

IGNAZIO SILONE
(1900-1978)

My January, 2016 essay dealt with Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, arguably the most important Italian novelist of the 20th Century with his novel The Leopard (Il Gattopardo). I say “arguably” because another important Italian novelist of the 20th Century, Ignazio Silone, whose corpus includes more important novels than Lampedusa, can compete competently for that title. The choice basically rests upon the critics whom one wishes to follow and the criteria they emphasize in pushing forward their claims. February’s essay will look at the life, work, and influence of Silone, and his place in 20th Century Italian literature.

IGNAZIO SILONE was born on May 1, 1900 in the small village of Pescina dei Marsi in the Abruzzo region. His real name was Secondino Tranquilli, and he was the son of a small landowner who died when the boy was 11. He was educated in Pescina until he was 15. He became an orphan when the massive 1915 Avezzano earthquake struck the region, wiping out his home town in twenty-five seconds, and killing 3,500 people in a village of 5,000. His mother and many of his relatives were included in the death toll. (Only one of his five siblings survived the earthquake and childhood illness to live to adulthood.) After drifting for a time, he managed to finish secondary school, and in 1917 he began working with Socialist groups.



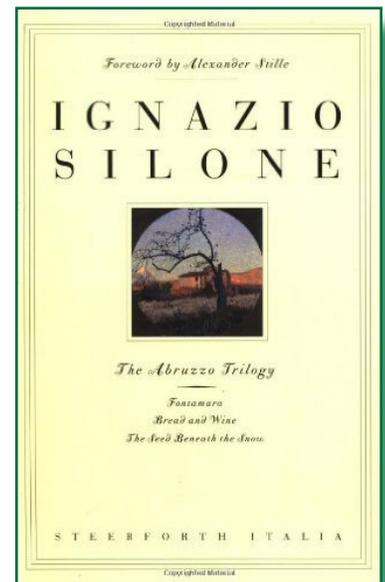
During the remainder of World War I, he became a teenage militant in the ranks of the Young Socialists, rising quickly through its ranks in the ‘two red years’ (*biennio rosso*) between 1919 and 1920, when he was active in Rome. He became a leader of the antiwar movement and editor of the Roman Socialist paper *Avanguardia*. When the Italian Socialists split in 1921, he helped found the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and in 1922 became the editor of the party’s paper in Trieste, *Il Lavoratore* (*The Worker*).

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. While on a trip to Moscow during this period, he met Lenin and was greatly impressed with the activity going on in Moscow, where (as he later recalled in a radio interview) “everyone was contributing to remaking society.”

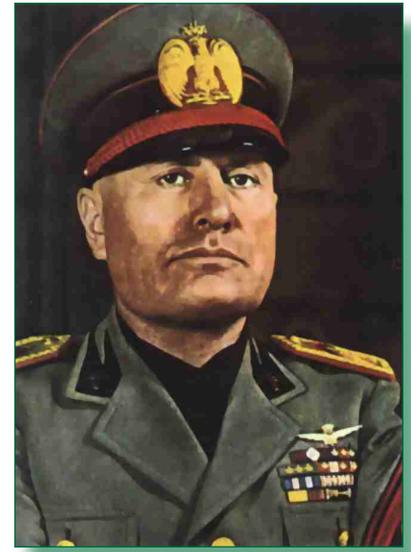
In 1923, while he was in Spain, he was imprisoned for helping local Communists organize opposition to the government. (It was during this time that he reinvented himself as Ignazio Silone to protect his family from Fascist persecution). Within a few years, as Mussolini's Fascism consolidated its rule in Italy, 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 that was fighting the Fascists. (His brother, Romolo Tranquilli, who was arrested in 1928 for being a member of the PCI in a botched bomb attempt to kill the King in Milan, eventually died in prison in 1931 of pneumonia and of wounds suffered from severe beatings he received at the hands of the Fascists). When Stalinist Moscow imposed the sectarian policies of the Third Period on the Communist International at the end of the 1920s, which threatened to tear the PCI apart, Silone left Italy in 1927 on a mission to the Soviet Union to attend the epic meeting of the Communist International that saw the showdown between Stalin and Trotsky. Silone refused to condemn Trotsky on the basis of a document that he, like all others present, had not been allowed to read and study. Subsequently, he read that Trotsky had been condemned "unanimously." It was not long after this disheartening experience that Silone broke with the Communists and the PCI in 1931.

Since he was now on his own politically as an anti-Fascist who was physically exiled from Mussolini's Italy, and as an anti-Stalinist who was intellectually and morally exiled from much of the Communist left, he went to Switzerland. There in the 1930s and 1940s, he found fame not as an activist but as a writer of three novels which were set in his birthplace, Pescina, and known popularly as the Abruzzo Trilogy.

