



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Reflection of Münir Ertegun's Death on Diplomatic Documents and Its Impact on Turkish Foreign Policy

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Received: Oct 17, 2024

Accepted: Dec 11, 2024

**Keywords**Münir Ertegun  
Türkiye Foreign Policy  
Türkiye-U.S. Relations  
Battleship Missouri**\*Corresponding Author:**

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Mehmet Münir Ertegun, who was appointed as Türkiye's Ambassador to the United States in 1934, strengthened relations between the two countries during his ten-year mission in the U.S. and made significant efforts to promote Türkiye. Following his death from a heart attack on 11 November 1944, his remains were buried with a military ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. After Second World War, The U.S. government announced that the remains of Münir Ertegun would be transported to Türkiye aboard the Missouri, one of the largest battleships of the U.S. Navy. This development was interpreted as a sign of America's intention to draw Türkiye to its side. In a coded telegram sent from the Turkish Embassy in Washington to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 27 February 1946, it was noted that transporting Ertegun's remains aboard the Missouri should be viewed as a response to the Soviet threat. From that day onward, the political and economic cooperation initiated by the two countries also became evident in diplomatic documents. Ambassador Hüseyin Ragıp Baydur, after meeting with an official from the U.S. State Department, stated that the selection of the Missouri was not a coincidence. In another "Secret" document sent by Baydur, Turkish press institutions were warned not to attribute special political meaning to the visit of the Missouri and to act with caution. Missouri departed from New York on 23 March 1946 and arrived in Istanbul on 5 April 1946, where it was greeted with great enthusiasm. When all of these developments are evaluated together, the most obvious evidence that Turkey followed a pro-US policy after the Second World War is its benefit from the Marshall Aid and its membership in NATO. This study discusses the impact of Münir Ertegun's death on Turkish-American relations and its reflections on post-war Turkish foreign policy.

## INTRODUCTION

Born in Istanbul in 1883, Münir Ertegun studied law at the Darülfünun and served as a legal adviser in the Ottoman State. He took part in the Turkish diplomatic delegations during the negotiations of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Treaty of Sèvres, and the Lausanne Peace Conference (Simsir, 1996: 296-297). During the Lausanne negotiations, he occasionally met with French and British legal experts to address judicial issues (Sonyel, 1974: 104). After the proclamation of the Republic, he participated as a member of the Turkish delegation in many international meetings held to resolve Türkiye's international issues. In 1924, during the Mosul question discussed by the League of Nations, Münir Bey served as a legal adviser within the Turkish delegation led by Ali Fethi Bey (Musul-Kerkük, 1993: 66). Appointed as Türkiye's envoy to Bern in 1925, Ertegun made significant contributions to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Switzerland (Simsir, 1996: 296-297). In the following years, until the end of his life, he served as an ambassador in several key diplomatic posts abroad, becoming one of Türkiye's most prominent diplomats.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was prepared by literature review method to reveal theoretical information about foreign policy and to address the foreign developments that Türkiye has put forward in the past years. For

this purpose, archive documents and press organs of the period were examined and copyrighted works were used.

### **The Activities of Mehmet Münir Ertegun as a Diplomat**

When the negotiations between Türkiye and Britain regarding Mosul produced no results, the League of Nations referred the issue to the Permanent Court of International Justice for an advisory opinion. Münir Bey, who chaired the Turkish delegation in Geneva, emphasized that the British claims alleging that “the Turks were deporting and massacring Christians in Mosul” were unfounded, noting that Christians had not lived in the region for a long time. He argued that such accusations against the Turks should be avoided (Ozturk, 2016: 88).

In 1928, Münir Bey served as Türkiye's Expert Representative on the Security Committee at the Disarmament Conference held in Geneva. Later, he represented Türkiye in the activities of the International Labour Organization and was subsequently appointed as Türkiye's Ambassador to Paris (Harris, 2009: 179). Archival documents indicate that his appointment to the Paris Embassy was proposed by the Council of Ministers on 14 September 1930, and that President Gazi Mustafa Kemal approved his assignment with a salary of 150 Turkish Lira and an allowance of 55 Turkish Lira (BCA. 030.18.1.2 / 14.61.10). During his ambassadorship in Paris, Münir Bey also contributed with his legal expertise. He represented Türkiye at the 4th International Conference on Criminal Law, held in Paris on 27–30 December 1931 (BCA. 030.18.1.2 / 24.75.9).

