

## REVIEWS

Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali, *L'informatore: Silone, i comunisti e la Polizia*,

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### THE SECRET LIFE OF IGNAZIO SILONE

Ignazio Silone, best known as a remarkable writer and novelist, was born on the First of May 1900 in a small village in the Abruzzo. His real name was Secondino Tranquilli. The son of a small landowner who died when he was eleven, he became an orphan at the age of fifteen when a massive earthquake wiped out his home town in twenty-five seconds. During the First World War he became a teenage militant in the ranks of the Young Socialists, rising quickly through its ranks in the 'two red years' (*biennio rosso*) between 1919 and 1920, when he was active in Rome. When the Italian Socialists split in 1921, he became a founder member of the Italian Communist Party. Nominated to the Young Communist International, he was a frequent visitor to Berlin and Moscow, and organized Italian workers' groups in Spain, France, Belgium and Luxemburg. Within a few years, as Fascism consolidated its rule in the country, he became one of the eight top leaders of the PCI in exile, and in 1927 was sent back into Italy as head of the party's underground network. When Moscow imposed the sectarian policies of the Third Period on the Communist International at the end of the decade, a line which threatened to tear the Italian party apart, Silone was eventually expelled from the PCI for sympathies with the opposition to it.

Withdrawing from active politics after his expulsion, Silone wrote his masterpieces *Fontamara* (1933) and *Bread and Wine* (1936), two of the most powerful anti-fascist novels ever written, in Switzerland. His analytic study *School for Dictators* (1938) remains unsurpassed in the brilliance and accuracy of its dis-

section of fascism's rise to power and of Mussolini's rule. In 1941, he rejoined the Socialist Party in Zurich; he was arrested and interned by the Swiss police a year later. In October 1944 he returned to Rome, and played a leading role in the Socialist Party, opposing Nenni's alliance with the Communist Party. In 1947 he left the PSI and, as the Cold War developed, took a prominent part in the anti-communist politics of the time, contributing to the notorious symposium *The God that Failed* (1950), and creating the journal *Tempo Presente* under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, of whose Italian section he became the director. Detested as a Cold Warrior by the PCI, Silone was widely admired outside it. His *Emergency Exit* (1965), a collection of essays and testimonies on his time in the Party, became a touchstone for the non-Communist left. Continuing to write and revise his novels, Silone described himself as 'a socialist without a party, a christian without a church'. For so long a central figure in the Italian intellectual landscape, he died in 1978. For many, his life and work embodied the vicissitudes, alternately tragic and heroic, of the century.

Some ten years later, plans for an exhibition of documents about the novelist were mounted in his home town. Requests were sent to Rome for relevant materials. There a senior official of the State Archive, looking through a file devoted to Silone by the OVRA, the political police of the Fascist period, came upon two letters that he set aside from the rest of the file, which he sent on. The documents that he abstracted, he neither made public nor put back where they belonged. He removed them. In one, written in early 1930 and addressed to Emilia Bellone, sister of Guido Bellone, General Inspector of Public Security charged with stamping out subversion, the writer speaks of a deep moral and psychological crisis, and pleads to be released from 'all falsehood, doubt and secrecy', expressing a desire 'to repair the damage that I have caused, to seek redemption, to help the workers, the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fibre in my body) and my country.' No word of this document reached the outside world. But as it happened, a young historian working on a biography of Silone, Dario Biocca, was starting to come across other documents which suggested that Silone might have been a police informer between 1928 and 1930. At a conference held in Florence in 1996, Biocca for the first time aired this conclusion in public. A storm immediately broke over the allegations, which generated a huge controversy in the national press. At this juncture, a lesser official at the Archive in Rome who knew of the letter of 1930, but had neither restored it to its place nor informed Biocca of its existence, decided to release a copy to the newspaper *La Repubblica*. Not surprisingly, its publication was greeted with consternation and further furious debate. (The letter, along with other documents and a commentary, is now available in English in an article by Mauro Canali, 'Ignazio Silone and the Fascist Political Police', published in the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 5(1) 2000.)

Since then Biocca has continued his research, joined by Mauro Canali, a historian working on the Fascist secret police. The fruits of their careful and patient study of the archives, pursued amidst great hostility, are now available in the book they have jointly published, *L'informatore*. Composed of a joint introduction, a long essay by Canali on the 1919–23 period, another by Biocca covering the decade following 1924, and 117 pages of transcribed documents and explanatory notes, it is a formidable body of work which removes all doubt about the activities of Secondino Tranquilli in the twenties. The chilling truth is that Silone was an informer for the Italian secret police from 1919 to 1930. This revelation is so staggering that many still hesitate to believe it, but the evidence presented by Biocca and Canali, neither of whom has any political axe to grind, is overwhelming. The suppressed letter of 1930 establishes beyond question that 'Silvestri', a long-time informant of the police and in particular of Guido Bellone in Rome, was in fact Silone. 'Silvestri' was by far the most important spy working for the Fascist regime within the Communist movement. He also informed for far longer than any other agent. A series of smaller signs—handwriting, style, substance, numerous biographical details—confirm his identity. Silone's complicated movements in the twenties mirror those of 'Silvestri': when Silone is in Berlin, 'Silvestri' writes from Berlin; when Silone is in Paris, 'Silvestri' writes from Paris. The reports dry up after Silone was expelled from the PCI (and left active political life) in 1931. A police document from 1928, which has played a key role in convincing many previous doubters of Silone's guilt, identified Silone as a spy for the benefit of Mussolini himself. Others show that Silone was protected from arrest on a series of occasions, or given privileged treatment by the Fascist police. Much of the information provided by 'Silvestri' could only have come from within a very small group of Communist leaders. Silone himself was often left out of lists of names supplied, and on one occasion a photograph of PCI leaders sent by 'Silvestri' was reproduced and distributed to various Fascist agents, with all figures in the frame except that of Silone (the photograph, together with others supplied by 'Silvestri', is reproduced in *L'informatore*).

