

The New Criterion

Features September 2001

The exemplar: Ignazio Silone

by David Pryce-Jones

A consideration of the novelist and anti-communist, and the accusations against him.

Communism, though little discussed now and loitering in hidden garrets on miserable straw pallets, is the dark hero destined for a great, if temporary, role in the modern tragedy.

©Heinrich Heine, June 20, 1842

Ignazio Silone liked to say that every author writes different versions of the one book singular to him. In his own case, this book was the novel *Fontamara*, published inauspiciously in Switzerland in 1933. At the time Silone was poor, in exile, solitary, and on top of everything else suffering, as a result of consumption, from chronic ill-health. A couple of years earlier, he had broken with the Italian Communist party. He had been one of its eight most senior leaders. Palmiro Togliatti, the party's secretary general and a subtle interpreter of Stalin's every whim, had himself come to Switzerland to warn Silone that only someone of great strength could survive the break with the party. Silone was one such; he persisted and went on to literary fame.

Fontamara is a village in the Marsica region of the Abruzzi—not so far from Rome—modelled closely, perhaps exactly, on Fucino where Silone himself had been born in 1900, the child of a small landholder. His real name was Secondino Tranquilli; Ignazio Silone was only one of a number of pseudonyms he adopted in the course of his career. When he was fifteen, his whole family, with the exception of his younger brother Romolo, was killed in an earthquake. In its aftermath, he saw a relation stealing the wallet from the corpse of one of the victims. Once coming out of church, he had been present when a minor aristocrat set his dog on a seamstress. When she took this man to court, the magistrate found against her and made her pay costs. How was a human being to come to terms with violence, great or small, natural or unnatural? Silone received a religious education and repaid it in his fiction with more than one characterization of priests as humble to the point of saintliness. His own idealistic and rather priestly nature had its roots in the unhappiness, hardship, and injustice in which he had grown up.

Soon after the First World War, the Italian socialists split, and the young Silone joined the breakaway Communist faction almost at once. Quickly making a name for himself, he was sent to

work for the Comintern in Spain and Germany. In 1927 Mussolini's secret police, the OVRA, virtually destroyed the party organization, whereupon Silone went underground, adopting some of his several pseudonyms. But that same year, he was present in Moscow when Stalin rigged the vote to expel Trotsky from the party as a prelude to the eventual exile and murder of this rival. Silone refused to vote on the issue as instructed. By now, he had learnt all he needed to know of both Communism and fascism in action, and he was to spend the rest of his life defending humane values against totalitarianism.

A writer of that generation could still use his background to conjure up a whole world that would be true to itself and yet unfamiliar, as in the novels of François Mauriac or Isaac Bashevis Singer. *Fontamara* is just such a self-contained microcosm, with a prince as its absentee landlord, devious lawyers, assorted busybodies, and above all peasants or *cafoni*, men and women who have no choice but to accept injustice and fate with as much wisdom and humor as they can muster. Nothing much has ever changed in their lives, and they are unaware of the political calamity about to strike. Mussolini is nowhere mentioned in the novel, and the word *fascisti* appears only once by my count. "Those men in black shirts" arrive by night, and in groups, "evil, malicious, treacherous." A series of brilliantly plotted events, complete with trickery and misunderstanding, leads to confrontation and finally the massacre of innocent villagers. "What are we to do?" the survivors ask, in the novel's closing words.

Anti-fascist and pro-Communist fiction in the Thirties as a rule staked out ideological positions and was therefore still-born, today ludicrous as literature. *Fontamara* is free from propaganda; its drama is allowed to speak for itself and therefore depicts a generalized struggle of good and evil. That is its strength. At the time, it was not clear whether Mussolini would align himself with the democracies or with Hitler. The left immediately used *Fontamara* to recruit for the anti-fascist cause. Leon Trotsky and Karl Radek were among its admirers. Graham Greene, whose own early novels were full of "the usual left-wing scenery" as George Orwell put it, in a review described *Fontamara* as "the most moving account of Fascist barbarity I have yet read." It was a great deal more than so reduced a schema implies. During the war, in an act of black propaganda, the Allies flooded Italy with reprints, incidentally sealing Silone's reputation as Italy's foremost writer.

Building on this first novel, Silone wrote *Bread and Wine* (1937) and *The Seed Beneath the Snow* (1941), comprising what is known as *The Abruzzo Trilogy*, which has been newly reissued by Vermont's Steerforth Press^[1] In the trilogy, the character of Pietro Spina is evidently a projection of Silone himself, a Communist on the run who disguises himself as a priest. He believes himself to be organizing a revolution, but the villagers take him to be a genuinely holy self-denying man of God. "Honor poverty and friendship," says Pietro in a sentence that amounts to the moral of the trilogy, "and be proud." But he also observes of himself, troublingly, "I'm not one of those whose kingdom is of this world." In the manner of Gogol, new characters are constantly popping up to hold the center of the stage for a moment, and wonderfully lively they are too. To give just one example of the idiosyncrasy and economy of his style, Silone describes an old maid: "She had the

mauve-green coloring of persons who cannot stand flies. But the trilogy seems slowly to lose its way in diffusion and Silone's own self-examination, sailing on like a great liner unable to put into harbor.

