

# ANIMAL FARM AT 70

John Rodden and John Rossi

What havoc “a little squib” can cause! Seven decades ago, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* was published in the United States. Its publication launch was August 26, 1946, almost exactly a year after its appearance in England. Subtitled “A Fairy Story,” the “little squib”—Orwell’s modest term for the book when he wrote the Russian émigré scholar Gleb Struve—was only thirty thousand words, a brilliantly original hybrid of Aesopian fable, Menippean satire, and historical allegory.

*Animal Farm* hit a nerve at the right psychological moment in America, just when the pro-Soviet fellow-traveling movement was beginning to unravel. Published to reviewers’ kudos and good sales in the United Kingdom in August 1945, it nevertheless gained attention chiefly from the English literary-political elite, especially the London left-wing intelligentsia and serious literary-minded readers. *Animal Farm*, however, had only a moderate influence on the wider British public. Its full impact was not felt until it crossed the Atlantic a year later, and some

of the long-term consequences proved highly ironic. Indeed, the circumstances shaping the American reception of this Englishman’s “squib” generated cultural and intellectual tremors that contributed decisively to the decades-long ideological fault lines that surfaced between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Communism was never a powerful political force in either the United States or England, albeit during the war broad popular support for the Russians in their struggle against Nazi Germany prevailed. Both countries, however, featured groups of prominent and influential fellow travelers whose sympathy, if not primary loyalty, was to the Soviet Union and its communist principles. In the United States, fellow traveling peaked during the war. The Russians became the darlings of the American progressive left, and Joseph Stalin acquired the image of the affable pipe-smoking “Uncle Joe.” Unlike in the U.K., however, by the time *Animal Farm* landed on the desks of most American readers, the gloss was already

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beginning to fade from this rosy picture of the USSR. Even liberal-minded Americans' affections for the avuncular wartime ally had cooled—and the Cold War was on the horizon. It would take another decade for a similar feeling of alienation to reach the left intelligentsia in England—in fact, not until Nikita Khrushchev's so-called Secret Speech exposing Stalin's crimes shocked the West in February 1956.

Numerous other differences between the postwar U.K. and U.S. also accounted for the growing transatlantic rifts. For example, whereas the English were preoccupied with the devastation caused by the war, including postwar rationing and an economy in shambles (not to mention the July 1945 defeat of the Conservatives under Churchill and election of the first Labour government in decades), America was enjoying an unprecedented level of prosperity and global influence—the apogee of the “American Century.”

Specific to *Animal Farm's* reception in the United States was a series of events that disillusioned all but the blindest admirers of the Soviet Union. The Russians began clamping down on communist-controlled governments in Poland and other Eastern European countries. In February 1946 Winston Churchill struck a fatal blow at the communist cause in his famous Iron Curtain speech, significantly delivered in the United States, not in Great Britain. His purpose was to warn the Americans of the inescapable reality of Soviet imperialism in Europe.

Around the same time, a minor code clerk in Canada, Igor Guzenko, defected and was seeking refuge in the West—and revealed that the Russians had been spying on their Western allies throughout the war and had gained valuable information on the construction of the atomic bomb. To make matters worse for progressive defenders of

the USSR, Orwell's “squib” arrived soon thereafter, making the clever and convincing case that the Soviets' wartime conduct was no merely ephemeral issue. The fable delivered a persuasive and easily understood indictment of the Russian Revolution itself, the centerpiece of much left-wing and progressive praise.

So *Animal Farm* appeared in the midst of an escalating controversy in the United States over how to deal with the Russians. The “Fairy Story” established Orwell's reputation in America, a process that would be completed with the publication of his better-known indictment of Soviet Communism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, three years later. Little known outside certain intellectual circles in England before the war, Orwell became, along with Arthur Koestler, the outstanding popularizer of the perils of Soviet totalitarianism in the postwar years. Orwell's success, even more so than Koestler's, was largely a by-product of the Cold War. Orwell presents us with the curious paradox of an admitted leftist—he preferred to describe himself as a “democratic Socialist” (and always capitalized the noun) with the emphasis on democratic—who also became a cult hero among conservatives throughout the United States.

