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Emergency exit

The double life of Ignazio Silone

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Dario Biocca and
Mauro Canali

L'INFORMATORE
Silone, i comunisti e la polizia
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Published in Zurich in April 1933, only weeks after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Ignazio Silone's extraordinary novel *Fontamara* struck a resonant chord throughout anti-Fascist Europe and beyond. Leon Trotsky wrote to Silone – one exile to another, one enemy of Stalin to another – to say that "the book deserves to be distributed in millions of copies". Graham Greene, reviewing the novel in the *Spectator* in 1934, declared that "this story of an obscure Italian village 'about one hundred ragged, shapeless, one-floor hovels' is the most moving account of Fascist barbarity I have yet read . . . . It should be read to its merciless end."

The success of *Fontamara* was all the more remarkable in that it was Silone's first novel. Born Secondino Tranquilli on May 1, 1900, he had grown up in the impoverished Marsica region of the Abruzzi, near Rome. The peasants, the *cafoni*, of his home were to be the heroes of *Fontamara* and many later works. At the age of fifteen, he lost all his immediate family, apart from his younger brother Romolo, in a massive earthquake that claimed over 30,000 victims. After three years under Catholic tutelage, Silone was drawn to Rome, to the Socialist Party and, in 1921, to the new breakaway Communist Party of Togliatti, Gramsci and Bordiga. For a decade afterwards, he was a key figure in the party, editing journals and newspapers, travelling to Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland and Russia, carrying out often dangerous missions – two of which landed him in gaol, and leading the underground Communist network in Italy after the Fascists had banned all opposition in 1926. In 1927, he witnessed Stalin peremptorily ousting Trotsky, Zinoviev and others in Moscow, and from then on his relations with the party were increasingly fraught and unclear. By 1931, when he was finally expelled, he had already turned away from active politics, *Fontamara* was written, and, with it, Silone had found a new medium to express his convictions.

Fontamara launched Silone on to a remarkable second career that would see him become a literary standard-bearer for a certain moral, leftist resistance to totalitarianism, his reputation akin to that of figures such as Camus, Koestler and Orwell. His next novel, *Bread and Wine* (1936), was a masterly exploration of the moral complications of being an anti-Fascist, as embodied in the semi-autobiographical hero Pietro Spina, a Communist in hiding in Italy disguised as a priest. From his exile in Zurich, Silone also wrote one of the most acute of all analyses of Fascism, the satirical dialogues *The School for Dictators* (1938). His international reputation was sealed after the Second World War when his devastating account of his loss of faith in Communism appeared in Richard Crossman's 1950 collection, *The God That Failed*. Despite the increasingly Christian, devotional tenor of Silone's later work and despite the at times ferocious hostility of the Communists, he remained something of a hero and a paragon for many on the European socialist Left. Until now.

In *L'informatore*, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali offer an overwhelming body of archival evidence to suggest that, for over ten years between 1919 and 1930, Silone was a regular informant to a Roman police official called Guido Bellone. Writing under the pseudonym Silvestri, Silone gave Bellone written details of individuals, institutions and activities in whatever political circle he found himself in and wherever he travelled around Europe. Indeed, it was his mobility that allowed Biocca and Canali to pin Silvestri down, circumstantially at least, since the date, place and mission of every single report of this highly placed informant coincided with Silone's activities. When his brother was arrested for plotting to assassinate the King of Italy in 1928, Silone made efforts to help, but to no great avail, since his brother was tortured, imprisoned and would die in gaol in 1932. Perhaps as a result of this personal crisis and perhaps as an offshoot of the unsustainable tensions in his relations with the Partito Comunista Italiano and Moscow, Silone finally cut all links with Bellone in a

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remarkable letter of April 1930:

> I find myself at a moment of truth in my life-crisis and I can only see one way out: to abandon active politics altogether (I'll look for intellectual work of some kind). The only other solution was death. I could not, I cannot carry on living ambiguously [nell'equivoco].

Cutting off the supply of information was a dangerous move for an informant; the only way out for Silone was to cut himself off from the information itself and thus render himself useless. His second career as a writer was, then, born of a double decampment or "emergency exit": from Stalin and the Comintern, but also from Bellone and the hypocrisies of a decade of betrayal.

We have grown quite inured to revelations of compromise and complicity emerging after the fall of totalitarian regimes, and Fascist Italy, even over fifty years on, continues to offer its own examples. There were recent spats over a letter from Alberto Moravia to Il Duce, and over Cesare Pavese's pro-Fascist musings in his private diary. But the case against Silone is at once more complicated, more messy and more astonishing than these, cutting across political and cultural fault-lines of both the Fascist period and the 1990s.

The rather clinical book by Biocca and Canali, made up of two essays tracing Silone's activities over the period in question, and more than fifty of Silvestri's reports, is only the latest sally in a debate that has already lasted several years. It had long been suspected that Silone may have tried to contact the regime in 1928, in a noble and desperate attempt to help his brother. When the first suggestions appeared, in 1996, from Biocca and others that there was more to it than that, many were appalled. There followed a drip-feed of claims and counterclaims in conferences, journals and the national press, at times propelled more by the dynamics of media scandal than by serious debate. As new documents emerged, defenders of Silone were forced to change their ground more than once. Several simply refused to countenance the possibility that Silone was an informer. The veteran journalist Indro Montanelli declared that "even if Silone himself rose up from his tomb to tell me these accusations were true, I would still not believe them". The philosopher Norberto Bobbio also defended Silone, more out of loyalty to the man and his ideas than out of an examination of the evidence. Once historians began looking at the material seen by Biocca and Canali, several let loose accusations of manipulation and inaccuracy of transcription. Silone's widow threatened to sue. Meanwhile, mutterings even emerged of an old scandal linking Silone to the CIA, in the 1950s, through the Congress for Cultural Freedom. From Switzerland came evidence of links during the war with the CIA's predecessor, the OSS, including meetings with Allen Dulles. Silone risked being turned into a spy for all seasons and for all sides.

