Leone Ginzburg, a Forgotten Intellectual in the Fight Against Fascism

BY

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Born to a Jewish family in the Russian Empire in 1909, the brilliant intellectual Leone Ginzburg was deeply shaped by the October Revolution and the class struggles in postwar Turin. His short life, ending in an Italian jail in 1944, was devoted to the struggle against fascism and for socialism.

Review of *L'intellettuale antifascista. Ritratto di Leone Ginzburg* by Angelo D'Orsi (Neri Pozza, 2019).

Leone Ginzburg was one of the most brilliant intellectuals of his generation — and writing a biography of him was sure to be a difficult endeavor. Ginzburg's was a life "short on time," which met its tragic end in a jail in German-occupied Rome on February 5, 1944. Already decades ago, the philosopher Norberto Bobbio — a childhood friend of Ginzburg's who saw Fascism from the same classroom — implored historian Angelo D'Orsi: "You must write a biography of Leone."

It took time for D'Orsi, best known as a scholar of Antonio Gramsci, to create such a study; the work for this book began already in the 1980s. Ginzburg left far fewer traces than the fellow Turin anti-fascist Piero Gobetti, a liberal revolutionary. This biography had to reckon with Ginzburg's "hard-to-match intellectual power" but also his exceptional moral force as an anti-fascist, expressed in many testimonies gathered in the book.

The strength of D'Orsi's biography lies in its ability to piece together the cues that he did leave behind. Carlo Ginzburg, son of Leone, and his wife, Natalia Levi, would become among the first exponents of "microhistory." This biography, too, provides a broader landscape of anti-fascism — while never losing sight of the very individual story at its heart.

From Odessa to Turin

Leone Ginzburg's life was, in D'Orsi's words, "objectively cosmopolitan." He was born on April 4, 1909, to a Jewish family in Odessa, on the edge of the Black Sea, "one of the most culturally and politically stimulating centers in the Russian Empire." His mother, Vera Griliches, had in 1894 married Fyodor Nikolayevich Ginzburg, a liberal businessman close to the Constitutional Democrats (Cadets). Leone's siblings were more radical: his sister, Marussia, born in 1896, sympathized with the Social Revolutionaries, while his brother, Nicolai, born in 1899, was close to the Social Democrats.

The young Leone's life was changed thanks to the tutor Maria Segre. Reaching Odessa from Italy in 1902, she taught French and Italian to Vera, Marussia, and Nicolai. Vera met Maria Segre's brother Renzo during a trip to Viareggio, Italy, and returned to Odessa already pregnant with Leone. In 1914, with the rest of Europe at war, Vera left young Leone with Maria Segre in still-neutral Italy, where she opened up his horizons to music (Bach, Mozart, Debussy), cinema, and theater.

The Ginzburgs were a well-off family, and after the Bolshevik victory in October 1917, they fled Russia: the father, Fyodor, headed for Berlin, while Leone's mother and siblings met him in Turin. "This son of Europe," D'Orsi writes, "did not feel either German or Slavic or Jewish (even if he knew he could not, and did not want to, give up this latter 'condition') but resolutely Italian, long before he definitively settled in Italy."

Taught Russian by his sister, Leone avidly read Gogol, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Dostoyevsky, but also late nineteenth-century French authors like Balzac, Stendhal, and Maupassant — taking "physical pleasure from reading." He would become a critical reviewer and translator of their works, an interpretation process that also challenged cultural assumptions, like what he had in a 1928 article called the "Slavic soul." He translated important works from Russian like Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (1927), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1928–9) and *Kreutzer Sonata* (1942), Turgenev's *Home of the Gentry* (1932), and Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* (published in 1949, after Ginzburg's death). The meticulous Ginzburg was ever aware of the difficulty of his work: upon translating *Anna Karenina* he wrote to Bobbio: "It is magnificent, and I shudder to think that it will be me who corrupts it." Ginzburg understood culture as the effort to go beyond the world such as it really is, and the social imaginaries and understandings that go with it.

Gramsci, Gobetti, Ginzburg

Turin was the Italian Petrograd — the city of Antonio Gramsci, of *l'Ordine Nuovo*, of the "two red years" of 1919-20. The cultural exchange there was symbolized in the close ties between the Communist leader Gramsci and the young liberal revolutionary Gobetti. In this city, the shadow of revolutionary Russia lingered like a promise yet to be fulfilled in Italy: even Gobetti learned Russian, insisting that his liberalism was rooted in the concrete experience of struggles from below, of which the *soviety* (councils) were the fullest expression. The fascination for revolutionary Russia and its literature was explained in an article that D'Orsi attributes to the Sardinian Marxist: "Russian literature is a unique historical document because the pain, the humiliation to which men were subjected in Russia was without equal.”

