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THE UNITS OF TRANSYLVANIAN ROMANIAN VOLUNTEERS IN ITALY (1917-1919)

Abstract: One of the most important elements underpinning the **Moment of 1 December 1918** was the fight of the Romanians abroad, a fight waged both with weapons in hand on the Italian, Russian, or French fronts, and with diplomatic means, through the more or less official delegations and the Romanian emigration in capital cities such as Paris, Rome, London or Washington.

Keywords: Italy, volunteers, Romanians, Transylvania, Union

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The Romanians' activity in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was entwined with that of the Romanians from the Old Kingdom, in a common struggle of the Romanians throughout the historical provinces. It was a struggle that had started at the end of the eighteenth century, while its climax and end were reached at the time of the outbreak of the First World War.

One aspect of this common fight is approached in the present study: the complex process that led to the formation of the Romanian Legion in Italy and the support of the Romanians' national cause through propaganda in Italy, a member country of the Entente.

The Romanians who were mobilised in Austria-Hungary as soldiers of the Habsburg monarchy expressed, through both individual and collective actions, their desire to rally themselves to the ideal of Romanian national unity. An example of this is provided by Lieutenant Ion Metea, a former combatant on the Italian front, where he served as an officer of the Austro-Hungarian army and, then, as an officer of the Romanian Legion in Italy: "In July 1914, mobilisation was launched. The regiment of which I was part, Regiment 31st, was stationed in Sibiu. There I was present from the first days of the mobilisation, with other comrades of mine. I was a student at the Polytechnic School in Brno and the war had caught me in

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the middle of my studies. In the courtyard of the regiment, we made friends, met former acquaintances, and planned attitudes for the future. We had been called to fight for foreign ideals, under a foreign flag. Among us there were very many students with short-term conscription obligations (*Einjahrig Freiwilliger*), and the reserve officers of the regiment included very many Romanians, all cherishing the same thoughts. The Transylvanian Theological Seminary was our place of meeting during those frantic days of mobilisation. Here we met every night, reading the press from the country (Romania) and, in particular, **Universul** and watching the attitude of Romania with interest. We truly rejoiced when we found out that our homeland would not go to war on the side of Austria-Hungary.

The attitude of Romania entitled us not to fight for ideals that were foreign to us. In our souls we carried the thought of crossing the Carpathians into the homeland. In these meetings, held at the theological seminary, we were planning to get there and establish a body of Transylvanian volunteers, a legion that, at the right time, would fight to liberate Transylvania and Banat. Thus, the idea of the Romanian Legion in Italy, which would be formed later, was actually born in Sibiu, in the first days of mobilisation.

The Austro-Hungarian authorities learned about our plans, especially since many young Romanians had managed to eschew the vigilance of the customs officers, enlisting as volunteers in the Romanian army.

To prevent mass desertions, the Supreme Command of the Austro-Hungarian army ordered the 31st Infantry Regiment, consisting only of Romanians, to be moved from Sibiu to Prague; in its place was brought a regiment of Czechs and Slovaks.

They believed that by distancing us from the borders with Romania, they would also remove the ideas from our hearts, but they were wrong.”²

Simultaneously with the desertions of Romanian soldiers on the Russian front and then on the Italian one, the Romanian civilian population in the counties bordering Romania crossed the Carpathians in large numbers during the years of neutrality and settled in the Old Kingdom, actively rallying themselves to the powerful movement of the Romanian public opinion, which was to speed up Romania’s entry into the war, in order to achieve the ideal of national unity.³ A large part of the refugees from Transylvania renounced their Austro-Hungarian nationality and voluntarily enlisted in the Romanian regiments: 70 Brăila, 11 Siret, 80

² Octavian Metea, *Legiunea română din Italia*, in “*România Nouă*”, VII, no. 69, 1940, p. 3.

³ Eugen Hulea, *Contribuția voluntarilor români la Unire*, in “*Apulum*”, XIV, 1976, p. 344.

Bucharest, 38 Ploiești or 7 Prahova.⁴ In this context, mention should be made of the 46th Regiment, composed almost exclusively of Transylvanians; after the battle of Ghimpați, it was left with only 30 living soldiers.

At the time of Romania's entry into the war alongside the Entente, about 20 000 Transylvanian Romanians were enrolled in the Romanian army; in the next period their number increased considerably. To them were added thousands of Romanian soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army who had defected or had fallen prisoners to the Russians, the Italians or the Serbs. Suffice it to consider that on the Italian front alone – where, after the events of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and after the temporary removal of Romania and Serbia from the war, most of the Austro-Hungarian troops, including the Romanian regiments were concentrated – over 400,000 soldiers and 10,000 officers of the Habsburg monarchy fell prisoners to the allies.⁵

Due to the intensifying crisis of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, but especially due to Romania's exit from the war under the Peace of Bucharest in 1917, the Romanian prisoners in Russia, Italy and France realised that the problem of Romanian unity risked being omitted from the debates of the upcoming peace talks. This prompted them to join in the efforts of the Romanian emigration from the states of the Entente. Those efforts were channelled towards championing the Romanian cause before the Great Powers. The Romanian prisoners in the allied states endeavoured to continue the fight, as representatives of the Romanian army; hence, the idea of concentrating them in national units that would do battle on the Italian, French or Russian front, against the Central Powers. As a result of these initiatives, the Body of the Romanian Volunteers from Russia, the Romanian Legion from Italy and the Romanian Legion from France came into being during the First World War.