By presidential decree, Münir Bey was appointed as Ambassador to the United Kingdom on 26 May 1932 (BCA. 030.18.1.2 / 29.42.5). The Daily Telegraph reported this on 30 May 1932, describing him as highly knowledgeable and an esteemed jurist. The report highlighted his command of foreign languages and noted that he had assisted İsmet Paşa during the Lausanne negotiations through his translations (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 534, File No. 37076.148805.34).

A judicial assistance agreement signed between Türkiye and Britain on 28 November 1931, titled the Mutual Judicial Assistance Convention, regulated processes for judicial notifications between the two countries and entered into force with Law No. 2045 (Resmi Gazete, 5 July 1932). Münir Bey was authorized on 2 January 1933 to convey this law to the relevant authorities in the United Kingdom (BCA. 030.18.1.2 / 33.2.9).

Münir Bey remained in his post as Ambassador in London for less than two years. In February 1944, when Türkiye's Ambassador to the United States, Ahmet Muhtar Bey (Mollaoğlu), returned to Ankara, Münir Bey was appointed to succeed him. Münir Bey would serve in Washington for nearly ten years, playing an important role in Türkiye's interests during the Second World War (Simsir, 1996: 303).

An experienced diplomat, Münir Bey was nominated in 1936 for membership in the Permanent Court of International Justice but failed to secure enough votes, after which he continued his duties as Ambassador to Washington (Harris, 2009: 189). According to the Turkish Diplomatic Archives, Albania instructed its permanent representative in Geneva to support Münir Bey in the vote (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 514, File No. 44416.212295.11). In another document, Minister of Foreign Affairs Tevfik Rüştü Bey (Aras) noted that Münir Bey's failure to be elected was not due to his inadequacy but because the Chinese and Latin American countries had agreed among themselves not to support him (BCA. 030.10.0.0 / 129.926.15).

### **Mehmet Münir Ertegun's Work During His Tenure as Ambassador to the United States**

With the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, Türkiye's independence was recognized by many states. Since the United States had not taken part in the conference, it did not sign the treaty. Diplomatic relations were reestablished through the exchange of notes—known as the *Modus Vivendi*—signed on 17 February 1927 (Acikses & Gur, 2009: 16). Following this development, the United States sent Joseph Grew as its ambassador to Türkiye in September 1927. Ahmet Muhtar Bey began his service as Türkiye's Ambassador to Washington in December 1927 (Simsir, 1977: 277). He served until 1934, when he was recalled to Ankara. Having previously served as ambassador in Bern, Paris, and London, Münir Bey was appointed Ambassador to Washington by presidential decree dated 19 March 1934 (BCA. 030.18.1.2 / 43.15.11). A few days after his arrival in Washington in June 1934, he met with Secretary of State Cordell Hull and presented his credentials to President Franklin Roosevelt on 26 June 1934 (Harris, 2009: 181).

On 17 January 1935, a banquet was held in New York in honor of Ambassador Münir Bey by Charles H. Sherrill, former U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye. The event was attended by President Franklin Roosevelt and his mother Sara Ann Delano. Münir Bey expressed his gratitude for Roosevelt's remarks about Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. An archival document quotes Roosevelt as saying that "the greatest man in Europe sits in Türkiye" (BCA. 030.10.0.0 / 268.803.2).

In June 1938, Münir Bey sent a telegram to Ankara asking for information about the so-called Ekrem König incident, which concerned a rumor that Türkiye had ordered airplanes from Canada. It was later discovered that the incident was fabricated, involving forged signatures of two Turkish ministers and an unauthorized attempt by Ekrem König to place an order on behalf of Türkiye. Through his meetings with American officials, Münir Bey helped reveal the fraudulent nature of the case, demonstrating the importance of his close coordination with the Turkish government during this process (Öztürk, 2018: 234).

During this period, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Şükrü Saraçoğlu stated that Admiral Bristol, head of the board of trustees of the hospital built by the United States in Istanbul, wished to travel with his wife to Türkiye for the hospital's opening in the spring of 1939. Given Admiral Bristol's favorable stance toward Türkiye during the War of Independence, Ambassador Münir Bey was tasked with extending the invitation (BCA. 030.10.0.0 / 268.804.11). During this period, Münir Bey also evaluated that the closure of Robert College, which was a problem in Türkiye – U.S. relations, would cause a negative image in the American public and that it would be appropriate to make the necessary arrangements for Robert College to continue its operations in order to maintain friendly relations (Ozturk, 2016: 128).

