

PHILADELPHIA BURNS AT TRIPOLI  MEMORIES OF THE KHE SANH SIEGE

NAVAL HISTORY

U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE

FEBRUARY 2004

**ROOSEVELT'S
UNDECLARED WAR**

**STRUMA'S SOLE
SURVIVOR**

**POLITICALLY
INCORRECT MARINES**

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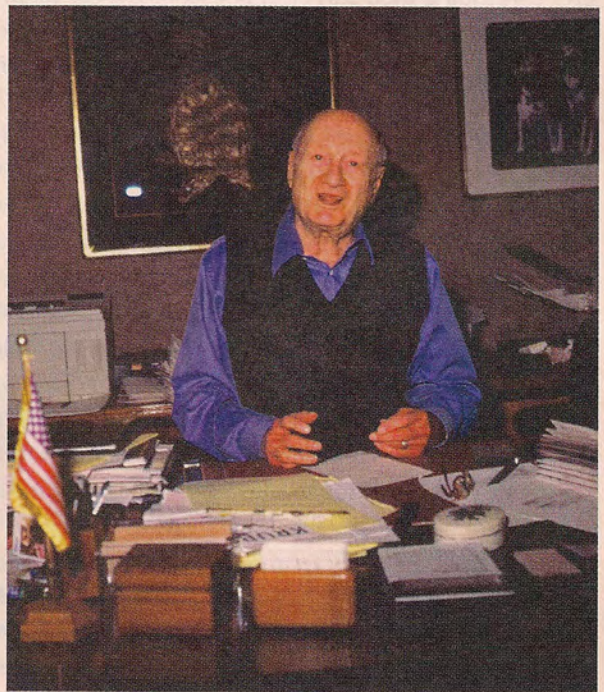