These peripheral nuclei of what would become the future Romanian army after 1918 constituted themselves as hotbeds of Romanianism, all upholding the concept of national unity, with all its meanings – from the doctrine of the Transylvanian School and up to the 14 Wilsonian points. Romania continued to fight even after the Peace of Bucharest, through these units of volunteers. After Romania's re-entry in the war in 1918, they became integral parts of the Romanian army, fighting in the Bolshevik Hungary of Bela Kun (1919-1920), or defending the eastern border from the anarchy that had been unleashed in Russia, where the civil war was fully underway.

The fall of the Romanian soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army into Italian captivity took place in different circumstances, throughout the

⁴ Sever Bocu, *Les legions romains de Transylvanie*, Paris, 1918, p. 18.

⁵ Ion Popescu, Augustin Deac, *1918-Unirea Transilvaniei cu România*, București, Ed. Politică, 1978, p. 465.

operations on the Italian front, starting on 23 May 1915, when Italy decided to intervene in the war alongside the Entente.⁶

If at the beginning of hostilities, prisoners were taken mostly during the military action itself (units of the Austro-Hungarian army, which also included Romanians, were captured in combat), as the war dragged on and especially after Romania's entry into the war alongside the Entente, the phenomenon of defection became more and more frequent, as was that of crossing the lines *en masse* into the Italian zones.

Many of the Romanians who were in the Italian theatre of war had had their minds set on defecting since their departure to the front. One of them, Ion Ilie was to write in his memoirs that when he arrived in Italy, he had fulfilled his wish because: "upon leaving for the front, I told my dad that I would not fight for a foreign cause and that when I arrived on the Italian front, I would surrender myself."⁷ In his turn, Corneliu Pop, who became a prisoner in Italy, confessed that many Romanian soldiers and officers had been planning to defect to the Italians when the first opportunity presented itself.⁸

The propagandistic preparation of the Romanian soldiers' defection from the Austro-Hungarian army was carried out in two ways: one from within, through the intellectuals (reserve officers) and career officers from the Romanian regiments on the Italian front; the other type of propaganda came from the ranks of the Italian army, the Italian planes throwing manifestos written in Romanian. Placards were hoisted from the Italian trenches in some sectors of the front, saying "Vivat la Rumania".

Another fact which led to growing numbers of Romanian deserters consisted in the strong impression the Italian language made on them. Thus, in the frequent clashes on the Italian front at Isonzo, the Romanians realised that they could easily understand Italian, linguistic similarity being, for the less educated, reason enough to cross into the Italian lines.

At first, the bravest, those who assumed the risks of individual defections crossed the lines to the Italians. Later, they defected in groups, consisting of two-three soldiers or of whole companies of soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers. Although the front lines were very close together, the "no man's land" was well organised by means of observation posts, which surveyed the front line, and of headlights that, at night time, illumined the trenches. Deserters who were spotted by the headlights were machine gunned. Toma Milea from Ileni confessed: "I read all the manifestos they threw from the Italian airplanes flying over our own lines. Now I was a few hundred metres away from them and yet I

⁶ Ion I. Șerban, *Legiunea Română din Italia*, in "Apulum", XVIII, 1980, p. 497.

⁷ Vasile Frențiu, *Amintirile unui fost ofițer din primul război mondial*, in "Mitropolia Banatului", XXVIII, no. 10-12, 1978, p. 655.

⁸ C. I. Stan, *Intrarea României în război de partea puterilor Antantei și atitudinea românilor aflați în străinătate*, in "Apulum", XXIV, 1987, p. 329.

could not move. Many a night, as I stood sentry, I saw a fugitive making his way through the rocks and through the networks. As soon as he was discovered by the rays of the reflector, machine guns started firing. I saw many comrades who lost their lives just one step away from the Italian lines.”⁹

Those who managed to reach the Italians were considered prisoners of war and, not infrequently, they were expected by Romanian officers, deserters or prisoners, attached to the various Italian commands to act as interpreters and to guide people to the various camps across Italy.

The Romanian prisoners were divided into about 50 camps, from Lombardy to Sicily. These camps were not segregated by the prisoners' ethnicity: the prisoners were of the various nationalities, from Czechs and Slovaks to Poles, Hungarians, Saxons, Serbians and Romanians. However, in some camps there were compact groups of Romanians from Transylvania and Bukovina. Thus, at the beginning of 1918, there were about 3600 Romanian prisoners in the camp of Mantova, 2000 at Cavarzere, 800 at Ostiglia, 800 at Cavanelle, and 400 at Cona.¹⁰

By the end of 1918, the total number of Romanian prisoners in the Italian camps had risen to about 18,000.¹¹

The perception on everyday life in these camps must take into account both individual perceptions, which can only be subjective and dependent on the level of the informant's intellectual training, and the realities, which were different from one camp to another. For instance, Ion Cornea, a prisoner in the camp of Cavarzere, remembers: “A quarantine camp was formed in an open field, where we stayed for a month: we were about 12 000 prisoners. We were given one loaf of bread a day, and canned food for lunch. We were living better than on the front. In camp we had a well with a pump, and at night we slept in tents, five in each one. All this time we didn't work at all. After a month we were seen by a doctor, then we were taken by train to Avezzano, where a camp had been set up for us. After three weeks, we were assigned to work in agriculture, railways and mines. To pass the time more quickly, I signed up for agriculture, my job.

