

ARTHUR KOESTLER'S TRAIL OF DARKNESS

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That *Darkness at Noon*, in this seventy-fifth anniversary year of its publication in the United States, continues to be read and admired is indeed an impressive feat. One is tempted to think that a novel so seemingly rooted in a signal event of the twentieth century—the Moscow show trials of the 1930s—would be regarded, if at all, as an interesting historical marker. Yet Arthur Koestler's novel has endured precisely because of its literary achievement and its philosophical depth. It continues to give its readers a plausible, subtle, and convincing account of an exceedingly mysterious and apparently incomprehensible phenomenon. Koestler himself was well aware of the difficulty of his task: "To the western mind, unacquainted with the system and the rules, the confessions of the Trials appeared as one of the great enigmas of our time."¹ Yet Koestler not only succeeds in shedding light on this enigma; he also shows how the moral and psychological dilemmas at work in confession and self-sacrifice touch the problem

of modern revolution and political ethics more broadly.

By the time of the novel's publication in England in December 1940, Koestler had joined and resigned from the Communist Party, had been a witness to events such as the terror famine in the Ukraine and the civil war in Spain, and had been imprisoned in three different European countries—living under a death sentence in one of them. Perhaps even more improbable than the book's ongoing resonance and power is the fact that it exists at all.

Arthur Koestler became a Communist via a letter of application to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany on the last day of 1931. Though initially disappointed that the Party did not immediately allow him to head to the Soviet Union to join a collective farm—and instead asked him to maintain his position at a prominent publishing house and keep his membership secret—he embraced his new world of intrigue with gusto.² With the ascension of

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Hitler and the Nazis, he, like many other German émigrés, would make his way to Paris in the fall of 1933. There he would begin working for the indefatigable figure of the international antifascist movement, Willi Münzenberg. Münzenberg was by the mid-1930s a veteran organizer and propagandist in international appeals for solidarity with the Soviet Union and socialism. He founded organizations like International Workers Aid and the World Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German Fascism; such philanthropy provided a convenient cover for his ideological and political agenda. He owned newspapers in Germany and organized underground resistance. As Koestler put it, “Willy had found the pattern which he was to repeat...in his various Chinese, Spanish and other relief campaigns: charity as a vehicle for political action.”³

With the onset of civil war in Spain in August 1936, Münzenberg’s next great cause was born. He was at the center of an international campaign for a nonintervention pact to be signed by all the major players in international politics. Of course this campaign was very much in keeping with Münzenberg’s previous enterprises. As Koestler’s biographer Michael Scammell points out, “[Münzenberg’s] Moscow patrons had done a masterly job of concealing their real intentions until now and were poised to intervene behind the smokescreen of the pact.”⁴ What the defenders of socialism needed at that moment was information about the nature and extent of German and Italian support of Franco. Koestler offered his services. He had a Hungarian passport and a press card from a German-language Hungarian newspaper called *Pester Lloyd*.

Though an excellent cover (*Pester Lloyd* was a “conservative paper in a semi-fascist country friendly to Franco”), the paper was also unlikely to have the resources to send

its own correspondent.⁵ So Münzenberg’s deputy Otto Katz contacted a foreign editor (and Party member) of the London-based *News Chronicle* to see if he would be interested in publishing Koestler’s reportage from Spain. Koestler spent a little more than a month in Spain in the fall of 1936 and posted a number of stories for the *News Chronicle*. Katz then started a Spanish Republican press agency in Paris and asked Koestler to return to report from the southern front of the war in Málaga. Arriving there at the end of January 1937, Koestler was promptly arrested on February 9. He would spend the next three months in Franco’s prisons, much of them in solitary confinement, wondering if and when his execution might come.⁶ He was released to British officials in Gibraltar on May 14.

Spain was absolutely crucial to Koestler’s intellectual and ethical evolution. This had been true for other writers, Orwell and Malraux among them. “Koestler,” according to Scammell, “began to recognize that revolutionary violence was highly questionable, and that the sanctity of life was not to be taken lightly.”⁷ Spain marked him forever and really sparked the final, difficult path of leaving the Communist Party. Ironically, it was the Party operating through the Comintern, Otto Katz, and Western sympathizers that played a crucial role in his release from prison.⁸

Koestler’s book *Spanish Testament* was published in England at the end of 1937 as a choice of the Left Book Club. It made him something of a celebrity and he was asked to give a series of lectures about his experiences in Spain. Within these leftist circles, the Party sought to ensure that the proper interpretation of events in Spain was maintained. For example, one had to denounce the Trotskyite organization POUM (Partido Obrero Unificado Marxista) operating in Spain—but Koestler refused to distort his

own experiences and interpretation of events on the ground.