DOOMED FROM THE START

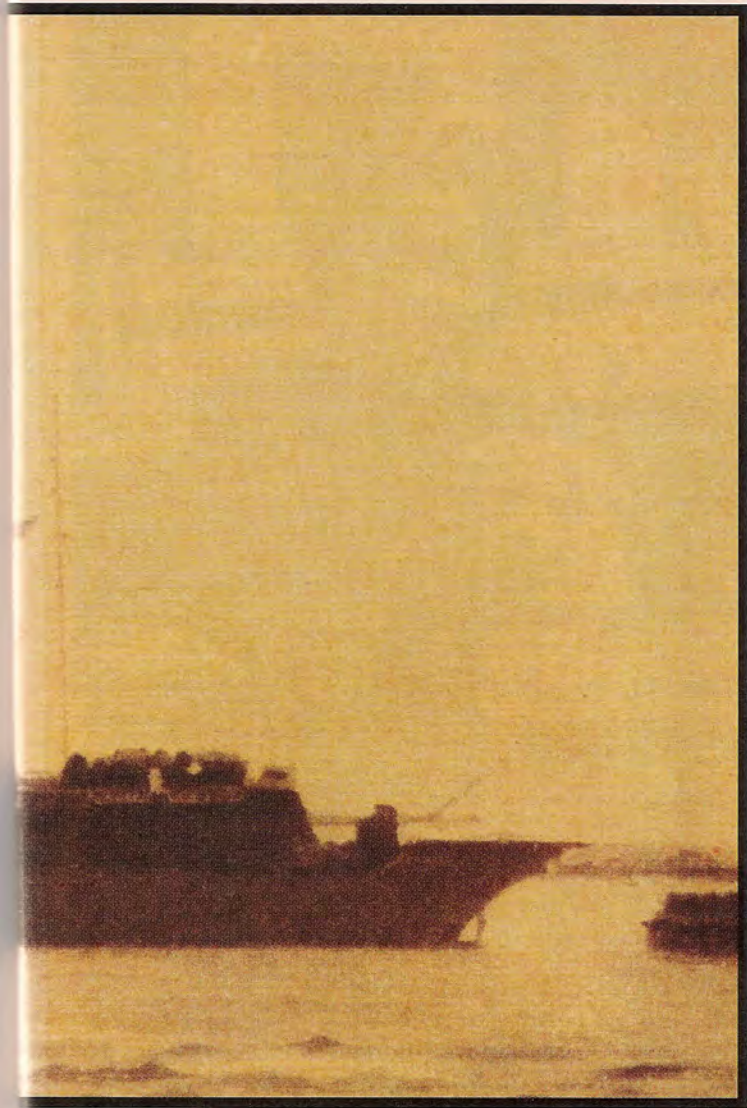
BY ALAN AND ADAM GUGGENHEIM

HAGANAH ARCHIVES, TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

In early 1942, nearly 800 Jewish refugees from Romania were stranded on board the Struma (above, interned in Istanbul), their fates in the hands of Turkish and British diplomats. Forced to return to Romania, she exploded soon after reaching the Black Sea. Only one man survived to tell the tale. David Stoliar (right, at his home today) exposed the hypocrisy of those who refused to save the Struma's passengers.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



Shortly after noon on 23 February 1942, 80 Turkish policemen, with truncheons raised, stormed on board the *Struma*, an old, rickety, retrofitted cattle barge packed with 791 passengers and crew.¹ The police scuffled with some of the hot-headed passengers and cut the anchor chain of the hapless vessel. They secured lines to the Turkish military tugboat *Aldemar*, while passengers wailed from below deck. On shore, bystanders at Istanbul's Tophane landing, opposite the *Struma*'s anchorage, saw passengers drape from the ship railings painted shirts and sheets that read "Jewish Immigrants," "SOS," and "Save Us."²

The *Aldemar* towed the *Struma* out of Istanbul through the 12 natural bends in the Bosphorus and into the Black Sea. Five hours later, as night fell, the *Aldemar* cast the *Struma* adrift, without an anchor, provisions, or a working engine.

As callous and insensitive as the actions taken by the Turkish authorities might sound today, they were *exactly* what the British Colonial Office and the Palestine High Commissioner had desired. On 9 October 1941, British High Commissioner Harold MacMichael notified the Colo-

onial Office that the refugee ship *Struma* was preparing to leave Romania for Palestine. Initially, MacMichael requested that His Majesty's ambassador in Ankara, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, ask the Turkish government to fabricate some legal pretext to bar the *Struma*'s passage through the Dardanelles Strait. If this failed, MacMichael suggested the Admiralty intercept and force the *Struma* back to where she began.³ The Turks ended up performing exactly as MacMichael had requested.

Then the inevitable happened. At 0200 the following morning, the *Struma* exploded. Initial reports attributed the blast to a "stray mine." The first dispatch out of Istanbul, transmitted by the Associated Press and published in *The New York Times*, said "a search was begun immediately," but there were "no reports of survivors."⁴

Had there been no survivors, the *Struma* might have disappeared as a minor maritime tragedy against a backdrop of world war in Europe, North Africa, and the South Pacific. But one man did survive—a 19-year-old Romanian Jew, David Stoliar. And to the chagrin of Turkey, Stoliar lived to expose their hypocrisy. The Turks delayed their rescue effort for 24 hours, and when their search party arrived, it comprised only six men in a rowboat who were surprised to find anyone alive.

Even more damning to Turkey and Great Britain (and, in retrospect, to the Soviet Union) was Stoliar's explanation that a torpedo—not a stray mine—sank the hapless refugee ship. Stoliar's survival underscored the callous indifference Turkey, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union showed toward to the plight of refugees fleeing Nazi and Fascist persecution in Europe and turned the 791 victims of the *Struma* into martyrs for the creation of modern-day Israel.

Today, at age 81, the sharp-witted and fit survivor of the *Struma* suspects a crucial piece of the puzzle remains missing. To date, no back-channel communications have turned up in the archives of Winston Churchill's Great Britain or Josef Stalin's Soviet Union to indicate a conspiracy between those two nations to get rid of the *Struma*, and Turkey's official archives remain closed on this subject. Yet Stoliar, a naturalized citizen of the United States since 1983, questions the coincidences surrounding the sinking of the *Struma*. He also wonders whether the Middle East might be less volatile today if the British simply had thrown out a humanitarian welcome mat to the doomed refugee ship.