I was sent by train to the province De Luca, the village of Cavarzere. I was separated from my old comrades, for a while. The villages in this part of Italy were placed on hills, and the houses were isolated. Farmers owned one cow and one donkey. I was assigned to a farm, where I worked under the supervision of Bartolomeo, the administrator.

⁹ Octavian Metea, *op. cit.*, VIII, no. 6, 1941, p. 3.

¹⁰ Simion C. Mândrescu, *În Franța și Italia pentru cauza noastră (27 septembrie 1918-7 ianuarie 1919)*, Ed. Sfetea, București, 1919, p. 28.

¹¹ Archive of the Union Museum in Alba Iulia (AMUAI), *Fond Unirea*, Doc. 3567

I dug in the vineyard every day. On the hills there were many olive trees. They didn't slaughter pigs; unlike us, they used oil instead of fat. They ate a lot of macaroni and cheese, which I really liked.

We dug the coast of the hill into terraces, which we consolidated with stones. In the right places, we planted vines and olive trees, very sensitive trees. There were also fig trees, orange trees, all manner of trees unknown in my country. The farm at which I worked was situated on the side of a hill, surrounding a valley with a meadow that was 2-3 km long. The houses were built of stone.

Here we were six prisoners, surveyed by a sentry with a gun. After a few days, seeing that we were trustworthy men, they no longer guarded us. We ate well and drank at will. Many a time, the wife of the manager prepared us food and a polenta from chestnut flour, after which we had plenty of wine. During work, because of the heat, we drank wine instead of the water. Each of us had a bowl of wine under the bed, which subtly, at night, we filled, though the next day it was empty again.

Not being accustomed to the heat, we bathed daily in the lakes around the farm, where the waters from the mountains were gathering. Next to each lake was a mill. We often bathed in the moonlight. During this time I wrote home a few times, but the mail worked with great difficulty. I never received a reply.”¹²

Unlike Ion Cornea, another prisoner, David Cornea, who was in a camp near Rome and then at Avezzano, experienced a reality that was completely different. He reports the following:

“We walked day and night, for four days. We had gathered some sugar and tobacco, the good kind, so in exchange for them we got some food. We reached the sea, where they took us into a garden. About 15 Italian officers inspected our backpacks and money. The sugar we had was divided among four comrades. I still had 900 crowns. I hid them so well that they weren't taken from me. All the money snatched from the prisoners was burned. Then they put us on boats, about 80 on each. I was scared of water, especially because it was at night. That's why I waited until morning, when I boarded with the Czechs. Because of this I got separated from the people I knew.

We sailed by boat for six hours. The music of the Czechs was awaiting us on the shore. They lived better, they got a loaf of bread a day, not a half like us.

The Romanians were placed in separate camps from the Czechs. I changed the money, received seven lire for a hundred crowns, so I could buy food from street vendors. We weren't allowed to buy it, but people battled for the vendors' baskets.

¹² Apud Octavian Metea, *Legiunea Română din Italia*, in “*România Nouă*”, VIII, no. 8, 1941, p. 3

From here we left and four days later we were in Rome. We could see here the lowland strongholds, useless. From there, we walked 6 miles, to a camp, where there were Romanian officers. We were in the village of Verona, where very many prisoners had died. I gave a pair of boots for a canteen of flour. I don't know why, they took our jack-knives, but we sharpened the edges of the spoons and, with these rudimentary knives, we felled a 2-feet tall oak tree to the ground.

Here we stayed for four weeks, and then they took us to another camp, where there were Hungarians. Here we had large tents, but the camp was surrounded with seven rows of wire. There was a tailor among us. He worked in the city, where he bought everything we wanted. Here we stayed only eight weeks. On Christmas night we set off on the road again, for four days. We had a physician riding a bike among us.

On Christmas night we quartered in the field, under tents. We were 1800 people. We build a fire with corn cobs, but it was still cold. In the morning four comrades remained there forever.

Thus we got to Avezzano. Here we were put in barracks, a hundred soldiers in each. I heard that in 1913 this region had been shaken by an earthquake that had knocked down all the houses. The barracks of wood had been built then. Here we had better food.”¹³

Lieutenant Ion Metea, a prisoner in the camp at Urbaria, had a much broader and more consistent perception, a perception that exceeded the daily reality of the camp, encompassing the general problems of the war on the Italian front and the Romanian soldiers' organisation in the Italian camps:

“We were directed to the camp in Udine. The fraternal treatment, the good wine made us quickly became good friends. We came from regiments 31, 64 and 62. In this camp in Udine, after several talks among the officers, we decided to ask to be sent to Romania, to fight alongside the Allies, or, if this was not allowed, to set up a Romanian Legion in Italy.

In Udine, we were divided into different camps, twelve being taken to Urbaria, where we were accommodated in very good conditions, we enjoyed good treatment, but we were deprived of freedom and had received no answer to our request to be sent to Romania. Every day we submitted to the commander of the camp requests for the establishment of the Romanian Legion. We were informed by a benevolent man that our requests had been thrown away by Colonel Schmidt, the commander of the camp. The Italians didn't trust him enough to send him to the front, so they kept him in command of this camp.

¹³ Apud Octavian Metea, *Legiunea Română din Italia*, in “*România Nouă*”, VIII, no. 9, 1941, p. 3.

Life in the camp was monotonous. We tried to make friends with the officers who were on duty, talking to them about Transylvania. The majority were unaware of our province; hence, the many disappointments, and the answers to our requests failed to come.

