

# Darkness at noon

Literature



Many critics consider Arthur Koestler's novel, *Darkness At Noon*, to be one of the most insightful literary works regarding the qualitative attributes and characteristics of a totalitarian regime. Because of Koestler's personal experience as a Fascists prisoner under Franco, one can understand and appreciate the deep connecting parallels between Nicholas Rubashov, the protagonist, and Arthur Koestler, the author. At the time when this novel was published, few books existed that could accurately describe the inner workings of a totalitarian government, and the ideology that directed its course of action.

It is easy to identify Koestler's personal testimony interwoven throughout the binding of this incredibly detailed fictitious account. There are numerous underling themes that constitute the overarching framework of this novel. The primary focus of this work deals explicitly with utilitarianism and situational ethics; and ultimately the consequences of Machiavellian ideology. Initially—when looking at this novel through a literary lens—one of the primary successes of this work, is the mastery of character development and symbolism.

Nicholas Rubashov is a veteran of the Civil War, and a member of the old revolutionary Party—(Historically he is often compared with Leon Trotsky, they both wore pince-nez). He has dedicated his life the Party's vision; being that that all men are born equal and that the masses should govern themselves. Rubashov personally fought to ensure that this future vision became a present reality. The ultimate goal was to create a utopia, where every person acted altruistically for the good of all.

There was a time when Rubashov believed that their cause had begun to succeed. But then, as the ideology of party continued to evolve, so did its members. There are several reoccurring examples within the novel that allude to the natural transition from the old to the new, and the significance thereof. The first example is when Koestler describes Vassilij, Rubashov's Porter. He is described first as an old thin man, with a military overcoat, and a scar that he had received in the Civil War (Darkness At Noon, 5-6). Another example is when Rubashov is arrested.

He is arrested by two officers, one was described as a young man with a gun, and the other as an old man standing at attention (7). The foundational pillar of faith for all party members was that 'they'—the party and its leader No. 1—were infallible. " The Party can never be mistaken... You and I can make a mistake. Not the Party. The Party, comrade, 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" (43). In light of this knowledge, it is interesting to observe the contrast between the older generation, and the younger generation.

Both claim to believe in the infallibility of the Party—which represents the maxim of their ideology, but it seems that the older generation is limited by their individual moral obligations, whereas the younger generation have completely done away with the concept of absolute morality: rejecting it completely as bourgeois romanticism. Rubashov is among that older generation. After he is arrested, he is fortuitously interrogated by Ivanov—an old friend and Party member. Ivanov arduously endeavors to convince

Rubashov that he has become politically divergent. Rubashov initially rejects this claim.

He asserts that, " You [the younger generation] killed the 'We'; you destroyed it. " "[You] no longer represent the interests of the Revolution, or the masses or, if you like, the progress of humanity" (85, 86). Ivanov demonstrates to Rubashov that such an accusation, cannot be true. He continues to elucidate that rationally, it is not the Party that has evolved, but the people's understanding the Party's ideology. That is not to say that the ideology has shifted. On the contrary, it has merely been illuminated in its simplest form; utilitarianism or situational ethics: all means are necessary to ensure the common good for the masses.

So in actuality, the moment Rubashov chose to allow his conscience to dictate his beliefs—instead of No. 1—was the moment that he stood in opposition of the party. " No. 1 has faith in himself, tough, slow, sullen, and unshakable. He has the most solid anchor-chain of all. Mine has worn thing in the last few years... The fact is: I no longer believe in my infallibility. That is why I am lost" (101). After further reflection Rubashov begins to understand. The idea had not changed, it had just been followed to its logical extreme.

We were held for madmen because we followed every thought down to its final consequence and acted accordingly" (100). The older generation was being replaced by the younger; just as the Neanderthaler replaced the Apes as the dominant species. True, the Neanderthaler must have been considered to be unnatural, uncouth, and vicious by the Apes, but despite those attributes, they became the altering force of nature, and evolution

ensured their success (234-235). The older generation had stagnated. It was time that they were replaced by a superior species.

The ultimate goal of the Party, and No. 1, was to create a utopia. All means were necessary in order to accomplish that goal. Even the Church believed that there are times when morality must be suspended. The Bishop of Verden, Dietrich Von Nieheim believed that: When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, simony, prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good. 97) It is this same philosophy that dictates not only actions of a totalitarian regime, but those of all governing bodies. Saint-Just said, " No one can rule guiltlessly" (1). When we take the time to objectively step back and analyze the flow of history, it is impossible to arrive at any other conclusion. " 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 carried and the corpses of the drowned," " He who is in the wrong must pay; he who is in the right must be absolved.