The critical moment would come in the spring of 1938, when Koestler was asked to give a talk in Paris to the Association of Exiled German Writers. A Party representative asked to see the text of his speech in advance and requested a denunciation of POUM. Koestler refused both requests. In addition, though normally speaking more or less extemporaneously from notes, he added three carefully chosen lines at the end of his speech calculated to declare his heterodoxy: (1) "No movement, party or person can claim the privilege of infallibility"; (2) "It is as foolish to appease the enemy as it is to persecute the friend who pursues the same end as you by a different road"; (3) and, from Thomas Mann, "In the long run, a harmful truth is better than a useful lie."⁹ Shortly thereafter Koestler would pen a letter to the party caucus of the Writer's Association to announce his resignation from the Communist Party.

By the summer of 1939 Koestler had settled in Roquebrune in the south of France to write. His companion was a young British sculptor named Daphne Hardy who was fluent in German. In a matter of weeks the now ex-communist had penned 230 pages of a novel he then called "The Vicious Circle" (what would become *Darkness at Noon*). Dissatisfied and distracted by the town's activity, he and Hardy would quickly retreat to a quieter and smaller Alpine village called Roquebillière. Here Koestler would read the awful news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. He and Hardy would then slowly make their way back to Paris as the atmosphere was increasingly tense. German and Austrian refugees (especially Communists) were now of great concern to the French government on the grounds that they represented a potential fifth column. Though

Koestler possessed a Hungarian passport and had officially left the Party, he had been monitored by the French government since 1933.

On October 2, 1939, Koestler was arrested for his propaganda work with Münzenberg and Katz on behalf of the Soviet Union (he was not told the reason at the time of his arrest). He was taken to the Roland Garros tennis stadium for nine days and then shipped off to Le Vernet, an internment camp near Toulouse. He would spend the better part of three months there, cleaning latrines but somehow finding time to continue to work on his novel. He was released in January 1940 thanks to the efforts of some contacts in the British Foreign Service and their pleadings with the French Interior Ministry. Back in Paris, his apartment was raided on March 12 and the police carried off many books and manuscripts. They somehow missed the typescript of *Darkness at Noon* sitting atop his desk in full view of anyone casting a glance. He and Hardy would work furiously, with the latter translating the novel into English almost as Koestler completed his pages. As Hardy noted in her diary, "I would be imprisoned [at the round table] until lunch time... while he worked with concentrated fury about ten feet away, on the other side of the curtain, sometimes leaning over the table until he was half lying on it, or even kneeling in complicated positions in his chair, sometimes coming to squint at me and see how I was getting on."¹⁰ An English version of the novel was mailed to his British publisher on May 1.¹¹

Ten days later the Germans invaded Paris and Koestler was on the run again. The fascinating story of his travails in France from the summer of 1939 to the fall of 1940 is told in *Scum of the Earth*.¹² It includes vivid depictions of his imprisonments at Roland Garros and Le Vernet, another arrest that Koestler

somehow talked his way out of, his enlistment in the French Foreign Legion under a false identity, two failed suicide attempts, trips to Oran and Casablanca via Marseilles, and finally his escape to London via Lisbon on November 6, 1940. However, the British were just as concerned about Koestler's loyalties as were the French—so when *Darkness at Noon* was published by Jonathan Cape in London in December, Koestler was in solitary confinement at Pentonville prison, to be released just before Christmas.

Having spent about six months in total in various prisons and internment camps in Spain and France, Koestler was well-poised to relate the atmosphere of these places in a novel. As Scammell notes, "Rarely can a major novel have been written at such breakneck speed or under such conditions of chaos and fear, with arrest and persecution a palpable threat and whole chapters written inside a concentration camp. No wonder it reeked so claustrophobically of prison and paranoia, and no wonder Koestler entered so effortlessly into the thoughts and dreams of a trapped official doomed to execution."¹³

One might quibble with "effortlessly," but the atmosphere of *Darkness* is indeed vivid and claustrophobic. But the novel succeeds not only for this reason but also owing to the subtlety and sympathy with which Koestler draws the principal characters in the novel: Rubashov and his two interrogators, Ivanov and Gletkin. Further, the novel's power as an investigation of actual historical events depends precisely on Koestler's imaginative rendering of the psychological, ethical, and philosophical dilemmas experienced by Rubashov during his weeks in prison.