What was the content of the information Silone was sending for over a decade to the State Police and (after 1922) to those employed under Mussolini's regime? Much of it is generic material, as in all police-informant reports, in this case bearing on political debates within the PCI and Socialist movement, and relationships with the USSR. But much else is specific delation of individuals. 'Silvestri' provides photographs of militants; he indicates when activists from the underground will be moving across borders and under what false names; he identifies addresses and secret printing presses; he draws maps; he describes people. Such information led to swift repression and arrests. In 1923 'Silvestri' told the police: 'Yesterday evening Mauro Scoccimarro left for Italy via Switzerland. He has a passport under the name of the Neapolitan Communist

Vergili, upon which he has substituted his photograph.' Almost immediately, the authorities were able to circulate the following message to every prefect in Italy: 'The noted Communist Mauro Scoccimarro will return into Italy via Switzerland with a passport under the name of Virgili or Vergili (from Naples) upon which he has substituted his own photo. Investigate and arrest the subject if the passport has been changed.' Biocca and Canali cite numerous other examples in *L'informatore*, and further documents will certainly emerge from the archives. The evidence also seems to suggest that 'Silvestri' was aware of fellow collaborators working within the Communist movement and helped warn them of possible discovery. The conclusion is inescapable: Silone was almost certainly invaluable in the detection and depletion of the Communist and anti-Fascist networks built up across Europe in the twenties.

How have Silone's admirers reacted to these discoveries? In the initial rush to defend him, the documents found in the archives were denounced as forgeries, which could only have been planted in the files by the Fascist authorities themselves, with the aim of discrediting him. But as more and more evidence came to light, the idea that the OVRA had created folders full of sophisticated forgeries in the thirties waiting to be discovered (and then hidden, and then released) by future generations, had to be abandoned. Many who were initially sceptical now accept that 'Silvestri' was, in fact, Silone. But for others the psychological shock is so great that they simply 'refuse to believe' that Silone could possibly have been a spy. Indro Montanelli, a leading liberal commentator, had declared he would not believe it even if Silone were to reappear and tell him it was so to his face. The Socialist historian Giuseppe Tamburrano, biographer of Nenni, has tried to counter-attack with what Canali has described as 'a poorly executed form of collage of random documents found in Silone's file' from the mid-thirties, with some success in recruiting others to his cause, the latest being none other than Norberto Bobbio, in a letter to *La Repubblica* of 5 May 2000.

The single serious issue raised by Silone's supporters concerns the fate of his younger brother, Romolo Tranquilli. The only one of Silone's five siblings to survive childhood illness and the earthquake, Romolo was arrested by the police in 1928 on suspicion of participation in a bungled bomb-attack against the King in Milan, which left eighteen bystanders dead. Silone, who was devoted to his brother, tried to intervene on his behalf with the Fascist authorities. Various 'official' Silone publications have glossed this as the only reason for his having been in touch with the OVRA. Thus Bruno Falchetto, introducing the 1998 edition of Silone's Collected Works, *Ignazio Silone. Romanzi e saggi, 1927-1944*, writes: 'We cannot exclude the possibility that contacts were made for a time, between 1928 and 1930, with Emilio (sic) Bellone, head of the special office of the political police of the Interior Ministry. [But] these contacts would seem definitely linked to attempts to explore every avenue and try and help young "Romolotto".' A somewhat more ingenious version of the same line of argument

can be found in Ottorino Gurgo and Francesco de Core's 1998 hagiography *Silone: L'avventura di un uomo libero*, which devotes just three pages out of its nearly five hundred to the charges against Silone, suggesting that he had a plan 'to make the OVRA believe that he was their informer in order to obtain the liberation of Romolo or, at the very least, an improvement in his terrible conditions in prison.' This desperate effort to reinvent Silone's activities as a heroic triple game holds no water. For not only is there ample evidence that 'Silvestri' was in communication with Bellone well before 1928, but it was the issue of Romolo that led the OVRA to identify Silone as an informer to Mussolini himself. Biocca and Canali's account turns the whole question on its head. What they show is that it may have been the tragedy of his younger brother that finally forced Silone to cut his ties with Bellone. Romolo was tortured by the Fascists, cleared of the attentat against the King, but sentenced to twelve years imprisonment as a Communist. He died in jail from pneumonia in 1932. Silone's 'moral and psychological crisis' could well have had its origins here.

