the largest civilian naval disasters of World War II.¹ The acts of sinking of the *Çankaya* and the *Struma* were but two in a line of Black Sea tragedies that this chapter seeks to place in a broader geopolitical context. Rather than a survey of military encounters on the Black Sea between 1939 and 1945, the present work highlights moments of cooperation and conflict between the littoral and non-littoral states.

Ultimately, this paper highlights the way that the war brought fundamental changes to the peoples around the Black Sea. The argument is in keeping with existing historical literature on World War II that has begun to compensate for earlier accounts that overlooked this region. To take just one example, exploring the broader ramifications of the Nazi-Soviet collaboration between 1939 and 1941, Roger Moorhouse's *The Devils' Alliance* shows how, despite the Soviet Union's best attempts to forge its own post-war narrative, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was essentially an imperialist division of spheres of influence between two great powers at the expense of smaller neighboring states.² Likewise, in his *Grand Delusion*, Gabriel Gorodetsky illustrates the centrality of a Black Sea logic in Stalin's war plans.³ In a similar vein with Moorhouse, Gorodetsky et. al., the present chapter demonstrates how the smaller littoral states around the Black Sea got caught up in the meshes of a struggle between two great powers.

The wartime transformation of the Black Sea political landscape was remarkable. After World War II, the Soviet Union acquired two new satellites (Romania and Bulga-

1 Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *Death on the Black Sea: The Untold Story of the "Struma" and World War II's Holocaust at Sea* (New York: Ecco, 2004); Onur İşçi, *Turkey and the Soviet Union During World War II: Diplomacy, Discord and International Relations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

2 Roger Moorhouse, *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–41* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014).

3 Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

ria), pressured Turkey to revise the Straits regime, and cherished hopes to finally bring an end to the Eastern Question and turn the Black Sea into a “Russian lake”—free from Western incursions. Several years into the Cold War, Moscow had reason to entertain such designs. But in a dicey volte-face and diplomatic brinkmanship, the neutral Turkish state set out to mend fences with Western powers and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to maintain its status as the sole custodian of the Straits—free from Soviet incursions. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey remained the only littoral power outside the Russian sphere of influence on the Black Sea, which once again divided neighbors.

1 Resurrecting the Eastern Question

The Straits Question, which had long been an intrinsic part of the larger problem known as the Eastern Question, reemerged in the context of a Europe whose map was changing. Bitterness towards the Western-dictated postwar international order drove relations between newborn states around the Black Sea.⁴ In particular, nationalist Turks and internationalist Bolsheviks found themselves in an unusual convergence that each side defined as anti-imperialist and laid to rest centuries of rivalry between their imperial predecessors. At the heart of their cooperation was a geopolitical alignment that sought to shield the greater Black Sea region from Western intrusions.⁵

On the eve of the Turkish Republic’s establishment, the Ankara government was vexed about the existing regime of naval passage into the Black Sea—as that passage took foreign navies through the heart of Istanbul. But, during the Lausanne Conference in 1922–23, which replaced the Sèvres Treaty of 1919, Turkish nationalists had other priorities, such as sovereignty, recognition, and state-building on the rubble of a failed empire. Hence, in 1923 Turkey reluctantly agreed to demilitarize the Straits and transfer their control to an international convention. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, argued that the Black Sea constituted a *mare clausum* that differed from internationalized waterways like the Suez and Panama canals. Hence, Georgii Chicherin, the head of the Soviet delegation at Lausanne, argued against the demilitarization of the Straits much more strongly than the Turks themselves.⁶ The Soviet Union was disappointed with Turkish concessions at Lausanne regarding naval passage through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.

The Soviet Union’s position on the Straits Question was clear at the Lausanne Convention—they were categorically against the inclusion of non-littoral powers in any ne-

4 Samuel J. Hirst and Onur İsci, “Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development,” *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 5 (November 2020): 834–59.

5 Onur İsci, “Yardstick of Friendship: Soviet-Turkish Relations and the Montreux Convention of 1936,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4 (Fall 2020): 733–62.

6 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 159, op. 2, d. 19, l. 100 (December 19, 1922).

gotiation, in order to offer protection to the Soviet coastline in Ukraine, southern Russia, and Georgia. But they understood Turkey's predicament and proclaimed that they would support Turkey's sovereignty and its desire to remilitarize the Straits when the time was right. Hence, thirteen years later, when Turkey pointed to rampant revisionism in Europe and set out to revise the Lausanne Convention in 1936, the Soviet government "empathized with Turkey's legitimate concerns regarding the insecurity of peace and the grave danger of the outbreak of war."⁷

The Montreux Convention represented the first peacefully negotiated revision of the post-World War I peace treaties. At Montreux, with a position strengthened by post-war recovery, Turkey asserted its sovereignty over the Straits, claiming the right to develop fortifications in the area and take control of passage into its own hands. There were a number of issues that the Soviets sanctioned: For instance, it was more or less established that unhindered commercial traffic, both in peace and war, would be guaranteed, and that Turkey would have the right to remilitarize the Straits. What disturbed the Soviet Union in the draft treaty was the inclusion of the Turkish sovereignty clause, which meant that Turkey would have the right to open or close the Straits to warships.⁸ Maksim Litvinov, head of the Soviet delegation at Montreux, announced that his government would support the Turkish thesis provided that non-littoral use of the Straits would be "for specific purposes and within specific limitations."⁹ In its final amendments, Article 10 of the Montreux Convention introduced the kind of specific limitations Litvinov sought and expressed exactly when and how non-littoral powers could pass through the gates of the Black Sea.¹⁰ Additionally, Article 12 gave Black Sea littoral countries privileged access to the Straits and the right to dispatch their fleet for purposes of rejoining their base outside the Black Sea with adequate notice. Finally, Article 18 curbed the aggregate tonnage of non-littoral states in the Black Sea in times of peace and stipulated that their vessels of war may not remain in the Black Sea more than twenty-one days, whatever the object of their presence there. The Soviet conditions were met almost entirely in the new accord.