To these was added the disaster of Caporetto, where the Italian front was broken by the Austrians. In Italy there were frequent defections and an almost general state of demoralisation. We often saw deserters, bound to one another, guarded by two or three riflemen. The population was very anxious.

The priests made propaganda everywhere, even in our camp, for the revolution, for the people to escape from the war. This situation was filling our souls with deception.

It was fortunate that General Cadorna, commander of the army, was replaced by General Diaz.”¹⁴

As regards the methodical organisation of a body of Romanian volunteers in Italy, this initiative was preceded by spontaneous movements among the Romanian prisoners; after Romania’s entry into the war, the Romanians requested the Romanian legation in Rome to intervene in order to be received in the ranks of the Romanian army.¹⁵

These requests created, for the Romanian prisoners, the illusion that they would be transported by ships to Romania, an illusion motivated by the hard times the Romanian army was experiencing at that time. Unfortunately, the situation in Romania made it impossible to answer the demands of the Romanians in the Italian camps favourably, so they channelled their efforts towards the formation of a Romanian Legion, ready to fight on the Italian front.¹⁶

The first petition addressed to the Italian authorities for authorising the establishment of the Romanian Legion in Italy was registered in July 1916. The initiative belonged to a group of officers. The petition stated, among other things:

“The fight for the freedom of the Romanian people in Austria-Hungary is a fact, a reality. It has lasted and will last for as long as honest Romanians still live. In the last offensive, when all the Romanian regiments were concentrated on the Italian front, nearly 10,000 soldiers were taken prisoner. We believe that the terms of the Romanian prisoners’ enlistment in the legion are very suitable, the environment is very favourable to the war and the Romanians and the Italians have not, for one second, ceased to feel like brothers.”¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ AMUAI, *Fond Unirea*, Doc. 3568, p. 11.

¹⁶ Eugen Hulea, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁷ Ion Bulei, Constantin Botoran, Ion Calafeteanu, *Cu voința nestrămutată pentru România tuturor românilor*, in “*Flacăra*”, no. 34, 1983, p. 8.

The efforts to organise the Romanian prisoners in Italy on national bases were met, for a long time, with a lot of difficulties, of which the most important were Romania's forced exit from the war, which made it impossible for the government in Iasi to grant its official support; on the other hand, the situation in Romania at the end of 1917 created moments of mistrust and suspicion on the part of the Italian government, regarding to what extent the Romanians could be counted on as the representatives of a country that was a "former ally" of the Entente.¹⁸

In a first phase, to overcome these hardships, the Romanian prisoners in Italy resorted to compromise solutions, such as enrolment by individual request in the ranks of the two Italian divisions that were fighting on the French front; others, such as those in the camp of Cavarzere, offered to dig trenches and fortifications behind the Italian front line.

At the same time, efforts continued towards the formation of a distinct Romanian unit that would fight on the Italian front. Noteworthy in this regard is the initiative of Lieutenant Petre Uglişiu, who crossed into the Italian frontlines in December 1917, leading a detachment of Romanian soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army. Asking permission to go to Rome, Uglişiu submitted, a petition to Alexandru Lahovary, the head of the Romanian Legation in Rome, on February 24, 1918. The petition was signed by a group of officers from the camp in Cassino. In this petition the signatories requested Romania's permission and support for the formation of a corps of Romanian volunteers. As Romania was no longer in a state of belligerence with the Central Powers, it could not provide official support, so Colonel Florescu, the military attaché of Romania in Rome, intervened unofficially with General Spingardi, the president of the Commission of POWs. The latter expressed his verbal consent for the recruitment of a number of Romanian officers and non-commissioned officers in the Italian camps, for the establishment of future combat units, with an exclusive Romanian make-up. The initial nucleus of this unit was coagulated in the camp of Cassino, around Petru Uglişiu and 22 Romanian officers and non-commissioned officers.¹⁹

In March 1918, this initiative group submitted a memorandum similar to the one in February, to the Romanian Legation and emigration in Paris. Following it, Senator G. G. Mironescu arrived in Italy. Together with Professor Benedetto De Luca, he visited the camps in Cassino (18 April 1918) and Comaldoli (21 April 1918). During these visits, Mironescu found that: "the Romanian prisoners' morale was admirable

¹⁸ Ion I. Şerban, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

¹⁹ Petru Uglişiu, *Pagini de suferinţe şi glorie (Amintiri din Italia)*, ms., vol.II, Doc.3305, in AMUAI, pp. 2-26.

and they were ready for the ultimate sacrifice in support of the allied cause, which was also that of Romanianism”.²⁰

A second reason why G. G. Mironescu was in Italy was to participate in the Congress of the Nationalities in Austria-Hungary. The congress was held in Rome between 8 and 11 April 1918 under the presidency of Italian Senator Ruffini and was attended by representatives of the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Serbs, Romanians, and Italians. Each nationality was represented by an action committee led by: Beneș and Stefanik on behalf of the Czechs and Slovaks, Trumbici on behalf of the Serbs, Jamorsky and Skirmut on behalf of the Poles and Torre on behalf of the Italians. The Romanians were represented by a delegation consisting of: G. G. Mironescu, Simion Mândrescu, Ion Ursu, Dumitru Drăghicescu, Nicolae Lupu and Benedetto De Luca.

