*Animal Farm* and the Russian Revolution

**About Politics:**

The plot of *Animal Farm* closely parallels some of the main events of the Russian Revolution and subsequent events until World War II. It is not essential to know about the Russian Revolution, the story stands on its own, but it is quite interesting to know which historical events and figures are being referred to. Here is a brief history of the events in Russia from 1917 to 1945. As you read the novel, see if you can place the facts of history beside the main events of the story.

**Before 1917:**

Until 1917 Russia was ruled by an Emperor called the Czar. The ruling class was rich and powerful, but compared with the rest of Europe Russia was a backward country, most of the population being poor, rural peasants. Even when the Czar tried to industrialize the country in the last years of the nineteenth century, the peasants who moved into the towns found themselves in appalling living conditions with low wages and not enough to eat. There were some organized protests against the oppressive regime, but most of these were brutally put down and the leaders imprisoned. The Czar tried a few experiments in democracy, notably a Russian parliament called the Duma, but they did little to ease the poverty. The Duma did however grant equality and the freedom of speech and religion.

When Russia entered WWI in 1914, the Czar’s position seemed reasonably secure, but there followed a series of defeats which, coupled with a dreadful lack of organization, meant that by 1917 Russia was in a state of collapse. In the early weeks of 1917 many soldiers began to desert, and in February there were major demonstrations in the capitol, Petrograd, against the conduct of the war. Czar Nicholas II realized he had little support and gave up power.

**The 1917 Revolution:**

For eight months there was a period of uncertainty, with a Provisional Government trying to both fight the war and hold the country together. Finally in late October 1917, Vladimir Lenin, who led the Bolshevik Party decided the time was right to seize power in the name of the workers. Street fighting continued for ten days and ended with the Bolsheviks capturing the Winter Palace on November 6, 1917 (The November Revolution). In 1905, the palace had been the scene of brutal repression, when hundreds of people holding a peaceful demonstration had been killed by the Czar’s soldiers, and the entering of the palace by the Bolsheviks was an important symbolic gesture. Lenin proclaimed the first socialists state where all workers could have a say in the running of the country. Many of his ideas came from Karl Marx, a German economist, whose major work *Das Kapital* proposed a society in which all people would be free and equal. The concept is called Revolutionary Socialism in which private property and social classes are abolished. Marx died in 1883 and never saw the revolution he had inspired. Lenin had worked towards this revolution for many years, and an effective part of his agitation had been the use of simple but effective slogans to help people understand the aims of the revolution. When he and the Bolsheviks gained power they faced enormous problems. The combination of years of inefficient government by the Czar, and the effects of the First World War, meant that the economy had collapsed. There was little food, and there were huge outbreaks of typhus and influenza. In March of 1918, the Bolsheviks changed their name to Communists. They were the “Reds,” and the Czar’s army and wealthy opponents were referred to as the “Whites.” From 1918 to 1921 there was a civil war, and many foreign countries, alarmed that their workers might take over in the same way, sent troops to fight against the Communists.

After three years of bitter fighting, the Bolsheviks gained control of Russia, though the country was still weak. In 1921 the Czar and his family were killed (Anastasia). The country became the USSR in 1922. In 1924 Lenin died, and there followed a struggle for power between Josef Stalinand Leon Trotsky. Stalin was a silent cunning man, who was General Secretary of the Communist (previously Bolshevik) party. He posed as a moderate man, carrying out Lenin’s policies. He was not interested in spreading revolution abroad, and his main aim was to build up Russia as a strong country— ‘Socialism in Our Country’. Trotsky was a brilliant speaker and had been in charge of the Red Army during the Civil War. He wanted to see the revolution spread throughout the world— ‘Permanent Revolution’. Both men had their supporters within the party, and for a period of two years there was much discussion within the party about the direction the newly formed Soviet Union should take.

**Stalin Takes Control:**

By 1926 Stalin was able to discredit Trotsky, and in 1927 Trotsky was deported, to be permanently exiled in 1929. From this time onwards, whenever Stalin met with problems inside the country, he blamed the difficulties on Trotsky (scapegoating), who he claimed was working for foreign powers against the Soviet Union.

By 1928 Stalin was the virtual ruler of the Soviet Union which seemed a contradiction to many Soviet people. What they could understand of the views of Karl Marx seemed to be very different to the way the Soviet Union was moving. To the ordinary Russian, Stalin seemed more like a Czar than a man trying to build the ‘new society’ based on the views of Marx and Lenin. It was also very confusing for them to understand Stalin’s own views. In 1921 he had been against the rapid industrialization of Russia, yet in 1928 he had decided to start Russia on her first 5 yearPlan— an attempt to industrialize the country quickly and at the same time ‘collectivize’ the peasants. He put them in large state farms. This was vigorously opposed by theKulaks, land-owning peasants, and in 1929 many of them burnt their farms and killed their cattle to prevent them falling into the hands of the government.

Industrialization included steel mills (4xs), oil (3xs), cement, electric power and chemical plants. USSR became the 2nd largest producer of iron & steel.

**Repression:**

When faced by opposition, Stalin tended to adopt brutal, simple solutions. Those who refused to accept the propaganda given out by the State were either killed or exiled to remote areas. When Kirov, the Leningrad party boss, was murdered in 1934, it marked the start of a period of ‘show trials’ of leading party members who admitted to crimes they almost certainly could not have carried out. Stalin had them removed as he felt they posed a threat to his rule. During the Great Purge from 1934-1938 millions of ordinary Russians were killed or uprooted and all branches of society suffered badly. Out of these ‘purges’ the Stalin ‘cult of personality’ arose, whereby everyone was to see Stalin as a sort of god-like figure.

When regard to foreign policy, Stalin realized that a Communist government was not popular with the government of other states and when Hitler came to power in 1933, fascism became his greatest worry. The Soviet Union joined the League of Nations in 1934 and Stalin tried desperately to find allies against Hitler. When this seemed impossible in 1939, he actually signed a treaty with Hitler. This Nazi-Soviet pact seemed unbelievable to many in the Soviet Union but with WWII looming Stalin needed time to build up his country to face a superior military power like Germany. On June 22, 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union and for the next two years the Soviet people had to endure incredible hardships to survive against Hitler. 1 ½ million people died of starvation in Leningrad alone. During this time, Stalin rallied the Russian people— he had misread foreign affairs and now wanted to give the impression that only his leadership and the sacrifice of the Russian people would give victory. From 1941-43 Stalin encouraged his new allies, America, Britain, and France, to start a second front to help ease the situation in the Soviet Union but because of his previous position, this help was not forthcoming.

**The Rise of the Soviet Union:**

Even though Stalin’s economic figures are difficult to believe, and untrue in certain areas, the rise of the Soviet Union as one of the world’s greatest industrial powers took place in the 1930’s. The human sacrifice was very great and the consumer benefits virtually nil. Stalin (Man of Steel) concentrated on the buildup of heavy industry and even though there were many mistakes and failures, by 1939 Stalin had laid down the pattern for the future.

During the war which followed, the Soviet people often found it difficult to understand Stalin’s thinking, for at times past ‘enemies’ were now to be seen as ‘friends’ and much of the propaganda of the past 10 years was re-written. Stalin was able to get away with this because he controlled all aspects of Soviet life. The society which Stalin created, with a powerful ruling elite, seemed to many people a long way from the original ideals of Marx and Lenin.