

THE IRON GUARD AND A PLOT FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF PRINCE MICHAEL IN ITALY (1934)

Abstract: We shall present herein a unique historical document relating to the possibility of organizing a plot for kidnapping the future King Michael I of Romania in 1934. The authors of the plot, according to information that circulated in London, were representatives of the Iron Guard, an extremist organization from Romania. The kidnapping was to take place in Florence, where Michael was paying a visit to his mother. The future king would have been hidden until his father, King Charles II, was deposed from the throne and Michael became King, his mother Helen becoming Regent.

Keywords: conspiracy, Romania, Italy, King Michael, Florence

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The relations of the Romanian royalty with the Italian Kingdom were constant during the interwar period, being predicated on a system of mutual respect, without any exceptional peculiarities. The fact is that the monarchy of Romania had not contracted matrimonial ties with the Italian royalty, which maintained the relations between the two dynasties at a moderate level.

Still, both during the period of the constitutional monarchy and after the abdication of King Michael, in 1947, a part of the royal family of Romania was indelibly linked to Italy through the residency that Queen Helen,² the mother of Prince Michael, who was to become King of Romania twice, chose near Florence.

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² Princess Helen of Greece and Denmark, the wife of King Charles II of Romania and mother of King Michael I, was born in Athens on 2 May 1896. She was the eldest daughter of King Constantine I of Greece and Queen Sofia of Prussia. Paternally Helen was descended from Tsarina Catherine the Great and maternally - from Queen Victoria of Great Britain. She was related to the Emperor of Germany and to the Kings of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Helen and Charles met in Lausanne, Switzerland, where they got engaged on 12 January 1921. After that they attended together, in Bucharest, the celebration of the engagement of Princess Elizabeth with George of Greece. On 10 March 1921, in the Orthodox Cathedral in Athens, in the presence of the two royal families and over 80 guests, Charles and Helen were wedded. Shortly afterwards, on 25 October 1921, the heir to King Charles II was born at Foișor; on 10 January 1922, the child was baptized as Michael, after the name of Voivode Michael the Brave, by King Ferdinand and Queen Maria as his main godparents. The relations between the two cooled until reaching a divorce, pronounced on 21 June 1928 by Romania’s High Court of Cassation and Justice, the marriage being dissolved on the grounds of “incompatibility.” The divorce and Charles’s return as King of Romania compelled the queen to choose her residence in Italy. Except for the years 1940-1947, when she resided in Bucharest, in the proximity of King Michael, Queen Helen spent her life primarily at Villa Sparta. During the last years of her life, material constraints forced her to relinquish Villa Sparta, her beloved home, and to move to Lausanne in 1980, where she died at the age of 86, on 28 November 1982.

Known as Villa Sparta, a building located in Fiesole, near the Dominican convent where Beato Angelico had lived, this residence was erected in the 15th century and it passed through the hands of several owners, who were members of the Florentine bourgeoisie or nobility. Refurbished and renovated at the beginning of the 20th century, Villa Sparta was bought by Queen Helen in 1933, but she moved here only at the beginning of 1934, more precisely in the spring, after having had the villa refurbished. The funds for the purchase of the small palace came from the sale of the palace she had owned in Mamaia and of a small farm near Bucharest.

Beyond the leitmotif passion that the great nobility and the high bourgeoisie worldwide have for Tuscany and Florence, there was a particular reason behind Queen Helen's choice: the royal family of Greece preferred an Italian exile, as close to the homeland as possible.

According to the agreements made between King Charles and Queen Helen, after his return to the throne of Romania, the responsibility for the education of Prince Michael belonged to the monarch for the most part of the year, while Queen Helen had only two months a year to enjoy the company of her son.

In this context, of the adolescent Michael's presence at Fiesole, at his mother's home, perhaps in the context of the last touches for the purpose of inaugurating the new residence, the Italian authorities, which had looked favourably upon the Queen establishing her residence there, received a confidential report that was rather alarming.

The police in Florence had been confidentially informed, by a local journalist, a correspondent of Reuter's Press Agency, about a plot that had allegedly been organized in order to kidnap Voivode Michael.

The information, provided by the Questura and then the Prefecture of the city on the Arno River, could have or not a certain degree of verisimilitude. What is certain, however, is that the Italian authorities took it seriously and, through one of the highest officials of the Interior Ministry in Rome, they proceeded to inform the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs so as to be prepared for any possible consequences.