The odyssey for young Stoliar, the son of a babushka manufacturer in Bucharest, began in September 1940, when Fascist-leaning Ion Antonescu assumed dictatorial powers in Romania similar to those of his friend, Adolf Hitler, in Nazi Germany. To the satisfaction of Hitler, Antonescu systematically implemented measures intended to strip Jews of their citizenship and loot them of their property.



David Stoliar's ticket for his voyage on the *Struma* (above), survived the torpedo sinking in the pocket of his thick leather jacket. His 18-year-old girlfriend, Ilse Lothringer, perished with other school classmates of Stoliar's.

Stoliar was 18 years old when anti-Semitic looting and killing swept through the streets of Bucharest in a bloody pogrom in January 1941. Several months later, Antonescu's government conscripted Stoliar to work in a day-labor camp at the Poligon sports complex, a 45-minute streetcar ride east of downtown Bucharest. Stoliar's job was digging trenches for a new firing range for German troops massing in Romania for Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Stoliar's father Jacob believed he could survive the Fascists and the Nazis, but he feared for his son's life. The sight of Jews being marched through the streets of Bucharest at the point of Romanian bayonets prompted Jacob to pay an extortionate \$1,000 to the *Struma* organizers, an opportunistic amalgamation of right-wing Zionists seeking free passage for their own members to Palestine, and Jean D. Pandelis, a 300-pound Greek shipping agent known by the Jewish underground as "Yanaki the Fatty," who clearly was involved for the money. Together with his junior partner, Commander Stefano d'Andria, an Italian ex-naval officer and Peter Lorre look-alike nicknamed "the Gnome," Pandelis organized the *Struma's* voyage and sold tickets at ever-increasing prices. Jacob Stoliar was a secular Jew, an affluent professional who disdained Pandelis and the Zionists, but he paid their price. "Under the circumstances, he had no choice," said David Stoliar. "The *Struma* was our only hope—that's how bad things were."

Stoliar did not want to leave his father, but he was excited nonetheless. Kicked out of public school almost two years earlier, intimidated and forced to work as a virtual slave to the Romanian Army, Stoliar was bursting with hope. He had a ticket to Palestine. Better yet, his girlfriend, Ilse Lothringer, and her parents, as well as a few of his for-



BOTH YAD VASHEM ARCHIVES, JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

mer school classmates, including his friend, Mircea Eizig, also had tickets and would be sailing with him.

A secular Jew who spoke no Hebrew, Stoliar knew little about Palestine, the land that Muslims, Christians, and Jews all agree God promised to Abraham and Sarah. But Stoliar feared the Nazis and the Fascists who ruled Romania. And besides, Great Britain had promised in the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 to establish a national homeland in Palestine for Jewish people such as he. Palestine represented the unknown, but in Stoliar's case the unknown was a safer bet than digging ditches for the Nazis at the Poligon.

On 12 December, Stoliar crossed the gangplank onto the *Struma*. "It was quite a shock," said Stoliar. "We hadn't expected a luxury liner, but this was a sardine can!" He read the ominous words printed on his ticket: "This is not a pleasure trip. Be tolerant, good-natured, patient, have pity on your neighbor. Do not push, do not try to get the best place because you are stronger. Leave the best places for the weak."

An hour before the *Struma* left Constanza, Romanian authorities seized half of the food provisions, the copper cooking utensils, and all of the passengers' foreign currency and jewels, except their wedding rings.

