Historical Background for Understanding George Orwell’s Story

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 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.

(Notes from SparkNotes)

**Character List & Analysis**

**Napoleon**—The pig who emerges as the leader of Animal Farm after the Rebellion. Based on Joseph Stalin, Napoleon uses military force (his nine loyal attack dogs) to intimidate the other animals and consolidate his power. In his supreme craftiness, Napoleon proves more treacherous than his counterpart, Snowball.

From the very beginning of the novella, Napoleon emerges as an utterly corrupt opportunist. Though always present at the early meetings of the new state, Napoleon never makes a single contribution to the revolution—not to the formulation of its ideology, not to the bloody struggle that it necessitates, not to the new society’s initial attempts to establish itself. He never shows interest in the strength of
Animal Farm itself, only in the strength of his power over it. Thus, the only project he undertakes with enthusiasm is the training of a litter of puppies. He doesn’t educate them for their own good or for the good of all, however, but rather for his own good: they become his own private army or secret police, a violent means by which he imposes his will on others.

Although he is most directly modeled on the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, Napoleon represents, in a more general sense, the political tyrants that have emerged throughout human history and with particular frequency during the twentieth century. His namesake is not any communist leader but the early-eighteenth-century French general Napoleon, who betrayed the democratic principles on which he rode to power, arguably becoming as great a despot as the aristocrats whom he supplanted. It is a testament to Orwell’s acute political intelligence and to the universality of his fable that Napoleon can easily stand for any of the great dictators and political schemers in world history, even those who arose after Animal Farm was written. In the behavior of Napoleon and his henchmen, one can detect the lying and bullying tactics of totalitarian leaders such as Josip Tito, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot, Augusto Pinochet, and Slobodan Milosevic treated in sharply critical terms.

**Snowball**—The pig who challenges Napoleon for control of Animal Farm after the Rebellion. Based on Leon Trotsky, Snowball is intelligent, passionate, eloquent, and less subtle and devious than his counterpart, Napoleon. Snowball seems to win the loyalty of the other animals and cement his power.

Orwell’s stint in a Trotskyist battalion in the Spanish Civil War—during which he first began plans for a critique of totalitarian communism—influenced his relatively positive portrayal of Snowball. As a parallel for Leon Trotsky, Snowball emerges as a fervent ideologue who throws himself heart and soul into the attempt to spread Animalism worldwide and to improve Animal Farm’s infrastructure. His idealism, however, leads to his downfall. Relying only on the force of his own logic and rhetorical skill to gain his influence, he proves no match for Napoleon’s show of brute force.

Although Orwell depicts Snowball in a relatively appealing light, he refrains from idealizing his character, making sure to endow him with certain moral flaws. For example, Snowball basically accepts the superiority of the pigs over the rest of the animals. Moreover, his fervent, single-minded enthusiasm for grand projects such as the
windmill might have erupted into full-blown megalomaniac despotism had he not been chased from Animal Farm. Indeed, Orwell suggests that we cannot eliminate government corruption by electing principled individuals to roles of power; he reminds us throughout the novella that it is power itself that corrupts.

**Boxer**—The cart-horse whose incredible strength, dedication, and loyalty play a key role in the early prosperity of Animal Farm and the later completion of the windmill. Quick to help but rather slow-witted, Boxer shows much devotion to Animal Farm’s ideals but little ability to think about them independently. He naively trusts the pigs to make all his decisions for him. His two mottos are “I will work harder” and “Napoleon is always right.”

The most sympathetically drawn character in the novel, Boxer epitomizes all of the best qualities of the exploited working classes: dedication, loyalty, and a huge capacity for labor. He also, however, suffers from what Orwell saw as the working class’ major weaknesses: a naïve trust in the good intentions of the intelligentsia and an inability to recognize even the most blatant forms of political corruption. Exploited by the pigs as much or more than he had been by Mr. Jones, Boxer represents all of the invisible labor that undergirds the political drama being carried out by the elites. Boxer’s pitiful death at a glue factory dramatically illustrates the extent of the pigs’ betrayal. It may also, however, speak to the specific significance of Boxer himself: before being carted off, he serves as the force that holds Animal Farm together.

**Squealer**—The pig who spreads Napoleon’s propaganda among the other animals. Squealer justifies the pigs’ monopolization of resources and spreads false statistics pointing to the farm’s success. Orwell uses Squealer to explore the ways in which those in power often use rhetoric and language to twist the truth and gain and maintain social and political control.