Given the impending war in Europe, the Soviets were understandably irritated that Black Sea security now relied exclusively on good-neighborly relations with the Turkish government. Although this was a significant issue, serious concessions had been made to alleviate Soviet concerns. The so-called "Black Sea yardstick" clause, which Turkey had introduced in the final draft of the treaty, limited non-littoral powers to a fixed tonnage of 30,000 tons with a limited period of stay in the Black Sea. There was a clause allowing a one-off increase in tonnage to 45,000, if the Soviet fleet was further expand-

7 "Nota Narodnogo komissara inostrannykh del SSSR poslu Turtsii v SSSR Apaidynu," April 16, 1936, in *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1974), 19:231–32.

8 Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (AVP RF), f. 5, op. 16, pap. 112, d. 113, l. 28 (Stomoniakov to Karakhan, July 13, 1936).

9 "Nota Narodnogo komissara inostrannykh del SSSR."

10 No. 4015, "Convention Regarding the Régime of the Straits," signed at Montreux, July 20, 1936, in *League of Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 173, 1936–37, 215–41.

ed. Nonetheless, this was a much more stringent limitation than anything in the Lausanne Convention and, given that the Soviet Black Sea fleet had a known tonnage of 60,000 tons, beneficial to the Soviet Union. The Soviets accepted the yardstick clause and agreed to sign the convention, which replaced the Lausanne regime on July 20, 1936 and reinstated “Turkey’s full sovereignty over the Straits in times of war and when it senses an imminent possibility of war.”¹¹

Despite hindrances, Soviet-Turkish interactions in 1937 permeated the Black Sea, where the two states looked beyond their geopolitical differences and focused on state-sponsored ventures. In fact, there was even a ray of hope for a bilateral military pact on the Black Sea between Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union to ward off imperialist penetration. Indeed, as undeniable tensions grew between these states, until 1939, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact demonstrated that one party had aligned with an expansionist power outside the region, Moscow and Ankara shared a sense that their interests overlapped in defense of the Black Sea.¹² Turkey’s foreign minister Tefik Rüşti thus entered into negotiations with Ion Antonescu of Romania to probe the possibility of an exclusive Black Sea Non-Aggression Pact that would have included the Soviet Union.¹³ Even though the proposed Black Sea pact was not much more than a gesture, the British ambassador in Ankara voiced his concerns about the support his country had given Turkey at Montreux and questioned whether it would backfire.

Indeed, the Soviet Union had significantly more interest in the Black Sea coastline than it did in the ice-bound Baltic or the Barents Sea, which were easily threatened by the German navy. The Black Sea had well-equipped commercial ports; proximity to valuable manganese, oil, wheat, coal, and steel hubs; and developed canal systems. Another auxiliary aspect of the question of a Black Sea pact was also evident in the matter of interstate trade among its littorals. Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria were all customers of the Soviet Union, where water-borne merchandise passed through the Black Sea to the Danube and was then reshipped to Istanbul and to other Black Sea ports. Given the centrality of this area for Soviet trade outlets and routes, the British government was concerned about a more privileged partnership between Ankara and Moscow, which they had so carefully sought to circumvent at Montreux.¹⁴

The struggle to carve out sovereignty in a world demarcated by postwar international order defined the formation of the three newborn littoral states of the Black Sea—Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania. In the case of Turkey, which now controlled the Straits, Kemalists had always looked to the Soviet Union—whatever its other faults—

11 “Montrö Boğazlar Sözleşmesi ve Ekleri,” *Resmî Gazete*, August 5, 1936, 37.

12 Türk Diplomatiği Arşivi (TDA), TSID 5028381 (15th Anniversary of the Soviet–Turkish Friendship Treaty, March 24, 1936).

13 In fact, as early as 1933 there had been rumors of Turkish–Romanian negotiations about a Black Sea pact (Karadeniz Misakı) between Aras and Nicolae Titulescu. See TDA, TSID 6940596 (Turkish Embassy in Moscow to Ankara, September 15, 1933); TDA, TSID 6940463 (Turkish Embassy in Moscow to Ankara, September 18, 1933).

14 Public Record Office (FO), 424/280 E 4434/386/44 (Lorraine to Eden, July 26, 1937).

as a foil to European great-power politics. Soviet rapprochement with Nazi Germany, and hence with the aggressive revisionism that Turkey feared, brought an end to that vision. At talks in Moscow, Viacheslav Molotov referred menacingly to occupied Poland as an example of the kind of fate that could befall Turkey.¹⁵ While the discourse of national sovereignty was associated exclusively with Western imperialism during the early Kemalist years, it took on a new meaning with the outbreak of World War II and began to reflect Turkey's apprehension vis-à-vis Soviet imperialism across the Black Sea.

2 The Black Sea on the Eve of World War II

Between the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Hitler's unleashing of Operation Barbarossa, the Black Sea was a neutral but eerie trading zone. The Soviet Union freely exchanged critical raw materials such as petroleum, grain, rubber, and manganese with the Third Reich in return for weapons, technology, and manufacturing machinery. Beginning in the fall of 1939, the three neutral riparian states that remained outside the Soviet Union—Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria—watched the convergence between these two colossi with utter trepidation. For the governments in Ankara, Bucharest, and Sofia, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact meant that the balance of power could only be attained by maintaining relations with either London or Berlin as possible allies against imminent Soviet aggression.

