

The Military and “Humanitarian” Mission of Colonel Romanelli to Hungary (1919)

ANDREA CARTENY

*He was one of the winners,
but he sought to restore
law and justice without
humiliating the
defeated enemy.*

Andrea Carteny

Assistant professor at the University of Teramo and at Sapienza University of Rome. Author, among others, of the volume **I partiti politici in Romania (1989–2004)** (2007).

COLONEL GUIDO Romanelli, the head of the Italian Military Mission in Hungary, held a position of power in the few months of 1919 he spent in Budapest, facing both the dictatorship of Béla Kun’s Soviet regime and later the Romanian occupation forces. His actions—in the broader context of the Danube policies and of the fluctuations in the Italian “military diplomacy” in the immediate aftermath of World War I—are themselves controversial, particularly when it comes to the leading role played by the Italian officer as the only representative of the Entente in a particularly dramatic historical situation for Hungary and the Hungarians. In this context, the “humanitarian” label applied during the last years of the 20th century to the Italian Mission led by Romanelli in Hungary in 1919 seems quite exaggerated—even considering the unavoidable temporal and historical discrepancies.¹

The character of Romanelli—amid the disputes between Hungary and Ro-

mania in the complex situation following the end of hostilities in the autumn of 1918²—has been approached in its entire complexity after the recent republication of his memoirs concerning the mission to Hungary.³ In this unusual document written by the protagonist himself, Colonel Guido Romanelli the man and the soldier gives his testimony on these controversial events—such as his direct connection with the Bolshevik Hungarian leader Béla Kun, known as “the Magyar Lenin,” his direct correspondence with the Chairman of the Paris Peace Conference, Georges Clemenceau, and the equally direct contacts with the Romanian General Staff during the occupation of Budapest—underlining the only purpose pursued in such difficult situations: observance of the existing agreements and the defense of the populations of any nationality.⁴

After the armistice of Villa Giusti, Romanelli came back from the banks of the Piave to Catania. On 6 May 1919, this artillery and engineers officer received the order to join the Italian Armistice Commission in Vienna. In Vienna he reported to General Roberto Segre, this leader of the Italian Military Mission, who ordered him to go to Budapest and lead a Mission recently restored after the Allies had initially severed all contacts with the non-recognized Bolshevik dictatorship of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In Budapest, Romanelli became the only *de facto* representative of the victorious Powers and the only Allied interlocutor for the feared Soviet dictator, Béla Kun. At that moment, the Bolshevik leader was 33 years of age. As a militant member of the leftist Social Democratic Party before the war, he had completed his own ideological journey in Lenin’s revolutionary Russia, becoming an agitator and a man of action and practicing the Leninist form of Orthodox Marxism. A Transylvanian Hungarian of Jewish extraction, this clever politician was able to exploit the vacuum of power produced by the resignation of the Károlyi government, caused by the unacceptable “Vix Note” of 20 March 1919, accepting a subordinate role for the Communist Party alongside the Social Democrats. His condition was the creation of a “Soviet Republic” following the Bolshevik Soviet example. President Sándor Garbai, the Social Democratic leader, immediately saw the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Béla Kun as the most important man around, mainly because of the direct contact he claimed to have with Lenin: the bond of “brotherhood” with the Leninist regime was ratified at once in the form of a treaty of alliance with Soviet Russia. From the very outset, the power of the regime stemmed from the reorganization of a “Russian” Army, based on the masses of factory workers: it was potentially able to drive out the Romanian and Czech troops present within the borders set by the Armistice.⁵

From the very beginning, Romanelli’s relation with Kun was a delicate one, affected by unpredictable international political developments. During their very first meeting, despite their clear political and ideological differences, a direct

