

# *Turkish Diplomatic Initiatives and Refugee Evacuation from Spain (1936-1937)*

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## **ABSTRACT**

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In the midst of the Spanish Civil War, diplomatic missions based in Madrid played a significant role in providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict. One of the prominent countries that accepted asylum seekers, who were predominantly individuals associated with right-wing political movements and perceived by Republican authorities as potential threats to the government, was Türkiye. As the intensity of the conflict in Madrid increased, the relocation of these asylum seekers to Türkiye became a pressing issue, leading to intensive diplomatic exchanges between Turkish and Spanish authorities. This study focuses on the evacuation of Spanish nationalists who sought refuge at the Turkish Embassy in Madrid due to wartime conditions. Remaining neutral throughout the Spanish Civil War, Türkiye provided support to those seeking protection. Detailed plans were developed for the transfer of Spanish nationals sheltered at the Turkish Embassy in Madrid to Türkiye, particularly under the leadership of Ambassador Tevfik Kâmil Koperler. Negotiations between Turkish and Spanish officials primarily focused on

determining the criteria for individuals to be granted entry into Türkiye. Utilizing comprehensive diplomatic archives from both the Republic of Türkiye and the Kingdom of Spain, the study aims to shed light on an underexplored aspect of the Spanish Civil War and Turkish foreign policy history by analyzing the role and diplomatic maneuvers of the embassy during this process. In addition to the Spanish archives which were previously used to some extent in earlier studies regarding the situation of the Turkish embassy in Madrid during the Civil War, unused Turkish diplomatic documents are also included in the research, aiming to provide a fresh perspective on the topic and lay the groundwork for future academic studies in this field.

**Keywords:** Turkish foreign policy; Spanish Civil War; Turkish diplomatic archives; neutrality; Türkiye-Spain relations; Turkish Embassy in Madrid

## ÖZ

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İspanya İç Savaşı sırasında Madrid'de bulunan diplomatik misyonlar, çatışmalardan etkilenenlere insani yardım sağlanmasında önemli bir rol üstlenmiştir. Bu süreçte, ağırlıklı çoğunluğu sağ kanat siyasi hareketlerle ilişkili kişilerden oluşan ve Cumhuriyetçi yetkililer tarafından hükûmete karşı potansiyel tehdit olarak görülen sığınmacıları kabul eden ülkeler arasında öne çıkanlardan biri de Türkiye olmuştur. Madrid'de çatışmaların şiddetlenmesiyle birlikte sığınmacıların Türkiye'ye taşınması gündeme gelmiş, bu durum Türk ve İspanyol makamları arasında yoğun bir diplomasi trafiğinin ortaya çıkmasını beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu çalışma, savaş koşulları nedeniyle Türkiye'nin Madrid Büyükelçiliği'ne sığınan İspanyol milliyetçilerinin tahliyesine odaklanmaktadır. İspanya İç Savaşı süresince tarafsız kalan Türkiye, korunma talebinde bulunanlara destek sağlamış; Madrid'deki Türk Büyükelçiliği'nde bulunan İspanyol vatandaşlarının Türkiye'ye nakli için, özellikle Büyükelçi Tevfik Kâmil Koperler'in öncülüğünde ayrıntılı planlamalar yapılmıştır. Türk ve İspanyol yetkilileri arasındaki müzakerelerde, büyük ölçüde, Türkiye'ye kabul edilecek kişilere dair ölçütlerin belirlenmesi üzerinde durulmuştur. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ve İspanya Krallığı'na ait diplomatik arşivlerden kapsamlı bir şekilde faydalanan araştırma, Türk Büyükelçiliği'nin bu süreçteki rolünü ve diplomatik hamlelerini inceleyerek, İspanya İç Savaşı ve Türk dış politikası tarihinin daha önce pek ele alınmamış bir boyutuna ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. İç Savaş sırasında Madrid'deki Türk elçiliğinin durumuna ilişkin önceki çalışmalarda belli ölçülerde yararlanılmış olan İspanyol arşivlerine ait belgelerle birlikte, şimdiye kadar kullanılmamış Türk diplomatik belgelerinin de araştırmaya dâhil edilmesi suretiyle, konuya yeni bir bakış açısı kazandırılmasının yanı sıra bu alanda yapılacak yeni akademik çalışmalara zemin

hazırlanması da hedefler arasındadır.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Türk dış politikası, İspanya İç Savaşı, Türk diplomatik arşivleri, tarafsızlık, Türkiye-İspanya ilişkileri, Madrid'deki Türk Büyükelçiliği

## Introduction

During the Spanish Civil War, which commenced in 1936 and culminated in the triumph of the Francoist forces in 1939, tens of thousands were compelled to either relocate within the country or seek refuge abroad. This period was marked by instances of significant population movements. Notably, in the initial stages of the conflict, following the Nationalist assault on San Sebastián and Irún, approximately 15,000 individuals were compelled to evacuate the Basque region. Similarly, the capture of Santander and Asturias by Franco's troops in the summer of 1937 prompted a considerable exodus, with an estimated 160,000 individuals fleeing, predominantly to France. Moreover, in 1937, the Spanish Republic coordinated the evacuation of 30,000 children, marking another significant event of displacement. These juveniles sought sanctuary in various countries, including the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and Mexico, underscoring the international scope of the humanitarian crisis triggered by the war.<sup>1</sup>

Amid the Civil War, individuals aligned with Nationalist factions were also compelled to abandon their homes, migrating from Republican-held territories to areas under Nationalist control. Furthermore, diplomatic missions emerged as crucial sanctuaries for those supporting Franco's forces. Located in Madrid, which remained predominantly under Republican sovereignty for an extended duration of the conflict, these diplomatic entities played a pivotal role in delivering humanitarian assistance to those seeking refuge from the war's devastations. As hostilities escalated, the Republican administration intensified its scrutiny and repression of individuals suspected of endorsing or sympathizing with the Nationalist uprising, thereby amplifying the demand for protection. Consequently, many embassies within Madrid were obliged not only to open their doors but also to expand their facilities to accommodate the influx of refugees. The Republican government's acquiescence to the establishment of annexes for accommodating refugees represented a novel departure from existing international norms and was an unparalleled event in

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<sup>1</sup> Rosy Rickett, *Refugees of the Spanish Civil War and those they left behind: personal testimonies of departure, separation and return since 1936*, University of Manchester, Doctoral thesis, 2014, pp. 53-54.

the annals of diplomatic history.<sup>2</sup> During this period, nations such as Chile, Norway, and Argentina took the lead in orchestrating a concerted diplomatic initiative aimed at formulating a unified strategy for the protection and eventual relocation of Spanish nationals who had sought sanctuary within their diplomatic premises. While the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom did not formally endorse this policy, they nonetheless provided clandestine shelter to refugees within their embassies. The Soviet Union, for its part, not only refused asylum because of its support for the Republican government during the Civil War, but also voiced its objections to the practices of other embassies in Madrid that opened their doors to those fleeing persecution.<sup>3</sup>

Türkiye, maintaining a stance of neutrality throughout the Civil War, was among the nations that welcomed refugees during this turbulent period. Commencing in the initial weeks of the conflict, the Turkish embassy began to offer sanctuary to refugees. As the peril in Madrid escalated over time, a strategic plan was devised to relocate these individuals to Türkiye. This study scrutinizes the dynamics preceding and following the relocation of Spanish nationalist refugees from the Turkish embassy to outside Spain on the ship *Karadeniz* (Black Sea). It is predominantly based on documents sourced from the Turkish Diplomatic Archive of the Foreign Ministry<sup>4</sup> and materials from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs housed in the “Archivo General de la Administración”. Additionally, a number of documents from the Republican Archive under the Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives have also been incorporated into this study as archival sources. Within the purview of this research, an examination of extant literature on the topic indicates that the matter of refugees seeking sanctuary in the Turkish embassy in Madrid during the Civil War has received scant attention. The bibliography on the subject includes the book by Javier Rubio entitled “Asilos y canjes durante la guerra civil española”;<sup>5</sup> Carmen Uriarte’s book *Las Relaciones Hispano-*

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<sup>2</sup> Antonio Manuel Moral Roncal, “Asaltos y cierres de Legaciones extranjeras. Un grave asunto diplomático en el Madrid de la guerra civil”, *Madrid: revista de arte, geografía e historia*, No 4, 2001, pp. 221-222.