Familiar in the United States only to a narrow band of Trotskyists in New York until *Animal Farm's* publication, Orwell entered the American scene as a blank slate—and soon became touted as the leading literary Cold Warrior. Only after the publication of *Animal Farm* and the even greater success of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which appeared in June 1949, a mere seven months before his premature death from tuberculosis, did many of Orwell's writings from the 1930s and 1940s appear in the U.S. His essays, especially “Shooting an Elephant” and “Politics and the English

Language,” embellished his reputation as a master of direct, crystalline prose. The image of Orwell in America was also simple, clear, powerful—not to mention politically useful. He was the outspoken, even belligerent Cold Warrior, the writer who also led the fight in the “Cold War” on the linguistic and cultural front. (Orwell is even credited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with having coined the phrase *Cold War*.)

Toward the end of World War II, as Orwell began to castigate the Soviet Union as something less than a disinterested, gallant ally of the West, he became an object of suspicion in the eyes of those American leftists who sympathized with the cause of communism. American Trotskyists and pacifists, men like Dwight Macdonald and Philip Rahv, regarded him as an honest man and not an apologist for either Stalinism or capitalism. Orwell was one of the first writers to recognize that the real threat to Western society was from totalitarianism, not simply from fascism. In an essay on Arthur Koestler in 1946, he made this point with characteristic directness. “The sin of nearly all left-wingers from 1933 onwards is that they wanted to be anti-Fascist without being anti-totalitarian.” The American left would not reach this stage in its thinking until long after the war.

Although Orwell’s achievement of popular success in the United States came in 1946 with the publication of *Animal Farm*, he had conceived the idea for it after fighting against General Franco’s forces in the Spanish Civil War. He joined the anarchist units in Catalonia and was disgusted on his return home to discover how much the popular press had distorted the war. What particularly disturbed him, however, was his discovery that the communists and their sympathizers had managed to get their view

of the war accepted by knowledgeable leftist groups in England. During his stay in Spain, Orwell had watched with growing disgust the adroit way in which the communists destroyed the power of other popular left-wing forces opposing Franco. He thus made a discovery that other European and American leftists were not to learn until after World War II: despite their ideological pose, the communists subordinated everything to Russian national interests.

For Orwell, the essence of socialism was that it championed “justice and liberty,” as he said in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The Spanish Civil War convinced him that the pretense of the USSR—the Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics—to be a “socialist” country would have to be exposed. Indeed, Stalin’s totalitarian regime was no more “socialist” than its Janus-faced counterpart on the right, Nazi (Nationalist *Socialist*) Germany. The Second World War put a temporary halt to any work on Orwell’s part to demythologize the USSR. But toward the end of the conflict, he became even more determined to unmask the Soviet system, because Russia’s heroic defense against Hitler had further blinded people to the real nature of communism. In “The Prevention of Literature” (1946), written just a few months after the British publication of *Animal Farm*, Orwell elaborated on his reasons for wanting to expose communist tyranny. Fifteen years ago, he noted, when one defended intellectual freedom, one had to do so against the attacks of conservatives, Catholics, and fascists:

Today one has to defend it against Communists and “fellow-travelers.” One ought not to exaggerate the direct influence of the small English Communist Party, but there can be no question about the poisonous effect of the Russian *mythos* on English intellectual life. Because of it,

known facts are suppressed and distorted to such an extent as to make it doubtful whether a true history of our times can ever be written.

This attitude dominated Orwell's work in the postwar period. He continued to attack tyranny and totalitarianism as he had before the war, only now the most serious threat came from Russia.

Another factor convincing Orwell to expose the Russian Revolution was his intense dislike of Stalinist intellectuals and fellow travelers in England. Orwell was disgusted with the way "fashionable" leftists—his own inveterate descriptor—swallowed and belched out communist propaganda. His struggle to get his Spanish Civil War reports and other anticommunist writings published deepened this sense of disgust. Orwell found it hard to forgive those who had censored him in the 1930s. The personal and the political mixed a powerful brew of rage in his mind, firing his commitment to expose how Comrade Napoleon's system of government and ideology, along with his smug cadres of well-trained pigs in Britain and elsewhere, had thoroughly duped the West.