His brother's ordeal, however, leaves the problem of Silone's role in the PCI after 1929 unanswered. His activities in the Third Period have always seemed ambiguous. He appeared to support neither those Communists who resisted the Soviet doctrine that social democrats were no better than 'social fascists', nor the PCI leaders who implemented Stalin's line. After a long period of this 'double game', Silone was expelled from the Party in 1931. How are we to understand his role in the light of the revelations about him? Was he intent on provoking his own expulsion, to escape from the 'falsehood, doubt and secrecy' of his letter to Bellone in 1930? Or was he deliberately prolonging the internal conflict in the PCI to damage the Party? We cannot be sure; maybe he was doing both at once. What is clear is that 'Silvestri' stopped reporting to Rome in 1930. When he was expelled from the PCI the following year, Silone withdrew from politics altogether and underwent an analysis by Carl Jung in Zurich. His apparently bizarre and solitary 'dissent' had allowed him to escape from the grip of the PCI and the OVRA at the same time.

Much remains to be explored in this period of Silone's life. But the weight of evidence on display is now such that defenders of his reputation, after half-hearted attempts to block the publication of *L'informatore*, are now very much on the back foot. Biocca's forthcoming full-length biography of Silone should provide a more complete picture. Meanwhile, the enigma that remains unresolved is the question of motive. What lay behind Silone's decade of betrayals? Retrospectively, we can read in his fiction signs of an inner turmoil that bear on his other life. The confession of a young militant befriended by a policeman and turned into an informer in chapter 25 of *Bread and Wine* could reflect something of his own 'recruitment'. The themes of *The Fox* (1934), published in Italy in 1958, and the play *And He Hides Himself* (1944), are spying and treachery. The historian Mimmo Franzinelli mentions an unpublished work (held in the

Silone archive) called *Il Dossier*, in which an anti-Fascist Minister of the Interior re-reads his own life through the police records of the Fascist period, as if Silone knew that one day he would be unmasked. 'In my solitary brooding, that left me not a moment's peace,' confesses the spy in *Bread and Wine*,

I passed from fear of punishment to fear of non-punishment. The idea that I was haunted by the wrong I had done only because of the continual risk of being found out began to frighten me. So I began to wonder whether, if better technique enabled one to betray one's friends with the certainty that one would never be found out, that would make it more supportable . . . So might technique be capable of destroying the distinction between right and wrong, by eliminating the risk of punishment? The idea frightened me.

As Adriano Sofri wrote in *La Repubblica* on 15 April 2000: 'One re-reads all of Silone, and one thinks: how could we not have seen it before?' Biocca and Canali, too, invite us to look within Silone's fiction for the unravelling of his secrets. Indeed, Biocca says, it was a close study of *Bread and Wine* that first led him to suspect the truth. Certainly, reading works like *Fontamara* will never be quite the same again.

But literary clues, suggestive though they may be, can only take us so far. Historical evidence for Silone's motivation in becoming an agent of the secret police still remains too thin for any confident answers. He was very young when he embarked on his career as an informer, only nineteen. From childhood he would have been psychologically fragile; maybe he needed money to support his family in the Abruzzo. Certainly he was paid for his betrayals over a decade, on occasion even, it would seem, bargaining for more generous pieces of silver. He began to inform on the socialist movement before Mussolini came to power, and his reports to the political police, whose personnel was largely continuous before and after the March on Rome, reveal little ideological commitment to Fascism later. If he was tempted by the glamour or power of the regime in the twenties, there is no clear sign of it. He does express extreme hostility to the leadership of the PCI by 1930, and was certainly a violent anti-Communist after 1945, so it is just possible that he was driven by hatred of the revolutionary left from the start (in 1919 the PSI was still an insurrectionary party). But this would require some dramatic teenage conversion, of which we know nothing.

What is clear is that at the centre of the mystery lies his relationship with Bellone. What was the bond between 'Silvestri' and his controller, the 'gentlemanly' interlocutor for whom he expresses his respect in 1930? Bellone went to visit Silone abroad, convinced his informant to continue when he was wavering in 1924, and tried to dissuade him from quitting in 1930. There is no hint of blackmail in the documents, and it is striking that the regime did not expose Silone in the thirties, when his novels had become very effective weapons against it. Bellone himself retired in 1936, eventually dying in a lunatic asylum

in 1948. Documents show the Fascist authorities were not indifferent to Silone's fame, but they took no action against him. Could Bellone initially have protected him? These are at best speculations. What is clear is that once Silone had begun to inform, it was very difficult (and dangerous) to stop, and that the price he had to pay for ending his duplicity was high, a complete detachment from political activism. For someone whose whole adult life had been lived within the labour movement, this was a traumatic decision, which led to a kind of psychological breakdown. Out of it came the distinguished writer and pillar of anti-fascism the world has thought it knew ever since. Beyond the factual mystery of the reasons for Silone's service as a spy for the regime, the psychological mystery of his emergence from it as a literary-ethical phoenix is yet greater.

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