Münir Bey sometimes had difficult times in Washington due to Türkiye's neutral policy during the Second World War, which started in 1939. In particular, despite Türkiye's stated neutrality, it has had to fight against perceptions that its failure to enter the war on the side of the allied group is as if Türkiye is against the United States. In addition, developments on the sale of chromium with Germany, where Türkiye is in trade, have also been asked to Mr. Munir from time to time. The Washington Daily News newspaper reported on October 1, 1942, that Münir Bey was faced with the cold shoulder of Washington society. Türkiye's continued chromium trade with Germany, its maintenance of neutrality, and its cooperation with Russia were interpreted as Türkiye not wanting to fight anyone. Münir Bey dismissed Türkiye's chromium trade agreement with Germany by saying that there was no information reaching the embassy (The Washington Daily News, 1942: 37).

During the war, political relations between Türkiye and the United States grew increasingly significant. The United States urged Türkiye to enter the war against Germany and to halt its chromium exports to that country. Although Türkiye initially resisted as part of its policy of balance, it later agreed—under pressure from the Allied Powers—to halt chromium sales and eventually to enter the war (Onsoy, 2012: 114).

Despite the challenges, developments also occurred in Münir Bey's favor. In April 1944, he became the *doyen* of the diplomatic corps in the United States. A newspaper report dated 9 April 1944 described Münir Bey—after nearly nine years of service—as a distinguished legal scholar with fluent English, polite manners, a modern appearance, and a sharp expression, and stated that he would continue to fulfill his responsibilities with dignity (The Evening Star, 1944: 38).

### **Reflections of Münir Ertegun's Death in Diplomatic Documents and Its Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy**

In a coded telegram sent from the Turkish Embassy in Washington by Secretary Orhan Kutlu to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, it was reported that Ambassador Münir Bey had been unwell for some time and that after returning from New York—where he had gone for medical treatment—he spent most of Republic Day (29 October 1944) in bed. It was stated that because he stood for nearly four hours to greet guests later that day, he became fatigued and experienced heart-related complications. Doctors conducted examinations and reported that Münir Bey needed rest and should remain on leave for one month (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23510.102392.5).

A few days later, doctors R. Massie Page and Thomas Lu sent a telegram to Ankara informing him that Ambassador Münir Bey's health was serious and that he should not return to duty for three months. Two days later, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded in a telegram wishing Münir Bey a

speedy recovery and granting him three months of leave to rest. Before this telegram reached Washington, another telegram sent from the U.S. to Ankara stated that Ambassador Münir Bey passed away at 4:15 a.m. on November 11 (Simsir, 1996: 305).

U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a condolence message to Turkish President İsmet İnönü upon Münir Bey's death. In his message, Roosevelt described Ertegün as a successful diplomat, emphasizing his honesty and courteous personality, and conveyed his condolences to the Turkish nation. American cabinet members also expressed their sorrow over his death (FRUS, 1944: 915–916).

Acting U.S. Secretary of State Edward Stettinius visited the Turkish Embassy early in the morning following Münir Bey's death to express his condolences to the ambassador's family and colleagues (The Evening Star, 1944: 18). Stettinius stated that Türkiye had lost one of its finest public servants (Cumhuriyet, 1944: 3). The telegram sent from the Turkish Embassy in Washington stated that it was not possible to send Münir Bey's body to Türkiye due to the Second World War, and that for this reason he would be buried in Arlington Cemetery with the participation of U.S. officials and diplomatic corps members. (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23510.102392.3).

Münir Bey's funeral ceremony took place at 11:00 a.m. on November 15, 1944. According to a document in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, the ambassador's body was placed on a gun carriage and transported to the cemetery in a funeral procession of 150 automobiles. The Ambassador to Mexico, the Deputy Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps, spoke at the ceremony and offered his condolences. As the body was laid to rest in the cemetery, three rifles were fired and a horn was blown, as is customary in military ceremonies. (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23510.102392.1).

Following Münir Bey's death, Hüseyin Ragıp Baydur was appointed as Türkiye's new Ambassador to Washington. In a telegram sent on 26 November 1945, Baydur stated that with the end of the Second World War, there might now be an opportunity to transport Münir Ertegün's remains to Türkiye aboard a U.S. warship and asked for the Turkish government's instructions on the matter (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23510.102422.1).

Since the Turkish War of Independence, the Soviet Union had been among Türkiye's strongest supporters, and friendly relations continued until the start of the Second World War. During this period, Türkiye benefited from Soviet economic and political support. However, Türkiye's neutrality during the war prompted Moscow to reassess its relations with Ankara. Türkiye's stance was met with disapproval by the Allies, especially by the Soviet Union (Luca, 1977: 510). This shift in policy also influenced Türkiye's perspective toward Western powers.