<sup>3</sup> Moral Roncal, *ibid*, p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> The document system within the Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives includes four categories: the Ottoman Archive, the Republican Archive, the Turkish Diplomatic Archive and the Military History Archive. Most of the sources used in this study come from the Turkish Diplomatic Archive, with additional material obtained from the Republican Archive.

<sup>5</sup> Javier Rubio, *Asilos y canjes durante la guerra civil española: Aspectos humanitarios de una contienda fratricida*, Editorial Planeta, Barcelona, 1979.

*Turcas durante la Guerra Civil Española 1936-1939*,<sup>6</sup> derived from her doctoral thesis; the article by Antonio Manuel Moral Roncal "Asaltos y cierres de Legaciones extranjeras";<sup>7</sup> as well as the books by the same researcher *Diplomacia, humanitarismo y espionaje en la Guerra Civil española*<sup>8</sup> and *Estudios sobre asilo diplomático en la Guerra Civil española*.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Javier Cervera Gil's doctoral thesis titled "Violencia política y acción clandestina: la retaguardia de Madrid en Guerra (1936-1939)";<sup>10</sup> Gültekin Kâmil Birlik's article "İspanya İç Savaşında (1936-1939) Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası";<sup>11</sup> Sinan Kuneralp's article "İspanya İç Savaşı ve Türkiye";<sup>12</sup> Berksan Gülsoy's article "İspanya İç Savaşında Türkiye'nin Tavrı ve Savaşta Yer Alan Türk Vatandaşları";<sup>13</sup> and Seçil Aladağ's master's thesis entitled "İspanya İç Savaşı ve Türkiye"<sup>14</sup> are included within the corpus. In addition to the aforementioned, a notable recent study conducted by Pablo de Miguel Iglesias and Mehmet Necati Kutlu delves directly into the subject matter. Their article titled "Turquía y el asilo diplomático durante la Guerra Civil española"<sup>15</sup> contributes to shedding light on this underexplored topic by examining the developments at the Turkish Embassy in Madrid during the Civil War. While all of these studies provide critical insights into the subject, they do not include documents from the

<sup>6</sup> Carmen Uriarte, *Las Relaciones Hispano-Turcas durante la Guerra Civil Española 1936-1939*, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Centro de Documentación y Publicaciones, Madrid, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Moral Roncal, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Manuel Moral Roncal, *Diplomacia, humanitarismo y espionaje en la Guerra Civil española*, Biblioteca nueva, Madrid, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Manuel Moral Roncal, *Estudios sobre asilo diplomático en la Guerra Civil española*, Universidad de Alcalá Servicio de Publicaciones, Alcalá de Henares, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Javier Cervera Gil, *Violencia política y acción clandestina: la retaguardia de Madrid en Guerra (1936-1939)*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Doctoral thesis, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Gültekin Kâmil Birlik, "İspanya İç Savaşında (1936-1939) Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası", *Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Volume 12, Number 24, 2016, pp. 122-155.

<sup>12</sup> Sinan Kuneralp, "İspanya İç Savaşı ve Türkiye", *Tarih ve Toplum*, Number 37, 1987, pp. 6-8.

<sup>13</sup> Berksan Gülsoy, "İspanya İç Savaşında Türkiye'nin Tavrı ve Savaşta Yer Alan Türk Vatandaşları", *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları*, Volume 136, Number 270, 2024, pp. 291-316.

<sup>14</sup> Seçil Aladağ, *İspanya İç Savaşı ve Türkiye*, Ege University, Master's thesis, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Pablo de Miguel Iglesias, Mehmet Necati Kutlu, "Turquía y el asilo diplomático durante la Guerra Civil española", *Aportes. Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, Volume 39, Number 114, 2024, pp. 73-95. One of the authors of the article, Kutlu, previously addressed the subject in 2008 in his work titled "İspanya İç Savaşı Dönemi Türk-İspanyol İlişkilerine Dair Düşünceler ve Bir Örnek Olay (Reflections on Turkish-Spanish Relations during the Spanish Civil War Period and a Case Study)".

Turkish Diplomatic Archive. Due to the largely restricted access to Turkish Foreign Ministry documents in previous years, Turkish researchers have faced challenges, particularly in studies focusing on diplomatic relations. Only a few have been able to conduct studies requiring examination of diplomatic archives with special permissions, while many have had to rely on archives of foreign countries. In recent years, however, the documents of the Turkish Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been digitised and made available for research. In this context, this study represents the first endeavor to utilize the diplomatic archives of both countries simultaneously within a single text. By incorporating Turkish diplomatic documents, it may present new opportunities for research inquiries in a field typically reliant on archives primarily from Spain.

The study comprises three main sections. The first section examines the status of the Turkish Embassy in Madrid during the early months of the Civil War. Subsequently, it delves into the negotiations between the two countries regarding the evacuation of Spanish refugees at the Turkish embassy prior to dispatching the ship from Türkiye to Spain. The third section focuses on the disembarkation of refugees bound for Türkiye at the Syracuse port in Italy and the tension it engendered between the two countries.

### **The Situation of the Turkish Embassy in Madrid during the initial Months of the Civil War**

From the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the Turkish government maintained its neutrality towards the warring factions. Türkiye demonstrated its commitment to non-intervention by joining the ranks of the Non-Intervention Committee at an early stage. Turkish diplomats, especially in cooperation with Britain and France, carefully coordinated their activities in order to maintain a common stance. The main objective underlying these diplomatic efforts was to prevent the conflict from turning into a wider European crisis. In line with this overarching objective, Türkiye carefully monitored the Balkan states' responses to the Civil War throughout its course, recognizing its significant implications for regional security. During this period, Türkiye also did not hesitate to extend a helping hand to those seeking refuge at the Turkish Embassy, with Ambassador Tefvık Kâmil Koperler playing an active role in these efforts. The precise commencement time for the reception of refugees at the Turkish Embassy is not certain. However, the earliest documented reference to such an event in Turkish diplomatic archives dates back to August 30, 1936. On this date, Ambassador Koperler conveyed in a

report from Madrid to Ankara that the embassy was accommodating refugees.<sup>16</sup>

In the initial stages, the admission of refugees at the Turkish Embassy did not appear to pose significant issues for the Spanish government, as evidenced by the amicable relationship between the Spanish and Turkish authorities. This is further highlighted by the prudent approach taken by the new Spanish government in its dealings with its Turkish counterpart. In early September, Spain underwent a change in government, resulting in the formation of a new administration on September 4, 1936, led by Francisco Largo Caballero. Julio Álvarez del Vayo, assuming the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new cabinet, engaged in diplomatic discussions with various ambassadors during the initial days of his tenure. Among these engagements was a meeting with the Turkish Ambassador Koperler. During this meeting, the Minister mentioned that he had been informed by his predecessor that the Turkish government did not sympathize with the rebel factions. Álvarez del Vayo also expressed appreciation for Türkiye's commitment during the conflict, considering Türkiye a friend of Spain due to its steadfast presence in Madrid despite the war conditions.<sup>17</sup> Although Türkiye adopted a neutral stance during this period, subtle indications of sympathy towards the Republican government can be discerned in Koperler's communications. For instance, in a report on the newly established Basque government in Spain, the Turkish Ambassador stated that "unfortunately" there were no signs that would "give hope" the military situation would turn in favor of the government soon. Given the war's progression, Koperler's forecasts regarding the Civil War's future were also strikingly realistic in the report. The Ambassador anticipated the swift downfall of Basque autonomy before it could take root, with Catalonia poised to face a similar fate thereafter.<sup>18</sup>

The chaotic atmosphere in Madrid was the reason why the Turkish Embassy and other missions in the city received many requests for asylum from the first days of the war. Following the dissolution of the regular army on July 19 and its replacement by militia formations, Madrid witnessed a substantial shift in power dynamics, resulting in the rise of various trade unions and political factions. During this period, the militias used harsh measures against their opponents and carried out numerous arrests. Those arrested were often

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<sup>16</sup> *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Dışişleri Bakanlığı Türk Diplomatik Arşivi* (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives Ministry of Foreign Affairs Turkish Diplomatic Archives) (TDA from here onwards), 537 / 7438-43802-1, 30 August 1936.