The Black Sea played a paramount role in Nazi Germany's acquisition of raw materials during the early phase of war. By 1939, almost all of Nazi Germany's resources for arms production were imported: 80 percent of its rubber, 60 percent of its oil, 60 percent of its iron ore, and 100 percent of its chrome and manganese came from abroad.¹⁶ Given the country's dependence on imports, the Soviet Union was a natural trading partner, being the world's largest producer of manganese, copper, and iron ore. The two countries signed a credit agreement in 1939, which was supported by a trade agreement ratified the following year. Soviet deliveries to the Third Reich were shipped across the Black Sea from the Caucasus to Bulgaria and then transported by rail to Germany. In the spring of 1940, Soviet exports to Germany were approximately 10 million Reichsmarks per month, rising steeply to nearly ten times that value in September 1940.¹⁷ Likewise, German exports to the Soviet Union rose from 15 million Reichsmarks in May 1940 to 37 million in December 1940. This meant that in 1940 alone, over 50 percent of Soviet exports were destined for Nazi Germany, which valued around 400 million Reichsmarks against a German export volume of 240 million Reichsmarks. The extent of Nazi-Soviet trade across the Black Sea was remarkable but the role of Soviet oil

¹⁵ TDA, TSID 16992896 (Molotov-Sarper Meeting—First Report, June 9, 1945).

¹⁶ Moorhouse, *The Devils' Alliance*, 173.

¹⁷ Heinrich Schwendemann, "German-Soviet Economic Relations at the Time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, 1939–1941," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 36, no. 1–2 (January–June 1995): 176.

exports was grossly exaggerated. Although Hitler certainly had an insatiable thirst for fuel to feed the *Wehrmacht*, Nazi Germany went to war in 1939 with over 2 million tons of oil stocks, which merely dropped by a quarter when the Nazi-Soviet war began in 1941.¹⁸ Soviet oil exports to the Third Reich were by no means unsubstantial, but nonetheless amounted to barely 3 percent of USSR's annual production. What the Soviet Union offered Berlin in return for bullion was Ukrainian grain that fed Nazi soldiers.¹⁹

A more significant source of crude oil for Nazi Germany was Romania, which offered its wells to the *Wehrmacht*'s disposal in 1940. As Adam Tooze argued in his magisterial *Wages of Destruction*, "if the Third Reich was to survive a truly global war, it would need to extend its influence systematically to the oil fields of Romania and Iran. Turkey thus took on a strategic importance."²⁰ Beyond its oil resources, Romania had a strategic value as a gateway into the Black Sea steppe in Hitler's odyssey to realize *lebensraum*. As early as 1936, Richard Walther Darré—the Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture—stressed the centrality of this area for the Nazis' blood and soil designs in a conference paper: "The natural area for settlement by the German people is the territory to the east of the Reich's boundaries up to the Urals, bordered in the south by the Caucasus, Caspian Sea, Black Sea, and the watershed which divides the Mediterranean basin from the Baltic and the North Sea. We will settle this space, according to the law that a superior people always has the right to conquer and to own the land of an inferior people."²¹ Here too, the Black Sea's relevance was clear.

Regarding Romania, Stalin's plans were equally unambiguous. Beginning with the Crimean War, the Romanovs laid historic claim to Bessarabia, which provided the Russian imperial navy with a natural depth of defense for the port of Odesa. In many ways, Romania constituted the backbone of Russian security in the Black Sea. In Stalin's mind, the annexation of this area would also help the Red Army extend its influence into the Balkans with the ultimate goal of acquiring naval bases on the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. For both Nazi and Soviet chiefs of staff, Romania and Turkey were two of a series of critical moves to control the Black Sea.

Mindful of the situation, the Third Reich attempted to cultivate a historic fear of Russia in Romania for the next stage of war. Nazi propaganda means and purposes were ubiquitous and not exclusive to Romania.²² Diplomats of the Third Reich did their best to amplify fears of the Soviet threat among Turkish political elites as well. When the Red Army marched into Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina in late June

18 Moorhouse, *The Devils' Alliance*, 188.

19 Moorhouse, 268.

20 Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 198.

21 Andrea D'Onofrio, "Rassenzucht und Lebensraum: Zwei Grundlagen im Blut- und Boden-Gedanken von Richard Walther Darre," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 49 (2001): 141–57.

22 Louis de Jong's *Die deutsche fünfte Kolonne im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1959) and Peter Longerich's more recent *Goebbels: Biographie* (Munich: Siedler, 2010) are useful sources for probing Nazi propaganda efforts in general.

1940, Ernst von Weizsäcker of the Nazi Foreign Office asked for a meeting with the Turkish ambassador in Berlin. Weizsäcker insinuated to the Turkish ambassador that Stalin might soon make a motion to revise the Straits regime if an agreement was not reached. Nazi Germany's anti-Soviet propaganda efforts also created, however, deep reserve in Turkey toward Berlin.