As the Cold War set in, Silone began employing the phrase "ex" for former Communists. In an essay in the famous and influential collection *The God That Failed* (1949), he explained how Exes like himself had originally hoped to redress social wrongs. Instead he had found that in the Communist movement "a vocation for tyranny nestled next to the desire for liberty." The Soviet Union was "a system of oppression and exploitation of a new kind." He felt "an urgent need to testify." Silone participated in the Congress for Cultural Freedom and was an editorial advisor for its Italian publication, *Tempo Presente*. Like his contemporary Primo Levi, he seemed to certify that it was possible to live through the ideologies and horrors of the century and emerge as a human being through force of will and love of the truth.

One of his friends, Iris Origo, herself a perceptive and high-minded writer, wrote a biographical sketch of him, to which she gave the title "A Study in Integrity." His greatness, she thought, lay in his "persistent pre-occupation with human suffering." He was pale, slight—as though he did not want to take up more space than was his due—and evidently introspective. When once I had lunch with him, all those years ago on a summer day in Rome, I was struck that he kept the three buttons of his suit formally, protectively, done up. "He carried within him wounds," Iris Origo wrote, "which he knew to be unhealable."

Expiring in its final few incarnations, such as China, Cuba, or North Korea, the experiment of Communism is set to pass into history for what it was, a tide of oppression and murder so immense that nothing like it had ever before happened, and nothing like it should ever happen again. There remain intellectuals in the West, nonetheless, who argue that the evils of "really existing" Communism in practice do nothing to vitiate the underlying dogma. Not many in number, this is the last moment for such intellectuals to salvage the mystique of Communism, and leave it loitering in the garret of history for some future role.

The vilification and marginalization of anti-Communists is the best means available to this end. Long ago, the climate of opinion was put in place whereby anyone and everyone opposed to Communism was beyond the pale. Whether far-fetched or trivial, accusations were conjured up to pick off opponents and suppress their dissent. Albert Camus, for instance, could be written off as a reactionary when he failed to support the Moscow-backed Algerian revolution because his mother was a *pied noir* still living in Algeria. George Orwell and Arthur Koestler were labelled traitors to humanity, no less, and party publications and meetings used to call regularly for death sentences to be passed on them. Defamation continues posthumously. At the suggestion of a friend with connections to British intelligence, it has lately been revealed, Orwell wrote out a list of Communist and fellow-traveling intellectuals. Some might think that this was an obligation at the onset of the Cold War, but left-wing commentators at once trashed him as a police stooge. Koestler, according to his latest biographer, was a serial rapist. By definition, the opinions of such delinquents on any

subject must be permanently discredited.

And now it is the turn of Ignazio Silone. Two Italian academics, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali, in recent years have published a book and various subsequent essays accusing him of being a fascist spy and denouncing Communists to Mussolini's secret police. In the light of documents they have discovered in the archives, they claim that Silone was a regular informant of a senior OVRA official by the name of Guido Bellone. Under the pseudonym *Silvestri*, he is accused of passing on details about other clandestine Communists, their whereabouts and travel plans, over a period starting in 1923 and perhaps even earlier. On April 13, 1930, while he was breaking with Communism, he wrote to Bellone that he found himself "at a moment of truth," when he had either to abandon active politics or kill himself: "I cannot carry on living ambiguously." Also in the official files is a correspondence from October 1937 in which Mussolini asks OVRA for information compromising to Silone and his anti-fascist novels. The OVRA reply states that at one moment in the past Silone "seemed to have repented of his anti-fascist past and had attempted a rapprochement with the Italian authorities." Nothing further developed, however, from this exchange.

In Italy, as elsewhere in continental Europe, the anti-fascist legacy is exaggerated to serve as a buttress to national self-respect. If Silone really were a police informer and not the honest man he seemed so patently to be from his writings and his conduct, then the anti-fascist legacy is compromised. Today's reconstructed fascists stand to gain from that, but so do the Communists, reconstructed or not, for they can claim that Silone was a fraud who forfeited all right to be taken seriously. Throughout the media, gleeful extremists have used Biocca and Canali's work to stamp on his reputation. The controversy has seemed factitious, not to say incredible. The doyen of Italian journalists, Indro Montanelli, summed it up when he countered that "even if Silone himself rose up from his tomb to tell me these accusations were true, I would still not believe them."

A new book, *Processo a Silone*, goes over all the evidence.^[2] Declared, even militant, socialists in the Pietro Nenni tradition, the three authors, Giuseppe Tamburrano, Gianna Granati, and Alfonso Isinelli, are out to refute Biocca and Canali once and for all. The book's preface immediately questions whether Silone's two critics have been displaying "the slap-dash reading typical of journalists, or 'ideological' prejudice." The tone is outright polemical. At times, assertion is met with counter-assertion, leaving the reader is something of a quandary. Nonetheless, there are some firm markers.