<sup>17</sup> TDA, 537 / 8195-51778-26, 9 September 1936.

<sup>18</sup> TDA, 537 / 7541-44014-2, 9 October 1936.

sent to various detention centres, where in a significant number of cases their ultimate fate was execution.<sup>19</sup> In the asylum acceptance process, Latin American countries played a prominent role. However, it is important to note that many of these countries sought to maintain a policy of neutrality throughout the conflict. This was particularly true even in nations where governments sympathetic to the Francoist rebels were in power. For instance, the Argentine government ensured that even officials who supported Franco adhered to the country's official policy of neutrality.<sup>20</sup> This policy of neutrality influenced the approach to asylum acceptance, with a tendency to prioritize humanitarian concerns in the decision-making process. Consequently, even countries that were not officially neutral demonstrated considerable flexibility when it came to the acceptance of refugees. A notable example of this flexibility can be seen in the Mexican government's decision to admit Francoist refugees, despite its support for the Republican side during the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Türkiye adopted a positive stance towards refugees, showing a careful approach, which was notably influenced by the efforts of Ambassador Koperler.

In this context, the risks arising from the situation in Madrid at this time were also emphasized in correspondence from the Turkish Ambassador to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The safety of both embassy personnel and refugees became significantly imperiled as conflict escalated within the city subsequent to the November siege of Madrid by Nationalist forces led by General Francisco Franco. One of the dispatches of the Turkish Ambassador highlighted the widespread violence and insecurity prevailing in the city, wherein individuals, irrespective of age or gender, faced imprisonment and even summary execution in the streets. While acknowledging that foreigners were generally spared from attacks unless suspected of espionage, the Ambassador also disclosed the precariousness of diplomatic personnel's lives. Instances such as the executions of the Austrian and Paraguayan consuls in Bilbao, as well as the deaths of German nationals in Barcelona on charges of espionage, exemplified the hazards faced by foreign representatives. Amidst this fraught environment, the Turkish Ambassador expressed concern for his own safety and that of the refugees under his protection, while acknowledging that there was nothing to be done but to wait for the course of the war.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> de Miguel Iglesias - Kutlu, *ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> Joe Robert Juárez, "Argentine neutrality, mediation, and asylum during the Spanish Civil War", *The Americas*, Volume 19, Number 4, 1963, p. 385.

<sup>21</sup> Juárez, *ibid*, p. 402.

<sup>22</sup> *TDA*, 537 / 7438-43781-1, 25 November 1936.



In early November 1936, Madrid faced a severe crisis that led the Republican government to move its headquarters to Valencia. Despite the imminent threat of a Nationalist takeover of the city, Republican forces, supported by significant Soviet military assistance, gained a considerable advantage in both ground and aerial combat engagements. The Nationalist forces came to terms with the realization that victory would not be swiftly attained. Conversely, the Republicans found encouragement and experienced an uplift in morale following their success in the Battle of Madrid.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, despite the substantial reassertion of government control over the city, persistent disorganization within the Republican ranks precipitated a notable governance and security vulnerability, which also had repercussions on the operations of foreign missions situated within the city. Given the tumultuous conditions in the city, it was unsurprising that the Turkish Foreign Ministry directed Koperler to return to Ankara in early December.<sup>24</sup> The Ambassador found it unfeasible to comply with this directive owing to the unstable conditions prevailing within the country. Land travel posed significant hazards, exacerbated by the scarcity of gasoline. Furthermore, the Republican government, having relocated its headquarters to Valencia, severed communication with the embassies in Madrid, leaving embassy personnel without governmental support. Both land and air transportation were dangerous, with few aircraft able to depart the country, often becoming targets of attacks. Ambassadors who managed to depart did so at considerable risk, as moving between cities meant they could get caught up in the middle of a firefight. Moreover, life within the city had become increasingly arduous for embassy staff, with challenges including inadequate heating due to coal shortages, severely limited food supplies, and occasional bomb threats near embassy premises. The penetration of a rifle bullet through the window of the Koperler's residence demonstrated the seriousness of the danger they faced. Additionally, in the midst of these circumstances, financial limitations exacerbated the challenges confronting the Turkish Embassy. Consequently, Koperler, in a meticulously detailed report directly addressed to Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, articulated the aforementioned circumstances vividly. He highlighted that the annual budget allocated by the Foreign Ministry had been depleted within six months and appealed for additional financial assistance. Additionally, the Ambassador sought financial aid to support the provision of

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, pp. 90-91.

<sup>24</sup> *TD A*, 537 / 7438-43773-2, 13 December 1936. If this plan had come to fruition, a Charge d'affaires would have been appointed in Madrid to fulfill Koperler's responsibilities.

food for the refugees under the embassy's protection.<sup>25</sup>

It is noteworthy that Koperler had had the opportunity to depart the country during the initial weeks of the Civil War when the railway remained operational despite escalating hostilities. However, the Ambassador refrained from seeking permission from the Turkish Foreign Office to leave, mindful of the embassy staff and refugees left behind. As conditions deteriorated, Koperler opted to persevere temporarily with financial support from Türkiye and adapt his strategy in response to the evolving conflict. On December 25, 1936, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified Koperler of the approval for the financial assistance requested directly from İnönü. Additionally, the Ministry informed Koperler of the option to relocate the embassy to Valencia. However, this scenario posed a major dilemma for the Turkish ambassador, especially regarding the fate of the refugees in the event of possible displacement. In such a case, a key question would be whether the refugees would accompany them to Valencia or remain in Madrid.<sup>26</sup> Koperler exhibited reluctance towards the proposition of relocating to Valencia, primarily due to the high risks of traveling between cities while the clashes were ongoing. In his correspondence with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 30 December 1936, the Ambassador underscored the severity of the situation, citing recent incidents such as an attack on a Red Cross representative's aircraft. Moreover, he recounted an incident from a few weeks prior, wherein a prominent member of the Communist Party was wounded by an anarchist while on duty outside the city due to his refusal to disclose his identity. The Ambassador further stated that the inability of the Republican government to protect its own members rendered any assurances provided by them meaningless under the existing circumstances.<sup>27</sup> Even in the event of relocating the Embassy, Koperler was reluctant to proceed without ensuring the safety of the refugees. He harbored distrust towards the Republican government's ability to safeguard their well-being. Previous incidents, such as the destruction of caravans of refugees despite prior government protection, had revealed the precariousness of their situation. Furthermore, given the prevailing conditions, it did not seem feasible to transfer responsibility for refugee protection to another embassy.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> TDA, 537 / 7438-43773-2, 13 December 1936.

<sup>26</sup> TDA, 537 / 7438-43773-1, 25 December 1936.