By November 1943, his thinking had crystallized and he began work on a short political tract aimed at demonstrating how the Bolshevik Revolution had been corrupted by the revolutionaries themselves. After considerable experimentation, he hit upon the idea of using the form of the beast fable: he would destroy the Soviet myth with an even more powerful counter-myth.

Within a matter of weeks, he finished the first draft of *Animal Farm* and began looking for a publisher. Since the Anglo-Russian alliance was still strong, his manuscript was consistently rejected. Victor Gollancz, owner and publisher of one of the leading leftist

publishing houses in England, rejected *Animal Farm* on the grounds that, whatever its merits, it was playing into the hands of the Nazis, a charge that Orwell found specious and that angered him bitterly.

Despairing temporarily of seeing his work in print—and even considering having it published at his own expense—Orwell found a small English press, Secker and Warburg, which agreed to put out a limited edition. So *Animal Farm* appeared in 1945 and won immediate critical and popular acclaim. The cordial relations between Russia and England were just beginning to fray, rendering the political-intellectual climate more tolerant of a work condemning the Soviet Union.

*Animal Farm's* positive reception in Great Britain was far exceeded by its smashing success in the United States. The initial American reaction to Orwell's fable came in the form of a favorable review in the very influential pages of *Time* in May 1946. Shortly thereafter, the Book-of-the-Month Club announced that *Animal Farm* would be its choice for the month of September, thereby guaranteeing Orwell a large audience in the United States for the first time.

The Club's selection of *Animal Farm* was probably the single most significant event for expanding Orwell's reputation in his lifetime, and arguably the most important event in his entire American reputation history. "The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of our time," announced one member of the Club's selection committee. Extolling the fable's "world-wide importance," Club president Harry Scherman issued a special statement: "Every now and then through history, some fearless individual has spoken for the people of a troubled time. . . . Just so does this little gem of an allegory express, perfectly, the . . . inarticulate philosophy of tens of millions of free

men. . . . Wherever men are free to read what they want, this book and its influence will spread.”

As if to guarantee that outcome, Scherman also asked subscribers to pick *Animal Farm* rather than any alternate Club choice. The fable sold 460,000 copies during 1946–49 through the Club and soon became a runaway bestseller. By 1947 it had been adapted as a BBC radio play and translated into nine languages (and titled *Comrade Napoleon* in at least one language). In 1941 Arthur Koestler had bet some literary friends five bottles of burgundy that Orwell would be “the greatest bestseller” among them in five years’ time: *Animal Farm* was proving Koestler prescient.

After the special treatment that *Animal Farm* received from the Book-of-the-Month Club came a rapturous welcome in America. The popular magazines—including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times Magazine*—were all enthusiastic in their admiration. One of the most flattering reviews came from the highly respected Edmund Wilson in the *New Yorker*. Wilson gave Orwell’s reputation a generous boost by comparing him as a satirist with La Fontaine, Voltaire, and Swift. Naturally, some reviewers missed the point of the allegory. Edward Weeks, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, concluded an otherwise favorable comment by noting that *Animal Farm* showed a “clever hostility if one applies the analogy to Soviet Russia.” If? To what other country could the analogy possibly have applied?

The political magazines on the left reacted with confusion and anger. They were still committed to the ideal of Soviet-American friendship and thus viewed *Animal Farm* as a lethal threat to that cause. The winds of the Cold War had not yet begun to blow strongly through the American literary scene. Isaac Rosenfeld in *The Nation* raised contrived, ideologically motivated reasons for disliking

Orwell’s tale, which were more obviously concerned with political than literary factors. He denied, for example, that Orwell’s interpretation had any validity when applied to Russia. Rosenfeld conceded that at one time such a view had some relation to reality. But he argued that offering such an interpretation now made *Animal Farm* a reactionary work. There was little that Rosenfeld liked about *Animal Farm*. He believed that it not only failed to explain why the revolution was betrayed but, what was worse in his eyes, told readers things about Russia we already knew. This was a strange view from a journal that had sought to justify every switch of the communist line during the 1930s.

