

Agree or Die: A World of Few Words

The First Hearing of Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* is a study in a dictatorial world of strict party systems. The people cannot express their opinions freely against their opposition, nor can they argue against their own party's principles. In the mind of Rubashov, the main character and a person of high political importance in the Party, political opinions for and against his party are fixed; he flatly refuses the requests of subordinate members to logically reason an alternative and removes any dissenters from the Party. However, around Rubashov are a wealth of dynamic people who change to societal situations, such as these dissenters with their more liberal views and his friend Ivanov. With the book told from Rubashov's perspective, it is only the main character that is in the right; other values are expressed, but they are not correct. These fixed opinions, in the mind of Rubashov and Koestler, should not be tolerated to change—as Didion had suggested—but instead handled with an iron fist when one is in the power to do so; this policy governs the way Rubashov acts.

Despite desperate attempts to stay loyal to the Party, slight deviations from the Party's principles lead Rubashov to flush out the nonconformists. When Rubashov consulted with Richard, a young member of the Party, he coldly rejects Richard's pleas to stay in the Party after he expressed dissenting views. Richard pleads to Rubashov that “[Richard is] not an enemy of the Party ... You c-can't throw me to the wolves, c-comrade” (47). Richard's slight deviations from mainstream Party guidelines simply materialized as changed posters: he still believes strongly in the party, but even this slight difference of opinion makes his stance intolerable.

This stance is viewed even more strongly in the case of Little Loewy, a well-established official in the Party. Rubashov first perceives him as “not odious and detestable” (62), a kind man; however, the quick rejection of his shipping idea to the leaders of the docks of the Party led to the removal of all three of them from the Party. Little Loewy had been the most compliant and accepting of the three, saying that “what [Rubashov] said is also my opinion” (75), but he appears “pale” (75) and reveals his reluctance to the decision. As a result, he hangs himself a few days later.

Both of these dissenters hold conventional ideas that aim to preserve the original meaning of the Party: Richard through his reluctance to adopt the new principles that falsely advertise the Party's well-being, and the Party leadership at the docks for their intruding inquiries into the new shipping business. Had Didion's claim been supported by Koestler, these men would have provided a diverse backdrop for the Party. Rather than being kicked out of the Party, these members—still avid supporters of the Party's cause—would provide a different perspective for the rest of the Party. This could be especially important if that different opinion is more practical or appeals more to people or the truth

than the central authorities rule. But in Koestler's novel, this is not the case: opposing arguments cannot and do not exist after Rubashov deals with them.

But to these dynamic people, the opposite must be true. Rubashov is wrong, Rubashov was always wrong, Rubashov's fixed opinions cannot be tolerated. Richard begs for mercy; Loewy hangs himself.

But another interesting case is Ivanov. He gives the first hearing of the novel, in which he sets a light tone and points out after-the-fact that there is "no stenographer present" (93). He was Rubashov's colleague, and through the struggles of war he became a member of the opposition. Now, with power over Rubashov, he decides the outcome of the conversation; in other words, he sets the conditions that Rubashov should be obliged to follow. In his pretending to be an examiner, he asserts that Rubashov is incorrect and decides to create a better opportunity for him to escape from jail rather than being condemned to death. His tone during the interrogation was crude as if he were a true prosecutor; after the trial, although his words were softened and his intention clear, still had a point of asserting his words' truth on Rubashov. When Rubashov tries to deny Ivanov's help, the rejection is anticipated and Ivanov says that "I have no doubt that you will send [a written declaration]" (96). With so much conviction, he is not has not "come ... to tolerate many ... fixed opinions" such as his friend's: it is his beliefs that are in the right.

As Benjamin Franklin said in his final speech at the Constitutional Convention, "few express it so naturally as a certain French Lady, who in a little Dispute with her Sister, said, I don't know how it happens, Sister, but I meet with no body but myself that's always in the right." It cannot be less true in *Darkness at Noon*, in which opposition is met and crushed. With others, Rubashov either agrees, forces people to comply if he is in power, or is sidelined if his opinion does not match that of his superiors. With himself as well, there are no intersecting thoughts, misgivings, or doubts. This creates an amazing efficiency in Rubashov, a cold and calculating mindset that prevents setbacks when he indirectly condemns others to their deaths by evicting them of the Party and keeps himself alive during trying trials and imprisonment.

This extends to the scope of the entire novel as well, a national sense as well as the personal one. The Party only exists to exert its own opinion in a nation where any opposition is ruthlessly crushed. Richard mentions that "[the opposition] beat the Party to shambles" (41) for the differences in their ideologies; both parties are working against each other, asserting their own position, not letting the other yield. This is Didion's reference to the "national piety": the party in power is the one to be respected, and all else will be wiped out. There is no tolerance here.

Koestler's work draws striking connections to Orwell's *1984*, or the world of any dictatorship. What is powerful is justifiably correct; any opposition is simply wrong. Even the first assumption of Didion's claim is reduced in Koestler's novel: there are few dissenting opinions, the majority being conformist agreements to previous Party beliefs. In a not-so-ideal world such as that of Rubashov, Didion's idealistic view of differing opinions blending harmoniously and being tolerated gently is rejected by Koestler, describing the inconsequential laziness that comes with modern American politics; Koestler demonstrates the hellfire that words and opinions can produce in a stricter world.

Any agreement, a dissonance, an action can be a cause for war and death.