<sup>27</sup> TDA, 537 / 7903-47571-51, 30 December 1936.

<sup>28</sup> TDA, 537 / 7903-47571-51, 30 December 1936.

### Evacuation of the Refugees from the Turkish Embassy

As conditions in Madrid deteriorated, Koperler not only informed the Turkish authorities about the aggravating situation, but also began to prepare a plan for the evacuation of the refugees. The plan envisaged transferring refugees to an internationally protected port city and facilitating their departure on a ship protected against possible attacks. Koperler was of the opinion that if the Turkish government could orchestrate this through the League of Nations,<sup>29</sup> it would constitute a significant humanitarian effort unprecedented in history. Furthermore, the Ambassador emphasized the necessity of conducting negotiations exclusively between the Turkish Government and the Republican Government in Valencia to preclude interference from external entities. Consequently, Koperler himself laid the groundwork for the plan to transfer refugees to Türkiye by *Karadeniz*, dedicating concerted efforts to persuade the Spanish authorities of its feasibility.<sup>30</sup>

In early 1937, the Turkish Foreign Ministry took the first step towards implementing Koperler's proposal. Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras engaged in discussions with his Spanish counterpart, Julio Álvarez del Vayo, in Geneva concerning the plight of refugees. During this meeting, Álvarez del Vayo assured Aras of his intention to promptly issue directives facilitating both the relocation of the Turkish embassy from Madrid to Valencia and the safe evacuation of refugees harbored within the embassy premises.<sup>31</sup> In the absence of progress on the issue, Turkish authorities reiterated their concerns to the Spanish Charge d'Affaires, Ricardo Begoña, on February 2, 1937. Begoña assured the Turkish officials that he would promptly dispatch a telegram to his government, reminding them of Türkiye's request.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, archival documents from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated February 14, 1937, reveal that Begoña reported the matter to his government in early February.<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, following the directives he received, Begoña engaged with the Secretary-General of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 9, 1937. In this meeting, the Spanish Charge d'Affaires outlined the

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<sup>29</sup> This plan was subsequently formulated not via the League of Nations, but through direct communication and negotiations between the two countries.

<sup>30</sup> *TDA*, 537 / 7903-47571-51, 30 December 1936.

<sup>31</sup> *TDA*, 537 / 7903-47571-49, 2 February 1937.

<sup>32</sup> *TDA*, 537 / 7903-47571-49, 2 February 1937.

<sup>33</sup> *Archivo General de la Administración, Asuntos Exteriores, Archivo Renovado (General Archive of the Spanish Administration, Foreign Affairs, Renewed Archives)* (AGA, AE from here onwards), box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 14 February 1937.

Spanish government's proposed conditions for initiating negotiations. Among these propositions, one particular stipulation elicited significant concern within Turkish diplomatic circles: the Spanish government's insistence on excluding individuals of military age from the cohort of refugees eligible for evacuation. This condition had not been raised a few weeks ago when the Foreign Ministers of the two countries met on the occasion of the League of Nations meeting in Geneva.<sup>34</sup> On February 18, 1937, Mehmed Esad Atuner, the Chief of the First Department at the Turkish Foreign Ministry,<sup>35</sup> along with Basri Rızan, the Deputy Chief of the First Department, held discussions with Begoña to express their concerns to the Spanish Charge d'Affaires. The details of this encounter are consistent across both Turkish and Spanish diplomatic records.<sup>36</sup> Türkiye adamantly advocated for the transfer of all refugees to its territory. Turkish officials argued that excluding individuals of military age from the evacuation would result in the separation of numerous families seeking asylum, a scenario vehemently opposed by women and children among the refugees. Additionally, Atuner and Rızan provided assurances to the Spanish government that the refugees would reside in Türkiye until the cessation of hostilities and would refrain from any hostile actions against Spain. In response, Begoña expressed concern that such exceptional treatment of refugees in the Turkish embassy could lead to similar requests from other nations with refugees in Madrid.

Another noteworthy aspect of the meeting between Turkish Foreign Ministry officials and Begoña on February 18, 1937, was the emergence of the issue concerning a list of refugees. During the discussion, Begoña inquired whether the Ambassador in Madrid had provided the Turkish officials with a roster of refugees. The Spanish Charge d'Affaires emphasized the government's need to acquire the names of refugees to ascertain whether any of them were individuals subject to legal sentencing. Despite both the Turkish and Spanish records of the meeting reflecting a negative response to Begoña's query, there are disparities. While the Turkish document does not explicitly affirm the

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<sup>34</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 14 February 1937.

<sup>35</sup> In the historical central organizational structure of Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, within the General Directorates, there was a unit called the "First Department," which was one of the directorates and advisory offices. This department, inherited from the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was responsible for political affairs and relations with certain countries, and continued to exist during the early years of the Republic. Ali Rıza Özcoşkun, *Cumhuriyetin Kuruluşundan Bugüne Dışişleri Bakanlığı Teşkilat Yapısı (1920-2018)*, Türk Diplomatik Arşivi Yayınları, Ankara, 2018, p. 9-15.

<sup>36</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 19 February 1937; TDA, 537 / 7491-43257-2, 18 February 1937.

presence of such a list, it suggests that Atuner communicated to Begoña their stance of refusing to condone any form of discrimination among refugees. Conversely, the Spanish document does not mention the Turkish authorities' rejection of such discrimination; rather, it solely notes Begoña's awareness that the Turkish Foreign Ministry had not yet received such a list.

At this point, the question arises as to whether the evacuation plan predominantly stemmed from Koperler's initiative or if it also garnered significant traction within Turkish Foreign Affairs circles. A note found in Atuner's report following his meeting with Begoña serves as a significant indication of the strong stance within the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the evacuation of refugees from Spain. In the aforementioned note, Atuner suggests that emphasising the free passage of Spanish Republican ships through the Turkish Straits could be a subtle strategy to convince the Spanish authorities to evacuate.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this sentiment had been indirectly conveyed, if not explicitly stated. For instance, the Secretary-General of the Turkish Foreign Ministry had earlier alluded to this aspect when expressing Türkiye's goodwill towards Spain, emphasizing that "*its ships pass through the Straits at their discretion*".<sup>38</sup> Atuner advocated for the explicit negotiation of the passage of Spanish vessels through the Straits in the event that Spain presented conditions for the evacuation of refugees, advancing beyond this position. This stance aimed to bolster Türkiye's position regarding the evacuation. However, it could be argued that such action was hardly necessary. The Spanish Republic was already aware of the strategic significance of maintaining the uninterrupted passage of its own vessels, as well as those of the Soviet Union supporting its cause, through the Straits, both for domestic stability and in the context of its diplomatic relations with Türkiye. This awareness was further confirmed in the following months by Türkiye's response to escalating tensions in the region. In August 1937, the sinking of two Spanish ships in the Straits<sup>39</sup> prompted the Turkish government to take swift diplomatic and military action. A statement issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that any unauthorized submarine detected in Turkish waters would be ordered to surrender or face

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<sup>37</sup> TDA, 537 / 7491-43257-2, 18 February 1937.

<sup>38</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 14 February 1937.