For Hitler, Turkey was necessary as a buffer zone against the Allies, mainly because Romanian oil destined for Nazi Germany was shipped via the Straits to Italian ports. But the Anglo-French coalition had equally vital reasons to cajole the Ankara government into a friendly neutrality. First and foremost, Turkey's active participation was needed to impede the Black Sea trading routes that the Soviets had been using to provide the Nazis with oil, food, and other supplies. Four months before the Nazi invasion of Paris, the French Ambassador in Ankara, René Massigli, was entertaining such scenarios in a detailed report in which he outlined how a naval blockade of Moscow's Black Sea trading routes was possible. In despair, the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier welcomed Massigli's plan to ease France's troubles in the Western theater through a twofold campaign in the East: against the Nazis on the Black Sea and against the Soviet Union in the Caucasus.²³

After France succumbed to Hitler's pressure in June 1940, Turkey began hedging its bets for two separate wars involving Nazi Germany, conducted independently by Britain and the USSR. On the eve of the impending Nazi-Soviet War, fear of the Soviet Union was so strong that Ankara hoped for a Nazi victory over the Soviet Union, provided that Britain was then able to check the Third Reich, which would soon encircle Turkey via Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. Stalin, on the other hand, was mostly concerned about the country's southern flank, which stretched from the Caucasus to the Black Sea, but now that France had collapsed, his anxiety about Nazi designs in the Black Sea became more pronounced. In fact, Turkish records demonstrate that as early as July 1940, the Ankara government already anticipated an aggressive Soviet reaction that might target the Bosphorus and Dardanelles in order to secure their southern flank.²⁴

In the fall of 1940, on the eve of the Greco-Italian War, it became more important to weld the Balkan states into the fabric of the dam against the Axis to prevent the war from spreading to the Black Sea. But there were serious obstacles which eventually proved to be insurmountable. The main problem was that both Turkey and Romania distrusted Bulgaria, and neither one of them seemed inclined to sacrifice much to improve the situation. Without Bulgaria, both the Balkan and the Black Sea formations were insecure but its inclusion could be brought about only by concessions. Gafencu, the Romanian foreign minister, although opposed to any immediate concessions to Bulgaria, did not seem entirely averse to some ultimate accommodation.²⁵ By the time Italy

²³ Onur İsci, "The Massigli Affair and its Context: Turkish Foreign Policy after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55, no. 2 (April 2020): 271–96.

²⁴ TDA, TSID 11584331 (Ambassador Hüsrev Gerede to Ankara, July 18, 1940).

²⁵ BCA, 30.10.0.0/200.370.3 (Conversation with Romanian Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu, June 8, 1939).

entered the war, Turkey was considering a solution whereby Bulgaria could be brought at once into the Balkan Entente, in return for an undertaking that a settlement of the Dobruja problem would be made when hostilities were over. Dobruja had been a source of territorial contestation between Romania and Bulgaria since World War I, and the Bulgarian Prime Minister Georgi Kioseivanov was known to make public claims to the region, but it was at least essential that Romania kept the door open to construct a cordon sanitaire between the Balkans and the Black Sea.

Before the end of 1940, however, all hopes for Balkan solidarity had foundered. The situation was exacerbated by disasters suffered by the Allies. The Netherlands, Belgium, and France had been overrun within six weeks of the start of May 1940. The Kioseivanov government in Bulgaria was succeeded by the weak-kneed Bogdan Filov cabinet. Following King Boris's orders, Filov would drive Bulgaria into the war on the side of the Nazis in March 1941. On the Turkish side, while there was clear evidence of a determination not to allow themselves to be hurried into hostilities before they had decided for themselves that the moment had arrived, there had never been any doubt that they would defend themselves if their vital interests were attacked. As the Balkan turmoil unfolded towards the end of 1940, Turkey gave verbal assurances that this determination would cover an attack by any power on Turkey itself, an attack by Bulgaria on Greece, or an invasion of Bulgaria by Nazi Germany (which Turkey would regard as aimed equally at herself and Greece), or a Nazi attack on Greece through a non-resistant Bulgaria.²⁶

Ultimately, however, the long-drawn-out efforts to unite the Black Sea littoral powers in common defense ended. Perhaps Romania was the most to blame, but Bulgaria could also be regarded as culpable. The treachery of King Boris placed Bulgaria under the Nazis' heel. Athens briefly triumphed over Rome but its victory was brought to naught by Hitler's assistance to Mussolini. Regardless of historians' prosecutorial rhetoric on the subject, the prospects for a collective security system on the Black Sea via the three Balkan powers crumbled to dust. As far as Turkey's fate was concerned, policy-makers in Ankara seemed unwilling to provide the necessary assurances to their neighbors in the Black Sea. Yet, as the British ambassador correctly defined, it was the fiscal situation in the country, more than anything, along with exhausted local remedies and overdue arms deliveries, that deterred the Turks from implementing their treaty obligations in the Balkans and protecting the Black Sea from the spreading war.

Hitler was acutely aware of Turkey's critical position and in March 1941, during a meeting with the Turkish ambassador in Berlin, he referred to the Soviet bases in passing as he considered bringing Turkey to a more benevolent neutrality towards Berlin. Hitler insinuated that back in November 1940 Molotov had spoken about the granting of bases, which no doubt fed Turkey's apprehension. The context of that conversation between Hitler and the Turkish ambassador was mostly about the closure of the Black

26 BCA, 30.18.1.2/96.72.3 (Turkish Ambassador in Sofia to the Foreign Ministry, December 13, 1940).

Sea to non-Black Sea powers, but the Nazis played on Turks' historic fear of Russia.²⁷ Hitler was not lying either. On the eve of the Molotov-Hitler meeting in Berlin in November 1940, Molotov had handed the Nazi ambassador in Moscow a draft protocol regarding Soviet conditions for acceptance of the Four Power Pact, which included the establishment of a base for land and naval forces of the USSR within the range of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Hitler was informed that just a few days before his meeting with the Turkish ambassador, the Soviet Union had delivered a note to Turkey which stated that if the Turks were attacked, they could rely on the full neutrality and benevolence of Moscow in the Black Sea.²⁸ Hence, by referring to Molotov's November 1940 request in passing, Hitler sought to ridicule the Soviet Union's volte-face after the failed Nazi-Soviet talks in Berlin, in which Stalin decided to improve the Straits regime in direct negotiations with Turkey and not behind her back.²⁹ The Turkish government suspected that by divulging Molotov's request a fortnight before the *Wehrmacht* marched into Greece with Bulgaria on its heels in April 1941, Hitler might be offering an ambiguous reassurance to Turkey that the Straits would be off Nazi limits.