Postwar Turin was rich in political and cultural experiments. When Ginzburg moved “From Odessa to Turin,” as the title of one chapter puts it, his life bridged two spaces that each pointed toward a changing world. In Turin, leading young intellectuals born in the early years of the new century clustered around Gobetti’s journals, *La rivoluzione liberale* and *Il Baretti*; Leone contributed to the latter with articles on Tolstoy and Russian poetry, but also French authors.

At the Massimo d’Azeglio classical *liceo* (grammar school), the “pre-eminent school of the Turin bourgeoisie,” Leone’s classmates included the core of the future Einaudi publishing house, including Cesare Pavese and Giulio Einaudi. Here, he established a strong friendship with Bobbio, who recalled, “When he came to *liceo* in late 1924, at barely 15, he wasn’t a boy like the others . . . he spoke unhurriedly but as if he was writing: he spoke, we used to say, like words in a book.” A younger pupil, Franco Antonicelli, spoke of a “severe, inquiring, intransigent temper (like Gobetti’s), intimidating even his friends.” For D’Orsi, the school was a “hotbed of anti-fascists . . . which was not to be credited to or blamed on this or that teacher, but as if because of the atmosphere, the soil of the ‘environment’ in Turin and Piedmont.”

Biography is an especially useful means of grasping a period while not sacrificing the “interstitial — and yet important — freedom of [historical] actors.” No human’s life is without its cracks and splits; and the biography of Ginzburg offers an opening through which to observe the history of anti-fascism as a concrete political movement, rooted in its time, led by men immersed in tensions and contradictions. These anti-fascists took a tortuous path: the final destination was the building of an Italy liberated from Fascism, but this does not alone capture the whole person, the whole life of each anti-fascist during a twenty-year dictatorship.

For the young people around Ginzburg who distanced themselves from Fascism over the 1920s and 1930s, there was often painful uncertainty over what stance to take and the concrete impact of radical political choices on their “legitimate desire to advance in the world.” There were those who joined the Fascist Party on the regime’s tenth anniversary. Ginzburg expressed a certain understanding of their decision in a 1933 article in an exile journal: “The young . . . have been abandoned; these are hardly times in which families can allow themselves the luxury of a son, a younger brother who has ‘got ideas.’ For many young men, signing up . . . was the first compromise with their own conscience, and it will be their first regret.”

Apparently defeated at the end of the 1920s, this was, nonetheless, a youth “destined” for anti-fascism. Their inspiration came from the philosopher Benedetto Croce; after the assassination of the reformist Socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti, he completed “his turn to the opposition, after hesitations and compromises with fascism.” Ginzburg met Croce in 1928, becoming the “most faithful of the faithful.” In 1929, some of these young men would sign a letter in support of Croce and be arrested and “cautioned” — notably, Umberto Segre, from 1926, in contact with leading anti-fascist Carlo Rosselli.

Culture and Politics

Under Fascism, Ginzburg chose what D’Orsi calls a “latent conspiratorial activity”; after the banning of non-Fascist parties in November 1926, there was no choice for oppositionists other than exile or to take to conspiracy (however active or latent). In 1931, a year after his father’s death brought harsh financial difficulties for the family, Ginzburg graduated with a dissertation entitled *Guy Maupassant*, and the following year was granted teacher status. This same year, he obtained Italian nationality; and as his comrade-in-arms Vittorio Foa put it, Ginzburg’s anti-fascism was his way of being an Italian.

Ginzburg drew on Gobetti's impulse to bind culture to politics — and was critical of those parts of Italian society that remained indifferent. As D'Orsi put it, he "declared war on moral abstentionism." He showed this moral courage also in his professional work, notably in the Slavia publishing house (founded by Alfredo Polledro in 1926 to make Russian literature available to the Italian public). Gobetti died this same year, and his widow, Ada Prospero, would count among Slavia's early translators. Ginzburg's commitment was also evident in his collaboration with Cesare Pavese's review, *La Cultura*; Antonicelli's publishing house, Frassinelli; and, from 1933, Einaudi, a publisher whose logo of an ostrich with a nail in its mouth served as an allegory for Italian culture under Fascism.

Leone and Natalia Ginzburg.