The congress in Rome voted unanimously on a memorandum to be submitted to the powers of the Entente. The memorandum expressed a common point of view, adopted in a representative frame, as follows:

1. Each of these peoples proclaims its right to build its own nationality and state unity, or to complete and raise them to full political and economic independence.
2. Each of these peoples sees in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy the instrument of German domination and recognises it as a fundamental obstacle to achieving their own aspirations and rights.
3. The assembly also recognises the need for a common struggle against the common oppressors, because each nation seeks its total liberation and complete national unity in the free unity of its state.²¹

A continuation of the Congress of Nationalities held in Rome from 8 to 11 April 1918 was the smaller scale meeting of April 24, 1918, organised in Rome. The representatives of the Romanians at this meeting were Vasile Lucaciu, Octavian Goga, Ion Ursu and Simion Mândrescu. The talks started from an analysis of the concrete results of the congress and the programmatic setting of common future propaganda actions.

On April 6, 1918, the group of Romanian officers at Cassino addressed a call to the Romanian representatives at the congress. The call ended like this: “Our destiny, our duty and our will are yours. Long Live Greater Romania.”²²

One effect of the congress was the intensification of the Italian public’s expression of sympathy for and solidarity with the cause of the

²⁰ George Moroianu, *Luptele de emancipare ale românilor di Ardeal, în lumina europeană*, in “*Transilvania, Banatul, Crișana, Maramureș*”, Cultura Națională, vol.III, București, 1929, p. 1458.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1455.

²² Petre Uglișiu, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 32-33.

Romanian people's unity, in general. The following Italian gazettes endorsed and popularised the Romanian cause: *Il Messagero*, *Il Giornale d'Italia*, *L'Italia* and *la Tribuna*.²³

As suggested by a note published in the newspaper from Cluj "Gazeta Voluntarilor", when Francesca Garibaldi, the wife of Italian national hero Giuseppe Garibaldi, met two Romanian Legionaries in the winter of 1918, she expressed her interest in the fate of the Romanians from Transylvania and Bukovina.²⁴

In terms of the practical consequences of the Congress, the Italian government headed by Prime Minister Orlando and Foreign Minister Sonnino, paid more attention to the problems of the Romanian prisoners.

Having remained in Italy with G. G. Mironescu, Simion Mândrescu, the president of the "Society of the Romanians from Transylvania and Banat", engaged in numerous diplomatic exchanges with Orlando, to allow the Romanians to organise themselves into a battle unit with a national character. This preliminary permission was obtained at the beginning of May 1918, when Orlando approved assigning a building in the city of Cittaducale in the province of Aquila to 111 Romanian officers. In that building they were to set up a "camp de triage", for the recruitment and training of members of the future Romanian Legion.²⁵ Over the following days, 32 Romanian officers arrived at Cittaducale. Among them was the group of officers from Cassino. By 20 May 1918 the number of Romanians who arrived there had reached 84.²⁶

On 7 May, Simion Mândrescu arrived at Cittaducale. He informed the Romanian officers of the decision reached by the Italian government. The Romanians at Cittaducale were to become the core of the future Romanian Legions in Italy. The next day he sent a telegram thanking the Italian prime minister, a telegram in which he expressed the Romanians' determination to fight in the ranks of the Italian army, as they "prefer to die rather than return under the yoke of the Austro-Hungarian empire". Orlando replied stating that he would do everything for the achievement of the Romanians' aspirations to national unity.²⁷

Following the recommendations made by the Italian authorities, the officers in Cittaducale drafted, on 10 May 1918, individual requests to the Italian Ministry of War, expressing their desire to be conscripted into the Italian army and to fight against the Central Powers. These requests were submitted on 15 May. The answer of the Italian General Staff was

²³ Ion I. Șerban, *op. cit.*, p. 503.

²⁴ "Gazeta Voluntarilor", I, no. 27, 1923, p. 3.

²⁵ Dan Grecu, Robert M. Bell, *The Romanian Legion in Italy (1918-1919)*, în "Romanian Postal History Bulletin", no. 26, 1998, p. 26.

²⁶ *La Transylvanie*, I, nr 3, 1918, p. 15.

²⁷ *La Roumanie*, no. 21, 1918, p. 2.

favourable in the sense that the Romanian officers were to receive operative tasks according to the needs of the front.²⁸

The first Romanians who went to battle alongside the Italian army were 10 officers from Cittaducale, who, on June 4, 1918, just before the Battles of the Piave River, were attached as information officers with the Second Italian Army.²⁹

Seeing that the official decision for the organisation of the Romanian Legion was delayed by the Italians, the Romanians in Italy decided on June 19, 1918 to form an Action Committee of the Romanians in Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina. The purpose of this committee was “to gather together all the Romanians subjugated to Austria-Hungary in the allied countries, to organise a Romanian Legion and to make the necessary propaganda in order to achieve national unity”.³⁰

The headquarters of this committee were to be in Rome. The president was Simion Mândrescu, who was mandated to take all the necessary steps with the Italian government for the recognition of the Committee as the only representative body of the 18 thousand Romanians “who are in the land of Italy, those in the allied countries, and those remaining at home”. The minutes of incorporation were signed by 71 people, 45 of whom were from Transylvania and 26 from Bukovina. In the meeting which followed immediately after the formation of the Committee, it was decided to form three delegations tasked to travel to Paris, London and Washington in order to support an intense propaganda in favour of the Romanian goal.³¹

As a natural result of all these events, Italian Prime Minister Orlando appointed Minister Bissolati to deal with the organisation of the Romanian Legion. The latter handed Simion Mândrescu a government order stipulating that all the officers in Cittaducale who had submitted individual requests for enrolment should be declared free and equipped with Italian uniforms, as well as wear badges showing the Romanian flag as distinguishing marks. According to the same provisions, the Romanian officers received permission to visit the camps of prisoners from Mantova, Cavanello, Cona and Costiglia and to recruit volunteers from the more than 7000 Romanian soldiers there.³² Of these, 500 formed the first company of the Romanian Legion in Italy. On July 28, 1918, this company, along with two companies of Czechoslovak and Serbian volunteers, received the battle flag with the Romanian tricolour. Italian General Diaz, general commander of the Italian army, participated in the

²⁸ Simion Mândrescu, *În serviciul unității naționale*, București, 1922, p. 150.