Though it is sometimes suggested that one knows quite quickly Rubashov will both confess as well as be executed for crimes he did not commit, attentiveness to Koestler's artistry in rendering Rubashov's mind as

he grapples with his past deeds and with the arguments put forward by Ivanov and Gletkin makes this deterministic reading of the book untenable.¹⁴ Even Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perhaps Koestler's most strident critic, acknowledges, "The greatness of Koestler's book is precisely that it leads us to see that Rubashov does not always know how to evaluate his conduct and, at various moments, approves of it and condemns it."¹⁵ Koestler wants to show that the fact that so many figures like Rubashov confessed to these fabricated crimes does not mean that they were bound to do so. For such determinism would seem to grant one premise of the totalitarians—that human beings are mere tools of history who ultimately must play the role assigned to them. He wants to reveal how and why the human soul—when infected by the totalitarian virus—becomes so willing to embrace such a singular self-abnegation. Rubashov is one eminently convincing portrait of the totalitarian mind as it attempts, but ultimately fails, to escape the ideological chains that bind it.

Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov is a hero of the revolution. He has had a distinguished and varied career of service to the Party—occupying posts outside the country (positions entrusted only to the most reliable Party members). He has been sent on difficult, clandestine missions to manage sister parties abroad where fascist dictatorships have come to power. Indeed, during one such mission Rubashov was arrested and imprisoned for two years—upon his return he received a hero's welcome.

In this sense Rubashov seems a kind of model revolutionary and Party member. He has dedicated his life to the Party and has suffered in the service of his devotion. In communication with another prisoner shortly after his arrest, Rubashov says he does

not regret his killing of somewhere between seventy and one hundred counterrevolutionaries during the civil war. He would do it all over again, even knowing that the product of the revolution would be the coming to power of No. 1 (the Stalin-like figure in the novel). So Rubashov seems a man thoroughly devoted to the revolution without illusions about what he has done.

We also know that the past two years have been difficult for Rubashov. He has become uncomfortable with the deaths for which he considers himself responsible. Not the killing during the civil war but the deaths that have been a product of his clandestine activities now seem to cause him to question the Party. Rubashov has been required on two occasions during the past two years to reaffirm his loyalty and devotion in writing—the political trials of Party members have begun. He is not at all surprised on the morning of his arrest when the loud knock on the door comes—he has been dreaming about the moment for years. He expects that he will be shot. Rubashov also calls the Party a “mass of bleeding flesh.” During his first interrogation, he levels a critique against the current leadership of the Party and the evolution of the revolutionary project as a whole.

This introspection and judgment is made possible by two character traits to which the narrator of the novel explicitly refers. Both are extremely noteworthy in that each seems to call into question Rubashov's suitability for the role he has played in this radical political movement.

We discover the first very early in the novel, when Rubashov has just protested the fact that he has not received his breakfast ration. He has banged on his cell door, summoning the warder and Officer Gletkin. The latter laconically listens to his complaints, refusing to satisfy them. He also demands that Rubashov clean up his cell and stand

before addressing him. In their brief encounter, Rubashov can barely conceal his contempt for Gletkin. After the warder and Gletkin depart, Rubashov paces back and forth in his cell and attempts to relive the unpleasant encounter. He wants to enliven his hatred for Gletkin, as he thinks this will help prepare him properly for the battles to come. But he cannot. Instead, Rubashov “fell once more under the familiar and fatal constraint” of placing himself in the position of his antagonist.¹⁶ He sees himself through the eyes of Gletkin, imagining the pathetic figure he must cut in front of this younger officer. He nearly convinces himself that he really must clean his cell.

He reverts to this habit more than a week later, reflecting on his first interrogation at the hands of his old friend and comrade Ivanov. Using the “familiar constraint,” he convinces himself of Ivanov's sincerity. Rubashov knows all too well that his habit is quite antithetical to the revolutionary ethic. It is difficult to transform the world if you are constantly extending your sympathy to others through imaginative identification. “He who understands and forgives—where would he find a motive to act? Where would he not?” wonders Rubashov (23).