The document in question is preserved at the Archivio Storico-Diplomatico in Farnesina and is accompanied by a reply for the police authorities in Italy. In the note submitted by the Ministry of the Interior, on 17 January 1934, signed, at the order of the Minister, by the Deputy Head of the Italian Police Carmine Senise,³ it is stated that a journalist from Florence, Knight Brogi, who was also a news correspondent for Reuters' Agency, had been informed by London about a possible attempt to kidnap the future King Michael. We may assume that the journalists from Reuter's Agency were fairly well connected with the British political circles to access sensitive

³ Carmine Senise was born in Naples on 28 November 1883 and passed away in Rome on 24 January 1958. He was a policeman by career. In 1932 he was appointed prefect and deputy head of the Italian police. In 1940 he was appointed Head of Police in the Kingdom of Italy, being deposed in April 1943. He actively participated in Mussolini's deposition by the Grand Fascist Council before being appointed Head of Police again by Marshal Badoglio. Captured by an SS commando in September 1943, he was transferred to Germany and interned in various concentration camps. He was released on 2 May 1945.

information relating to Europe's crowned heads. The information that Knight Brogi had confidentially learned was quite hot and plausible: the Iron Guard allegedly planned to organize an attempt at capturing Voivode Michael. The action was expected to take place in Italy, where the voivode was on holiday with his mother. In fact, it was stated, the kidnapping would not be detrimental to the voivode, but favourable to him. The abduction act, ordered by the Iron Guard, would allegedly entail hiding Michael, in anticipation, perhaps, of a political movement in Romania that would lead to deposing King Charles II from the throne. Following the removal of the Romanian monarch, the future King Michael would be installed on the throne, but the state leadership would be enforced through Queen Helen, who had to accept the role of Regent. Since such a scenario risked blowing Romania up, Reuter's obviously alerted its contributor to follow closely the developments in Florence. Probably not necessarily due to his civic spirit, but out of fear of the penalties he could incur from the fascist regime if he had been caught concealing such information, Brogi decided to inform the local police authorities. Panic-stricken, they telegraphed their superiors in Rome to ask for instructions. Although the trail of the documents appears to have been normal, let us not forget that Italy was under an authoritarian regime, true, a moderated repressive regime, but still a dictatorship, and such information had to be quickly catalogued and investigated to ensure its full control over the actions taking place on the Italian territory. Carmine Senise informed the authorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the police had decided to monitor all the movements of the heir to the throne of Romania in order to prevent a possible kidnapping and requested instructions from this ministry so as to distribute another package of instructions to the local prefecture.

The reply of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came without fail, being dated 18 January 1934, 10 am. According to this document, the police authorities were demanded to order the Prefecture of Florence, within the limits of the legal mandate and the forms authorized by the fascist law, to keep the future King of Romania under surveillance, in order to guarantee his personal safety against any violent attempts.

We do not know who gave the resolution to this issue of attempted abduction, but we should specify that the head of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at that time was Benito Mussolini himself.⁴ Thus, it is quite possible that the fascist dictator was informed about the plot. In any case, the undersecretary of state who managed the entire diplomatic apparatus was Fulvio Suvich,⁵ a connoisseur of the Romanian realities.

The natural, necessary and correct question that arises is, therefore: why was an attempt being plotted against Voivode Michael, an attempt that would have a positive dénouement if it had taken place? To answer this question, we need to analyse the Romanian situation at the end of 1933 and the beginning of 1934.

Internally, in the autumn of 1933, King Charles II had decided that it would be

⁴ He cumulated *ad-interim* this ministry from 20 July 1932 to 9 June 1936.

⁵ Born in Trieste on 23 January 1887, he was a partisan of Italian irredentism. He was a deputy in the Italian Parliament, undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and from 1936 to 1938 he served as ambassador to Washington. He died in Trieste on 5 September 1980.

better to accept a Liberal government, after 4 years of governance by the Peasants' Party, corruption scandals, economic decline and internal political conflicts. The newly appointed Prime Minister was the Liberal Ion Gheorghe Duca. On 14 November 1933, the I. G. Duca Government took the oath before King Charles II. The Duca Cabinet was a provisional solution since the relations between the king and the Liberals were extremely bad. The monarch could not overlook the fact that upon his return to the country in 1930, as Carol Caraiman, later to become King of Romania by dethroning the legitimate king of the country, the minor Michael I of Romania, I. G. Duca and Vintilă Brătianu had made harsh statements against him. Under these circumstances, the political conclusion that was reached was that new elections should be scheduled for 20 December 1933.