Throughout his career, Orwell explored how politicians manipulate language in an age of mass media. In *Animal Farm*, the silver-tongued pig Squealer abuses language to justify Napoleon’s actions and policies to the proletariat by whatever means necessary. By radically simplifying language—as when he teaches the sheep to bleat “Four legs good, two legs better!”—he limits the terms of debate. By complicating language unnecessarily, he confuses and intimidates the uneducated, as when he explains that pigs, who are the “brain-workers” of the farm, consume milk and apples not for pleasure, but
for the good of their comrades. In this latter strategy, he also employs jargon ("tactics, tactics") as well as a baffling vocabulary of false and impenetrable statistics, engendering in the other animals both self-doubt and a sense of hopelessness about ever accessing the truth without the pigs’ mediation. Squealer’s lack of conscience and unwavering loyalty to his leader, alongside his rhetorical skills, make him the perfect propagandist for any tyranny. Squealer’s name also fits him well: squealing, of course, refers to a pig’s typical form of vocalization, and Squealer’s speech defines him. At the same time, to squeal also means to betray, aptly evoking Squealer’s behavior with regard to his fellow animals.

**Old Major**—The prize-winning boar whose vision of a socialist utopia serves as the inspiration for the Rebellion. Three days after describing the vision and teaching the animals the song “Beasts of England,” Major dies, leaving Snowball and Napoleon to struggle for control of his legacy. Orwell based Major on both the German political economist Karl Marx and the Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Ilych Lenin. As a democratic socialist, Orwell had a great deal of respect for Karl Marx, the German political economist, and even for Vladimir Ilych Lenin, the Russian revolutionary leader. His critique of Animal Farm has little to do with the Marxist ideology underlying the Rebellion but rather with the perversion of that ideology by later leaders. Major, who represents both Marx and Lenin, serves as the source of the ideals that the animals continue to uphold even after their pig leaders have betrayed them.

Though his portrayal of Old Major is largely positive, Orwell does include a few small ironies that allow the reader to question the venerable pig’s motives. For instance, in the midst of his long litany of complaints about how the animals have been treated by human beings, Old Major is forced to concede that his own life has been long, full, and free from the terrors he has vividly sketched for his rapt audience. He seems to have claimed a false brotherhood with the other animals in order to garner their support for his vision.

**Clover**—A good-hearted female cart-horse and Boxer’s close friend. Clover often suspects the pigs of violating one or another of the Seven Commandments, but she repeatedly blames herself for misremembering the commandments.

**Moses**—The tame raven who spreads stories of Sugarcandy Mountain, the paradise to which animals supposedly go when they die. Moses
plays only a small role in *Animal Farm*, but Orwell uses him to explore how communism exploits religion as something with which to pacify the oppressed.

**Mollie**—The vain, flighty mare who pulls Mr. Jones’ carriage. Mollie craves the attention of human beings and loves being groomed and pampered. She has a difficult time with her new life on Animal Farm, as she misses wearing ribbons in her mane and eating sugar cubes. She represents the petit bourgeoisie that fled from Russia a few years after the Russian Revolution.

**Benjamin**—The long-lived donkey who refuses to feel inspired by the Rebellion. Benjamin firmly believes that life will remain unpleasant no matter who is in charge. Of all of the animals on the farm, he alone comprehends the changes that take place, but he seems either unwilling or unable to oppose the pigs.

**Muriel**—The white goat who reads the Seven Commandments to Clover whenever Clover suspects the pigs of violating their prohibitions.

**Mr. Jones**—The often drunk farmer who runs the Manor Farm before the animals stage their Rebellion and establish Animal Farm. Mr. Jones is an unkind master who indulges himself while his animals lack food; he thus represents Tsar Nicholas II, whom the Russian Revolution ousted.

**Mr. Frederick**—The tough, shrewd operator of Pinchfield, a neighboring farm. Based on Adolf Hitler, the ruler of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, Mr. Frederick proves an untrustworthy neighbor.

**Mr. Pilkington**—The easygoing gentleman farmer who runs Foxwood, a neighboring farm. Mr. Frederick’s bitter enemy, Mr. Pilkington represents the capitalist governments of England and the United States.

**Mr. Whymper**—The human solicitor whom Napoleon hires to represent Animal Farm in human society. Mr. Whymper’s entry into the Animal Farm community initiates contact between Animal Farm and human society, alarming the common animals.

**Jessie and Bluebell**—Two dogs, each of whom gives birth early in the novel. Napoleon takes the puppies in order to “educate” them.
Minimus—The poet pig who writes verse about Napoleon and pens the banal patriotic song “Animal Farm, Animal Farm” to replace the earlier idealistic hymn “Beasts of England,” which Old Major passes on to the others.

(Notes from SparksNotes)