The second trait is not a capacity but rather a lack, an absence of a trait necessary for a good revolutionary. The narrator tells us that the one “revolutionary virtue” that Rubashov lacked was the “virtue of self-deception” (68). More specifically, he lacks the ability to deceive himself about the logical consequences of Party policies for the lives of real people. Rubashov understands perfectly well how the execution of a new policy will affect Little Loewy and the communist-run dockworker union in a northern European country. During his conversation with Loewy when he announces the new policy, he cannot prevent a horrifying image from

recurring. After Loewy's expulsion from various European countries for his communist activity, he was able to survive by killing cats (breaking their spines over his knee) and selling their skins. As Rubashov looks upon Loewy, he cannot shake the feeling that he must grab Loewy and break his spine over his knee. This is what the Party has done to Little Loewy's spirit. And a week later Loewy commits suicide.

Koestler thus presents his readers with a character who is neither a shining, perfectly committed agent of the totalitarian project nor a wholly disaffected Party member ripe for a martyr's death. He is surely something in between these two poles. This complexity is confirmed by Rubashov's twists and turns as his interrogations proceed.

During his first interrogation with Ivanov, Rubashov is forthright about his critique of the Party as it currently exists. He argues that it has lost all connection with those for whom the movement came into being: the masses. He mentions to Ivanov that he himself has even lost the habit of using the first person plural when talking about the Party. This would seem to confirm quite clearly his oppositional stance, but Rubashov denies being part of any formal opposition. When Ivanov tells him that the Party has all the testimony and evidence it needs to confirm his involvement in such a group, Rubashov then asks him why the Party would need a confession. It is a good if somewhat naive question, and it is unclear whether Rubashov really does not know the answer or is trying to draw out Ivanov as much as he can.

In any case, Ivanov explains that there are two categories of judicial cases: the first is those handled "administratively," outside public view, before a secret board. Individuals placed in this category are summarily executed—Ivanov mentions a number of their former friends who were subject to

this model. The other category is those cases handled in a public trial before a judge. Of course it is obvious that only those willing to declare their guilt were given this second option. And Ivanov here offers Rubashov a deal: give us a partial confession, affirming your participation in oppositional activities but denying any connection to the assassination attempt on No. 1. Further, explain that you withdrew from this group once you heard about this plot. Do this, Ivanov explains, and I'll get you a twenty-year sentence, and you'll be out in two or three! Rubashov rejects the deal, conceding that logic may be on Ivanov's side, but that he has "had enough of this kind of logic." "I am tired," he notes with resignation, "and I don't want to play this game any more" (96).

Just a few days after his interrogation by Ivanov and seven days after his arrest, Rubashov reaffirms his refusal of Ivanov's offer—considering it as "settled" (110). His living conditions have improved markedly since his first interrogation—he has been brought soap, a towel, prison vouchers for cigarettes and food, and paper and pencil. He also understands that he does not have much time left to live, so is eager to continue his written reflections.

Yet, a mere three days later, on the tenth day of his imprisonment, Rubashov realizes that his decision to hold firm in his refusal is not as iron-clad as he thought. The narrator notes, "Now it seemed to him even questionable, whether he had ever seriously intended to reject the offer and to walk off the stage without a word" (129). What's going on? How can we account for such a change?

The change seems even more perplexing when we consider than some things have happened that would seem to support Rubashov's initial refusal. First, he relives the events surrounding the death of his former secretary and lover Arlova. He was then

the leader of a trade delegation in a western European country. During this time, the second trial of the opposition occurred. Arlova was brought up on charges and sent back to the home country. She called on Rubashov as the main witness in her defense. He issued a declaration of loyalty and publicly disavowed Arlova—this proved decisive in her death sentence.

Second, while Rubashov is getting shaved, a piece of paper is shoved under his collar. It is a message from the outside—the only such message he receives in prison—that reads, “Die in silence.” And finally and most important, it is around this time that Rubashov discovers what he calls variously the “I,” the “silent partner,” or the “grammatical fiction.” It is this entity that is responsible for his recounting of the events surrounding Arlova. He “gradually became convinced that there was a thoroughly tangible component in this first person singular, which had remained silent through all these years and now had started to speak” (110).

So Rubashov has gained a new perspective on his past activities in the service of the Party. The “grammatical fiction” has caused him to see his role in the death of Arlova in a new light—he is forced to confront his guilt. And he even receives encouragement for his defiance of Ivanov’s request for confession from someone on the outside. “Die in silence” tells Rubashov that his silent death would, in fact, speak volumes. There are people outside who would understand it and appreciate his deed.