At the Potsdam Conference following the war, the Soviet Union's demands concerning control over the Turkish Straits alarmed both the United States and the United Kingdom. The conference ended without agreement. After Potsdam, the United States reconsidered its policy on the Straits and, beginning in January 1946, became increasingly concerned with protecting Türkiye's territorial integrity. One of the first signs of this shift was the American decision to return Ambassador Münir Ertegün's remains to Türkiye aboard the battleship *USS Missouri* (Gonlubol & Ulman, 1996: 201).

On January 25, 1946, U.S. Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson consulted with U.S. President Truman on how to repatriate Münir Ertegün's remains to Türkiye. Acheson suggested that the remains of the deceased Turkish Ambassador, Münir Ertegün, who was serving as the doyen of the diplomatic corps in Washington, be sent to Türkiye aboard an American cruiser, stating that this would be in accordance with established diplomatic practices. The Undersecretary stated that this gesture should in no way be linked to political events and was merely a courtesy (Alvarez, 1974: 233).

In a coded telegram sent to Ankara by Hüseyin Ragıp Bey, Türkiye's ambassador to Washington, he announced that the U.S. State Department had granted permission for the transfer of the late ambassador Münir Bey's remains to Türkiye. The remains would first be exhumed from Arlington Cemetery, transported by train to New York, and then placed on a cruiser for Istanbul. The cruiser was scheduled to depart on March 21st and, barring any unforeseen circumstances, arrive in Istanbul on April 5th. (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23642.102991.9). Although another telegram sent by Hüseyin Ragıp Bey stated that the selection of the Missouri ship was a coincidence,

it was also stated that someone from the U.S. Foreign Ministry considered the selection of this ship not a coincidence but an initiative against the Mediterranean threat of Soviet Russia (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 571, File No. 35271.138715.174).

The then U.S. Navy Secretary James Forrestal suggested on February 28, 1946, that the U.S. send a powerful fleet to the Mediterranean, and President Truman instructed that other U.S. ships accompany the battleship Missouri, which would carry Münir Ertegün's remains (Akalın, 2003: 3). However, this situation led to a harsh stance against Soviet Russia. The idea of sending the ambassador's remains to Türkiye with military honors would not only strengthen the U.S.-Türkiye friendship but also increase Türkiye's reliance on American support. More importantly, an American naval force in the Eastern Mediterranean would enhance American prestige in the Near East and demonstrate America's interest in the region to Britain, France, Russia, and the Arab countries (Alvarez, 1974: 235). In a statement on March 10, 1946, James Forrestal stated that the U.S. task force would not accompany the battleship Missouri for various reasons, and that Münir Ertegün's remains would be sent only on the battleship Missouri (Inanc and Yilmaz, 2012: 405). This decision was influenced by the potential shortage in the army if the U.S. navy and personnel were to be deployed to the Mediterranean for an extended period (Fisher, 1995: 132).

In its March 8, 1946, issue, *Son Posta* newspaper reported that the Missouri would bring the remains of the late Münir Ertegün. It informed its readers that the selection of one of the world's warships for this purpose was met with astonishment and should not carry any political connotations (*Son Posta*, 1946: 1). In a telegram sent from the Turkish Embassy in Washington to Ankara on the same day, the U.S. State Department stated that the Missouri's arrival in Türkiye should be viewed as a sign of respect and should not be attributed any other political significance. The telegram also stated that Russia had requested a base from Greece on the Dodecanese islands, and that Russia would provide subsistence aid in return. Although the Greek Prime Minister rejected the Russian offer, it was assessed that Russia's motives in this initiative were related to the Turkish Straits. As can be seen from this information, Russia's discomfort with the U.S.'s deployment of the Missouri is clearly evident (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23642.102991.8).

On March 21, 1946, Münir Bey's remains were carried aboard the battleship Missouri, accompanied by U.S. President Truman's appointed ambassador Alexander Wilbourne Weddell and his wife; the Turkish Embassy's Chief of Protocol, Kadri Rızan; Ambassador's Counselor Mennan Tebelen; Münir Bey's wife and children; and Ambassador Hüseyin Ragıp Baydur. The Missouri, which departed on the same day, was accompanied by the U.S. naval forces USS Providence and USS Power (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23642.102991.4). The fact that this fleet was commanded by Admiral Henry Hewitt, Commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe, and that Major General Jules James, who would later establish the 6th Fleet, was also part of the fleet suggests that the visit was more than just a courtesy visit (Esel, 2022: 483).

According to a report by Edwin Carleton Wilson, the U.S. ambassador to Ankara, the Missouri's visit to Istanbul established a policy to protect America's interests in the Middle East and urged its continuation. Wilson argued that unless Soviet Russia's actions against Türkiye's independence were prevented, Soviet advances into the Mediterranean would be unavoidable, and a new world war would become inevitable (FRUS, 1946: 822-823).