connection was created between the two characters: this connection was founded without a doubt on “a kind of mutual respect”⁶ that enabled the Italian colonel to speak in defense not only of matters concerning the Italian interests, but also of the Hungarian citizens that were oppressed by or opposed to the Bolshevik regime. Romanelli had to face a very difficult situation concerning the fate of a group of young military men who had joined the counterrevolutionaries on 24 June. The youths in question were mostly cadets at Ludovika Military Academy, and they were able to seize the public communications service, while some “monitors” marched with the national tricolor along the Danube. This action was effectively ended by the “reds” during the night, because the Budapest population did not join in their attempt. Consequently, the public execution of the rebels was announced: they were to be executed in the Oktogon, the main square of Pest. On 26 June, Colonel Romanelli, “as the leader of the Italian Military Mission, the only representative of the government and of the Allied and Associate Powers”—to quote his own words—drew up a short note in French and sent it directly to Béla Kun, the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs: the Italian commander demanded the application of the Geneva Convention for prisoners of war in a firm and sharp tone, holding Kun responsible for any acts of summary proceedings.⁷ The same day a note from Béla Kun was sent to the Italian commander: it condemned the counterrevolutionary action—as Kun contended, it had turned against homes and hospitals, and particularly against women, children and Hebrews—expecting Italy to distance itself from it given its “friendly attitude” towards Hungary, and he ideologically and passionately defended the response of the Hungarian Soviet Government. Above all, he protested against and opposed any interference in the internal affairs of the country.⁸ The reaction of the communist leader somehow encouraged Romanelli, who had the possibility to exploit a popular movement that had been anything but malevolent. This reaction had run counter to the Italian position, favorable to the political prisoners and demanding the application of the rules concerning the treatment of the prisoners of war, expressed in notes distributed to the press. Romanelli’s answer recalled the terms of the armistice of 3 November, stating that the Hungarian Soviet Government was a “partisan” regime and that the Italian friendship had always been extended to all the people of Hungary and never to a single party.⁹ The strong Italian answer was likely to be distorted in the newspapers under “red” control. Therefore, Romanelli decided to give the answer to the Austrian press, which secretly circulated in Hungary. This note remained without an answer, but the final result was nonetheless important:¹⁰ the young counterrevolutionaries from the military academy were not executed but sent to a “training camp.” After this, the number of people appealing to the Mission was to increase: they asked for intercession in favor of relatives

and friends, oppressed or arrested by the Bolshevik police, or demanded Italian papers likely to help them leave the country.

This military and also moral authority gained by the Italian commander was respected by the Hungarians but resented by others, including the Italian circles closer to the Romanians. In fact, the Hungarian Soviet regime had responded to the victorious Romanian and Czech offensives from the second part of April with a strong mobilization, and in early June it had reacted to the counterattack in Slovakia, retaking Kassa/Košice and proclaiming the Slovak Soviet Republic. The direct intervention of Georges Clemenceau, who sent a note to Budapest demanding the withdrawal of Hungarian troops and of the other armies that had arbitrarily occupied some Hungarian territories, such as the Romanian one, seemed to suggest a possible international recognition of the regime. He persuaded Kun to order the Hungarian withdrawal, but this remained a unilateral act. The acceptance of the French requests combined with the moral victory of Romanelli, who interceded in favor of the counterrevolutionaries, considerably weakened Kun's position within the Bolshevik regime: the greatest threat was the increasingly powerful Számuely–Vágó–Pogány triumvirate, which brought together the worst and most cruel characters of the regime.

The Italian colonel continued with his work and communicated to the Allied and to the Romanian general staffs all the information he had acquired:¹¹ the planned attack against Romania was somewhat compromised even before the beginning of military operations.¹² As expected, the attack failed and the Romanian troops had the possibility to advance towards the Hungarian capital. It was at this moment that the Italian commander made another move: with an unflinching sense of honor, he offered to Kun's family the protection of the Mission. In fact, Béla Kun was already facing the imminent revenge of the counterrevolutionaries, the "white terror," and when the Soviet regime fell Romanelli interceded with Paris in favor of the new and frail government of the Social Democrat Gyula Peidl, turning directly to the President Clemenceau and asking him to stop the Romanian advance on Budapest. The Mission commander continued with his efforts meant to change the situation and prevent additional losses and damage.¹³ However, the context had changed radically: the Romanian Army—following in the footsteps of the advanced units of the Szeged counterrevolutionaries reorganized around the charismatic figure of Admiral Miklós Horthy—was presently close to Budapest and, despite the apparent courtesy extended by the Romanian generals to the Allied representative Romanelli, the Romanian Army proceeded with the occupation of the city. While waiting for the arrival of the four generals representing the victorious Great Powers—called in by both Romanelli and the Hungarians as a measure of last resort against the undisputed Romanian military occupation—Romanelli conveyed the Hungarian complaints