Stoliar felt the deck move as the Constanza harbor tug, the *Istria*, eased the ill-fated *Struma* from her berth and into the main channel against a rising tide. Not much more

than a salvaged shipwreck retrofitted by Pandelis with the support of the New Zionist Organization, the *Struma*, flying the Panamanian flag, was a two-masted sailing vessel of 226 gross (140 net) tons, about 146 feet long, with an 18-foot draft, with 12 compartments on three lower decks, and an auxiliary engine but no sails. Each compartment was lined with 18-inch-wide bunks, three high. Passengers ducked into the berthing compartments and had to take turns sleeping. There were four washbasins, one freshwater tap, and a bay with eight toilet stalls, but no toilet paper. Two lifeboats were strapped to the superstructure. There were no life preservers. The engine on the *Struma* was believed to be a 300-horsepower Mercedes Benz salvaged from a wreck on the bottom of the Danube River. Three of the engine's cylinders coughed and sputtered on a mixture of 75% gasoline and 25% lube oil, when it ran at all. A small dynamo powered the ship's lights.⁵

"Remarkably, though, morale was good, at first," said Stoliar. Soon, however, the air inside the ship became stuffy. The light bulbs cast frightening shadows. The *Struma* pitched and rolled. "We were thrown against the wooden hatches. The timbers creaked, the engine spluttered. It kept stopping, starting, stopping. The periods of silence got longer. The lights got dimmer. Then the engine stopped completely. We had only been going 40 minutes!" said Stoliar.

For three days, the *Struma's* captain, Grigori T. Garabatenko, a Bulgarian, arranged for repairs from shore that cost the passengers their wedding rings and nursed the vessel into the territorial waters of Turkey. On 15 December, the lookout on the *Struma* cried, "Mine ahead!"

Captain Garabatenko throttled back the engine, but it died. He prepared to abandon ship until a Turkish tugboat appeared and towed the *Struma* into Istanbul harbor.

"Our relief was short-lived," said Stoliar. "They put us in quarantine."

Turkey did not want the *Struma* adding to its already overcrowded refugee camps and jeopardizing its wartime neutrality. So the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs told British Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen that it would turn back the *Struma* to the Black Sea unless the Palestine government was prepared to allow her passengers to enter Palestine.⁶

While the Turks awaited a response from the British, the *Struma* ran out of food. Before the passengers starved, the Turkish police decided after ten days in port to allow the local Jewish community in Istanbul to ferry supplies to the vessel.

The British were in a quandary. They had promised Jews a homeland during World War I to reward their opposition against the Ottoman Turks. Now, in the midst of World War II, they opposed Jewish refugees entering Palestine. Arab support of the Allies was, at best, lukewarm. A flood of Jewish immigrants would drive the Arabs into the arms of the Nazis, who needed oil to win the war. So, even though immigration quotas had not yet been reached and visas were available, the British turned thumbs down on the *Struma*.

Chief author of the British position was Lord Walter Moyne, head of Britain's Colonial Office. Together with officials from the Foreign Office, Lord Moyne drafted instructions for Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen: "We should leave Turkish authorities in no doubt that His Majesty's Government's policy is unmodified in respect of this illegal immigration. Please make this clear accordingly to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and ask them to send the ship back to the Black Sea as originally suggested by the [Turkish] Ministry."⁷ In a second draft, to avoid blame for any possible resulting humanitarian disaster, Lord Moyne, an opponent of Jewish immigration who was assassinated by the terrorist Stern