Yet as his wife, Natalia Ginzburg, later wrote in *Family Lexicon*, "politics was [Leone's] real passion." For the Torinese Russian's future political choices, 1932 was a decisive year. With a study grant to delve deeper into his studies of Maupassant, he headed to Paris, where he met Carlo Rosselli.

Rosselli led the Justice and Liberty movement from the French capital, following a spectacular escape from the Italian island of Lipari, where he had been exiled by the regime together with anti-fascists like Emilio Lussu. In D'Orsi's words, this was a decisive encounter, "confirming Leone's entrance into the political anti-fascist struggle, taking him toward a journey very different from his life as a scholar." In Paris, he also met the anti-fascist historians Gaetano Salvemini and Aldo Garosci. Upon returning to Turin, he joined the city's Justice and Liberty group, now decisively turning to active conspiracy.

"Being Useful to Others"

Leone now left behind his expected career as a brilliant intellectual and threw himself headlong into the political struggle against fascism, just like Rosselli. In this, there was also the need to prepare the Italy of tomorrow by forming new "habits" — as Foa emphasized, these young intellectuals were driven by a rejection of the "consensus" behind Fascism, or better, of its capacity for seduction using a "calculated mix of compulsion and cooptation." For Foa, "We could not bear solitude, but since solitude was our present, the only way to remain in touch with the world was to work for the future." Ginzburg continued contributing to Roselli's *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*, signing his articles M. S. in homage to Maria Segre; this was, for socialist historian Gaetano Arfé, the culturally richest expression of the anti-fascist exile milieu.

This was evident in the vision of anti-fascism that Leone developed in its pages. He addressed questions like the federal organization of the state; the autonomy expressed by the "spontaneous action of the working-class and peasant masses"; the renewal of Marxism; the relationship between freedom and justice; and the sense of a "fully revolutionary liberalism" following in the footsteps of Gobetti. He also dedicated an article to Gobetti and the Russian Revolution. Here there was a notable focus on the figure of Leon Trotsky, the first volume of whose *History of the Russian Revolution* he had reviewed in a 1931 article entitled "Trotsky, Historian of the Revolution." In the article dedicated to Trotsky, "a refined genius of a polemicist," there emerged a positive vision of the Russian October. "For a modern state truly to be established in Russia," Ginzburg wrote, "it was necessary that every form of the previous society should perish. It goes without saying that the temporary — and yet grave — abuse of the values of the spirit is painful, and it is especially heart-rending for we men of culture. But history has inexorable demands of its own."

Ginzburg would also pay a personal cost. When professors across the kingdom of Italy were compelled to make a public pledge of loyalty to Fascism, Ginzburg was one of just a handful to refuse — and, on February 7, 1934, he was stripped of his teaching status. A month later, a wave of repression struck down on the Turin Justice and Liberty group. One evening, he met Vittorio Foa at the city's Porta Nuova station to await a delivery of materials, which never arrived; Ginzburg believed the couriers had been captured, and the following morning he was himself arrested at home. Carlo Levi, later author of *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, described the impact on the Justice and Liberty network: "he was one of the few, very few, who under the Fascist legal regime managed to think and to influence the thought of others." Upon his arrest, Ginzburg denied everything; but not all of his fellow arrestees did so, instead naming him as central to the movement's underground core. Ginzburg was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for "having been part of the revolutionary association (Justice and Liberty)." In May 1935, a second wave of arrests decisively crushed the network. In D'Orsi's words, "half the intellectuals in Turin were arrested."

This was a dark period, though what it did show was that the opposition was still alive on Italian soil. As D'Orsi explains, in Turin, the Justice and Liberty network was made up of friendship networks connecting individuals living in the same neighborhoods, many of them Jews. Fascist groups latched on to this to call for a "radical cleansing" of these Turin anti-fascist circles, promoting (even before the antisemitic racial laws of 1938) the idea that Jews were inherently anti-fascist. The Italian Jewish community strongly rejected such an equivalence, except the Jewish Youth Association, which was, however cautiously, anti-fascist.

The arrestees were defined not only by their Jewishness but also as activists from a middle- or high-bourgeois layer. The Communist Tina Pizzardo, close to these circles, was interrogated but not arrested because "on the police's opinion, a poor teacher living off private lessons . . . could not have anything in common with these [Justice and Liberty activists] belonging to the upper bourgeoisie, all renowned intellectuals." After a month in Rome's Regina Coeli prison, Leone Ginzburg was transferred to Civitavecchia and then released on March 13, 1936.