concerning the military requisitions that were seriously affecting the population. He even sent a note to the Romanian General Staff on behalf of the Council of Foreign Ministers,¹⁴ communicating directly with the Romanian Commander, Gen. Ștefan Holban. The arrival of the expected Allied generals in Budapest—Gordon for the United Kingdom, Graziani for France, Bandholtz for the United States, and Mombelli for Italy—set in motion the transition from the Romanian occupation to the new Horthyst regime. Col. Romanelli remained under the authority of Gen. Ernesto Mombelli until his return home, on 16 November. The Italian leaders presently adopted a “passive attitude,” unable to assume a clear international position in regard to both losers (the Hungarians) and winners (the Romanians). In this diplomatic-military context, the Italian representative, whose “human” and moral achievements had been more than what his own superior could tolerate, was considered effectively responsible for the cooling of relations with Bucharest, in spite of the unwavering Italian support offered to the Romanians during the peace negotiations and of the appointment of the new and appreciated Italian minister Martin Franklin to Bucharest at the end of August.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the courage of Romanelli the man completed the actions taken by Romanelli the soldier. He was one of the winners, but he sought to restore law and justice without humiliating the defeated enemy, anxious to lay a strong foundation for peace, avoid new disputes and suffering, and eventually saving human lives. Romanelli’s position—expressed in the first note sent to Kun in connection to the planned execution of the young counterrevolutionaries of 24 June, in which the head of the Italian Mission had referred to the application of the Geneva Convention on war and political prisoners—had surely been grounded in theoretical reasons. His actions in this respect were mentioned not only by the “reds,” but also by Gen. Segre. Still, his desire to oppose with all of his power a barbarous summary execution would justify, at least in the eyes of an external observer, any juridical or military trespass on his part.

Without a doubt Guido Romanelli was a passionate witness to those events and particularly to the destiny of Hungarians and Hungary—a country that he deeply loved and often visited—and his more evident limitations must be sought in his relationship with the Romanians, because he was not able to establish the rapport that he sincerely wanted.¹⁶ However, he did not lose his neutrality in regard to the rival parties. He gained the respect of Béla Kun and also of Miklós Horthy, as well as the gratitude of the Primate of the Hungarian Catholic Church, János Csernoch, who in 1922 awarded him with the “Sword of Honor” (*Diszkárd*) for his outstanding services. The influential testimony of witness Leo Valiani clarified his relations kept up with the Bolshevik leader, deemed “beneficial to all.”¹⁷ Yet, he was accused of being close—too close—to

the “reds” (communists) and imprudently pro-Hungarian, and also of “irresponsibly” exceeding his mandate, to the point of insubordination.¹⁸



Notes

1. A rich and interesting documentation is available in Rome, at the Historical Archive of the Italian Army's General Staff: Archivio Storico—Stato Maggiore Esercito, AUSSME, Inter-Allied Commission fund, repertorium E8.
2. The vast bibliography on this subject includes: G. Cipăianu and V. Vesa, eds., *La fin de la Première Guerre Mondiale et la nouvelle architecture géopolitique européenne* (Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000); A. Ghișa, *Romania and Hungary at the Beginning of 20th Century: Establishing Diplomatic Relations (1918–1921)*, trans. (Cluj-Napoca: Romanian Cultural Institute, Center for Transylvanian Studies, 2003); G. Torrey, “La Prima Guerra Mondiale e l'Unione del 1918”, in *Una storia dei Romeni*, eds. S. Fischer-Galați, D. C. Giurescu, and I.-A. Pop (Cluj-Napoca: Fondazione Culturale Romena, Centro di Studi Transilvani, 2003).
3. G. Romanelli, *Nell'Ungheria di Béla Kun e durante l'occupazione romana: La mia missione (maggio-novembre 1919)*, eds. A. Biagini and A. Carteny (Rome: Ufficio Storico—Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2002).
4. Cf. a recent book in Hungarian and Italian: M. Szabó, *A Romanelli-misszió: egy olasz katonatiszt Magyarországon—1919. május-november / La missione di Romanelli: un ufficiale italiano in Ungheria—maggio-novembre 1919* (Budapest: Mundus, 2009).
5. In this particular historical framework, we witness an almost surreal development: the conversion to Bolshevism of almost an entire nation, as the last hope of national resistance. F. Fejtő and M. Serra, *Il passeggero del secolo: Guerre, Rivoluzioni, Europe*, trans. (Palermo: Sellerio, 2001), 87.
6. A. Biagini, “Introduzione storica,” in Romanelli, XXI.
7. Cf. AUSSME, E8, b. 114, “*Trattato del Trianon*”, fascicolo 4 “*Trattato di pace—Atti della C.M.I. di Budapest e azione del Ten. Col. Romanelli—1920*”: to *Ministero degli Esteri Gabinetto*, from *Il Ten. Colonnello di S.M. (Pellicelli)*—n. 10213 Sp. Prot., Paris, 10 July 1919, with attach.: to *M. le Commissaire du Peuple pour les Affaires Etrangères*, from *le Lieutenant Colonel Chef de la Délégation de Budapest Romanelli (copia)*, Budapest, 26 June 1919. Quoting the text of the note to Béla Kun, Romanelli wrote: “Vous serez tenus responsables collectivement et individuellement des susdites violences si elles devraient se vérifier.” The exchange of notes between Romanelli and Kun (three notes, published in Romanelli, 93–104) is included in the documentation sent by Gen. Roberto Segre (head of the Military Mission in Vienna) to the Supreme Command of the Italian Armistice Mission (also including two letters between Segre and Romanelli). The mission orders of Gen. Segre (dated 30 June, with the appended aforementioned five documents) confirm that the criticism of the Romanelli's action amounted to a valid point of view, “giacché in