When Ribbentrop ordered the Nazi Ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich-Werner Graf von der Schulenburg, to communicate the Third Reich's war declaration to Molotov, he counted six reasons, one of which pertained to an earlier Soviet proposal to establish military bases on the Straits for Stalin's acceptance of the Four Power Pact.³⁰ Nazi Germany also pointed to the centrality of the Romanian and Bulgarian problems and the Soviet invasion of Northern Bukovina as grounds for Nazi Germany's war declaration. The Nazi declaration of war against the Soviet Union thus proclaimed that competition for influence in the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits was a crucial part of the Nazi-Soviet hostility.

3 The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941–45

The Eastern Front encompassed a large area stretching out from the Baltic to the Black Sea and saw some of the deadliest battles in human history. When Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, the German Army High Command (OKH) had 151 divisions in the east, with 3.8 million personnel, over 3,300 tanks, 7,200 artillery

27 TDA, TSID 11848208 (Gerede to Saracoglu, March 17, 1941).

28 No. 177, "Memorandum by an Official of the Foreign Minister's Secretariat," March 18, 1941, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, Series D, vol. 12, *The War Years, February 1–June 22, 1941* (Washington: US Government Printing Press, 1962), 310.

29 Turkish records confirm Gorodetsky's assessment about changing motives behind the Stalin's attempt to secure an agreement with Turkey after Molotov's failed negotiations with Hitler in Berlin in November 1940. See Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 76.

30 No. 659, "The Foreign Minister to the Embassy in the Soviet Union," June 21, 1941, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, Series D, 12:1063.

pieces, and 2,770 aircrafts.³¹ Supported by the Romanian Black Sea fleet, Hitler deployed fourteen panzer and ten motorized *Wehrmacht* divisions against the Soviet Union. Black Sea naval campaigns officially began with the Raid on Constanța, when the Soviet fleet unsuccessfully besieged the Romanian port on June 26, 1941. Two Soviet destroyers were ordered to bombard Constanța but later were engaged by Axis coastal artillery. After the failed Soviet attack, the German Army crushed Soviet border defenses, advancing quickly and decisively, and by the first week of July 1941, three main Soviet armies (the 3rd, 4th, and 10th) had been encircled.

The Raid on Constanța became the first and only encounter during World War II between major warships in the Black Sea, where operations turned into a succession of offensives and counter-offensives involving Nazi and Soviet submarines. Once the German Army Groups North and Center crossed the Daugava and Dniipro rivers, they advanced in two directions—the former swept across the Baltic along the Leningrad axis and the latter toward Smolensk along the Moscow axis. It was the German Army Group South that drove inexorably toward Kyiv, while the Romanian forces invaded Moldavia and threatened the Soviet Black Sea port in Odesa. Romania played a crucial role in early Nazi operations around the Black Sea but the decisive blow came from Army Group South, which moved from the Baltic Sea southward to the Black Sea with four panzer groups.³²

Even before the war, Stalin ordered the formation of a colossal defense line from Korzhenits to the mouth of the Danube at Kiliia (Romanian: Chilia Nouă) and along the Black Sea shores down to the Turkish Straits.³³ His plan was to use the Soviet navy in the Black Sea to intercept an amphibious landing in the direction of Odesa and to strengthen Soviet forces in Crimea with reinforcements from the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Clearly, this was a bigger undertaking than what the Soviets could accomplish alone, and Stalin knew that he had no allies left in the Black Sea. The crux of Moscow's defensive strategy in this region was a legacy of the Russian tsars and based on the notion of a buffer zone that would give the Red Army unhindered access to the Black Sea.³⁴

Drawing on historical lessons dating back to the Crimean War, Stalin was afraid that either Great Britain or Nazi Germany could cajole neutral Turkey into accepting the lesser of two evils and serving as a springboard for an attack against the Soviet Union. This is why he sought but failed to achieve supremacy in the Black Sea littoral, including the mouth of the Danube, as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.³⁵ The Red Army also provided military training to Bulgarian communists living in exile in the Soviet Union and brought them to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast in two submarines in the

31 David M. Glantz, *Barbarossa: Hitler's Invasion of Russia* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), 9.

32 For a comprehensive survey, see Lawrence Paterson, *Steel and Ice: The U-boat Battle in the Arctic and Black Sea 1941–45* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016).

33 Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 238.