²⁹ Dan Grecu, Robert M. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁰ AMUAI, *Fond Unirea*, Doc. 3567, p. 1137.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Simion Mândrescu, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

ceremony from Ponte di Brenta.³³ At the beginning of August 1918 the second and third Romanian companies were formed. These three Romanian companies were the only units of the Romanian Legion in Italy that entered the heat of battle on the Italian front. Thus, the 1st Romanian Company was integrated in the 52nd Italian Division of the Eighth Army, distinguishing itself in the battles of Montello and Vittorio Veneto. The 2nd Romanian Company fought with two platoons in the 2nd French Division at Sisemoled and Val Vella, the other two platoons being attached to the First Italian Army on the front of Cimone. The 3rd Romanian Company was integrated in the Fourth Italian Army, fighting at Monte Grappa.³⁴

The failure to recognise formally the establishment of the Romanian Legion, the small number of Romanian volunteers admitted in the sub-units destined for the front led the officers in Cittaducale to intensify their activities of recruitment, on the one hand, and of propaganda, on the other hand. Thus, on August 6, 1918, the members of the Action Committee of the Romanians in Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina set up three commissions designed to diversify the work of propaganda. Thus was formed a diplomatic-administrative commission, whose main purpose was to intervene with various cultural-political personalities in Italian society. The second military commission was to ensure the maintenance of permanent contact with the Romanian officers and soldiers in the camps and to continue the work of propaganda among them. The third literary-journalistic commission had the goal of supporting the Romanian cause in the Italian public opinion.³⁵

Of paramount importance for supporting the Romanian cause in the Italian public opinion was the demonstration held at Trajan's Forum in Rome on 25 August 1918. It was preceded by numerous articles favourable to the Romanian cause in the Italian press, by over 600 invitations sent to Italian personalities to participate in this event and numerous expressions of solidarity arriving from all parts of Italy.³⁶

The manifestation at Trajan's Forum, also known as "la giornata romena", gave a new impetus to the activity of setting up the Romanian Legion. Mândrescu stated on 31 August that the celebrations of 25 August had removed the last obstacles in the path of organising the legion. Italian Minister of War Zupelli agreed to increase the number of Romanian officers who were sent on missions of recruitment into the camps of prisoners. At the same time, medical expertise committees were sent to the camps and the new recruits were equipped with uniforms.

³³ La Roumanie, *Une Legion roumanie sur le front italien*, no. 32, 1918, p. 2.

³⁴ Dan Grecu, Robert M. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

³⁵ Ion I. Șerban, *op. cit.*, p. 511.

³⁶ Elie Bufnea, *Formațiile de voluntari*, in "Transilvania, Banatul, Crișana, Maramureșul," vol. I, Cultura Națională, București, 1929, p. 132.

The whole process of recruitment was seen differently through the eyes of the recruiting officer, compared with simple soldiers. Thus Lieutenant Ion Metea, the officer in charge of propaganda and recruitment in the camp of Avezzano, confesses:

“In this camp Romanians were on one side and Czechs on the other, even though they had the same ideals as us. Those who had foreign thoughts, or caused confusion, were thrown into the sea or hanged overnight.

With us things were very different than with the Czechs. We were in a shack with a table, through which each soldier passed and was asked if you would join the legion or not.

Those who declared themselves for the legion received a tricolour rosette to be worn on the chest, and those who refused, very few, were sent to another room, where they were convinced quickly of the need for the legion.

In the meantime many Romanian lives were cut down by the Spanish flu, which left many Romanian crosses in the cemeteries of Italy. Once sorting the good elements was finished, we organised ourselves into companies, forming a battalion, and later a regiment of volunteers. The Italians gave us the commanders of regiment and battalions, and we, Romanians, were the commanders of companies and platoons. Our military training was conducted in the Italian language.”³⁷ Legionary David Cornea saw altogether differently this process of the structural formation of the Legion:

“Now they really gave us the food. We started to do Romanian training. I ended up in the platoon of ensign Tampa, who was young. In one day he broke his brand-new boots at soccer, he even tore his pants.

Now we received pay, every 10 days, five lire. For 70 cents I could buy a litre of wine. We were accommodated in large barracks, 100 and 200 soldiers in each. We didn't have beds, but we slept on straws on the floor. At 5 in the morning we got coffee in bed, it was a bit too little. We did gymnastics for two hours and training for one. We were also commanded by Italian officers. We only had a hundred arms, so our turn to drill with them came only once a month.

At lunch we got soup and meat. I think the meat came from America, because it was wrapped in two layers of cloth and was stored in ice. We also had tomato paste in large barrels.

After the meal we had more training. Two months had to pass for us to learn the turns and marching in a column. As we didn't know our comrades, we couldn't handle turning in a column.

³⁷ Apud Octavian Metea, *op. cit.*, VIII, no. 10, 1941, p. 3.

