

SparkNotes: Animal Farm: Context

Context

George Orwell was the pen name of Eric Blair, a British political novelist and essayist whose pointed criticisms of political oppression propelled him into prominence toward the middle of the twentieth century. Born in 1903 to British colonists in Bengal, India, Orwell received his education at a series of private schools, including Eton, an elite school in England. His painful experiences with snobbishness and social elitism at Eton, as well as his intimate familiarity with the reality of British imperialism in India, made him deeply suspicious of the entrenched class system in English society. As a young man, Orwell became a socialist, speaking openly against the excesses of governments east and west and fighting briefly for the socialist cause during the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939.

Unlike many British socialists in the 1930s and 1940s, Orwell was not enamored of the Soviet Union and its policies, nor did he consider the Soviet Union a positive representation of the possibilities of socialist society. He could not turn a blind eye to the cruelties and hypocrisies of Soviet Communist Party, which had overturned the semifeudal system of the tsars only to replace it with the dictatorial reign of Joseph Stalin. Orwell became a sharp critic of both capitalism and communism, and is remembered chiefly as an advocate of freedom and a committed opponent of communist oppression. His two greatest anti-totalitarian novels—*Animal Farm* and *1984*—form the basis of his reputation. Orwell died in 1950, only a year after completing *1984*, which many consider his

masterpiece.

A dystopian novel, *1984* attacks the idea of totalitarian communism (a political system in which one ruling party plans and controls the collective social action of a state) by painting a terrifying picture of a world in which personal freedom is nonexistent. *Animal Farm*, written in 1945, deals with similar themes but in a shorter and somewhat simpler format. A “fairy story” in the style of Aesop’s fables, it uses animals on an English farm to tell the history of Soviet communism. Certain animals are based directly on Communist Party leaders: the pigs Napoleon and Snowball, for example, are figurations of Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky, respectively. Orwell uses the form of the fable for a number of aesthetic and political reasons. To better understand these, it is helpful to know at least the rudiments of Soviet history under Communist Party rule, beginning with the October Revolution of 1917.

In February 1917, Tsar Nicholas II, the monarch of Russia, abdicated and the socialist Alexander Kerensky became premier. At the end of October (November 7 on current calendars), Kerensky was ousted, and Vladimir Lenin, the architect of the Russian Revolution, became chief commissar. Almost immediately, as wars raged on virtually every Russian front, Lenin’s chief allies began jockeying for power in the newly formed state; the most influential included Joseph Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Gregory Zinoviev, and Lev Kamenev. Trotsky and Stalin emerged as the most likely heirs to Lenin’s vast power. Trotsky was a popular and charismatic leader, famous for his impassioned speeches, while the taciturn Stalin preferred to consolidate his power behind the scenes. After Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin orchestrated an alliance against Trotsky that included himself, Zinoviev, and Kamenev. In the following years,

Stalin succeeded in becoming the unquestioned dictator of the Soviet Union and had Trotsky expelled first from Moscow, then from the Communist Party, and finally from Russia altogether in 1936. Trotsky fled to Mexico, where he was assassinated on Stalin's orders in 1940.

In 1934, Stalin's ally Serge Kirov was assassinated in Leningrad, prompting Stalin to commence his infamous purges of the Communist Party. Holding "show trials"—trials whose outcomes he and his allies had already decided—Stalin had his opponents officially denounced as participants in Trotskyist or anti-Stalinist conspiracies and therefore as "enemies of the people," an appellation that guaranteed their immediate execution. As the Soviet government's economic planning faltered and failed, Russia suffered under a surge of violence, fear, and starvation. Stalin used his former opponent as a tool to placate the wretched populace. Trotsky became a common national enemy and thus a source of negative unity. He was a frightening specter used to conjure horrifying eventualities, in comparison with which the current misery paled. Additionally, by associating his enemies with Trotsky's name, Stalin could ensure their immediate and automatic elimination from the Communist Party.

These and many other developments in Soviet history before 1945 have direct parallels in *Animal Farm*: Napoleon ousts Snowball from the farm and, after the windmill collapses, uses Snowball in his purges just as Stalin used Trotsky. Similarly, Napoleon becomes a dictator, while Snowball is never heard from again. Orwell was inspired to write *Animal Farm* in part by his experiences in a Trotskyist group during the Spanish Civil War, and Snowball certainly receives a more sympathetic portrayal than Napoleon. But though *Animal Farm* was written as an at-

tack on a specific government, its general themes of oppression, suffering, and injustice have far broader application; modern readers have come to see Orwell's book as a powerful attack on any political, rhetorical, or military power that seeks to control human beings unjustly.

Historical Context

Russian society in the early twentieth century was bipolar: a tiny minority controlled most of the country's wealth, while the vast majority of the country's inhabitants were impoverished and oppressed peasants. Communism arose in Russia when the nation's workers and peasants, assisted by a class of concerned intellectuals known as the intelligentsia, rebelled against and overwhelmed the wealthy and powerful class of capitalists and aristocrats. They hoped to establish a socialist utopia based on the principles of the German economic and political philosopher Karl Marx.

In *Das Kapital* (*Capital*), Marx advanced an economically deterministic interpretation of human history, arguing that society would naturally evolve—from a monarchy and aristocracy, to capitalism, and then on to communism, a system under which all property would be held in common. The dignity of the poor workers oppressed by capitalism would be restored, and all people would live as equals. Marx followed this sober and scholarly work with *The Communist Manifesto*, an impassioned call to action that urged, "Workers of the world, unite!"

In the Russia of 1917, it appeared that Marx's dreams were to become reality. After a politically complicated civil war, Tsar Nicholas II, the monarch of Russia, was forced to abdicate the throne that his family had

held for three centuries. Vladimir Ilych Lenin, a Russian intellectual revolutionary, seized power in the name of the Communist Party. The new regime took land and industry from private control and put them under government supervision. This centralization of economic systems constituted the first steps in restoring Russia to the prosperity it had known before World War I and in modernizing the nation's primitive infrastructure, including bringing electricity to the countryside. After Lenin died in 1924, Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky jockeyed for control of the newly formed Soviet Union. Stalin, a crafty and manipulative politician, soon banished Trotsky, an idealistic proponent of international communism. Stalin then began to consolidate his power with brutal intensity, killing or imprisoning his perceived political enemies and overseeing the purge of approximately twenty million Soviet citizens.