Not least of the ironies thrown up by the case was the fact that the rearguard defensive action was joined by many on the ex-Communist Left, Silone's bitterest enemies during his lifetime. Here 1990s politics came into play: Biocca and Canali published their first academic articles on Silone in the journal of the revisionist historian Renzo De Felice. Evidence of a political attempt to weaken the anti-Fascist legacy and prop up the recently legitimized neo-Fascists, for some; evidence that no other journal would accept their work, for the authors.

The whole case was becoming caught up in the dense atmosphere of confusion in the 1990s, brought about by the crumbling of the anti-Fascist consensus on which post-war Italy had built itself. In literary circles, hagiographical treatment of Silone seemed for a while to continue unabated, but rereading his work provoked a growing sense of anxiety. A climactic chapter of *Bread and Wine* is given over to the confession of a young man, arrested in Rome and seduced into informing on his political companions by a soft-spoken police officer. Silone in 1918 or 1919, perhaps? This same young man was later be the protagonist of a play, *And He Hid Himself* (1944). Caveats about authorial fallacies aside, the prominence of themes of betrayal, disguise and guilt in the oeuvre should at least give pause for thought. As should the fact that Silone the writer emerges from the revelations as a richer and more challenging figure than his more pious champions had ever suggested.

In *L'informatore*, however, Biocca and Canali are interested in historical, not literary fact. After four years of polemic, the book quashes once and for all any attempt to deny that Silone sent these reports to Bellone. The establishment of that fact alone is a substantial achievement, but elements remain unclear. Although a letter of July 1929 talks of "relations" of ten years' standing, direct evidence from the years before 1923–4 (and indeed for the crucial years between 1925 and 1927) is still very thin. Some of the circumstantial questions raised by doubters are still awkwardly unanswered: if Silone was a spy, why, when he became such an important international symbol of the anti-Fascist cause in the 1930s, did the regime not simply reveal his duplicity to the world? And why was the regime still spying on him in the 1930s and 40s? Was Togliatti notified when he was Minister for Justice after the war, with access to most lists of informers and spies, and if so, again, would he not have acted against this traitor to his party and himself? But the most fundamental unanswered question is motivational: what sort of mutual interest bound Silone, and other informers like him, to figures such as Bellone and the regime?

It seems clear that Silone was never a Fascist. Bellone himself, more or less unknown before now, was operating in liberal Italy as a wily official with a gift for collecting information rather than for enforcing any ideology. The two had a strange and obviously intense personal rapport, begun years before Mussolini's rise to power. Bellone had even, according to some, served in the relief efforts after the 1915 Marsica earthquake and might have forged a bond with the young Silone based on this shared past. There is some talk of money changing hands between them, but also of loyalty and mutual respect. Further, Silone states in 1930 that he has not lost his devotion to the workers' and peasants' cause and does not believe he has done "a great deal of wrong to either my friends or my country". Wishful thinking, perhaps, but it is true the vast majority of Silvestri's missives give relatively little away. They contain low-key nuggets of information that the regime would have received from several lesser informers also. Even when he appears to go in for outright betrayal, he does so in a way that some have construed as practically useless to Bellone.

How could such a high-ranking, knowledgeable Communist have inflicted less damage on the anti-Fascist cause in ten years than, say, the foppish socialite Pitigrilli did to the liberal anti-Fascists of Turin, after he turned informer almost on a whim in 1930? There are two conjectural answers to the question, one unlikely and one that chimes with much we now know about the workings of the Fascist secret police, the Opera di vigilanza e di repressione dell'anti-fascismo (OVRA). It is just about possible, as some have claimed, that Silone was playing a double game (no matter what version of the story holds, it is clear that he was a master at this), feeding harmless information, even misinformation, to Bellone to keep tabs on what the regime knew and did not know. Much more likely, Bellone got precisely what he wanted from Silone, which was up-to-date, detailed monitoring, to help him build up a cumulative picture of the Communist movement. And no doubt part of his game was to allow his informant not to feel morally abject.

Hard though the distinction is to draw in moral terms, it is historically crucial: Silone was involved more in informing on than brazenly betraying the Communist cause, as Biocca and Canali have wanted to suggest. Mimmo Franzinelli, the author of an important recent book, *I tentacoli dell'OVRA* (The Tentacles of OVRA), has taken Biocca and Canali quite severely to task for not contextualizing "Silvestri" within the massive network of informers maintained by the regime, and for therefore overblowing the presentation and interpretation of what they have found in precisely this way. Having said that, Silone's information no doubt helped the regime immensely in its damaging assault on the clandestine Communists in the early 1930s.

The research continues. A full-scale biography is planned, and much remains to be said on this most compelling of figures, both as writer and political player. In Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 film *The Spider's Stratagem*, an anti-Fascist is unmasked by his companions as a traitor. However, he becomes a hero and a martyr when he is assassinated in a way that makes the regime look responsible. Years later, his son unravels the web of deceit, but in the end chooses to honour the simple myth of his father as hero and not the complicated truth. In the past, Silone's rapport with the twin forces of Fascism and Communism had seemed extraordinarily simple and emblematic, verging on the heroic. Now a more complicated truth is beginning to emerge, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali. Abandoning the myth has been a wrench, but the truth of Silone's double life makes him more, not less emblematic of his century.