<sup>39</sup> These ships were sunk by Italian submarines that continuously patrolled from the Dardanelles to the Spanish ports during this period. Willard C. Frank, "Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939", *Naval War College Review*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1984, p. 43.

destruction.<sup>40</sup> This declaration not only reaffirmed Türkiye's commitment to the Montreux Convention but also demonstrated a broader effort to assert authority over its regional waters amid growing international instability. Türkiye's firm and resolute stance during this challenging period in the Straits was positively received by Republican public opinion in Spain.<sup>41</sup>

During discussions with Türkiye concerning refugees, one particular point that Spanish authorities paid close attention to was the issue of the number and identity details of the refugees. Throughout the process, it is evident that Spanish officials made concerted efforts to obtain accurate information on this matter. As negotiations between the two countries on the conditions for the transfer of refugees to Türkiye progressed, uncertainty remained about the exact number and gender breakdown of refugees housed at the Turkish Embassy. The Turkish Foreign Ministry was hesitant to provide an exhaustive list to the Spanish authorities. Their Spanish counterparts would have to wait a while longer before they received the comprehensive response they requested. During their meeting in February, Atuner informed Begoña that the number of refugees at the Turkish embassy in Madrid was 530, but that a detailed list had not yet been compiled.<sup>42</sup> A pivotal event in December had precipitated a significant increase in the population of refugees within the premises of the Turkish embassy. On December 3-4, 1936, militants breached the Finnish embassy and one of its adjunct facilities, apprehending an estimated 400 to 600 refugees.<sup>43</sup> Prior to the raid, the Finnish Embassy stood as one of the foremost institutions providing sanctuary to refugees in Madrid. This was partly attributable to the leadership of a Spanish staff member, Francisco Cachero, who assumed responsibility for the mission following Ambassador Winckelmann's relocation to Lisbon during the initial stages of the Civil War, prompted by escalating street unrest. Amidst these circumstances, Cachero assumed command of the mission, accommodating numerous refugees within the embassy premises for a fee. Over time, he expanded accommodations by leasing additional facilities for refugees.<sup>44</sup> The main building of the Finnish

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<sup>40</sup> Yücel Güçlü, "Nyon Conference of 1937 on the Prevention of Piratical Acts in the Mediterranean and Turkey", *Belleken*, Volume 66, Number 246, 2002, p. 534.

<sup>41</sup> *TDA*, 537 / 7972-48821-1, 24 August 1937.

<sup>42</sup> *AGA*, *AE*, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 19 February 1937; *TDA*, 537 / 7491-43257-2, 18 February 1937.

<sup>43</sup> Moral Roncal, 2001, p. 226.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 224-225. It should be noted, however, that Cachero was not a real head of mission, temporary or otherwise, and therefore was not empowered to grant diplomatic asylum. Hence,

Embassy was located at 21 Zurbano Street, where the Turkish Embassy was also located. The intrusion into the Finnish Embassy has also been documented in Turkish diplomatic records. In his correspondence regarding this incident, Koperler argued that the Republicans' claims regarding a bomb threat and gunfire directed at the police from the raided building were inaccurate. However, he acknowledged the possibility that some refugees may have possessed firearms. Preceding the raid on the Finnish Embassy, Republican forces had similarly targeted the German and Italian embassies. In the same report, Koperler speculated that Soviet representative Rosenberg might have orchestrated these series of raids. The Ambassador also asserted the likelihood of successive attacks targeting other embassies in the future, with refugees facing the risk of detention and execution under similar pretexts.<sup>45</sup> An important outcome for Türkiye resulting from the raid on the Finnish Embassy building was the subsequent acceptance of numerous refugees by the Turkish Embassy in the aftermath of the raid. Discrepancies are observable in the numerical data reported in this regard. A document from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveals that Koperler reported the acceptance of approximately 700 refugees from the Finnish Embassy to the Turkish Embassy.<sup>46</sup> However, in a message dated 30 May 1937 to the Secretary-General of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Koperler reported that the number of refugees taken into their premises after the Finnish Embassy raid was 428. In the same message, Koperler also stated that this figure reached 480 when the number of military personnel excluded from the evacuation plan to Türkiye was added.<sup>47</sup> In any case, following the raid on the Finnish Embassy, there was a notable increase in the number of refugees within the Turkish Embassy premises. To such an extent that, as per records from the Spanish National Historical Archive (AHN), the Turkish Embassy provided refuge to a total of 923 individuals throughout the Civil War, positioning it as the second most significant host nation for refugees following the Embassy of Chile.<sup>48</sup>

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the asylum granted by him in exchange for money was not in fact an authentic diplomatic asylum. Rubio, *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> TDA, 537 / 7438-43780-3, 15 February 1937.

<sup>46</sup> TDA, 537 / 7903-47571-51, 30 January 1936.

<sup>47</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Turkish Ambassador in Spain, Tevfik Kâmil Koperler, to the Secretary General of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 May 1937.

<sup>48</sup> Moral Roncal, 2018, pp. 135.

The comprehensive refugee evacuation plan, which was the subject of lengthy negotiations conducted by the representatives of the two countries, did not include all refugees housed within the Turkish embassy buildings. The resolution of the refugee issue between the governments of Türkiye and Spain was reached in April. At this point, Türkiye had withdrawn its decision to withhold the transmission of a list of refugees to Spain, while Spain had relinquished its insistence that individuals of military age be considered outside the scope of asylum in Türkiye. Nonetheless, individuals currently or previously engaged in military service, regardless of age or status, were excluded from the agreement. As a result of this joint decision, 58 military personnel, predominantly from the Finnish representation, were stationed at the Turkish embassy on Calle Zurbano.<sup>49</sup> In accordance with the agreement, the Turkish Government committed to preventing evacuees from participating in any activities that could be perceived as hostile towards the Government of the Republic or in favor of any factions. Furthermore, Spanish authorities maintained the right to refuse departure authorization to specific refugees after reviewing the asylum list provided by the Turkish side.<sup>50</sup>

Following the resolution of disputes between the two nations and the establishment of conditions for refugee evacuation, the Turkish ship *Karadeniz* set sail for Valencia on April 21, 1937, to embark the refugees. During these days, a decision by the Turkish Council of Ministers recorded an expenditure of 25,000 liras for the charter of the ship, and 3,000 liras allocated for insurance.<sup>51</sup> Arriving at the port of Valencia on April 26, the ship encountered the backdrop of violent clashes within the city. In a correspondence from Koperler during this period, it was reported that the arrival of the ship coincided with the bombardment of the city by insurgent forces from both maritime and aerial fronts, posing a significant threat to *Karadeniz*. Turkish Ambassador further noted that amid the bombardment, while crews from other nations sought refuge on land, the crew of *Karadeniz* remained on board, risking their lives in adherence to their orders. At the time of drafting the letter on May 16, *Karadeniz* had already spent three weeks docked at the port, facing considerable danger. In the same correspondence, Koperler highlighted the harsh conditions and suggested to the Foreign Ministry that the ship's crew be granted bonuses,

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<sup>49</sup> Rubio, *ibid*, p. 89.

<sup>50</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Secretary General of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, 21 April 1937.

<sup>51</sup> Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Cumhuriyet Arşivi (*Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives Republican Archives*), (BCA from here onwards), 030.18.01.02/74.34.17, 29 April 1937.



citing as a precedent the generous wages and bonuses paid to the crews of other ships at the port.<sup>52</sup>

By the time Koperler wrote this letter, the refugees who were to be transported to Türkiye were fully accommodated on board. During this sequence of events, the initial step involved the arrival of the *Karadeniz* in Valencia. Subsequently, the transfer of the refugees from the Turkish Embassy in Madrid to Valencia commenced via bus transportation. While this was being done, 4 separate groups of refugees were transported to Valencia from the Embassy in Madrid at intervals of a few days. The first group left Madrid on May 1, 1937, whereas the fourth and last group arrived in Valencia on May 14.<sup>53</sup> While the newspapers offered conflicting reports regarding the number of refugees aboard the ship, official records indicate a total of 712 individuals.<sup>54</sup> In accordance with mutual agreement, military personnel among the refugees remained in Spain, leading to the inability to accommodate all refugees under the protection of the Turkish embassy on board the ship. Over the course of several weeks, arrangements for transporting the refugees onto *Karadeniz* progressed; during this period, the Turkish Embassy diligently provided comprehensive lists of the refugees to the relevant authorities of the Spanish Republic.<sup>55</sup> Occasionally, in response to Spanish requests, photographs of certain refugees were provided alongside these lists. Simultaneously, separate lists were prepared for individuals with military obligations. Although the lists occasionally contained name discrepancies or errors, the Turkish Embassy

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<sup>52</sup> TDA, 537 / 7846-48848-2, 16 May 1937.