That is the law of historical credit; it was our law (43, 99). Rubashov begins to understand that within the span of time, whomever succeeds in accomplishing their goal, decides what is right and what is wrong; there is no supreme foundational morality. Truth, is but the common consensus of the victors. That is the reason that the younger generation has become brutal, and less retrained. They are merely weighing the factors between morality

and expediency. There is no personal vendetta or emotion behind their action. They are governed purely by reason; goal oriented action.

The largest obstacle for mankind is its own conscience. If humanity decided to follow the law of history, then success would be conceptually possible. But it will never happen. Ivanov articulates that, " The greatest temptation for the like of us is: to renounce violence, to repent, to make peace with oneself" (156) such ideals incapacitate humanitarian progress. " The greatest criminals in history... are not of the type Nero and Fouche, but of the type Gandhi and Tolstoy. Gandhi's inner voice has done more to prevent the liberation of India than the British guns" (156).

The flow of history is successful fundamentally because it is a priori amoral and has no conscience. In order to conduct history according to the maxims of 'Sabbath' school, change cannot occur. " The temptations of God were always more dangerous for mankind than those of Satan. As long as chaos dominates the world, God is an anachronism; and every compromise with one's own conscience is perfidy" (156). This is why, it is an unforgivable crime to become politically divergent. If your ideas conflicted with the perpetual logical flow, than you had succumbed to grammatical fiction.

That alone was the heinous crime. This is the core reason behind Rubashov's arrest, Ivanov's replacement by Gletkin, and the death of characters such as Arlova, Richard, and Little Lewy. The Party was perpetually progressing toward its ultimate goal. The consequences of every ideological error is felt up to the seventh generation. " Therefore we have to punish wrong ideas as others punish crimes: with death" (100). Machiavelli argued, if you establish

a Republic and do not kill Brutus, or establish a dictatorship and do not kill the sons of Brutus, you will not remain in power for long.

This is why the Party recognized the necessity to eliminate political divergence. Rubashov realizes that in order to further his political cause, he will have to die for his crimes. When he announces to his cell neighbor, No. 402, that he intends to capitulate, we observe—through their interaction—the transition that has already taken place in his mind. No. 402 asks Rubashov if he has any honor left, and Rubashov states that their ideas of honor differ. No. 402 attests that honor is decency—not usefulness, while Rubashov explains that decency has been replaced by reason (177). Within this exchange, the final universal topic is revealed. When looking at this novel through a Christian lens, we see that on a cosmic scale, we are left with a choice between two totalitarian regimes: God—the benevolent dictator, and Satan—the malevolent dictator. Both regimes demand obedience, but they have different ultimate goals. When we as Christians—under the heavenly Theocracy—sacrifice our individuality to the will of God, we are granted individual fulfillment and purpose.

Whereas followers of Satan—under a worldly Democracy—seek fulfillment and purpose by focusing on the individual, veiled under the guise of common welfare. It is this final discourse between two conflicting ideologies that demonstrate the natural consequences of our beliefs. The Monarchist vs. the Marxist. In every scenario, we are faced with choosing a No. 1 for our life. Koestler wrote this novel in order to shed light on that very point. The only successful totalitarian government is God's. That is why every human

attempt to establish a utopia on earth has endeavored to mirror the totalitarian Government of God.

Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain, and Mao Zedong's China; all of these dictators were essentially the god of their country. Within totalitarian regimes, the flow chart of power is clearly distinguished. No. 1 has all the power. There is no questions, there is not deliberation, there is no disobedience. Information is only interpreted by No. 1, truth is what No. 1 says it is, logic only exists with the mind of No. 1, common sense, for the masses, is to do what No. 1 says to do. The management of power is very simple: all power resides in No. . No. 1 chooses to whom he entrusts authority. Initially, we rebel against the demand to submit our will to such a leader, but ultimately that is the choice we are left with. God calls us to obey, and Satan calls us to disobey God. One might wonder why, if these earthly governments so closely mirror that of God's, do they no succeed? This is the distinguishing factor: the employment of situational ethics, and utilitarianism. Because God has omnipotent power, he has no need to break the rules that he has set into motion.

All true authority resides in him. Since man cannot maintain absolute control—like God—he is forced to break the rules in the name of a greater cause, and succumb like all earthly governments to the sinful allure of Machiavellianism. In light of all this, Rubashov is searching for a purpose. He knows he has to die, so he chooses to sacrifice himself in the name of something greater (perhaps a loose connection—very loose—can be drawn between Jesus, and Rubashov; both fulfilled the will of their 'father' and died for a greater cause).

But ultimately, we as people must choose which regime we want to die for. We must choose whether we will follow the benevolent dictator who governs by a set rule of standard, or the malevolent dictator who governs with utilitarianism. Those are our only two choices. There will come a time in every person's life where they will have to look at 'their' God, and say, " Thy will be done. Amen" (256). Whom will you follow?