

Koestler Autobiography Excels

Marxism Seduces a Brilliant Man

ARROW IN THE BLUE, an autobiography. By Arthur Koestler, Macmillan. 353 pp. \$5.00.

Reviewed by Sterling North

I STILL find it virtually incomprehensible that any man with a first-rate brain should have been dazzled even temporarily by communism. The absurdities of Marxist "logic," the stifling atmosphere of this pseudo-religious "closed system" of thinking, the crudities of the dialectic, the patent dishonesty of the "party line," the childish atmosphere of cloak-and-dagger conspiracy, the callous indifference to slave labor and political terrorism all add up to such a filthy mess that it is utterly astonishing that some few intelligent individuals were taken in by its Utopian promises.

Despite the reams of copy Whittaker Chambers has written on his passionate excursion into the nether world and out again, he throws very little light on the subject. He accepted communism emotionally and he rejected it emotionally. But he still seems to be in a fog as to why he made either move.

No such accusation can be leveled at Arthur Koestler who is one of the very few really brilliant men ever seduced by Marxism. He knows precisely why he joined the party and precisely why he left it. He throws upon his complex mental processes the pitiless white light of self-revelation. He and his generation of European radicals stand starkly exposed in this first installment of what promises to be one of the most important autobiographies of our time.

Various forms of insecurity in his youth produced part of the author's need for certainty. Koestler's father often failed in business. The precocious, multilingual son had few friends. Several dangerous surgical operations (including one bloody affair in which he was strapped down with no anaesthetic) left nightmares in his brain.

THEN, before he had finished University, he left school and ran away to Palestine to become an idealistic colonist in one of the communes. He nearly starved as a young journalist in Tel Aviv but rose finally to become a well-paid employe of the Ullstein chain of publications centered in Berlin. Barely



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had he established himself, however, when the Nazis began making Germany purgatory for all liberals and Jews.

It was at this point in the early thirties that Koestler decided by "logical" elimination that there was no haven to which a European of his convictions and ethnic strain could turn except the Communist party—at that time virtually the only political force in Germany putting up a real fight against the rising Hitlerites.

Koestler has a well-trained scientific mind. He plays a good game of chess. He speaks and writes several languages. And he is an excellent journalist. But he has a strain of promiscuous romanticism which occasionally blurs his thinking in even so lucid a book as this one.

For instance, his recital of his career as a Casanova parallels rather amusingly his flirtations with various political causes. And his curiously romanticized chapter on the virtues and beauties of Paris brothels has echoes of nostalgic pubescence.

NEVERTHELESS, he is somewhat aware of his delayed emotional development. And, unlike some of his fellow writers of the left, he continues in general to mature mentally and emotionally in book after excellent book. Here is a young man who belonged to a duelling fraternity at the University of Vienna, worked on a communal farm in Galilee, peddled lemonade on the streets of Haifa and gradually worked his way to the top of his profession as a journalist in Paris and Berlin who eventually threw away respectability for the cause of communism.

In the final quarter of this book there is the finest vivisection of Communist "logic" in print. Even a summation would take a review many times this length. But for almost the first time we have here a believable explanation of why and how a man of real intellect became a Communist.

Twenty-six years of personal and international upheaval led Koestler to his fateful decision. He now sees his mistakes with painful clarity. But the reader gets the impression that for the author, his temporary conversion to communism was virtually "inevitable."

In the next installment we will be given Koestler's seven years in the Communist party during the 1930's. Let us hope that his continuing confession helps to prick the bright balloons still being sent up on the hot air of Communist propaganda to fascinate young left-wingers, few of whom have Koestler's ability to penetrate the trickery behind the illusion.

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