We also had much time for amusement. The boys danced the *călușarii*, and the Italians marvelled at our agility. All was a game and joy. We learned a lot of songs and marches. In the evening we cut up didos.

The younger ones dressed like women, and four with whistles kept dancing and so we went from barrack to barrack and danced. The most cheerful did all sorts of mischief. One dressed like a bear and, tethered by a chain, danced the bears' dance. When the Italians caught news of this, they no longer gave us permission.

Every Sunday a priest, a prisoner like us, celebrated service. As soon as the Italians learned that you were Catholic, they embraced you. The weakest physically were put on a diet and received a double portion. But many died of malaria every day. The Italian officers liked music, quite a lot. At our dances we had 30 *călușari*, who were hopping like madmen. The Italians were astounded.

After malaria appeared, they kept us isolated for 12 days. They disinfected everything around us. In the camp we had a cafeteria, in which you could find a hundred people a day. There were some who didn't get to buy anything until evening.

On Easter day the wind was blowing terribly hard. We stripped to the skin, threw everything into the fire and poured gasoline on us against malaria. Then we got new, Italian uniforms, on whose collar we sewed our tricolour.

Every Sunday afternoon we had some kind of amusement in which the officers took part, too.

From Avezzano we left for another town, where we slept in tents for 7 weeks, doing instruction. From here we went to Rome, where we paraded in front of King Victor Emmanuel".³⁸

At the end of September Brigadier General Luciano Ferrigo was appointed by order of the Minister of War Italian Zuppeli, commander of the Romanian Legion. This decision was all the more exciting as Ferrigo had been Italy's military attaché in Bucharest for a good while. He was married to a Romanian and spoke fluent Romanian.³⁹

The big moment of the recognition of the existence of the Romanian Legion in Italy, as a separate military unit directly subordinated to the Italian Supreme Military Command, was occasioned by the decree of October 15, 1918. By this decree the Italian Ministry of War provided the official framework for the legion and set up a warehouse of Romanian military effects under the leadership of Colonel Camillo Ferraioli, located in the latter's mansion, in the town of Albano Laziale near Rome. The enlistment of volunteers was to be made by several committees, in all the POW camps in Italy where there were Romanians. Military ranks were to

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Petre Uglișiu, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 68.

be identical with those of the Italian army. The uniform was to be Italian, with the Romanian tricolour cockade as a distinctive sign, to which was added the number of the regiment. In terms of the regulations, the military penal code and the pay, these were to be similar to those of the Italian army.⁴⁰

Immediately after the publication of the decree for the establishment of the Romanian Legion, the president of the Action Committee of the Romanians in Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina, Simion Mândrescu addressed a warm call to all the Romanians in the Italian camps to enlist in the legion: "Gather together around the flag of the irredentist Romanian Legion in Italy. Grab your weapons, this time for our cause.....".⁴¹

The camp at Avezzano was chosen as a unique concentration place for the Romanian prisoners enrolled in the legion; the number of applications for enrolment was very high, so the first regiment of the Romanian Legion, the "Horea" regiment was ready to go to the front by the Piave at the end of October. It was endowed with campaign equipment and weaponry from the warehouse in Albano Laziale. The regiment was reviewed by the King of Italy Vittorio Emanuele and was to leave for the front, but the precipitating events did not allow the "Horea" regiment to take part in the fighting. Due to the total collapse of the Austro-Hungarian army and the rapid advancement of the allied troops, the order for the "Horea" regiment's departure to the front was cancelled.⁴²

Following the insurmountable defeat which he suffered at the Piave, on November 3, 1918 Austria-Hungary signed the armistice of Villa Giusti. On 2 November of the same year, the Italian Supreme Military Command ordered all the units of volunteers, among which were the three Romanian companies attached to the large Italian units on the front, to be withdrawn and to make room for some Italian troops in reserve. The Romanian units were housed in settlements around Rome: Nemi, Rocca di Papa, Pietra Lata.

At the time of the conclusion of the armistice of 3 November, the Romanian Legion was composed of three front companies deployed around Rome, the fully equipped "Horea" regiment, the "Cloșca" regiment, undergoing equipment and organisation. About another 15,000 Romanians from the camp in Avezzano were waiting to be enrolled in the Legion.⁴³

The re-entry of Romania into the war and the establishment in Paris of the "National Council for the Unity of the Romanian People" (3

⁴⁰ AMUAI, *Fond Unirea*, Doc. 3568, p. 63.

⁴¹ Simion Mândrescu, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Valer Pop, *Legiunea Română din Italia*, in "Gazeta Voluntarilor", VIII, no. 12, 1933, p. 3.

October 1918), the representative body of the Romanians from abroad, officially recognised by the Entente, led to the intensified organisation of new units of the Romanian Legion in Italy. These units were to be transported to Romania. On 21 November 1918 a delegation of the Council of Paris arrived in Rome. The delegation comprised: Vasile Lucaciu, Nicolae Titulescu, Ion Ursu, D. Ghica and Constantin Mille. Accompanied by the ambassador of Romania to Rome A. Lahovary, this delegation travelled to Avezzano, where after a religious service officiated by father Lucaciu, the Romanians legionaries solemnly submitted the oath to the Motherland and to King Ferdinand.⁴⁴ The ceremony for the consecration of the battle flag of the “Horea” regiment took place at Mriano on 5 December 1918. The ceremony was repeated with the flag of the “Cloșca” regiment in the Siena Plaza of Rome on January 26, 1919.⁴⁵