This was no return to freedom. His wife, Natalia, described him upon his return to Turin: "He had a coat which was too short, a threadbare hat placed a little crooked over his black hair. He walked slowly, hands in pockets: his black, penetrating eyes darted around . . . his spectacles surrounded in dark tortoiseshell planted a little too far down his big nose." Described as a "subversive prisoner" and "diehard antifascist," he had to conform to the harsh constraints of his monitored freedom, including presenting himself to the police authorities each Sunday, returning home before an evening curfew, and not frequenting public places.

Anti-Fascism Revived

With both Gramsci's death and the barbaric murder of Nello and Carlo Rosselli in France, 1937 was a terrible year for anti-fascism. The latter's appeal connecting Italian anti-fascism to the fight against Franco — "Today in Spain, tomorrow in Italy" — seemed "drowned out by the indifference of some and the complicity of others." In 1938, with the promulgation of the regime's racial laws, Leone would lose his Italian nationality, and Natalia gave birth to their son Carlo, very likely named in tribute to the murdered Rosselli.

When Italy entered the war in 1940, the family were in ever greater difficulty: Leone was arrested as a "dangerous antifascist" and the family was exiled to the small town of Pizzoli, in the rural Abruzzo region, far from the main cities. The year before, 1939, had seen the birth of a second son, Andrea, and in March 1943 came their daughter, Alessandra.

QUI DIMORO'
LEONE GINZBURG
CHE NEL PENSIERO
NELLA AZIONE DEL MARTIRIO
CONSACRO' LA SUA FEDE
PER UN AVVENIRE
DI LIBERTA' E DI GIUSTIZIA
ODESSA 1909
ROMA 1944

Plaque on the house in Pizzoli, near L'Aquila, Italy, where Leone Ginzburg lived. The inscription reads, "Here dwelled / Leone Ginzburg / who in the thought / in the action of martyrdom / devoted his belief / in a future / of Liberty and Justice / Odessa, 1909 – Rome 1944."

But the war would bring a sharp reversal in Fascism's fortunes. As the Allies reached Italian soil on July 25, 1943, the king sacked Benito Mussolini. Ginzburg wrote to Croce of the dictator's downfall: it turned out that the Fascist empire was "not even made of papier-mâché . . . but no more than wrapping tissue." On August 4, Ginzburg was freed.

Three days later he was in Rome, where Einaudi had opened a new headquarters, and Leone helped create a new cultural-political book series. He resumed his political activity in the newly founded Action Party, which brought together the militants of the various Justice and Liberty groups. Together with Manlio Rossi Doria, Carlo Muscetta, and Francesco Fancello, he edited its clandestine newspaper, *l'Italia libera,* which he saw as an essential instrument for laying the bases of a republican and democratic Italy, part of a new Europe.

Yet the German invasion of September 8, 1943, soon brought an end to the brief moment of liberalization; and on November 20, 1943, he was arrested at the printworks where *l'Italia libera* was produced and taken back to Regina Coeli prison. Recognized as a stateless, anti-fascist Jew, in December he was transferred to the German wing of the prison, where he was tortured. Historian and author of *A Civil War* Claudio Pavone — also held at this prison — later described what happened:

> One afternoon, the guards, particularly agitated and abrupt, forced everyone to immediately return to their cells, with an absolute ban on leaving or even looking through the spyhole. The Germans were coming into the wing … The name "Ginzburg" was called

> out loud and after a couple of minutes he was handed to the Germans. With his worn-out blue jacket and his dark complexion he stood out from his new jailors' heavy green-gray uniforms. At that moment someone began to whistle the *Inno del Piave* [a patriotic song from World War I] from a cell. He whistled sure and clear; the Germans probably did not understand, but the Italians were moved. Leone was taken away.

The night between February 4 and 5, he was transferred to the prison hospital after swallowing drugs he had been prescribed by the prison's anti-fascist doctor. Leone repeated over and over, "I will not leave here alive." On the morning of February 5, perhaps because of an overdose, or — added to this — his weakened state of health, Leone Ginzburg died, leaving behind Natalia and his three children.

Bobbio wrote that Leone had died "without saying his final world, without bidding farewell to anyone, without concluding his work, without leaving us a message. We can neither resign ourselves to this or pardon it." These words appear at the end of D'Orsi's fine book, which seeks to raise one of anti-fascism's most authoritative moral, cultural, and political figures from historical oblivion. To do so is imperative in an Italy today more ignorant than ever of those who fought and died for freedom and justice. Each biography, it is said, is an autobiography; and this is the autobiography of the Italy that once was. D'Orsi's book is a resource to learn, to banish myths, and, perhaps, even to inspire an anti-fascist struggle today.

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