His partial retreat from his initial refusal is only intelligible when we consider Rubashov’s diary. Ivanov’s strategy of improving his prisoner’s condition and giving him the time and space to think seems to be working. In his diary entry after his first interrogation, Rubashov is precise and clear in his account of why the revolutionary ethics of his move-

ment are distinct from its competitors and predecessors. Others have been ruthless and Machiavellian—only the Party, though, has served universal, historical reason. This movement is the only one in accord with history’s iron laws of movement—this logic is the only one that may dictate action. Therefore all “cricket-moralists” who cling to traditional ethics must be overcome. Rubashov writes, “Each wrong idea we follow is a crime committed against future generations. Therefore we have to punish wrong ideas as others punish crimes” (100).

The will and strength to act can come only from one’s confidence—one’s faith even—that one’s understanding of history’s logic is correct. Rubashov admits he is lost now only because he has lost this faith. But he also cannot refute the Party’s account—he has no alternative. Merleau-Ponty puts his dilemma this way, “To die in silence Rubashov would have had first to change his morality—he would have had to prefer the vertigo of ‘testimony,’ to prefer the immediate and crazy affirmation of values to action in the world and upon history.”¹⁷ So would it really make sense to side with the semi-coherent and strange promptings of the grammatical fiction and die in silence? Or might it make more sense to attempt to rejoin the logic of history?

On the morning of Rubashov’s second interrogation, the prisoners’ communication network is working overtime. The sounds of taps on the walls move throughout each cell to convey the coming of an execution. The condemned is Michael Bogrov, decorated sailor and commander and bearer of the First Revolutionary Order. A whimpering Bogrov is eventually dragged directly past Rubashov’s cell. As he moves past Rubashov’s view through the judas-hole and fades out of sight, the moaning ceases, but

Bogrov bellows, “Ru-ba-shov...” Bogrov’s last gasp is seared into Rubashov’s memory. He wonders if Arlova had whimpered in the same manner before her execution.

Again, something has pushed Rubashov to consider an event from his past in a new light. Sure, he had found these deaths from his past problematic before—Richard, Little Loewy, and Arlova; this was not newly discovered territory—but these confrontations with his past had never fully convinced him that he acted wrongly. Now, after this moment with Bogrov and reimagining the death of Arlova, “his past mode of thought seemed lunacy. The whimpering of Bogrov had unbalanced the logical equation” (145). So it would now seem Rubashov is pushed back in the direction of a refusal to confess. If his past mode of thought now appears as “lunacy,” much better to die in silence than to go on participating in a ludicrous enterprise.

But later that very day, around the eighteenth day of his imprisonment, Ivanov arrives at his cell and conducts his second interrogation. Though Rubashov has been “unbalanced” by the Bogrov incident, the arrival of Ivanov—with a bottle of brandy!—makes it perfectly plain to Rubashov that this spectacle had been designed in advance. The poor, depressed prisoner will have been rescued by his old friend and comrade in his hour of need, and after a moment or two of reconciliation the prisoner will agree to confess!

Ivanov cannot deny that the crude tactic was in fact deployed in this manner, but he affirms that his colleague Gletkin put it in motion against his express instructions. Ivanov even explains to Rubashov why he was against it—revealing to him that he anticipated the very reaction of Rubashov in his emotionally fragile state. The tactic would push him toward the empty, useless

moralism that might lead him to embrace a romantic, renunciatory, conscience-saving death! Ivanov explains that he wants just the opposite: to bring Rubashov back to the plane of ice-cold, logical reasoning, to see things clearly and soberly, without illusion.

Ivanov’s explanation here of the Party and its role is nothing new. Rubashov himself had given a more concise version of it back in 1933, when he met with Richard. “The Party, comrade,” Rubashov tells Richard, “is more than you and I and a thousand others like you and I. The Party is the embodiment of the revolutionary idea in history. History knows no scruples and no hesitation. Inert and unerring she flows toward her goal. At every bend in her course she leaves the mud which she carries and the corpses of the drowned” (43). Ivanov also likens the Party to a force of nature. He argues that if nature herself is allowed these “senseless experiments on mankind,” should not the Party also have the right to conduct its own experiments for the final liberation of all mankind?

Ivanov knows that none of this is new to Rubashov. He also knows he must, so to speak, attack the problem from the other end—Rubashov has become increasingly attached to the significance of the “grammatical fiction.” Bogrov, Arlova, Richard, and Little Loewy have all caused him to doubt whether he ought to ally himself with the Party. The discovery of Rubashov’s “I” has made him inclined to see the “I” in others. This is the view that Ivanov knows he must combat. So Ivanov tells him that bending his neck in silence to a bullet from Gletkin would be the easy path. Taking this path would be pure vanity, a turning away from responsibility. He is appealing directly to Rubashov’s “I” and not to the logic of history. Rubashov is experiencing the “ecstasies of humility and suffering,”

which are nothing but debauched emotions. The world is not a brothel for these ecstasies, Ivanov tells him. Many great poets and revolutionaries have fallen for this temptation. It is tempting to make peace with oneself, the interrogator acknowledges. But one ought to be clear about the cost of vanity: "To sell oneself for thirty pieces of silver is an honest transaction; but to sell oneself to one's own conscience is to abandon mankind" (156).

