

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## In defence of Ignazio Silone

Sir, — With reference to Richard Bellamy's review of two books on Benedetto Croce and Ignazio Silone (January 28), I would like to point out that it is not true that Croce's was "by some way the more straightforward" case of anti-Fascism. Silone, as a high-ranking member of the Italian Communist Party, was a committed anti-Fascist, involved in extremely dangerous underground activity. After he broke with the Communist Party he carried on an even more effective campaign, in particular in his articles and novels — above all *Fontamara*. The Fascist police issued numerous warrants for his arrest. They even planned to assassinate him in 1943. Croce, on the other hand, continued to live in tranquil freedom, tolerated by the regime.

Bellamy writes that Croce "went into open opposition" against Fascism in 1924. On June 21 of that year, Croce voted in support of a vote of confidence for Mussolini in the Senate. This vote referred to the disappearance on June 10, 1924, of the Socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti, kidnapped and subsequently murdered by Mussolini's henchmen.

As regards Silone, Elizabeth Leake, the author of *The Reinvention of Ignazio Silone*, assumes that the writer had been a spy for the Fascist police and, being unable to give a convincing explanation for her speculation, attributes his behaviour to psychiatric problems. Bellamy adopts this explanation when he writes of "the personal psychology" of Silone, and "feelings of insecurity, that probably explain his choices". Leake goes into greater detail, postulating a homosexual liaison between Silone and the police officer, Guido Bellone, whom he was supposed to have "reported to". A novelist can make up plots; a historian cannot.

In fairness, Richard Bellamy takes care not to cite this implausible "reason"; in fact a few lines later he writes, "the motivations behind Silone's betrayal remain obscure". And they will remain obscure until the simple truth is accepted: that Silone had never been a Fascist spy.

Silone's only blunder was that, through contacts with Inspector Bellone, whom he knew, he tried to save his brother Romolo from being tortured and killed in a Fascist prison, where he was held after being falsely accused of carrying out a terrorist attack in Milan in April 1928. Bellone asked Silone to collaborate in exchange for this help, but Silone only gave some generalized information of a political nature: this went on for two years, from April 1928 to April 1930, when Silone realized that he could do nothing for his brother (who died in prison) and that the Fascists wanted him to spy for them, something he refused to do.

This is not my "opinion" but exactly what the head of the political police wrote to Mussolini in a report dated October 12, 1937: "Tranquilli Secondino [Silone's real name] was very fond of his brother and has suffered greatly. He tried to help him in every way . . . In that period he made a show of repentance about his anti-Fascist position and attempted some kind of reconciliation with the Italian authorities by sending them disinterested generalized information on the activities of political exiles. He did this in order to help his brother". (Central State Archives, political police, personal file, b.1370.)

After the war, a commission was set up, directed by that most rigorous of anti-Fascists, Pietro Nenni, which examined all the dossiers on the spies used by the political police (OVRA): Silone's name was not there.

Together with Gianna Granati and Alfonso Isinelli I have recently written a book entitled *Silone on Trial*, in which I examine the documents which have been said by the orchestrators of a recent campaign to prove Silone's "guilt": there is not a single one that is remotely convincing. The Italian press, thirsty for "sensational news", has incautiously swallowed this supposed scoop and regurgitated it for the benefit of the public. It has been a negation of the truth and an affront to the dignity of heroic figures like Ignazio Silone.

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