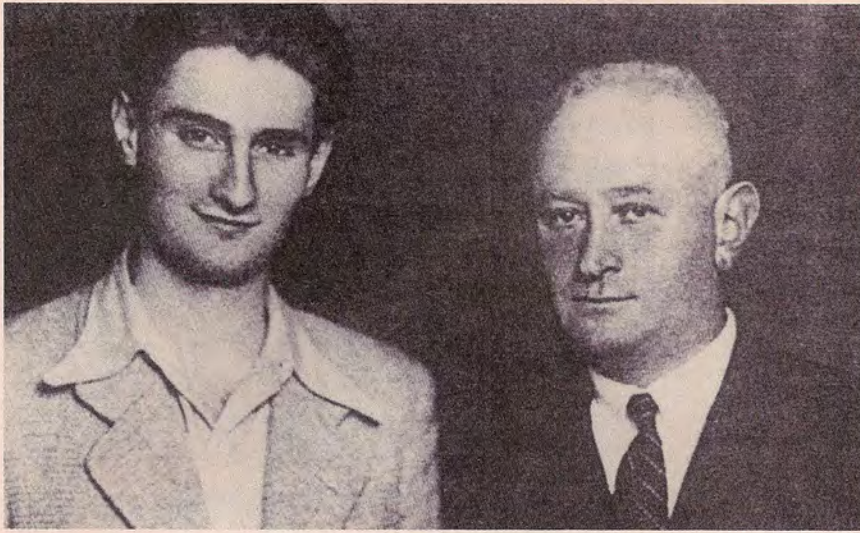


Gang in 1944 for his role in the *Struma* affair, softened the instructions to his ambassador, saying, "There seems no good reason why the Turks should not take the measure they themselves suggested."

On 28 December, Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen conveyed Britain's position to Ankara.⁸ The *Struma's* fate was sealed. The only question for the two nations was how to get rid of the vessel.

For ten weeks, the *Struma* remained politically marooned in the middle of one of the world's busiest harbors. From the top deck, David and his girlfriend Ilse drifted into a stupor as they watched the ship traffic and listened to the sounds of the city.

"People got used to the misery, the dirt, the promiscuity, the lack of food, the cold. We shaved the bugs off our



CENTRAL ZIONIST ARCHIVES, JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

David Stoliar stands beside Simon Brod, an Istanbul Jewish textile executive who worked tirelessly as the representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution to help feed the refugees on the *Struma* and to secure Stoliar's release from Turkish prison after his rescue.

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shirts with a razor blade. We had nothing else to change into, no water to wash with. There were lots of children. Some of them became ill. There was no medicine—plenty of doctors, but no medicine. We had not expected the journey to last more than five days.”

A pregnant woman miscarried. The Turks allowed her to leave the ship. The only other people the Turks allowed to disembark were four members of a family with influential friends in Istanbul, and three people who held expired visas for Palestine. The British reluctantly agreed to renew their visas, permitting them overland travel to Palestine.

While the British debated the fate of the *Struma* at the highest levels in January and February 1942, they never altered Lord Moyne's original instructions to Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen, except for a brief consideration of taking off the younger children.

On 23 February 1942, Turkey lost its patience. The *Alde-mar* cast the *Struma* adrift in the Black Sea. Deckhands yelled for the hapless vessel to make for the Bulgarian port of Burgas, home to the *Struma*'s captain and crew.

“Sure, the captain would have gone to Bulgaria if he could've,” said Stoliar. “But how? We didn't have an engine!” At midnight, Stoliar crawled into his bunk, disconsolate.

At 0200 the next morning, as the quarter moon was rising over the Black Sea, Turkish shore lookouts at the Reba coast guard station, six miles east of the Bosphorus, trained their binoculars for suspicious ship traffic. They were alert. Several hours earlier, a submarine fired a torpedo but missed. She then used a deck cannon to sink a small fishing vessel, the *Cankaya*.⁹ The predator was an Allied sub-

marine, the Soviet's *Shchuka* (*ShCh*)-213, commanded by Senior Lieutenant D. M. Denezhko. Two hours after sinking the *Cankaya*, the *ShCh*-213 stalked the *Struma* and went on the attack.¹⁰

The chief mate of the *Struma*, Lazar Ivanof Dikof, also a Bulgarian, knew nothing of the *ShCh*-213, but he immediately recognized the telltale trail of bubbles from a torpedo shooting toward the *Struma* from the direction of shore. Dikof ran to tell Captain Garabatenko. He got as far as his cabin door when the *Struma* vaporized. The blast blew Dikof into the air, still clinging to the doorknob. He splashed into the sea and floated on the door, gasping for air. The Turkish coast guard at Reba immediately reported the flash of the explosion.¹¹

Stoliar splashed into the sea, a soft rain pelting the choppy surface. He sucked air in the pandemonium of men and women, crying and splashing in the icy-cold water, their broken and bloody arms grasping for rotten splinters of debris not bolted to the steel plates of the ship. Stoliar strained to hear Ilse's voice or that of his friend Mircea. There was nothing.