- realtà il suo passo ha giovato al nostro prestigio ed alla nostra causa” (AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 4: “*Scambio di note a Budapest*,” to *Comando Supremo Segreteria*, from *Il Maggio[r] Generale Capo della Missione Roberto Segre*—n. 12738 prot. S.M., Vienna, 30 June 1919).
8. “L’attitude amicale de l’Italie à l’égard de la république des conseils hongroise ne me permet pas de supposer que l’Italie pourrait reconnaître comme parties belligérantes des bandes, qui en faveur de la contre-révolution veulent tuer des femmes et des enfants et assassiner les Juifs”: AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 4: to *M. le lieutenant-colonel G. Romanelli Chef de la Mission Italienne*, from *Bela Kun Commissaire des affaires étrangères (copie)*, Budapest, 26 June 1919. The conclusion confirms the determination of the government to operate “d’après leur propres lois et protestant contre toute ingérence dans les affaires intérieures du pays.”
 9. AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 4: to *M. Kum [sic] Bela Commissaire du Peuple pour les Affaires Etrangères*, from *le Lieutenant Colonel Chef de la Délégation de Budapest Romanelli (copie)*, Budapest, 27 June 1919; here Romanelli underlines that he must “attirer de nouveau toute Votre attention sur les conséquences fâcheuses que pourraient avoir pour Vous et les autres Commissaires du Peuple une attitude qui ne fut entièrement conforme aux désirs et aux espoirs des Gouvernements Alliés et Associés.”
 10. Cfr AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 4: to *Capo della Missione Militare Italiana*, from *Capo della Missione Militare Tenente Colonnello Romanelli* – n. 436 prot., Budapest, 27 June 1919. In this letter to Segre (including in attachment the copies of the three notes), Romanelli confirms the emergency of his action (“le deficienti comunicazioni con Vienna non mi hanno permesso di prendere consiglio prima di tali passi”) and underlines the real results achieved (such as the liberation of several prisoners and the sympathy for Italy among the Hungarian people). From Vienna, Segre stated his appreciation for the action but expressed juridical and formal criticism (“Ricordi però che in ogni circostanza, la lingua da adoperarsi nelle nostre comunicazione di servizio è quella italiana”): AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 4: “Scambio di note con Bela Kun”, to *Signor Tenente Colonnello Romanelli Delegazione Milit. Italiana Budapest*, from *Il Maggio Generale Capo della Missione R. Segre*—n. 12723 prot. S.M., Vienna, 30 June 1919. In the three telegrams (of 27, 28 and 29 June) sent by Segre to the General Staff (cf. “*Copia di tre telegrammi, inviati dal Generale Segre al Comando Supremo*,” 2 pages, attached in AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 4: to *Ministero Esteri Gabinetto*, from *Il Tenente Colonnello di S.M. (Pellicelli)*—n. 9752 SP., 4 July) Romanelli’s action was clearly censored (“Il Ten. Colonnello ROMANELLI ha errato gravemente attribuendo a insorti caratteri belligeranti invece di limitarsi ad insistere ragione di umanità”: Vienna 27/6/1919) but the positive evaluation done by the British representative was appreciated (“Anche Colonnello inglese Cunningham mi ha espresso suo soddisfare”: Vienna 28/6/1919).
 11. See the report “Composizione e dislocazione dell’esercito di Kun Béla al 10 luglio quale veniva comunicata dalla Missione alla Commissione di Armistizio a Vienna con invito a portarla a conoscenza delle autorità romene” quoted by Romanelli in his memories (Romanelli, 142, footnote 1).