These three novels were pioneering classics of proletarian fiction, telling about the tragic struggle of the Abruzzese peasants against rapacious landlords and brutal government officials. The first two were two of the most powerful anti-fascist novels ever written. The first, *Fontamara (Bitter Spring)*, was written in 1933, while Silone was recovering in a Swiss sanatorium from tuberculosis and severe clinical depression. It is the simple story of village peasants being condemned to wretchedness and unemployment by a domineering landowner who thwarts their attempts to use the water of a brook to irrigate their small plots of land. The novel does not present theoretical and polemical arguments, as might be expected from such a radical thinker as Silone. This was followed in 1937 by *Vino e Pane (Bread and Wine)*, and then by *Il Seme Sotto la Neve (The Seed Beneath the Snow)* in 1940. These portray socialist heroes who try to help the peasants by sharing their sufferings in a Christian spirit.



In 1938 he wrote an analytic study and satire, entitled *La Scuola dei Dittatori* (*The School for Dictators*) that remains unsurpassed in the brilliance and accuracy of its dissection of Fascism's rise to power and of Mussolini's rule. In 1941, Silone rejoined the Socialist Party in Zurich. He became the leader of a clandestine Socialist organization operating from Switzerland in support of resistance groups in Nazi Germany-occupied Northern Italy. Subsequently, he was arrested and interned by the Swiss. By Christmas, 1942 the Swiss wanted to expel him, but relented because of his importance to the Allied war effort in Italy. It was then that he found a new ally and a new career. Allen Dulles was then the Bern station chief of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the C.I.A., and enlisted Silone. He gave Dulles information and advice that, among other things, correctly predicted that "unconditional surrender" was a foolish policy that would prolong the defeat of Italy.



Benito Mussolini
1883-1945

In October 1944 he returned to Rome, where he played a leading role in the Italian Socialist Party, campaigning for a united Europe and opposing the plan to merge Italy's Socialist and Stalinist Communist parties. In 1947 he left the PCI again and, as the Cold War developed, played a prominent role in the anti-communist politics of the time. In 1950 he contributed *Emergency Exit*, which was one of the autobiographical essays by former Communists that appeared in the anthology *The God That Failed*. With this publication, Silone became an official cold warrior, creating the journal *Tempo Presente* of whose Italian section he became the director. This journal espoused liberal anti-Communism with financial support from the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). (Later, in 1967, with the discovery that the CCF had received secret funding from the United States CIA, Silone resigned and devoted all his energies to the writing of novels and autobiographical essays).

Una Mancinata di More (*A Handful of Blackberries*, 1952) takes up again the failure of political parties to correct the wrongs of poverty and injustice in the social structure of society. Once again, Silone sees the discrepancies not in terms of specific political parties, but as an oppression of the poor by the rich, with which any political party will have to come to terms. Thus, changes on the political scene meant next to nothing if the socially oppressive structure was not changed. In *Il Segreto di Luca* (*The Secret of Luca*, 1956) outward sociopolitical aspects seem to be less obtrusive, but even here, where the right to a personal life clashes with the demands of the state, the latter are the important determinants of the outcome.

La Volpe e le Camelie (*The Fox and the Camellias*, 1960) is Silone's first novel that is not set in the Italian South, but it, too, takes up political issues and their moral and social consequences under Fascist rule. A play, *L'avventura d'un Povero Cristiano* (*The Adventure of a Humble Christian*, 1968), which was awarded the Campiello Prize, depicts the historical clash between Pope Celestine V and Pope Boniface VIII in the late 13th Century. It deals with the conflict between individual spirituality and institutionalized religion.

Although Silone became detested as a Cold Warrior anti-Communist by the PCI, he was widely admired outside the Party. His *Uscita di Sicurezza* (*Emergency Exit*) was re-published and expanded in 1965 to include a collection of essays and testimonies on his time in the Party and his shifts from Socialism to Communism to Christianity. This became a touchstone for the non-Communist Socialist left.

Silone wrote little in the last decades of his life, spending most of his writing time revising his earlier novels. His last novel, *Severina* (published posthumously in 1981), was finished and largely written by his wife, Darina Laracy. It was his only novel to feature a female protagonist.



Darina Laracy
1917-2003

For so long a central figure in the Italian intellectual landscape, he died not in Italy, but in Geneva, Switzerland in 1978.

Italian historians Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali published documents (2000) which, they claimed, showed that Silone acted as an informant for the Fascist police from 1919 until 1930. His defenders conjecture that it was an attempt on his part to aid his brother who was imprisoned by the police (see above). But, during WWII we also have substantiated documentation that he worked as an informant for the OSS, and after the war for the CIA, in collecting information in the fight against the Nazis and later against the Communists. Thus, for many, his life and work embodied the vicissitudes, alternately tragic and heroic, of 20th century Italy. (At a symposium with Arthur Koestler in 1968, he called himself “a socialist without a party, a Christian without a church.”)

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from John Foote, “The Secret Life of Ignazio Silone,” New Left Review 3 (May-June, 2000) (newleftreview.com); Encyclopedia Britannica (Britannica.com); Encyclopedia of World Biography (2004) (Encyclopedia.com); Geoffrey Wheatcroft, “Bread, Wine and Politics,” New York Times Sunday Book Review (Aug. 21, 2009) (nytimes.com); and Wikipedia.