

Historical/Cultural Context of *Animal Farm*: The Russian Revolution

The Russian revolution was complex! But here is a brief overview of the key players and events.

First read this...

Animal Farm is an allegory about the Russian Revolution of 1917 in which the Russian Tsar, **Nicholas II**, was overthrown, and the world's first **communist** regime was established. In his dystopian novella, Orwell creates fictional characters (who happen to be cleverly disguised as animals), who represent the actual people surrounding the events of the Russian Revolution.

In the mid-1800s the **capitalist** system in Europe was thriving, unfortunately, at the expense of its people. Workers of all ages (including children, since there were no labor laws against it) toiled 14-16 hours a day for meager wages in unsafe conditions. In 1847, a worker's group called the Communist League, commissioned **Karl Marx** and **Friedrich Engels**, both German philosophers, to come up with a plan to organize and improve the worker's situations. Their plan came to be known as ***The Communist Manifesto***, which argues that capitalism is unstable and revolution by the underclass is inevitable. It argues that social classes and uneven distribution of wealth will not disappear without revolution.

From Marx's ideas, for it was Engels himself who gave credit to Marx for the Manifesto, a political party called **the Bolshevik Party** was formed, led by **Vladimir Lenin**. At this time, Russia was led by Tsar Nicholas II, nicknamed *Nicholas the Bloody*, whose oppression and violent executions terrorized the poor, discontented populace. After a series of rebellions, in **October 1917**, the Bolsheviks had had enough—they led a revolution and successfully overthrew the tsarist regime and set up the new government of the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics**, led by Lenin. In 1924, Lenin died, and sparked a bitter battle between Leon **Trotsky**, a strong follower of Marxist theory, and Joseph **Stalin**, head of the Communist Party. Stalin gained control, expelled Trotsky from the Communist Party, and ran him out of the country into permanent exile. In 1940, Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico.

Stalin worked to establish rapid economic and industrial growth. However, this rapid growth was not well planned, and resulted in the famine of 1932-1933, which resulted in the deaths of millions. As the new, unopposed Russian leader, Stalin gained power and strength, and used his influence to purge the country of all who opposed him. The secret police (which would later become the **KGB**) that he established, randomly arrested, tortured, and executed anyone who caused a problem for Stalin. During the 1930s, Stalin led the Great Purge, which led to the execution or deportation of millions, including a large number of ethnic minorities. In 1939, Stalin entered a pact with Nazi Germany. After the Nazis violated the pact in 1941, the Soviets joined the Allies to eject Hitler. This **totalitarian regime** dispelled freedom, forced labor, and caused general morose, and would remain such under Stalin's control until his death in 1953. The U.S.S.R was officially dissolved in 1991.

[from <http://cooperrussianrevolution.wikispaces.com/Animal+Farm+-+Historical+Context>]

Then answer these...

- 1) What does the word 'dystopian' mean? (*you may use a dictionary for this!)
- 2) What is a 'novella'?
- 3) What is the difference between a capitalist and a socialist society?
- 4) It says here that the *Communist Manifesto* argues 'that revolution by the underclass is inevitable.' Who, do you think, is this 'underclass'?
- 5) Do you agree with the findings of this manifest? That the only way to get rid of uneven levels of wealth in society is through revolution? Explain your answer.
- 6) Was Tsar Nicholas II a fair ruler in Russia? Quote to substantiate your answer.
- 7) What type of political system was set up by Lenin when he overthrew the tsar? (*pick one of the terms from the previous worksheet)
- 8) What was Stalin's key focus when he came to power? Was it successful? Why or why not?
- 9) In your opinion, was Stalin a fair leader? Why or why not?
- 10) Did Stalin adhere to the principles of communism, for which he claimed to stand? Explain your answer fully.