Before that, however, an internal political gesture was imperative: namely, the dissolution of the Iron Guard, a requirement imposed on the Liberal Government by France. French politicians feared that the political ascent of the Legionary Movement would lead to an economic rapprochement to Germany, to the detriment of France. Discussed on 7 December, in a Government meeting, this measure was opposed by the vast majority of the ministers. However, Nicolae Titulescu, who had returned to the country in the evening of the same day, insisted on the above-mentioned dissolution, referring to a loan for which he was carrying negotiations with the League of Nations, a loan that was conditional upon the dismantling of the Iron Guard. Under these circumstances, Duca and Titulescu addressed themselves to the king, requesting that he should sign a royal decree for the dissolution of the Iron Guard; this decree was to represent the legal basis of the dissolution. The king flatly refused. Accordingly, on 9 December, through a Journal of the Council of Ministers (the equivalent of a Government Ordinance), with 8 votes for and 7 against (the President of the Council of Ministers voted against), it was decided that the "group of the Archangel Michael, today the Iron Guard, is and shall stay dissolved."

The Government's decision was motivated primarily by the fact that "through its program and through its action this group has lately aimed, on the one hand, to change legal order in the State through revolutionary means, and on the other hand, the enthronement of a social and political regime contrary to the one established both by the Constitution and by the peace treaties!", adding that "this group's means of action are terror and violence."

From a procedural point of view, the decision of dissolving the Iron Guard was a legal fiction, since it had already been dissolved previously, in 1931, together with the Legion of the Archangel Michael, without ever being officially re-established. The name under which the Legionaries participated in elections was the "Corneliu Codreanu Group," the name under which they were enrolled at the Central Electoral Commission. As a result, the document issued by the Government should not have had consequences for the Legionaries. However, the Government decided to scuttle the Legionaries' participation in elections. Thus, it cancelled all the Legionaries' electoral lists, shortly before the elections, lest they should try running on other lists. The police made numerous arrests among the Legionaries, the estimates being that several thousand sympathizers were arrested. Having eliminated from the electoral

race a major opposition group that had counted as the third largest electoral force, the Liberals comfortably won the elections with 51% of the votes.

The situation created profound discontent among the Legionaries, especially since there were rather disquieting rumours in connection with the fate of the leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. The idea that was accredited in the intimacy of the far-right circles was the need to punish those who had decided the dissolution of the movement and the arrest of its members. A team assumed the first objective: the elimination of the Liberal leader and Head of the Government, I. Gh. Duca. A commando composed of three Legionaries assassinated Duca on the train station platform in Sinaia, on the evening of 29 December 1933. The consequence was a renewed campaign for the arrest and persecution of the Legionaries and their removal from the public life of Romania.

This was the context of Romanian domestic policy in which the Italian police had received information about the plot envisaging the kidnapping of Michael. As far as the Romanian-Italian relations were concerned, they weren't exactly optimal.⁶ Benito Mussolini had the tendency of increasingly supporting the revisionist policy that advantaged relations with Hungary, to the clear detriment of Italy's political rapports with Romania. Moreover, Mussolinian Italy did not agree with the Francophile policy whose protagonist was Nicolae Titulescu in the Romanian Government. Like the entire fascist diplomatic apparatus, Italian politicians had an aversion towards Titulescu. It was perhaps from this perspective that the Iron Guard representatives thought there were opportunities for action in Italy, which could make it easier to reset the game of power in Bucharest, through the use of some of the Crown representatives. In addition to this, the Italian political regime, consolidate over a period of 12 years, was somehow visibly compatible with the Legionary doctrine, especially as regards nationalism and the symbolism they used, so Italy seemed to be a suitable terrain for an action in force related to Romanian politics.

There is a possibility that this information was merely a rumour set into circulation by London circles close to Titulescu, to stimulate hatred against the Legionaries and the isolation of their supporters in Italy in the context of Duca's assassination. However, we believe that the Italian authorities' reaction went beyond the possibility of a rumour, as they credited the information to be truthful.