At the end of this second interrogation, Rubashov tells Ivanov he will consider a confession, but he knows he is well on his way to surrender. Shortly thereafter, Rubashov taps to his neighbor, "I a-m c-a-p-i-t-u-l-a-t-i-n-g" and then pens his confession renouncing his oppositional attitude. Three days later he is summoned by Gletkin for interrogation. He learns Ivanov has been executed and that his written admission of his oppositional attitude is not sufficient. The Party demands much more than he had thought.

Gletkin explains that Rubashov must confess not only to holding certain attitudes or opinions but also to the actions that logically follow from those opinions. He must confess to his involvement in a plot to poison No. 1. Gletkin summons a witness to the interrogation, one of Rubashov's cell mates (whom he had not recognized) to confirm his participation in the plot. Certain meetings, dates, and former associates are confirmed. Yet over the course of this long initial interrogation, Rubashov does uncover one detail that makes the assassination plot as constructed by Gletkin and the witness an impossibility. But Rubashov is brought to appreciate the logic of Gletkin's articulation of the necessary link between opinion and action. He is even critical of his own rather pathetic resistance—his grasping of minor details as if they could shed any light on the overall meaning of events. "The accusation, which until now had seemed to him so

absurd, in fact merely inserted—though in a clumsy and uncouth manner—the missing links into a perfectly logical chain" (211).

Rubashov signs a written confession admitting his involvement in the plot to assassinate No. 1. But this is just the beginning. This is during his first long interrogation after he is brought to Gletkin. He is interrogated at irregular, extended intervals over the course of the next week—Rubashov no longer has any sense of day and night.¹⁸ There are seven points of confession in total—Rubashov affirms all of them save one. In the midst of this horror, Rubashov becomes aware of a tacit, unspoken agreement that had developed between himself and Gletkin: all Gletkin had to do was establish that the "root of the charge" was correct. If he could do this, he was then permitted to insert the necessary details that would then prove the concrete existence of this or that crime. "Without becoming aware of it, they had got accustomed to these rules for their game, and neither of them distinguished any longer between actions which Rubashov had committed in fact and those which he merely should have committed as a consequence of his opinions; they had gradually lost the sense of appearance and reality, logical fiction and fact" (227–28).

Koestler has penetrated the radical core of the totalitarian project here. Hannah Arendt would come to a strikingly similar conclusion thirteen years later. The agreement between Gletkin and Rubashov would be extended to the "free" populations living under totalitarian rule. As Arendt puts it, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist."¹⁹ Once these distinctions are

effaced, the world becomes subject to the human will and can be made and remade as desired. Rubashov and Gletkin are now partners in this project. While Rubashov seems finally to have some awareness of the project, Gletkin does not.

The last point of confession has to do with Rubashov's motive. He wants to maintain that it was his inner convictions about what might be best for the revolution that led him to criminal activities. Gletkin asserts that "subjective" motives are irrelevant—or rather, cannot really be calculated. Rubashov must admit that he acted in the service of a foreign power. He resists capitulating on this last point. He has confessed to everything so far—a range of criminal actions that necessitate his death. Why should the "why" matter so much to Gletkin? He explains that the motive must be simple and clear—acting in the service of an enemy of the revolution. To attribute Rubashov's activities to sincere convictions would amount to admitting that it is possible that one might come to have a different opinion about what will best secure the revolution. The Party cannot admit this.

Gletkin's triumph over Rubashov on this final question of motive is particularly revealing. He casts Rubashov's final capitulation as the very last service that he must do for the Party. He reminds his prisoner that the stakes are high: the fate of one-sixth of the globe and one-tenth of its population hangs in the balance. Rubashov's final task is to ensure that no sympathy is awakened for the enemies of the revolution. His confession can help guarantee that the revolution can triumph in the future.