Silone did indeed have contact with Bellone, maybe even as early as 1919, at the outset of his political commitment. In the book's main section, Tamburrano analyzes their rather shadowy relationship. What, if anything, happened between them in the early 1920s remains obscure. Here was a game, he observes, in which we cannot be sure who was the cat, who the mouse. A quite different and highly personal drama began when Silone's brother Romolo was arrested on a charge of having placed the bomb that exploded in the Milan Trade Fair in April 1928, killing eighteen people. To this day, the culprit and the motive remain unknown. Romolo was judged innocent. But for the offense of going under a false identity and possessing other papers thought to be

compromising, he was sentenced to a long term in prison. Probably not a formal party member, Romolo seems to have romanticized Communism and the example of his brother. Tortured in prison, he wrote to ask his brother for help. Another consumptive, he was soon to die in prison.

Out of a sense of responsibility and guilt, Silone sent a telegram to Bellone to find out whether anything could be done for his brother. Older than Silone, Bellone had started his police work before the First World War and rose to be General Inspector of Public Security in Rome, finally dying in 1948 as the inmate of an lunatic asylum. Silone found him decent enough and told him so. But Bellone saw the opportunity for blackmail. Something could be done for Romolo if Silone were to furnish information about the Communist party and its organization. Tamburrano concedes that in the months between Romolo's imprisonment and the final letter of 13 April 1930 Silone did pass "generic" information to Bellone, in other words knowledge that was already widely available. The proper response to Silone's dealings with Bellone, Tamburrano argues passionately, is pity for the plight into which Romolo had got him, and admiration for the way he emerged unscathed.

In *The Abruzzo Trilogy* a character by the name of Murica is a Communist who turns to denunciation of his comrades. Silone treats Murica with understanding, which allows Biocca and Canali to infer that Silone was writing about himself. "Proof" of that caliber quickly earns inverted commas from Tamburrano. He also notes that police files contain many lists of informers, and Silone's name features on none of them. Is it likely that Bellone ran Silone as his own agent without informing anyone else in the OVRA hierarchy? But his best point derives from the Mussolini request in 1937 for material with which to blacken Silone as an anti-fascist, and the OVRA response that he had once attempted a rapprochement with the authorities. By then, Mussolini was sending arms to Franco in the Spanish Civil War, and Italian Communists including Togliatti were active on the Republican side. Had Bellone really extracted compromising material, this was the moment to go public with it, demonstrating that Communists could not be trusted. Nothing of the kind happened. The OVRA response also explicitly stated that Silone had approached the secret police "with the intention of helping his brother."

It is essential to Biocca and Canali's case against Silone to establish that he had an ongoing relationship with Bellone through the early Twenties, and that the intervention on behalf of Romolo was not the response to a sudden crisis but the calling-in of a favor due. To that end, they have published quite a lengthy series of documents discovered in the police files, dated between 1923 and 1927. These are all anonymous letters giving details about the whereabouts of Communists and their proposed movements across frontiers. A "T" crops up, and they assume that the initial stands for his real name of Tranquilli. In their view, the dates of the letters, and the places where they were written, correspond to Silone's movements, and so damn him completely as a long-term informer.

This is all speculation, Tamburrano now replies, and it ought to be rejected wholesale. These letters are incomplete, full of gaps, and scribbled all over so that they are hard to decipher. In their separate contributions, in effect scholarly appendices, Gianna Granati and Alfonso Isinelli examine

the two critics' interpretation of these letters, one by one. It is easy to show that Biocca and Canale have made all manner of sloppy errors and that Silone could have been in the right city to write some of these letters on some of the dates, but by no means all of them.

The case is not proven, as they say on doubtful occasions in Scottish courts, but common sense suggests that Tamburrano and his colleagues are right, and Silone deserves sympathy for helping his brother at a certain cost to himself. Biocca and Canali make no allowance for the totalitarian context, but strikingly and invariably place the ugliest possible interpretation on everything to do with Silone. Whatever its source, their animus is pointless. If beneath appearances, Silone was a real secret police informer, then that would be only a comment on the hateful demands totalitarianism makes on the individual—or to put it another way, some wounds to the human soul go deep, too deep to be understood, let alone healable. Outwardly Silone lived his life as an anti-fascist and an anti-Communist. The personal example stands. The writing speaks for itself.

Notes

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1. *The Abruzzo Trilogy*, by Ignazio Silone, translated by Eric Mosbacher; Steerforth Italia, 800 pages, \$27. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Processo a Silone*, by Giuseppe Tamburrano, Gianna Granati, and Alfonso Isinelli; Piero Lacaita Editore, 161 pages, 20,000 lire. [Go back to the text.](#)

David Pryce-Jones is the author, most recently, of *Openings & Outings: An Anthology* (Criterion Books).

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 20 Number 1, on page 28

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