⁶ “*Dal punto di vista dei rapporti diplomatici bilaterali non era certo un buon momento visto le divergenze che animavano le diplomazie romena ed italiana. La politica italiana, soprattutto con gli anni trenta, si indirizzò verso un moderato revisionismo che ha allarmato Belgrado (principale bersaglio di quella scelta mussoliniana) e Praga, ma anche Bucarest. In questo contesto tra i governi italiano e romeno fece la sua apparizione qualche tensione. Naturalmente la revisione territoriale di cui i governanti romeni non volevano sentire parlare riguardava i confini con l'Ungheria, paese che stava guadagnando un rapporto privilegiato con l'Italia, già durante il lungo governo di Bethlen come pure con i governi successivi (particolarmente con quello capeggiato dal filofascista Gyula Gömbös). Anche l'opinione pubblica intellettuale in Italia aveva un certo peso e si stava orientando a vantaggio dei magiari*”. Francesco Guida, *Le relazioni politiche tra Romania e Italia in età contemporanea*, in <http://scienzepolitiche.uniroma3.it/fguida/files/2009/11/Bucarest20091.doc>

Clearly, however, we can conclude that while nothing else happened in 1934, only 6 years later, in 1940, the protagonists of the political framework within which the ephemeral Legionary ideocratic regime developed and manifested were, on the one hand, General Ion Antonescu, in his capacity as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and on the other hand, King Michael and Queen-Mother Helen, as representatives of the Crown, in other words, the very protagonists envisaged by the rumours concerning the plot for the abduction of Voivode Michael. This is just a historical finding, without a subtext, because we do not have other data to confirm or to refute other hypotheses.

DOCUMENTARY ANNEX ⁷

1.

MINISTERO DELL'INTERNO
Direzione Generale della Pubblica Sicurezza
Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati

N.443/41596

Roma, 17 gennaio 1934 XII

TELEGRAMMA URGENTE A MANO – Riservatissima

On. Ministero Affari Esteri
Aff. Politici Uff. II
Roma

La Prefettura di Firenze telegrafa:

“A Londra corre voce che associazione rumena “Guardie di Ferro” avrebbe ordinato complotto per rapire Voivoda Michele il quale trovasi attualmente a Firenze presso la madre Helen ex Regina Rumania. Voivoda Michele dopo rapimento sarebbe tenuto nascosto fino al momento in cui Re Carol sarebbe deposto e Voivoda Michele sarebbe elevato trono con reggenza madre la quale vuolsi sia conseziante. Agenzia Reuter di Londra a conoscenza tali voci ha ordinato proprio corrispondente di Firenze Cav. Brogi tenersi pronto per rapide informazioni qualora piano dovesse attuarsi. Cav. Brogi in via riservatissima ha dato notizia tale ordine alla locale Questura. Informone codesto On. Ministero assicurando che compatibilmente mezzi a disposizione si attua cauta vigilanza per essere al corrente qualsiasi movimento Voivoda Michele”.

Si prega codesto On.Dicastero di compiacersi far conoscere con cortese urgenza, quali istruzioni eventualmente ritenga sia il caso di impartire alla suddetta Prefettura.

PEL MINISTRO
(Carmine Senise)

⁷ The two documents are preserved in Rome, in Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, fund *Affari politici 1931-1945, Romania*, busta n.7 (1934), without page numbers.

2.

Ministero degli Affari Esteri
Ufficio Affari Politici II

TELEGRAMMA IN PARTENZA N. S 23 nn

Indirizzato a: Regio Ministero Dell'Interno; Direzione Generale della Pubblica Sicurezza

Oggetto: Voci complotto contro Voivoda Michele di Romania

Roma, li 13 Gennaio 1934,

Anno XII, ore 10

Nel ringraziare per le comunicazioni di cui al telegramma urgente a mano n. 443/41596 del 17.c.m., questo Ministero prende atto delle segnalazioni fatte dalla R. Prefettura di Firenze e dei provvedimenti adottati, ravvisando l'opportunità che siano predisposte, naturalmente con le dovute forme, misure di sorveglianza tali che valgano a garantire, nei limiti del possibile, la persona del Voivoda Michele da ogni eventuale tentativo di violenza.

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