If Rosenfeld found *Animal Farm* insignificant, George Soule in the *New Republic* revealed a naiveté and hostility toward it that, particularly in hindsight, is embarrassing. According to Soule, *Animal Farm* was “dull” and the allegory was “a creaky machine for saying in a clumsy way things that have been better said directly.” He neglected to say where these things were said better. Certainly not in the pages of the *New Republic*, which had been one of the most consistent apologists for Soviet Russia in the United States. Soule managed the difficult task of confusing the identities of both Snowball and Napoleon. He thought Napoleon was supposed to represent Lenin, failing to recognize Stalin’s character in the successful pig who betrayed the Bolshevik Revolution.

Soule took strong exception to Orwell’s description of the young dogs being trained as secret police, asking if one was supposed to take that seriously as a commentary on Soviet education. He also could not see any relationship between the slaughter of the old workhorse, Boxer, and any event in Soviet Russian history. That claim represents further testimony regarding his understanding, or rather

lack of understanding, of Stalin's USSR in the 1930s, especially the purge of the faithful so-called Old Bolsheviks who had made the revolution a success. Yet such unfavorable reviews in the progressive journals could not offset the impact of the endorsement of the popular magazines.

Quite to the contrary. From the moment of its American launch in August 1946, *Animal Farm* became a bestseller, ultimately selling more than ten million copies in the United States alone. Three reasons for this are quite clear. First, the story itself was simple enough to be understood by anyone who wanted to understand it. Second, like all artful fables, it could be appreciated on at least two levels: as a children's tale of how "power corrupts" and as a sophisticated indictment of the Russians' betrayal of their own revolution. Third, *Animal Farm* appeared just as the Cold War began to obsess the American public. People suddenly discovered that the Russians had utterly divergent geopolitical interests from Americans. They became aware that the USSR was no longer willing to cooperate with the Western allies—Stalin was no benign Uncle Joe. Orwell's tale of the venality of the revolutionaries thus found a more responsive audience in America than in Great Britain, which did not have the responsibilities of the United States as a world power and therefore did not come into direct conflict with the Soviet Union.

Even before midcentury, *Animal Farm* had become a minor classic in the United States. Celebrated as a short, accessible tale of Bolshevik history precisely when the anti-communist "Red Scare" years were reaching their crescendo, the fable's popularity was aided by the Cold War success of nonfiction counterparts such as the memoirs of Louis Budenz (*Men Without Faces: The Communist Conspiracy in the U.S.A.*, 1950) and Bella Dodd (*School of Darkness: The Record of a*

*Life and of a Conflict Between Two Faiths*, 1954). Scarcely a high school or college student anywhere in America in the 1950s did not encounter *Animal Farm* as an assigned reading. Orwell's cleverness with words and his recognition of the significance of slogans served to create catchphrases that were soon exploited to reveal the reality of Russian communism. "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others" was especially effective in capturing the hypocrisy of the Bolshevik Revolution turned into a bureaucratic nightmare.

Orwell's success with *Animal Farm* not only made him financially secure but also, according to his good friend British anarchist George Woodcock, mellowed him. He no longer had any problems getting his work published and in fact found himself in demand to write articles and reviews. In America he contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly* and even the *New Republic*, which had finally become suspicious of the Soviet Union. In fact, he soon wrote more for the American than he did for the English audience.

As the literary world commemorates the seventieth anniversary of *Animal Farm*'s immense success in the U.S. (and soon thereafter on the wider international scene), our attention is inevitably drawn to another literary anniversary on the immediate horizon: the appearance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1949. (Orwell's American publisher, Harcourt Brace, retitled the novel 1984—a diabolically ironic case of what could be termed numerical Newspeak.)

1984 occasioned even greater praise than *Animal Farm* and came to exert a far greater worldwide impact. In hindsight, it is as if in 1945–46 the atomic bomb of *Animal Farm* exploded on the cultural front—soon followed by the hydrogen bomb of 1984, whose arsenal of catchwords detonated three years



later. With these two bombshells, Orwell gave Western intellectuals, as it were, an exclusive atomic option ideologically, a first-strike capability against ex-Comrade Napoleon and his pig tyranny, along with all their cultural coconspirators.