Gletkin emphasizes that for this last act of devotion, the Party offers Rubashov nothing in return (unlike some prisoners who were offered inducements of various kinds). He even calls Rubashov "Comrade" at this very

moment. In submitting to the Party's judgment, Rubashov will be rejoining its ranks. This act of complete self-abasement is a triumph over temptation. Rubashov's devotion is so pure, he needs no inducement.²⁰ Yet there is a profound paradox here. For this self-abasement, this radical submission to the will of the Party can also be seen as a triumphant self-assertion. These acts of singular devotion are prideful assertions of the purity of one's will. The power of the Party paradoxically depends on these striking acts of self-overcoming.²¹ Thus, in the case of Rubashov the line between *I am nothing and therefore must submit to the will of the Party* and *The Party requires my final triumph over temptation so that is what I will choose to deliver* is blurry indeed.

As the narrator notes near the conclusion of the novel, "The Party denied the free will of the individual—and at the same time it exacted his willing self-sacrifice. It denied his capacity to choose between two alternatives—and at the same time it demanded that he should constantly choose the right one" (262). In Rubashov's final statement—as read in a newspaper by the daughter of the porter in Rubashov's apartment building—he emphasizes that he has overcome the temptation to die in silence, and so has not made it easy for himself. This is his last justification (256).

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, major Communist Party members would be put on trial across the countries of Central Europe. "For Koestler," notes Scammell, "it was further confirmation of the truth of *Darkness at Noon's* thesis that the Russian Revolution was doomed to devour its own children through show trials."²²

One of these trials held particular interest for Koestler. In Czechoslovakia in 1952, Rudolf Slánský, a former general secretary

of the Party, was put on trial with thirteen other codefendants for a conspiracy against the state. One of these purported coconspirators was none other than Koestler's friend Otto Katz, now operating under the name André Simone.

Katz had been Willi Münzenberg's right-hand man during the Popular Front era as the Comintern sought to direct its Western allies in its campaign against fascism. Katz was a Czech Jew who was fluent in Czech, German, French, English, and Russian. Koestler described him as a "smooth and slick operator" who, "in spite of all his seediness was...a very likable human being." A good writer who produced a number of antifascist tracts, Katz was Willi's "roving ambassador," making trips to England and Hollywood to raise money and maintain political contacts.²³ Katz apparently spied on Willi for the Comintern and had played a crucial role in engineering Koestler's release from Spanish prison.

Simone (Katz) made his way back to Prague at the end of World War II and eventually became the editor of the Communist daily *Rudé právo*. Just as in the case of the Soviet Union, the Slánský trial in Czechoslovakia was part of a propaganda campaign to teach its citizens certain lessons about deviating from the Party line as well as what devotion to the Party would ultimately require. Public confessions were required of all fourteen defendants. The Czechoslovak Communists were well-schooled by their Soviet masters.²⁴ The trials took place from November 20 to November 27, 1952—eleven of the fourteen defendants (including Katz) were executed on December 3.

Koestler got wind of his friend's fate and monitored the trial from his home in London. He listened to the BBC Monitoring Service's broadcast of the final statements of the defendants. Simone concluded his state-

ment with this utterance: "The only good service that I can render is to be a warning memento to those whose origins, character, and temperament could tempt them to take the same hellish path which I took. The sterner the punishment, the greater the warning."²⁵ As Koestler listened, he heard clear echoes, even a paraphrase, of Rubashov in his final statement to the prosecutor: "I will describe to you my fall, that it may be a warning to those who in this decisive hour still waver... I will describe to you the sad progress of a traitor, that it may serve as a lesson and terrifying example to the millions of our country" (249).

One finds very similar language in an exchange earlier in the novel, shortly after Gletkin begins his interrogation of Rubashov. Rubashov asserts that he wants only to prove "his devotion to the Party," and Gletkin replies that the only path to such proof is his service as a "warning example" to the masses who might be tempted down his oppositional path (198). For Koestler, his friend's use of this language could not have been accidental: "This phrasing by Otto of his last statement was clearly intended as a camouflaged message, to indicate that he, too, had been brought to confess to crimes as imaginary as Bukharin's and Rubashov's."²⁶ Perhaps, Koestler speculated, this allusion would be noticed by his influential contacts in the West, who might then mount a campaign for his release. Sadly, notes Koestler, "When a man is going to be hanged, he tends to overestimate the interest which the world takes in his windpipe.... His last message was like a scribbled S.O.S. in a bottle washed ashore by the sea, and left to bob among the driftwood, unnoticed by the crowd."²⁷

