Books

Book Review: "Koestler"

The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic. By Michael Scammell '85GSAS.

By
Michael Kimmage
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Arthur Koestler in New York City. (Bettman / Corbis)

When Arthur Koestler arrived in New York City in March 1948 to launch an American speaking tour, his visit was front-page news. An audience of 3000 filled Carnegie

Hall, eager to hear Koestler's thoughts on "the radical's dilemma" and on America's pressing need to confront Soviet communism. Koestler had gained worldwide fame for his novel *Darkness at Noon*, published in 1940.

The hero of the novel is Nicholas Rubashov, a devout communist caught in Stalin's net in the 1930s for straying from the party line. Before his inevitable execution, he is interrogated and forced to confess to ludicrous crimes. At the heart of his ordeal is an "absolute faith in History": Stalin may be fallible, but the Soviet cause is infallible and can be made to justify countless deaths, including Rubashov's own.

The novel's taut, philosophical style made it a staple of international literary culture, damaged the Communist Party's global reputation, and made its author an icon of the *engagé* intellectual. For much of the Cold War, Koestler was a celebrity anti-communist.

Yet when Koestler, the author of some 30 books, died in 1983, his chosen legacy was detached from political parties, movements, and causes. In his will, he left most of his estate to endow an academic chair in parapsychology.

This unorthodox evolution can now be traced in *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic*, a new biography by Michael Scammell '85GSAS, professor of creative writing at Columbia. In Scammell's telling, Koestler knew his century's ideological tempests firsthand, flirted with its chilling certainties, and continued to return, over the course of his life, to the oasis of skepticism. Scammell presents Koestler as "a gambler and provocateur, taking physical and intellectual risks that led him to exciting and dangerous places, and sometimes to important insights ahead of his time. He was a Zionist in Palestine when it was extremely unfashionable to be a Zionist, and an anti-Zionist when Zionism was in its prime. He was a communist before communism became à la mode for western progressives, and an anti-communist at the floodtide of communist popularity during World War II."

Koestler was born in Budapest to a Hungarian-Jewish family in 1905. Like many Europeans of his generation, he possessed a lasting "thirst for utopia." Koestler first saw utopian possibility in Zionism, and then, by the 1930s, in the Soviet Union. (In a guesthouse in Turkmenistan, a new Soviet republic in the 1930s, Koestler heard a recording of Sophie Tucker singing "My Yiddishe Mamme" in the neighboring room; when he knocked on the door, it was opened by Langston Hughes.) In the interwar

years, Koestler worked as a journalist and was famous in many European countries. He was also a Communist Party member from 1933 to 1938, serving as a conspicuous cog in the Soviet propaganda wheel; his efforts were directed at the intelligentsia of Western Europe.

Koestler's journey to anti-communism went through Spain, where he had traveled as a journalist and as a communist. Arrested amid the chaos of the Spanish Civil War, Koestler entered "the twilight world of ideological outcasts and political prisoners," in Scammell's words. There he came to feel that charity is "not a petty-bourgeois sentiment but one of the gravitational forces which keeps civilization in its orbit," in Koestler's words. This banal insight, when applied to Stalin's ruthlessness, toppled his faith in Soviet virtue, leading Koestler to *Darkness at Noon* and to a career of anti-communist advocacy.

In an entry for *The God That Failed*, a 1949 compendium of autobiographical essays on communism, Koestler chronicled his communist years with such lucidity and eloquence that his essay became a classic of political self-analysis. As the Cold War took shape, Koestler immersed himself in anti-communist conferences and organizations, lending them the luster of his name. Koestler the Cold Warrior sought proximity to the new "'seat of the Holy Roman Empire,'" as he described Washington, D.C., and for a few years he lived in the U.S.

Koestler traced "the spiritual crisis of the west" — of which communism and fascism were comparably symptomatic — back to the scientific revolution of the 17th century. Not fully secular and not at all pious, Koestler worried less about the conflict between faith and reason than about the divorce between science and culture. For him, modern culture had failed to humanize "the ideology of the Enlightenment," and too often a harsh Enlightenment ideology was able to dominate Western culture. The first half of the 20th century had registered abuses of political rationality aligned with the Enlightenment. The century's second half, Koestler feared, might witness a similar abuse of scientific rationality. Thus, he applied the dissolvent of his skepticism to modern science, in book after book, risking ridicule in his explorations of parapsychology and extrasensory perception.

Scammell begins and ends his authorized biography with the double suicide of Koestler and his wife Cynthia. The 78-year-old Koestler was suffering from Parkinson's disease and leukemia; his younger wife was healthy at the time of his death. This macabre event cast a shadow over Koestler's overall reputation, as did

posthumous revelations of womanizing, including an allegation of rape, which Scammell moderates to “an unfortunate encounter.”

Scammell’s intent is to rescue Koestler from undeserved neglect, to claim him as more than a period-piece anti-communist (or intellectual rogue), and to present his “fusion of autobiography, psychological penetration, and dialectical analysis” as a “unique contribution to 20th-century prose.” Scammell succeeds brilliantly. His research — 20 years of it — is prodigious, his writing is impeccable, and his erudition is proportional to his extraordinary, multifaceted, multilingual subject. This will be the standard Koestler biography.

Scammell’s *Koestler* is not flawless. At times, the recounting of Koestler’s hectic personal life crowds out the creative work that was Koestler’s lifeblood, and Scammell devotes more critical attention to the later scientific books than to *Darkness at Noon* or to the essay in *The God That Failed*. Perhaps Scammell wanted to give the lesser-known Koestler his due and to avoid repetition of the familiar, but precisely because Scammell has written a major book it would have been valuable to have more of the major Koestler in it.

Scammell won considerable acclaim for his 1984 *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Arthur Koestler might seem polar opposites. Born in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn became a Christian conservative in the Russian mold, a skeptic about progress, about Europe, and about modernity, whereas the cosmopolitan Koestler was always “a leftist at heart,” a seeker of progress, and a European hedonist in his daily life.

Scammell’s two biographies should be read as a contemporary instance of parallel lives, the genre invented by Plutarch to distill political wisdom from the biographies of military and political giants. Solzhenitsyn and Koestler were both ardent communists in their youth; both were illuminated by their time in prison, leading them to become sworn enemies of the Soviet Union; both would merge the writing of history and autobiography with appeals for political action; and both devoted their intellectual maturity to contemplating the Enlightenment and its consequences. For Solzhenitsyn and Koestler alike, the Enlightenment was never a textbook chapter in the history of philosophy. It was the libretto of ideas behind the history of a terrifying century.

Michael Kimmage is an assistant professor of history at the Catholic University of America. He is the author of The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism.

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