Denezhko noted in his log, probably to the satisfaction of the submarine's political commissar, A. G. Rodimatzav, that the *ShCh*-213 sank the *Struma* with a single torpedo from a distance of 111.8 meters.¹² Denezhko may have rationalized sinking the *Struma*, because even though Turkey was neutral, it was the sole supplier to Nazi Germany and Fascist Romania of chromium needed to harden steel in war armaments. Besides, who was he to disobey a secret order from Stalin himself to sink all enemy and neutral shipping on the Black Sea?¹³

Twelve hours after the explosion, Dikof and Stoliar found themselves alone. They perched back to back on a piece of bench still bolted to a chunk of deck with twisted and bent railing protruding from the water. A corpse floated nearby, the eyes pecked out the day before by sea birds. They shivered and yelled and sang to stay alive. Dikof told Stoliar about the torpedo he saw coming from shore moments before the explosion. They watched distant headlights crawl over the hills and listened to the sounds of vehicle engines. An hour before first light, Dikof fell silent and slipped into the frigid water.

Shortly after dawn on 25 February, six coast guardsmen from the Turkish lighthouse station at Sile picked through the debris of the *Struma*. They came upon two corpses and, to their shock, a survivor.

Even as Stoliar finally was being rescued, tempers in Palestine, Great Britain, and the United States were flar-

ing. The tragedy brought together, perhaps for the first time, moderate Jewish organizations and more radical Zionists, including alleged terrorist groups such as the Haganah and the Irgun. Suddenly, Jews found themselves united in their demands for an explanation of the tragedy. The Turks hunkered down and kept Stoliar under wraps. But the British were unable to stonewall the controversy. In a House of Lords debate on 10 March 1942, Lord Harold Davies severely criticized the colonial administration as “stupid, callous, and inhuman” for refusing the *Struma*. His colleague, Lord Josiah Wedgwood, attributed the refusal of entry to the *Struma* to the Palestine Administration’s “need to appease Arabs.” He added, “if we are afraid of them, arm the Jews, and then we shall not need to fear the Arabs.”¹⁴

In Palestine, the official representation of the Jewish community, the Yishuv, called a general strike on 26 February to protest the “closing to Jewish fugitives of the only gateway of salvation from Nazi persecution.” Enraged, Palestinian Jews posted circulars attacking Great Britain. One showed a picture of Sir Harold MacMichael with the caption, “Murder! Sir Harold MacMichael, Known As the High Commissioner for Palestine, Wanted for Murder of 800 Refugees Drowned in the Black Sea on the Boat *Struma*.” A bomb exploded on the Government House fence. Hundreds of protest letters and cables from Jewish individuals and organizations flooded into the U.S. Congress and to President Franklin Roosevelt to do something. Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Parliament debated their options. The word from *Eretz Israel* was not good.

“I take the view that there is quite a likelihood of a Jewish insurrection in Palestine unless some concession is made to them,” said Britain’s High Commissioner MacMichael. “The difficulty is to find a concession which does not constitute a landslide.”¹⁵

In May 1942, Britain abandoned its policy of encouraging the return of Jewish refugees to Europe and ended the deterrent and punitive period of its immigration policy of the previous three years. Robert A. J. Gascoyne-Cecil, formally known as Lord Cranborne, replaced Lord Moyne in the Colonial Office. But the damage had been done. The British were helpless after the *Struma* incident to prevent the landslide of Jewish nationalism feared by Commissioner MacMichael. Just as they had been united in their demands for an explanation of what happened to the *Struma*, moderates in the Yishuv found themselves united with the more radical Irgun and Haganah groups’ demands for a Jewish state. The end of World War II only accelerated the struggle.¹⁶

On 14 May 1948, Zionist leaders essentially frog-marched British General Sir Alan Cunningham out of Government House in Jerusalem and proclaimed the State of Israel in Tel Aviv.