34 Gorodetsky, 317.

35 Gorodetsky, 318.

summer of 1941 so that they could then carry out attacks. Others were dropped off as parachutists. Almost all of the total of fifty-eight people were shot on arrival or executed later.³⁶

Initially the German plan was to encircle Soviet forces in southern Ukraine, while the Romanian 3rd and 4th Armies would clear the Black Sea coast and capture Odesa. Only a fortnight after Barbarossa, Hitler was entertaining scenarios of capturing Moscow and Leningrad by the late fall. As successful as the German *blitzkrieg* tactics were, however, it soon became clear that the Soviet Union would not succumb to the *Wehrmacht's* advance unless all Red Army forces west of the Dnipro were destroyed and all Soviet coastal armies in the Black Sea were swept.³⁷ As the war dragged on, Hitler ordered the German 11th Army to begin an invasion of Crimea in the October.³⁸ Although the *Stavka* evacuated the Odesa garrison to reinforce the defense of Sevastopol and successfully moved the Black Sea fleet from harm's way, on November 6, a Romanian submarine torpedoed and sank the Soviet cargo ship *Uralets* a few miles off the coast of Yalta and encircled the Soviet fleet.³⁹

Throughout 1942, the Black Sea theater almost exclusively involved submarine warfare and was marked by the Siege of Sevastopol. Soviet and Romanian navies clashed intermittently, sinking thousands of tons of goods and ammunition. Suspecting that neutral Turkey was allowing Axis submarines through the Straits to assist the Romanian navy, the Soviet fleet began systematic attacks near the Bosphorus. In the late February, a Soviet submarine (*ShCh-213*) attacked a Turkish steamer (*Çankaya*) in the vicinity of Istanbul's Black Sea coast. When the torpedo missed the *Çankaya*, the submarine surfaced and used its onboard canon to sink it. While this gave additional time for the Turkish sailors to evacuate the ship's passengers into lifeboats and escape, the Turkish government never felt more insecure than it did during the early hours of February 24.⁴⁰ Just when the Turkish authorities began working on a diplomatic note to be delivered to the Soviet ambassador, less than ten hours after the *Çankaya* incident, the Soviet submarine *ShCh-213* torpedoed a second vessel north of the Bosphorus—the *SS Struma*.⁴¹ *Struma* left behind only one survivor, David Stoliar, making it one of the largest civilian naval disasters of World War II.⁴²

Anti-Semitism in Turkey and Ankara's ambivalence towards its own Jewish citizens is a subject that falls outside the scope of this article. But as the *SS Struma* incident demonstrates, the Ankara government was directly or indirectly involved in determining the fates of many Jews who were trying to escape the Holocaust. Some scholars

36 See "Soviet Contributions: The Arrival of the Parachutists," in *Bulgarian Communism: The Road to Power, 1934–1944*, ed. Nissan Oren (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 174–80.

37 Glantz, *Barbarossa*, 127.

38 Glantz, 135.

39 Richard Compton-Hall, *Submarines at War 1939–1945* (Berkshire: Periscope, 2004), 127.

40 Isci, *Turkey and the Soviet Union During World War II*, 112–16.

41 BCA, 30.10.0.0/171.185.21 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Prime Ministry, February 24, 1942).

42 BCA, 30.10.0.0/124.881.6 (*SS Struma*, February 24, 1942).

have emphasized moments when Turkish diplomats facilitated Jews' escape from Nazi-occupied territories, while others have highlighted episodes when the Turkish government was decidedly less than helpful.⁴³ Beyond competing narratives on Turkey's policy towards Jews in Nazi-occupied territories and anti-Semitism in the country, one thing is clear: The menacing naval incidents of February 24, 1942 left Soviet-Turkish relations irreparably damaged.

The sinking of the *Çankaya* and the *Struma* was not an isolated incident and points to Stalin's broader strategy of containing the naval advances of Nazi Germany in the Black Sea. As the *Wehrmacht* got bogged down in a protracted siege of Sevastopol, Hitler sought to probe the Soviet defense line from the Black Sea. This was the first time Stalin experimented with a large-scale operation, involving millions of soldiers, and despite General Erich von Manstein's skillful counter-offensives, the Red Army was able to hold its ground until mid-1942.⁴⁴ But, with a new round of heavy Nazi bombardment in the June, Sevastopol was reduced to rubble and surrendered in the July. Through the fall's fog and filthy air, Stalin repeatedly overplayed his hand by counting on his numeric superiority and pushing the Red Army beyond its realistic capabilities.⁴⁵ As the Battle of Stalingrad loomed, Stalin initiated Operation Saturn, which essentially aimed to recapture Rostov by cutting off the approaching Nazi reinforcements from the Caucasus. Many German units were able to hit back from a narrow corridor along the Black Sea coast.⁴⁶

The Battle of Stalingrad was heavy with symbolism for any rank-and-file Soviet soldier. To accomplish Vasili Chuikov's pyrrhic victory alone, more than half a million Soviet soldiers were killed in action in January 1943. But with Stalingrad, the tide turned to Stalin's favor decisively. All the way from the Baltic to the Black Sea shores, the German army lost nearly a million soldiers that year.⁴⁷ The 6th Army was annihilated and in freezing conditions the *Wehrmacht* was pushed out from the Dnipro bend. Army Group South was wedged between Ternopol (Ukrainian: Ternopil) and the Black Sea without any possible support from the *Luftwaffe*, which too was beaten. After the Battle of Kursk in July–August 1943, the Soviet Army broke the stalemate and was ready to

⁴³ For Turkey's ambivalent policies regarding Jewish refugees, see Corry Guttstadt, *Turkey, the Jews and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For debates on anti-Semitism with German contacts, see Berna Pekesen, *Nationalismus, Türkisierung und das Ende der jüdischen Gemeinden in Thrakien, 1918–1942* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012). On Jewish academic emigration to Turkey, see Philipp Schwartz and Helge Peukert, *Notgemeinschaft: Zur Emigration deutscher Wissenschaftler nach 1933 in die Türkei* (Marburg: Metropolis Verlag, 1995). On Turkey's facilitation of some Jews' escape, see Stanford Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (New York: NYU Press, 1991).

