

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Ignazio Silone

Fontamara

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***Fontamara* was first published in German in Zurich in 1933, as it could not be published in Fascist Italy at the time. The original Italian edition appeared later, although an Italian-language version had already been circulated by the British in 1944 to Italian prisoners of war. The first English translation followed in 1934. The novel quickly gained international recognition, selling millions of copies and establishing itself as a powerful anti-Fascist work even before its official release in Italy.**

Fontamara was written by Ignazio Silone (born Secondo Tranquilli) while living in exile in Switzerland during the Fascist regime. A founding member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921, Silone later became one of its underground leaders. He left Italy in 1927 on a mission to the Soviet Union and settled in Switzerland in 1930. His expulsion from the PCI came after his outspoken criticism of Joseph Stalin and the Comintern leadership. During this period, Silone battled tuberculosis and severe depression, spending a year in Swiss sanatoriums. It was during his recovery that he began writing *Fontamara*—his first and most celebrated novel. By 1935, the book had been translated into over fifteen languages and had become one of the most widely read and discussed novels of the decade across the Americas, Europe, and the Soviet Union. It was championed by liberal and socialist circles in major cities such as New York, London, Paris, and Buenos Aires, earning the rare distinction of praise from both the Soviet establishment—through Karl Radek at the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress—and the exiled Leon Trotsky, who wrote that the novel “deserves a circulation of millions of copies” (1933: 4). Published shortly after the Nazi rise to power in Germany and on the eve of the Spanish Civil War, *Fontamara* significantly influenced public opinion. It became a symbol of resistance to tyranny and played a major role in shaping anti-Fascist discourse outside Italy in the late 1930s. Through its stark portrayal of corruption, exploitation, and political deception, the novel offers a powerful and enduring critique of Fascist ideology and those complicit in its rise.

When the complete Italian edition of *Fontamara* was finally published in 1947—nearly two decades after its initial release—the literary landscape in Italy had changed considerably. Silone's reception was hindered not only by the political controversy surrounding his work but also by his plain, unrefined writing style. Although undeniably talented, his upbringing in an Abruzzi dialect meant that, despite his command of standard Italian, he regarded it—as he acknowledged in the preface to *Fontamara*—as a “foreign language.” Meanwhile, neo-realism was at its height, and Silone's once innovative, stylised use of realist techniques from 1930 now appeared dated and mannered. The novel faced politically charged hostility from both the Right, including the Church, and the Left. Particularly harsh criticism came from a dominant circle of left-wing intellectuals led by figures such as Elio Vittorini, whose influence on post-war Italian culture was both significant and prescriptive.

The preface reveals that the people of *Fontamara* have endured oppression since the mid-nineteenth century, when the Torlonia family seized control of the land on which the village stands. The narrative exposes the exploitation of the peasants by wealthy landowners who deny them fair

wages; by educated officials who deceive them into unjust agreements through manipulative language; and by armed men—once landless peasants themselves—who assault the women while their husbands labour in the fields. *Fontamara* follows the villagers' descent into suffering, culminating in a massacre carried out by Fascist forces. After enduring escalating abuses and betrayals, the peasants begin to recognise the full extent of their oppression. A central figure in the latter part of the novel is Berardo Viola, a strong and principled peasant who emerges as a symbolic martyr for the community. He is eventually arrested and tortured by the Fascists for refusing to betray his fellow villagers or submit to the regime. His silence under interrogation and subsequent execution symbolise both resistance and the brutal cost of defiance. The novel concludes with the killing of several villagers attempting to distribute an underground anti-Fascist newspaper. They are gunned down by the authorities, who swiftly cover up the atrocity and shift the blame onto the victims. The final lines convey a bleak sense of loss and betrayal, yet also hint at a nascent political awakening among the survivors.

What is now largely forgotten is that *Fontamara*'s impact as anti-Fascist propaganda depended on its reception abroad, where readers—unlike Italians, who were denied access under Fascist censorship—understood it as a literal, historically accurate account of recent events in a specific region of Italy. For foreign audiences in the 1930s, it appeared as a direct exposé of Fascist repression and peasant resistance, even though it was neither strictly factual nor explicitly claimed to be.

References

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LANGUAGE: Italian/Italiano

This title was not censored before publishing