In parallel with these celebrations, the process of recruitment, equipment and training of new units of Romanian volunteers continued. Thus, the subunits of the “Crișan” and “Avram Iancu” regiments were set up at the beginning of 1919.⁴⁶

At the end of January 1919, the “Horea” regiment was boarded on trains, which left the Marino train station for the port of Taranto, where it was to be embarked on ships with the destination Constanța. Petre Uglișiu remembers that the train left the station “amidst the endless cheers of the Italians who came to say good-bye to the *bravissimi fratelli romeni nipoti di nostra comune madre* as they called the Romanians”.⁴⁷ The regiment was embarked at the beginning of February on the ships “Meram” and “Regina d’Italia” with the destination Constanța. By the end of May, the regiments “Cloșca”, “Crisan” and “Avram Iancu” had been shipped as well.

Behind the ships taking the Romanian Legion to the motherland remained the Romanian legionaries’ impressions about Italy. Their memories of Italy would long remain a “story-telling” subject for those at home. Thus, legionary ensign Mircea Derlosea remembers:

“As I was in charge of the mess hall, I made a number of observations regarding the diet of the Italians. I had heard that their favourite food is *pasta asciuta*, that is, dry macaroni. I didn’t believe until I tried it and almost every day I made the mess hall menu in such a way as to include the pasta that was so much liked by the Italians. I’ve never come across this again except on the ship Brasile on the way to Constanța and not in the form of macaroni, but as square shaped pieces.

I was surprised by the Italians’ food sobriety. No Italian comrade had anything in the morning except for a quarter (coffee). Lunch and

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *L’Union fraternelle des Roumanis et des Italiens*, in “*la Roumanie*”, no. 57, 1919, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Petre Uglișiu, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

dinner were not too hearty, but they always had a quarter of dark wine. If they drank more than a glass, they stayed up until morning, without food supplements, while we ate two or three times even at night.

But something incredible: at Avezzano, which is in the centre of Italy, I introduced serenades. With four gypsy boys (legionaries, too), with the violins under our arm, we crept underneath the window of the most beautiful girl, playing our usual serenade for her. I was greatly surprised at their surprise, especially since they didn't know what the noise underneath the window was all about. After explanations, they wanted serenades every night. The prohibition of the Italian commander and four days of arrest put an end to my troubadour skills, to the desolation of the girls in Avezzano.

What hurt us most was the Italians' lack of geographical knowledge, as no one knew where Romania was located.

I noticed the Italian soldiers' poor moral preparation, their lack of patriotism and spirit of sacrifice. Italian officers were, however, brave, so I fully admired them."⁴⁸

As regards the journey back home, legionary David Cornea recalls: "I left crying when we got separated from the Italians. We also boarded 20 barrels of wine on the boat. As for equipment, I had received two pairs of boots. But at Constanța our folk took both the wine and the boots. We arrived in Constanța during Pentecost. As an older soldier, I was sent home, so I didn't get to fight with the Hungarians."⁴⁹

Lieutenant Ion Metea recalls his arrival in Constanța: "After eight days we arrived in Constanța, with the joy of the shipwrecked who see land and know their salvation is within reach. But this was also the first disappointment. We weren't let off the boat because the *Bolsheviks* had arrived from Italy. After thousands of interventions, we managed to touch our native soil. The legionaries were crying with joy, tapping with their feet the holy soil of the motherland. Dobrudja was occupied by the French. Romanians in Dobrudja were in a dire mess.....the Bulgarians had destroyed everything in their path. Our legionaries gave up to half of their portions for the rest to be divided among the civilian population. Due to the lack of locomotives, we went up to Fetești on foot, and from the Fetești railway station we took a locomotive and a few carriages, from which we formed a train to transport us to Bucharest..... from Bucharest we were sent to Sibiu, then to Brașov. From Brașov to Făgăraș we destroyed all the inscriptions in Hungarian, and in Sibiu we continued the same operation.....we then passed under the leadership of the Cluj Surveillance Zone, under the command of officers in the Romanian army."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Apud Octavian Metea, *op. cit.*, VIII, no. 12, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

The reception of the legionaries from Italy in the cities of Transylvania was made in a festive atmosphere. They were greeted by the crowd but also by delegates of the Governing Council, headed by Vasile Goldiș and Romulus Boilă.

These were the last episodes of the epic of the Romanian Legion in Italy, because after their arrival in Transylvania, the regiments of the legion were transformed into line regiments of the Romanian army. An example was the transformation of the “Horea” regiment of the Romanian Legion in Italy into the Odorheiul-Secuiesc 97th infantry regiment. Legionaries proved their high military value during the campaign of the Romanian army in Hungary 1919-1920. Then, led by commanders such as Generals Moșoiu or Papp, they showed an extreme spirit of self-sacrifice.

The establishment of the Romanian Legion in Italy and its active participation in the fight against Austria-Hungary and Germany had a major importance for supporting the cause of the Romanians’ national unity, especially since Romania exited the war in 1917, and the Romanian communities in Russia, France, Italy, Great Britain or the United States became the representatives of Romanianism, struggling for the achievement of their ideals. Until the re-entry of Romania into the war, in the autumn of 1918, the Legion of Romanian Legion in Italy and the Romanian Legion in France represented those peripheral cores that continued the struggle of the Romanian army on the fronts of the First World War. Starting from the symbolic value of these units, it can be said that their military value was significant. That value was proved especially in the battles with the Hungarian Red Army.