⁴⁴ Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (London: Penguin, 1997), 151.

⁴⁵ Overy, 173.

⁴⁶ Overy, 174.

⁴⁷ Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, 660.

thrust into Romania. In the fall, Stalin took back Smolensk and was about to drive the *Wehrmacht* out of Ukraine and Belarus.⁴⁸

Throughout the first half of 1944, despite heavy German losses, submarine warfare in the Black Sea continued between German U-boats (supported by Romanian warships and submarines) and the Soviet navy. What tipped the balance was King Michael's coup in August 1944, when the Romanian government joined the Allies, effectively leaving the German navy to its own fate. Meanwhile, in the Ukrainian front, the Odesa-born Rodion Malinovskii launched a new offensive along the Black Sea coast onwards to the Danube.⁴⁹ Finally, in the spring of 1944, the Red Army encircled all remaining Nazi forces and recaptured Crimea in the April. When World War II came to an end in the Black Sea, tens of millions lay dead on the Eastern Front.

4 The Sovietization of the Black Sea, 1945–91

Built from white Inkerman granite in 1911 from Nikolai Krasnov's blueprints, Livadia Palace in Yalta is situated 150 feet above the Crimean coastline, and, facing the Turkish Castle of Sinop across the Black Sea, it glows with a daunting aura. In February 1945, Livadia Palace housed its most important guests since the departure of the Romanovs. The results of the Yalta Conference would determine much of the post-war order in the Black Sea—and the Turks, who were kept out of the loop, feared that secret protocols regarding the Straits might also be signed in those rooms. The Soviet Union, having emerged triumphant from a life and death struggle against Nazi Germany, demanded that the existing Straits convention was detrimental to Moscow's Black Sea security. Stalin alleged that Turkey, under the veneer of its wartime neutrality, had been a silent ally of Berlin and allowed passage of Axis warships into the Black Sea. Soviet demands to revise the Montreux Convention and the subsequent war of nerves between Ankara and Moscow between 1945 and 1947 ultimately pushed the former into NATO in 1952.⁵⁰ After the war, the Soviet Union also acquired two of the three neighboring littoral

48 Overy, *Russia's War*, 222.

49 David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 1995), 179–95.

50 Several important works have shaped our understanding of İnönü's predicament during this period. For the lasting legacy of Turkey's postwar transformation, see Nicholas Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey: Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). For the evolution of US–Turkish relations, see also Barın Kayaoğlu, "Strategic Imperatives, Democratic Rhetoric: The United States and Turkey, 1945–52," *Cold War History* 9, no. 3 (August 2009): 321–45. For Turkey's transition to multi-party democracy, see John VanderLippe, *The Politics of Turkish Democracy: İsmet İnönü and the Formation of the Multi-Party System, 1938–1950* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005). On the longer chronology in which this period constitutes a major rupture, see Samuel J. Hirst and Onur İsci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development," *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 5 (November 2020): 834–59.

states as satellites—Romania and Bulgaria—leaving Turkey as the only Black Sea power that remained outside the Eastern Bloc.

Years later, in a series of interviews with the writer Feliks Chuev, Molotov ruefully admitted that coercing Turkey in 1945 was a big mistake. When asked about the Turkish Straits, Molotov became animated and, in a stutter, said that “it was an untimely and unfeasible undertaking,” but that “he had to do what he was instructed to do.” Extricating himself from the blunder, Molotov claimed that Stalin was “a wonderful politician” but that he became “arrogant” in his last years and brushed off Molotov’s counsel about not intimidating Turkey.⁵¹ Only two months after Stalin’s death in 1953, the new Soviet government repudiated their earlier demands on the Straits. By that point, however, the Ankara government had already sworn enthusiastic fealty to the Soviet Union and was proclaimed as NATO’s anchor in the Black Sea to shield Europe from communist subversion.

From 1945 all the way through the turbulent 1960s, Turkey was closer to the Transatlantic community than at any other point in its history. Indeed, Turkey’s unqualified allegiance to the US-led containment in the 1950s was so strong that one Soviet diplomat argued that the country was acting “more royalist than the king.”⁵² Beginning in the late 50s, however, Turkey’s relations with the West began to deteriorate, partly because conditions on European and US economic assistance to Turkey’s development plans tightened, but also because of geopolitical differences over Cyprus and Syria. After the Syrian Crisis of 1957, when Turkey aggressively pushed against Soviet influence in Damascus and sought to drag NATO into an unwarranted conflict, Ankara’s leadership felt betrayed and abandoned by its allies. This was around the time when Turkey and the Soviet Union began to explore ways to push economic exchange beyond their carefully managed bilateral trade. As the Cyprus conflict deepened the wedge between Ankara and Washington, DC, economic cooperation defined Soviet-Turkish interstate relations.

Throughout the 1960s, successive governments in Ankara—left and right—described their nation’s “underdevelopment” as one of the most pressing problems of the day, and Soviet economists added Turkey to their lists of “developing countries.”⁵³ Ultimately, Ankara and Moscow were united again by a vision of a world composed of haves and have-nots. Although Turkey remained a member of NATO, tension with the West created parallels between Ankara’s foreign policy and the policies of non-aligned countries. Turkey’s politics again became explicitly statist and Soviet engineers crossed the Black Sea to build factories in a number of Anatolian towns. As it had done thirty years earlier, Turkey paid off Soviet investments and machinery in figs and raisins.

51 Feliks Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow: Terra, 1991), 199–203.

52 Turkish Prime Ministerial Archives (BCA) 30.01.0/37.226.7 (Soviet Chargé d’affaires Voronin on Latest Developments in Cyprus, 1955 – day and month unspecified).