The battleship Missouri and its accompanying ships arrived in Istanbul on April 5, 1946, and anchored in front of Dolmabahçe at 8:50 a.m. The Missouri's visit to Türkiye was met with great enthusiasm and admiration in Türkiye, with the print media reporting an incredible display of public joy (Kocaman & Golcu, 2021: 197). *Akşam* newspaper conveyed the public's strong sympathy for the American fleet in its columns. The report noted that thousands of people visited the ships starting at 1:00 p.m. (*Akşam*, 1946a: 1). Another report stated that the battleship Missouri would leave unforgettable, precious memories (Şakir, 1946: 5). In his newspaper article, Falih Rıfkı Atay stated that it would be wrong to seek any spectacle or ostentation during the Missouri's voyage (Atay, 1946: 1). In the article by Abidin Daver, a writer for *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, it was stated that the Turkish nation welcomed the battleship Missouri with appreciation and gratitude, and it was emphasized that the hospitality shown to the American sailors was an expression of sincere friendship (Daver, 1946: 1).

Diplomatic documents warned against attaching any special significance to the battleship Missouri's visit to Istanbul. A report in the Tanin newspaper demonstrates that this warning was heeded. It was stated that the dispatch of a battleship like the Missouri was a sign of respect for Münir Ertegun and, through him, a sign of friendship towards Türkiye, resonating sincerely in the heart of every Turk (Tanin, 1946: 1 and 4). Akşam newspaper, on the other hand, ran with the headline, "Welcome, our dear friends." Admiral Henry Hewitt stated in a statement that this visit was a manifestation of goodwill towards Türkiye, while Truman's representative, Weddell, stated that the Missouri's visit to Türkiye was the highest gesture of friendship between nations (Akşam, 1946b: 1).

On April 5, 1946, when the Missouri arrived in Istanbul Harbor, U.S. President Truman delivered a speech in Chicago to mark Army Day, announcing that he would reshape American foreign policy. In his speech, he stated that the Near and Middle East would become arenas of competition between major powers, potentially leading to conflict (Gonlubol & Ulman, 1996: 202).

After the Missouri's departure from Türkiye, reports in the U.S. press assessed that this visit would foster Turkish-U.S. friendship and contribute to the future of Middle East peace (Turkish MFA Archives: Ref. No. 502, File No. 23642.102989.1). Furthermore, this visit was seen as a sign that the U.S. would stand with Türkiye against a potential Soviet threat (Luca, 1977: 515).

After April 1946, changes were observed in Soviet Russia's approach to Türkiye. The clearest evidence of this was a note sent to Türkiye by Soviet Russia on August 7, 1946, regarding the straits. The note stated that ships passing through the straits should be restricted and that the security of the straits should be jointly defended by Türkiye and Soviet Russia (Gonlubol & Ulman, 1996: 204). This note from Soviet Russia was also conveyed to the United Kingdom and the United States. In a response to Soviet Russia's Washington chargé d'affaires, it was stated that the United States had a moderate approach to the restrictions on the passage of ships requested in the note, but that the U.S. government would not support a new straits regime dominated solely by the Black Sea coastal powers (Bulut, 2024: 700). A few days later, on August 14, 1946, the government program read in the Turkish Grand National Assembly declared in its foreign policy section that relations with the United States had been following a continuous development within the framework of mutual affection, respect, and cooperation. Shortly thereafter, Türkiye's diplomatic note to Soviet Russia rejected Soviet demands for joint defense of the Straits (Gonlubol & Ulman, 1996: 207).

By 1947, U.S. policies toward Eastern Europe, particularly Greece and Türkiye, had brought about new developments, initiating the process that paved the way for the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Aid. The most significant factor in this was the U.S.'s desire to attract strategically important states like Türkiye and Greece to its side.

## CONCLUSION

Following the visit of the Missouri to Türkiye in 1946, Türkiye, in response to Soviet Russia's pressure on Türkiye, resisted the USSR's aggressive reactions while simultaneously demonstrating its need for the aid and support of powerful powers like the U.S. and the UK.

After the war, when various demands emerged from Soviet Russia, Türkiye was forced to find new allies in the face of this pressure. The U.S., emerging as the new superpower in the political climate of the period, also made gestures of friendship to win Türkiye over. As a result of U.S. President Harry Truman's new ideas in 1947, the idea of providing financial assistance to countries including Türkiye and Greece ushered in a new era in Turkish-U.S. relations.

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