We can only hope that both *Darkness at Noon* and Koestler's own story can serve as a kind of message in a bottle to future

generations. The psychological and moral dimensions of revolutionary devotion ought to be explored by each generation anew. For the temptations of such devotion will remain. An appreciation for the reality

of Koestler's "grammatical fiction"—the beauty and dignity of each human person as a responsible being—is the beginning of wisdom for resisting the intoxicating charms of revolutionary politics and violence. †

- 1 Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, Danube Edition (London: Macmillan, 1969), 480.
- 2 Koestler's tale of party membership—from willing embrace to disillusionment—is beautifully told in his contribution to *The God That Failed*, Richard H. Crossman, ed. (London: Hamilton, 1950), 15–75.
- 3 Koestler, *Invisible Writing*, 252–53.
- 4 Michael Scammell, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic* (New York: Random House, 2009), 125.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 See Koestler's chronicle of his time in prison, *Dialogue with Death: The Journal of a Prisoner of the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War*, Danube Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1966). A version of this book was originally published in 1937 as the second part of a larger volume called *Spanish Testament*. Koestler then published another version as a stand-alone text—*Dialogue with Death*—in 1942.
- 7 Scammell, *Koestler*, 141.
- 8 On the campaign for his release, see Scammell, *Koestler*, 142–45.
- 9 Koestler, *Invisible Writing*, 472.
- 10 Quoted in Scammell, *Koestler*, 182.
- 11 Until July 2015 the original German version of the novel was assumed to have been lost in the chaos of the invasion and Koestler's escape. But last summer a German doctoral student named Matthais Wessel stumbled on a German typescript of the novel in a Zurich library. He has compared this version to Koestler's retranslation of the novel back into German in 1944, and the differences are significant. See Michael Scammell, "A Different 'Darkness at Noon,'" *New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2016.
- 12 This book, the first one he wrote in English, was composed in London in the winter and spring of 1941.
- 13 Scammell, *Koestler*, 182.
- 14 John V. Fleming, in an otherwise excellent account of Koestler and the novel, notes, for example, that "the reader who meets Rubashov on page 1 has little doubt what is to become of him on page 267." See *The Anti-Communist Manifestos: Four Books That Shaped the Cold War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 90.
- 15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: The Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), xxxvii.
- 16 Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (New York: Scribner, 1968), 22. Originally published in 1941 by Macmillan. Subsequent textual citations to the novel will be to this edition.
- 17 Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 6.
- 18 Koestler seems to combine two interrogation tactics used by the communists: the long interrogation and the "conveyor." See Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, 40th anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123–27. One of Koestler's friends was himself put through the "conveyor." For a gripping and vivid account, see Alex Weissberg, *Conspiracy of Silence* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1952), 220–52.
- 19 Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," in *The Great Lie: Classic and Recent Appraisals of Ideology and Totalitarianism*, ed. F. Flagg Taylor IV (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011), 141.
- 20 Gletkin does back away from this stance a bit when he says that the Party does promise that, "after the victory, one day when it can do no harm, the material of the secret archives will be published. . . then you . . . will be given the sympathy and pity which are denied to you today" (244).
- 21 Not all are capable of such extraordinary acts of devotion, which is why all those put on trial are not subject to the same tactics and punishment. Yet many figures who were caught in the show trials during Stalin's Great Terror did embrace this logic. See Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 109–31, and F. Beck and W. Godin, *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession* (New York: Viking Press, 1951).
- 22 Scammell, *Koestler*, 413.
- 23 Koestler, *Invisible Writing*, 255–56. See also Scammell, *Koestler*, 105–6.
- 24 See, for example, the account of one of the defendants who was not executed, Eugen Loeb, *Stalinism in Prague: The Loeb Story*, trans. Maurice Michael (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 45–50.
- 25 As quoted in Peter Steiner, *The Deserts of Bohemia: Czech Fiction and Its Social Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 176. Steiner's quotation is from the Czech transcription of the trial published in 1953 (see his footnote 11 on page 156). There is a slightly different published version of Simone's last statement: "The only service I can render is to warn all who by origin or character are in danger of following the same path to hell. The sterner the punishment. . . ." This version can be found in an obscure text called *Proceedings of the Trials of Slansky, et. al. in Prague, Czechoslovakia*, November 20–27, 1952, as broadcast by the Czechoslovak Home Service (there is no publisher or date of publication in this little volume).
- 26 Koestler, *Invisible Writing*, 493. On Simone's reasons for confessing to these imaginary crimes, see his letter to Klement Gottwald just before his execution. In Karel Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, trans. Karel Kovanda (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 272–79.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 494.