And what of Stoliar? The Turks hospitalized him, then imprisoned and held him incommunicado for almost two months before suddenly releasing him with visas for Palestine. Ironically, after six months of physical therapy for his feet and hands, Stoliar left Palestine for Cairo, joined the British Army, and served with distinction for almost four years, fighting the Germans and rising to squadron quartermaster sergeant. In 1948, he manned a machine gun for Israel at Erfula against the Syrians, then relocated to postwar Japan, where he lived and worked in self-imposed obscurity for 18 years.

While he bears the world no enmity, the coincidences surrounding the *Struma*’s loss still intrigue Stoliar. Why, after 71 days, did Turkey abruptly and without any forewarning tow the ship into international waters in the deadly path of a Soviet submarine? Did agents of the British Colonial Office or Foreign Office suggest that Turkey cast the *Struma* adrift so that the Allies could take care of the rest?

“I think there was a conspiracy. Of course, I can’t prove it, but I can’t help wondering,” said Stoliar. †

¹⁴The number of people who perished on the *Struma*, 791, is a composite developed by Dr. Samuel Aroni, professor emeritus at UCLA, in 2002 from six previous but conflicting lists. Aroni published his analysis in the epilogue of *Death on the Black Sea: The Untold Story of the Struma and World War II’s Holocaust at Sea* by Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

¹⁵David Stoliar, the sole survivor of the *Struma*, is the primary source throughout, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶Minutes and correspondence, with handwritten comments on MacMichael’s proposal, Foreign Office 371/29162 W4734 and Foreign Office 371/29163 W2180 (October 1941).

¹⁷“750 Refugees on Ship Blown Up in Black Sea,” *The New York Times*, 25 February 1942.

¹⁸Touvia Carmely, *The Real Story of Struma or Breaking Down a Sixty-Year-Old Conspiracy of Silence* (Haifa, Israel, 2002), pp. 34-5; American Consulate General Memo to the Secretary of State, 26 December 1941, File No. 704/885; Frantz and Collins, *Death on the Black Sea*, pp. 99-102.

¹⁹Knatchbull-Hugessen to Foreign Office No. 2960, 20 December 1941, on Colonial Office 733/449//P3/4/30.

²⁰Draft, Foreign Office 371/29207 W15571.

²¹Foreign Office to Ankara No. 2651, 24 December 1941. The telegram is Foreign Office 371/29207 W15313.

²²Letter from Acting Secretary of State Sumner Wells to Congressman Michael J. Bradley, 1 April 1945.

²³L. T. Ermilov, ed., Ministry of Defence, USSR, *Boevaia Letopis’ Voenno-Morskogo Flota 1941-1942* [War Chronicle of the Navy, 1941-1942] (Moscow: Military Publishing, 1983), p. 496.

²⁴Letter from Acting Secretary of State Sumner Wells to Congressman Michael J. Bradley, 1 April 1945.

²⁵Frantz and Collins, *Death on the Black Sea*, pp. 253-54.

²⁶In the Canadian documentary film, *The Struma* (Simcha Jacobovici, Associated Producers), Gennadi Kibardin, a Ukrainian historian in Kiev, disclosed his discovery in 2001 of Stalin’s secret order to sink neutral shipping on the Black Sea.

²⁷Division of European Affairs, Department of State, Mathews to Washington, Cable 1139, 10 March 1942.

²⁸Ronald W. Zweig, *Britain and Palestine During the Second World War*, (London: Boydell Press for The Royal Historical Society, 1986), p. 129, reference to High Commissioner to Colonial Office, Most Secret and Personal, 20 March 1942, Colonial Office 733/445//76021.

²⁹Zweig, *Britain and Palestine During the Second World War*, pp. 182-183.

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