12. Ibid., 134. In what concerned the Hungarian Army, Romanelli estimated “un complesso di 48 mila fucili, 713 mitragliatrici, 81 cannoni da campagna, 11 di medio e grosso calibro, mille cavalli, 23 aeroplani; il tutto raggruppato in 3 corpi d’armata, 2 divisioni e due brigate. Una ben povera cosa, e raccogliaticcia per giunta, per affrontare un esercito regolarmente inquadrato come era allora il romeno.”
13. Romanelli appealed directly to the Chairman of the Peace Conference, Georges Clemenceau, to contain the Romanian occupation. In the letter sent to Gen. Holban on August, the Italian officer reported violations of the agreements concerning Budapest’s occupation by the Romanian Army (AUSSME, E8, b. 116 “*Delegazione Italiana*,” fasc. 1 “*Delegazione Italiana—Relazioni varie —1919*”: to *Comando Supremo—Ufficio Segreteria Roma*, to *Delegazione Italiana per la Pace Parigi*, da *Il Maggiore Generale Capo della Missione (Segre)*, Vienna, 8 August 1919, with the attachment: to *Mr. Le Général Holban, Lieutenant colonel Guido Romanelli (copia)*, Budapest, 5 August 1919, 2 pages). The telegram addressed by Clemenceau to the Romanian Government through the French *chargé d’affaires* in Bucharest confirmed the doubts about the legitimacy of the armistice imposed by the Romanian Army to the Hungarian Government (AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 5: “*Trattato del Trianon e Missione Inter. del plebiscito—1919*”: “*Resolution*”—*Segretariato Italiano della Conferenza, Consiglio Supremo degli Alleati—N.D. 25*, 6 August 1919, with the attachment: *Télégramme adressé au Gouvernement Roumain*, G. Clemenceau, Paris, 6 August 1919). Here the Supreme Council “tient à déclarer d’une manière catégorique qu’il refuse de reconnaître au Commandant en Chef Roumain, le droit d’imposer aucun armistice sans l’autorisation des Puissances Alliées et Associées.” Then follow two more telegrams from Clemenceau: one to the Inter-Allied Mission in Budapest (12 August 1919, which invited caution in the de facto recognition of any kind of Hungarian Government), and one to the Bucharest Government (13 August 1919), demanding that the Romanian Army respect the decisions of the General Allied Commission “investita dell’autorità che le ha conferito il Consiglio Supremo” (“Elle n’est pas militairement qualifiée pour donner des ordres directs aux Généraux roumains. – Mais elle est qualifiée pour leur communiquer les vues arrêtées par les Puissances Alliées.”): cf. AUSSME, E8, b. 114, fasc. 5: “*Resolution*”—*Segretariato Italiano della Conferenza, Consiglio Supremo degli Alleati*, 13 August 1919, with 2 telegrams attached.
14. Cf. G. Caroli, *Rapporti militari fra Italia e Romania dal 1918 al 1945: Le carte dell’Ufficio Storico* (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, 2000), 52.
15. The Romanian criticism of the Italian position was evident in the words of Brătianu, the Romanian head of government, who described as “too Platonic” the Italian attitude towards Romania, supported more by “thought” than by “will” (ibid., 52).
16. Cf. Biagini, XXIV.
17. L. Valiani, *Riflessioni vissute su due rivoluzioni* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1989); cf. Biagini, XXIV.
18. The report by Gen. Mombelli (7 December 1919) on the actions of Col. Romanelli resulted for the Italian officer in a conviction for insubordination amounting to one month in a military prison. He was later amnestied. In connection to the Italian

Military Mission in former Austria-Hungary, we have to mention the book of the head of the Italian Mission in Vienna, Gen. Segre: R. Segre, *La missione militare italiana per l'armistizio: dicembre 1918–gennaio 1920* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1928). Recently, on 30 October 2000, during official celebrations, the bronze bust of Romanelli was reinstalled in the prestigious Hungarian Military Academy, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem of Budapest, in recognition of his having saved from “certain death” more than 100 cadets of the Military Academy in Budapest. His role is mentioned even in the book written by Giampaolo Pansa, *Romanzo di un ingenuo* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2000), in the chapter about Béla Kun.

Abstract

The Military and “Humanitarian” Mission of Colonel Romanelli to Hungary (1919)

Colonel Guido Romanelli, the head of the Italian Military Mission in Hungary, played an important role in Budapest for a few months in 1919, at the time of the Soviet regime led by Béla Kun and later, during the Romanian military occupation. His actions, in the framework of the Danube policies and of the international relations of Italy, led to an interesting debate in which his character has stirred both passion and criticism. After the publication of his memoirs of these events—*In the Hungary of Béla Kun and During the Military Romanian Occupation: My Mission (May/November 1919)*—the complexity of the story has also been confirmed by the documents found in the Historical Archive of the Italian Army’s General Staff Records Office. His relationship with Kun’s reds is defined as “beneficial to all” (by Leo Valiani), even if he was accused of being too close to the Hungarian Bolsheviks and of insubordination.

Keywords

Italy, Hungary, Paris Peace Conference, Hungarian Soviets, Romania, cadets