<sup>53</sup> The documents in the archive of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the transfer of refugees in four separate groups are as follows: AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Telegram from the Undersecretary of State to the Minister of Governance, 06 May 1937; AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Telegram from the Turkish Ambassador in Spain, Tevfik Kâmil Koperler, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 09 May 1937; AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of Governance, 10 May 1937; AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Telegram from the Turkish Ambassador in Spain, Tevfik Kâmil Koperler, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 13 May 1937; AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of Governance, 14 May 1937.

<sup>54</sup> BCA, 030.18.01.02/75.43.5, 21 May 1937; AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Turkish Ambassador in Spain, Tevfik Kâmil Koperler, to the Secretary General of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 May 1937. In terms of the number of individuals evacuated, it should be noted that this constitutes the largest evacuation during the Spanish Civil War since the evacuation of the Mexican embassy, despite the fact that over 200 individuals within the Turkish embassy were not permitted to depart. Moral Roncal, 2008, p. 477.

<sup>55</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from P.D. to the Minister of Governance, 24 May 1937.

promptly made corrections.<sup>56</sup>

While *Karadeniz* was en route to Türkiye, the Turkish authorities were concurrently deliberating on the resettlement of refugees and the provision of their sustenance. A sum of 30,000 liras was earmarked from the Ministry of Finance's budget for the Turkish Red Crescent to cater to the nutritional needs of Spanish refugees.<sup>57</sup> İstanbul was designated as the primary resettlement destination for the refugees.<sup>58</sup> According to the plan, upon their arrival in Çanakkale, a city on the Southern shore of the Dardanelles in Türkiye, refugees were to undergo a health check aboard the ship. Following this inspection, if a sanitisation procedure was deemed necessary, the ship would be directed to Tuzla, east of İstanbul, for the required process. If such a procedure was not required, refugees would disembark in İstanbul, where necessary bureaucratic formalities would be carried out on their behalf. Additionally, the plan outlined the classification of refugees into three categories: the "first class" individuals, deemed financially self-sufficient, would be permitted to reside in İstanbul; the "second class" individuals, experiencing temporary and partial financial need, would receive support and enjoy unrestricted residence in İstanbul akin to the "first class"; while the "third class" individuals, entirely reliant on assistance, would be accommodated in a facility provided by the Red Crescent, where both shelter and sustenance would be supplied.<sup>59</sup> The implementation of this plan was disrupted by an unexpected agreement between the two countries after the ship left for Türkiye. Taking this agreement as an opportunity, the refugees on board decided to disembark, and almost all of them chose to do so. The subsequent events surrounding this decision are thoroughly examined in the following section.

### **The Syracuse Incident and its Reactions**

As outlined in the preceding section, as of May 20th, Turkish authorities were still deliberating on the strategies for the resettlement of refugees within Türkiye. Nonetheless, insights gleaned from testimonies provided by both the crew and refugees aboard the ship, as well as from documents of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggest that an agreement was reached between the two countries during the ship's departure for Türkiye. This agreement entailed the release of certain categories of refugees -namely women, children, and men

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<sup>56</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from P.D. to the Minister of Governance, 07 May 1937.

<sup>57</sup> BCA, 030.18.01.02/75.41.13, 20 May 1937.

<sup>58</sup> BCA, 030.18.01.02/75.41.12, 20 May 1937.

<sup>59</sup> BCA, 030.18.01.02/75.43.5, 21 May 1937.

not of military age- within Italian territory. The accord concerning this issue was established between Koperler and officials from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Due to unforeseen circumstances and the subsequent abandonment of the ship by nearly all refugees upon reaching Syracuse on the island of Sicily, *Karadeniz* arrived in İstanbul with only nine refugees onboard. Among those who arrived in Türkiye, there were no Spanish nationals. Seven of the refugees who disembarked in İstanbul belonged to a Jewish family who had left İstanbul in previous years and settled in Spain, while the remaining two individuals were a woman employed at the Turkish embassy in Madrid and her one-month-old baby.<sup>60</sup>

Considering the extended weeks of negotiations and detailed plans between the two countries, the most significant question that arises is why such a landing was decided while the ship was underway. Available information and documents do not provide a clear answer to this question. Moreover, two additional questions seem to hold critical importance. Firstly, with 712 passengers on board when the ship set sail and considering that in Italy only women, children, and men beyond military service age were allowed to disembark among the refugees, how did the number of refugees on board decrease to 9 upon arrival in İstanbul? Secondly, at which stage of the journey was it decided to disembark women, children and men beyond military service age, and how was this decision communicated to those on board? Answers to these two questions are largely available. Multiple newspapers,<sup>61</sup> exhibiting general consistency, documented the sequence of events as follows: Shortly after departing from Valencia, a significant portion of the passengers expressed their intention to disembark on Italian territory. The officers on board conveyed this request to the Turkish authorities and asked for guidance. The Turkish authorities immediately contacted their Spanish counterparts through Koperler. During the ship's stopover in the port of Malta to replenish coal, the Turkish government responded to the request. The directive allowed women, children, and beyond military service age to disembark on Italian soil, sparking considerable excitement among the refugees. At this point, male refugees of military age demanded equal treatment, leading to a tense atmosphere on board.

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<sup>60</sup> “Karadeniz dokuz mülteci ile geldi”, *Haber*, 29 May 1937, p. 5; “İspanyadan kaçanlar”, *Tan*, 29 May 1937, p. 1; “Karadeniz vapurunun başına gelenler”, *Cumhuriyet*, 29 May 1937, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> The information presented here was compiled from the following newspaper articles: “Karadeniz İspanyadan mülteci yerine bir sandık pasaportla döndü”, *Son Posta*, 29 May 1937, p. 8; “Karadeniz dokuz mülteci ile geldi”, *Haber*, 29 May 1937, p. 5.; “Karadeniz vapuru dün 8 yolcu ile geldi”, *Akşam*, 29 May 1937, 7; “İspanyadan kaçanlar”, *Tan*, 29 May 1937, p. 1; “Karadeniz İspanya sularındaki tehlikeli yolculuğundan döndü”, *Kurum*, 29 May 1937, p. 3; “Karadeniz vapurunun başına gelenler”, *Cumhuriyet*, 29 May 1937, p. 4.

In the telegram sent by the Turkish authorities, the crew was instructed to disembark the refugees in the port of Genoa. However, due to the distance from Malta, the crew decided to redirect the ship to the port of Syracuse on the island of Sicily. Upon nearing the pier, a significant portion of the refugees expressed a desire to disembark, with some opting to jump into the water to reach shore. As the ferry approached the harbor, a situation akin to a large-scale disturbance ensued, leading to the departure of nearly all refugees from the ship, many leaving behind their passports and personal belongings. Subsequently, *Karadeniz* proceeded to Türkiye with only nine refugees remaining on board.

