

George Orwell

Essayist, Novelist, Critic

Eric Arthur Blair

- The son of a British civil servant
- George Orwell spent his first days in India, where his father was stationed
- His mother brought him and his older sister, Marjorie, to England about a year after his birth and settled in Henley-on-Thames
- His father stayed behind in India and rarely visited.
- Orwell didn't really know his father until he retired from the service in 1912. And even after that, the pair never formed a strong bond. He found his father to be dull and conservative.

Early Influences

"I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being **isolated and undervalued**."

- Like many other boys in England, Orwell was sent to boarding school where he got his first taste of England's class system
- On a partial scholarship, Orwell noticed that the school treated the richer students better than the poorer ones
- He wasn't popular with his peers, and in books he found comfort from his difficult situation
- He read works by Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells, among others
- What he lacked in personality, he made up for in smarts. Orwell won scholarships to Wellington College and Eton College to continue his studies.

Early Career

- After completing his schooling at Eton, Orwell found himself at a dead end
- His family did not have the money to pay for a university education.
- Instead he joined the India Imperial Police Force in 1922
- After five years in Burma, Orwell resigned his post and returned to England. He was intent on making it as a writer.

Early Career

- Orwell took all sorts of jobs to make ends meet, including being a dishwasher
- His first major work, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, (1933) explored his time eking out a living in these two cities.
- The book provided a brutal look at the lives of the working poor and of those living a transient existence
- Not wishing to embarrass his family, the author published the book under the pseudonym George Orwell

Conscience of his Generation

- Sometimes called the conscience of a generation, Orwell next explored his overseas experiences in *Burmese Days*, published in 1934
- The novel offered a dark look at British colonialism in Burma, then part of the country's Indian empire
- Orwell's interest in political matters grew rapidly after this novel was published
- Orwell is best known for two novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both of which were published toward the end of his life
- *Animal Farm* (1945) was an anti-Soviet satire in a pastoral setting featuring two pigs as its main protagonists
- These pigs were said to represent Josef Stalin and Leon Trotsky
- <http://www.biography.com/people/george-orwell-9429833?page=2>

Animal Farm: A Fairy Tale

- *Animal Farm*, is 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 of the early 20th Century:
- 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.

Russian 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, Kerensky was ousted, and Vladimir Lenin, the creator 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

Russian October Revolution of 1917

- Trotsky was a popular and charismatic leader, famous for his impassioned speeches
- 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

Russian October Revolution of 1917

- In 1934, Stalin's ally Serge Kirov was assassinated in Leningrad, prompting Stalin to commence his infamous eliminations 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
- therefore as “enemies of the people,” their immediate execution was guaranteed
- As the Soviet government's economic planning faltered and failed, Russia suffered under a surge of violence, fear, and starvation

Russian October Revolution of 1917

- Stalin used his former opponent(Trotsky) as a tool to calm the miserable public
- Trotsky became a common national enemy and thus a source of negative unity
- He was a frightening threat 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

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 poor 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**

Allegory

- Napoleon exiles 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
- though *Animal Farm* was written as an attack 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.**

Allegory

- a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one: *Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory of the spiritual journey*
- http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/allegory
- In an allegory, the setting, characters and even plot often symbolize historic, political, religious or other meanings.