53 Aleksei A. Rodionov, *Turtsiia: perekrestok sudeb. Vospominaniia posla* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2006); V. Smirnov, “Na osnove vzaimnoi vygody, v interesakh ukrepleniia ekonomicheskoi nezavisimosti razvivaiushchikhsia stran,” *Vneshniaia torgovlia* 12 (1972): 24–29.

Cold War construction projects followed the model that isolated exchange from the global market economy and from the two states' divergent geopolitical interests.

This is not to suggest that geopolitical tensions suddenly vanished. Even at the peak of Soviet—Turkish cooperation in the 1960s, Turkey's diplomats in Moscow still complained that in 1945 their position would not have changed had it not been for “the demands of Molotov, who pushed (them) into the Americans' arms.”⁵⁴ Turkey was still a NATO ally, but, beginning in the 1960s, Ankara and Moscow returned to an earlier model of managing their geopolitical conflicts for the sake of economic cooperation. Soviet observers rightly stressed the growing discontent in Turkey with the country's financial and military dependence on the US and noted that, from the eyes of the common people in small Black Sea towns, the existence of US bases and NATO offices came to be seen as infringements upon Turkish sovereignty.⁵⁵ Capitalizing on the growing US-Turkey rift, Moscow explored possibilities for developing bilateral touristic exchange. Given the favorable opportunities for tourism in the Black Sea region, the Soviet Union looked into the creation of a joint Soviet-Turkish company that would organize Black Sea tours. The crux of this plan was a proposal that avoided the need for foreign exchange, which facilitated the transit of tourists from other countries across Soviet and Turkish territory.⁵⁶

Moscow's desire to transform the Black Sea region into a zone of economic and touristic cooperation among littoral states was not limited to Turkey. Without question, Moscow's main partners in this new scheme were Bulgaria and Romania. In May 1962, for instance, when Nikita Khrushchev was in Bulgaria for a comprehensive tour of seaside resorts and industrial plants, the Soviet leader proclaimed that the Black Sea would soon become a shared socialist space in which Bulgaria would be the true pearl with its warm water and sunny shores. Khrushchev was truly impressed by what he called “our Black Sea coast” and framed its development as a project of Sovietization.⁵⁷ Khrushchev recalled an earlier tour of Bulgaria back in 1955, when he had laid the groundwork for an international health resort which would be the centerpiece of a shared, Sovietized space under the Kremlin's aegis.

Although the sort of Sovietized space in Khrushchev's mind never came into being, Moscow had mixed successes in facilitating exchange among littorals across the Black Sea. With normalization of Soviet-Turkish relations, regional trade improved noticeably throughout the mid-1970s, and Turkey's deteriorating relations with the West over Cyprus played a major role in the commensurate diversification of economic exchange. While previously Ankara and Moscow had exclusively traded heavy machinery in return for agricultural products within a net-balance framework, by the mid-1970s

54 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 5, op. 50, d. 508, l. 59–75, here 1.63.

55 RGANI f. 5, op. 59, d. 348, ll. 1–22.

56 RGANI f. 5, op. 59, d. 348, ll. 1–22.

57 Johanna Conterio, “Our Black Sea Coast: The Sovietization of the Black Sea Littoral under Khrushchev and the Problem of Overdevelopment,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 327–61.

both parties were probing possibilities to further improve relations through import substitution industrialization. Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, for instance, travelled to Moscow in 1978 and asked for more Siberian oil and Soviet-built metro lines for Ankara and Istanbul.⁵⁸ The Soviets agreed in principle and offered to buy Turkish pharmaceuticals and textiles. But the US arms embargo on Turkey ended later that year and many of these projects had to be shelved. Nevertheless, even after Turkey reopened the US base on the Black Sea (Sinop) and stationed US early warning systems in 1979, Ankara and Moscow worked on the first blueprints of oil and gas pipelines that would soon be laid in the Black Sea.

In hindsight, the history of the Black Sea since World War II has more episodes of cooperation than conflict. The latter half of the past century was more idle than its first half, which had been defined by an exciting interwar convergence in economic, political, and cultural terms before the violence and desolation of 1939–45. Except for the 1960 U2 Crisis or several other plane hijackings from the Eastern Bloc to NATO-allied Turkey in the 1970s, the Black Sea littoral states were mostly engaged in trade.⁵⁹ Certainly, there were moments of geopolitical tension even amongst Eastern Bloc littorals. During the Prague Spring, for instance, the Soviet Union dispatched mini-submarines to Bulgaria as well as a tank ferry from Ilichivsk (today: Chornomorsk) to Varna when Romania refused to grant transit permission for the Bulgarian army during the Soviet invasion of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968. In that sense, Khrushchev was quixotic when he argued for improvement of economic ties for the sake of peace and said “let the Black Sea unite us, not divide us.”⁶⁰ Moscow’s imagining of the Black Sea mainly as a geopolitical space prevented it from being truly united.

⁵⁸ Rodionov, *Turtsiia*, 155.

⁵⁹ For an exciting article on plane hijackings during the Cold War, see Eric R. Scott, “The Hijacking of Aeroflot Flight 244: States and Statelessness in the Late Cold War,” *Past and Present* 243 (May 2019): 213–45.

⁶⁰ Nikita S. Khrushchev, “Kemal Atatürk i sovetsko-turetskie otnosheniia,” *Izvestiia*, November 13, 1963; and “Pust chernoe more ne raziediniaet, a soediniaet nas,” *Izvestiia*, May 29, 1963.