Diplomatic correspondences and assorted sources offer additional insights into the events aboard *Karadeniz*. It appears that some of the refugees initially attempted to disembark while the ship was docking at the Port in Malta. Sources present divergent figures concerning the count of individuals attempting to disembark from *Karadeniz*. For instance, one study indicates that during a stop in Malta, 10 refugees attempted to escape, but were thwarted by British authorities.<sup>62</sup> Conversely, a document from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs cites the number as 3, without mention of any intervention by law enforcement.<sup>63</sup> Another document related to the incident is a communication dispatched by Begoña to Spain. In this correspondence, the Spanish charge d'affaires conveyed details obtained from the captain of *Karadeniz*, which had been translated for him by the Turkish authorities. As per this account, it was reported that only one Spanish individual attempted to flee and was subsequently apprehended in Malta.<sup>64</sup>

The unexpected incident in Syracuse provoked a strong reaction from the Spanish Government. Before delving into the correspondence sent to Türkiye by the Spanish authorities after the incident, it is pertinent to note that the Spanish Charge d'Affaires, Begoña, had doubts about the resettlement plan for refugees in Türkiye even before the incident took place. As an illustration, in a communication addressed to the Spanish Foreign Ministry on May 16, 1937, Begoña asserted that Turkish official circles were not content with Koperler's decision to harbor a substantial number of refugees within the embassy premises. According to Begoña, both the lengthy negotiations between the two countries necessitated by the refugees' situation and the resulting travel,

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<sup>62</sup> Gil, *ibid*, p. 515.

<sup>63</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 26 May 1937.

<sup>64</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 3 Junio 1937.

accommodation and subsistence costs had caused discomfort among Turkish officials. The Spanish Charge d'Affaires was of the opinion that Türkiye would seek a negotiated way to get rid of these "obligatory guests" once the refugees had arrived in Türkiye.<sup>65</sup> Another concern for Begoña was the residency status of refugees in Türkiye. As delineated in Turkish official records, the Turkish government had opted to accommodate the refugees in Istanbul. According to the Charge d'Affaires, this decision posed multiple risks. Begoña's primary apprehension revolved around the potential for disturbances near the Spanish Consulate in Istanbul or harm to the consulate's premises due to the influx of arrivals. Given the presence of active German and Italian consulates in the city, Begoña also feared that refugees arriving in İstanbul could establish contact and collaborate with officials from these nations. Such collaboration could range from reporting on Spanish maritime activities to participating in various propaganda activities. Beyond İstanbul, Begoña contended that other cities like Ankara and İzmir, where German and Italian influence was palpable, were likewise unsuitable for refugee resettlement. Despite conveying these concerns to Turkish authorities on multiple occasions, Begoña's appeals went unheeded. During one of their encounter, the Secretary-General of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed to him that İstanbul had been designated by the Council of Ministers as an appropriate destination for the refugees. The Secretary-General underlined that İstanbul was selected due to its robust police force, excellent accommodation facilities, and the presence of the Red Crescent organization. Additionally, Turkish authorities committed to retaining refugees within the country's borders and thwarting any activities that could undermine Spain's interests.<sup>66</sup>

Regarding the Syracuse incident, it is pertinent to state that the collaborative decision leading to this event was communicated to Begoña beforehand. On May 24, Cevat Açıkalın, succeeding Atuner as Chief of the First Department of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, apprised the Spanish Charge d'Affaires that, pursuant to the bilateral agreement, it had been resolved for Spanish nationals under 18 and over 60 aboard *Karadeniz* to disembark in Italy.<sup>67</sup> The decision-making process did not involve consultation with the Spanish Charge d'Affaires, which is quite remarkable. In fact, this development was even

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<sup>65</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 16 May 1937.

<sup>66</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 25 May 1937.

<sup>67</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 25 May 1937.

reported in the Turkish media at the time. *Tan's* report, based on Foreign Ministry information, outlined the challenges associated with accommodating, sustaining, and safeguarding the 712 anticipated refugees upon their arrival in İstanbul. The news article further reported that women, children, and men not subject to military service could opt to disembark in Italian territory. It indicated that this directive was conveyed to the captain of the *Karadeniz* via radio communication and through the Maritime Administration.<sup>68</sup> While the initial plan proposed landing the refugees in Genoa, the proximity of Syracuse to Italy prompted the crew to favor this port instead, as previously mentioned.

While Begoña may have harbored reservations about the decision, it is conceivable that, given his diplomatic role, he refrained from openly criticizing the bilateral agreement reached between the authorities of both nations regarding the handling of women, children, and men not subject to military duty seeking asylum. However, following reports that most of the refugees on *Karadeniz* bound for İstanbul had disembarked in the Sicilian port of Syracuse, the Spanish Charge d'Affaires began to express his displeasure with the process more openly. This unsettling development was communicated to him on the evening of May 25 by a Turkish official during negotiations on refugees.<sup>69</sup> Begoña promptly sought to establish communication with senior officials to authenticate the reported events. With Foreign Minister Aras absent from the country, Begoña reached out to Nebil Batı, the Secretary General of the Ministry. Batı expressed surprise and indicated a lack of awareness regarding the situation. However, he assured the Spanish Charge d'Affaires that he would promptly relay any pertinent information upon its receipt. Subsequently, Cevat Açıkalın, Chief of the First Department of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, contacted Begoña, confirming the unfolding events in Syracuse. In accordance with the information relayed by Açıkalın, Begoña reported that upon the ship's arrival in Syracuse, designated for the disembarkation of individuals aged under 18 and over 60, certain refugees resorted to drastic measures. Some individuals chose to leap overboard, while others utilized scaffolding and ropes to disembark in the harbor, apparently without encountering intervention from Italian authorities. Açıkalın further indicated that only five refugees remained aboard the ship.

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<sup>68</sup> "Mültecilerden bir kısmı İtalyaya çıkarılıyor", *Tan*, 23 May 1937, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> *AGA, AE*, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 26 May 1937.

Begoña's dispatch<sup>70</sup> conveyed palpable frustration with the handling of the situation by Turkish authorities. While he opted against explicit commentary, citing the intensity of his emotions regarding the incident, he did assert his longstanding skepticism toward Türkiye's management of the matter, a sentiment he felt validated by recent events. The Spanish Charge d'Affaires asserted that Türkiye's "*inexcusable*" negligence facilitated the escape of hundreds of unarmed individuals from the ship. In this context, considering the assurance given to the refugees that they would remain within Turkish territory until the conclusion of the Spanish conflict, the complete responsibility for the failure to implement measures to prevent their escape upon boarding the ship should be squarely attributed to Türkiye. However, Begoña refrained from attributing this situation to Türkiye's antagonism towards the Spanish Republic or any similar rationale. Instead, he primarily attributed it to economic considerations. According to him, Turkish authorities sought to avoid the substantial expense associated with accommodating refugees within Türkiye, which led to this outcome.

The events in Syracuse also elicited a response from the Spanish Foreign Ministry. Foreign Minister José Giral, in correspondence with Begoña on May 26, called for the drafting of a vigorous protest to be directed to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, citing the complete non-fulfillment of the mutually agreed-upon terms.<sup>71</sup> Begoña duly communicated his government's reaction to Aras.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a Note Verbale to the Turkish Embassy in Madrid, articulating a vigorous protest against the Turkish Government's non-compliance with its obligations. The Note Verbale emphasized formal reservations concerning the potential consequences stemming from this failure.<sup>73</sup>

From the outset, and persisting in the subsequent weeks, Türkiye maintained a position of disclaiming responsibility for the accusations made by the Spanish authorities. On June 1, 1937, in its response to the Spanish Foreign Ministry, the Turkish Embassy argued that the incident occurred within the legal waters of a foreign country and precisely for this reason on board a ship

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<sup>70</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 26 May 1937.

<sup>71</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, 26 May 1937.

<sup>72</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tevfik Rüştü Aras, 27 May 1937.

<sup>73</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Note Verbale to the Turkish Embassy in Madrid, 26 May 1937.

that could not escape territorial jurisdiction.<sup>74</sup> In Begoña's interactions with the Turkish authorities during this period, it was consistently emphasized by the Turkish officials that Türkiye bore no culpability in the incident and that the Turkish crew aboard had exerted their utmost efforts to prevent the situation from escalating to this extent. As an instance, on June 2nd, Acting Foreign Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu held a comprehensive meeting with Begoña. During their discussion, Saraçoğlu meticulously briefed the Spanish Charge d'Affaires on the telegraphic report submitted by the captain of *Karadeniz*. The Turkish deputy underlined that the agreement to pause *Karadeniz* in Syracuse stemmed from negotiations between the Turkish Ambassador in Madrid and the Spanish Government. Upon Saraçoğlu's clarification, Begoña remarked that the Spanish government's decision was motivated by their trust in Türkiye. Moreover, the Spanish Charge d'Affaires reiterated during the meeting that Türkiye bore a significant responsibility for the unfolding events. According to Begoña, there were insufficient preparations for docking at the Syracuse pier, the captain had been lenient, and the crew had failed to effectively prevent the escape of unarmed Spaniards. Consequently, Saraçoğlu's clarification did not assuage the concerns of the Spanish Charge d'Affaires. Additionally, during the meeting, the Spanish Charge d'Affaires proffered a suggestion to Türkiye regarding the next course of action, albeit no such request had been received from the Government of the Spanish Republic. Begoña proposed the possibility of Italy transferring refugees to Türkiye, whereupon the Turkish authorities would relocate them to a destination other than İstanbul. However, despite the Spanish Charge d'Affaires advocating for this suggestion, he harbored little optimism regarding its realization. He considered that, at this stage, the Turkish government's capability might be confined to persuading Italy to prevent Spanish refugees from departing Italy. Another noteworthy conversation at this point took place between Begoña and the Minister of the Interior, Şükrü Kaya. Begoña reported that during this meeting, Kaya not only asserted that Türkiye bore no responsibility for the events in Syracuse but also contended that the Spanish Government was culpable for permitting the disembarkation of certain refugees in Italy. Accordingly, Kaya argued that the Spaniards' decision to flee the ship resulted from a combination of their violent actions and the passive response of the Italian police, absolving Turkish officials of any culpability in the matter.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Note Verbale to the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 01 June 1937.

<sup>75</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 02 June 1937.



Subsequent to its protest in late May, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated its position in another note verbale dated June 12, 1937, asserting Türkiye's accountability for the departure of the refugees.<sup>76</sup> Responding to this, the Turkish Embassy issued a reply on June 20, 1937, which included findings from the investigation conducted on the matter. According to the report, upon the arrival of *Karadeniz* at the port of Syracuse, refugees disembarked hastily, disregarding the ship's docking process and engaging in altercations with the crew who attempted to intervene. As per the Turkish Ambassador's account, since the incident occurred while the ship was in port, within the territorial waters of a third-party state, the officers on board had limited recourse. Moreover, the crew lacked firearms, and even if they had possessed them, their use would have been deemed inappropriate. The authorities could have opted to simply reiterate to the refugees their obligation to proceed to Türkiye and remain there until the conclusion of the events, a directive which they indeed conveyed. Additionally, some officials went beyond this by attempting to obstruct the departure of the refugees, resulting in physical altercations. In this regard, the Government of the Republic of Türkiye asserted that it did not take any action or oversight that would constitute a deviation from its commitment to receive and accommodate refugees until the resolution of the conflict in Spain. Therefore, the Turkish Government did not acknowledge the protest issued by the Government of the Republic of Spain.<sup>77</sup> Just one day prior to this communication, on June 19, 1937, the Turkish Foreign Ministry had dispatched a message to the Spanish Charge d'Affaires containing nearly identical statements.<sup>78</sup> In response to Türkiye's statement, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent another message to the Turkish Embassy on July 3, indicating that Türkiye's response would be reviewed.<sup>79</sup> However, in subsequent weeks, this matter appeared to lose prominence on the agenda. One significant factor contributing to this phenomenon was the enduring significance of Türkiye for Spain. Given that the primary support for

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<sup>76</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Note Verbale to the Turkish Embassy in Madrid, 12 June 1937.

<sup>77</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Turkish Ambassador in Spain, Tevfik Kâmil Koperler, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 20 June 1937.

<sup>78</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Turkish Foreign Ministry to the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, 19-VI-1937. When conveying this message to the Spanish Foreign Ministry, Begoña assessed Türkiye's rationale in its response as "useless". AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 20 June 1937.

<sup>79</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Note Verbale to the Turkish Embassy in Madrid, 03 July 1937.

the Republican Government of Spain originated from the Soviet Union, facilitated by sending Spanish merchant ships to Russian ports through the Turkish Straits, Spain deemed it imperative to uphold amicable relations with Türkiye. This point was also emphasized by Begoña in a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressing the strategic importance of Turkish waters for Spanish maritime traffic and the necessity of avoiding any friction with Türkiye.<sup>80</sup>

Turning to the fate of refugees, it is known that many of the refugees who landed in Italy soon returned to Spain on an Italian ship and fought alongside Franco's forces.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, in the following months, refugees expressed their appreciation to the Turkish authorities in a joint letter bearing their signatures.<sup>82</sup> In the letter, the refugees articulated their gratitude towards Koperler, attributing their survival to his magnanimous and humanitarian endeavors. The return of Spanish nationalists who sought refuge in Syracuse to their homeland and subsequent participation in the Spanish Civil War likely heightened Spain's reaction towards Türkiye. Indeed, on January 28, 1938, the Military Information Service of the Republican government conducted a raid on the Turkish embassy premises, during which the Turkish Ambassador was subjected to mistreatment, and the refugees sheltered in the embassy were forcibly removed.<sup>83</sup>

### Conclusion

This research illustrates the intricate dynamics of refugee resettlement, international diplomacy, and the negotiation processes involved in facilitating the movement of displaced individuals during wartime. Türkiye's actions during the Spanish Civil War reflect a complex balancing act between humanitarian efforts and diplomatic negotiations. Türkiye's neutral stance allowed it to serve as a sanctuary for Spanish refugees through the Turkish embassy in Madrid, which became a crucial refuge for those fleeing the conflict. Ambassador Koperler played a central role in organizing the evacuation, navigating complex negotiations with Spain.

The evacuation of Spanish nationalist refugees via *Karadeniz* required extensive negotiations between Türkiye and Spain. Initially, Spain sought to exclude military-aged individuals from evacuation, but Türkiye opposed such

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<sup>80</sup> AGA, AE, box 82/02748, dossier 15, Dispatch from the Spanish Charge d'Affaires in Türkiye, Ricardo Begoña, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 02 June 1937.

<sup>81</sup> Gil, *ibid*, p. 515.

<sup>82</sup> TDA, 537 / 7491-43257-1, 02 October 1937.

<sup>83</sup> Gil *ibid*, pp. 515-516.

distinctions, advocating for the transfer of all refugees. A compromise was reached in April 1937, allowing the evacuation while maintaining restrictions on those with military service. *Karadeniz* departed for Valencia on April 21, 1937, but an unexpected incident occurred in Syracuse, where nearly all refugees disembarked, provoking Spanish objections. Türkiye, however, denied responsibility for events in foreign territorial waters, and the issue soon seem to lost significance.

Türkiye's approach to accepting and evacuating refugees during the Spanish Civil War presents both unique and conventional aspects. Unlike Latin American countries, which, due to their linguistic and cultural ties with Spain, took the most active stance on the refugee issue, Türkiye did not share such connections with Spanish citizens in a historical context. Nevertheless, it adopted an equally active stance, and in terms of the number of refugees accepted, it even surpassed many Latin American states. At the same time, Türkiye's response was not entirely unique. Similar to most other neutral countries, it did not discriminate based on the identity or political affiliation of those seeking asylum. As with many other states that were not fundamentally opposed to accepting refugees, Türkiye's policies throughout this process were primarily driven by humanitarian concerns while also reflecting an effort to balance these with national interests.

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