As if to confirm the genius of these twin masterpieces and Orwell's status as the Dr. Frankenstein (or Robert Oppenheimer?) of the age, the Trotskyist (and sometime Stalin apologist) Isaac Deutscher could bemoan that *1984* had become by 1955 "an ideological superweapon" in the Cold War of words.

Irving Howe noted in his essay on Orwell's *1984*, "History as Nightmare," that readers have a reluctance to reread some books, no matter how impressive they are. *1984* is such a work. Its somber forecast of the future is almost too vivid and too horrifying to contemplate. That was not the case with *Animal Farm*, given its imaginative way of dealing with the cruelties of the Russian Revolution. The world of *1984* was Orwell's vision of what a totalitarian society would look like after decades of protracted war between the West and the communist world, a war of rationing, shortages, distorting the truth, and the killing of innocent people.

Like *Animal Farm*, it emerged from Orwell's personal experience. Always sensitive to the written word, Orwell had seen how the events of the Spanish Civil War and Russia's role in World War II had been distorted for ideological purposes. In the world of *1984*, ideology was unimportant and history was simply rewritten. Orwell again showed insight into the future superior to that of most of his contemporaries. Hitler had burned books; in the future, Orwell predicted, totalitarian regimes would simply rewrite them, a process already under way in Russia.

*1984* also revealed the extent to which Orwell was a product of the bourgeois

age. He scorned the regimentation and impersonalization of life in the future and the destruction of the individual under totalitarianism, in a manner that made *1984* broadly fit a conservative interpretation. *1984* was commonly taken as an indictment of communism and not as a tendency of the modern state in general.

When it was published in June 1949, *1984* was another Book-of-the-Month Club selection. "Great Books Make Themselves" proclaimed the August 1949 *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, in a headline running over ecstatic tributes from Bertrand Russell, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and others.

Nothing, of course, could have been wider of the mark than the headline's declaration. Already in July the new Club president had predicted *1984* would become "one of the most influential books of our generation," a view the *Book-of-the-Month Club News* now repeated. The Club acknowledged it had solicited the opinions of "prominent persons" like Russell and Schlesinger who now confirmed the Club's "certainty that Mr. Orwell's book will be one of the most widely discussed books in recent years."

Subsequent kudos for *1984* from other "prominent persons" on both sides of the Atlantic (V.S. Pritchett, E.M. Forster, Rebecca West, Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul de Kruif) helped ensure that result. Leading intellectuals compared Orwell with Dostoyevsky, Wells, Huxley, and others in the anti-utopian tradition. Within five months the novel had sold 22,700 hardback copies in England. Eventually it rose to number three on the *New York Times* bestseller list during 1949. It sold 190,000 copies as a Book-of-the-Month Club choice during 1949–52 and became an American bestseller in 1951 when it appeared as a Signet paperback.

*1984* was also condensed in *Reader's*

*Digest*—a sure sign Orwell had gained wide popular acceptance in America. The reviews were uniformly favorable. Unlike *Animal Farm*, *1984* was well received even in the leftist journals of opinion. After the Berlin blockade, the communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, and the first signs of Russian espionage, Orwell's nightmare of the future no longer seemed so unreal to the American left.

Orwell was disturbed by the way both *Animal Farm* and *1984* were used by conservatives as indictments of British socialism, and he often protested this interpretation of his writings. Yet he did not foresee how his ideas would be expropriated by those with views diametrically opposed to his. There is no doubt he was ingeniously exploited in the service of the most damaging criticism of the left. What made his comments so effective was that they came from a man whose own leftist credentials were beyond dispute. Orwell never found a way of counteracting the conservative exploitation of his ideas and criticism. Though it was never his major purpose to censure socialism for its failures in the modern world, this crude verdict is levelled at his work by many American critics.

The Cold War formed the environment that enabled Orwell to seize the imagination of the American public. Unfortunately Orwell's major impact on Americans came essentially through his last two books. As a result, his other work has been relatively neglected. His critical essays—which include pioneering examinations of topics as varied as English postcards, Rudyard Kipling, and the art of the murder mystery—have never secured a large readership in the United States. This is regrettable. In fact, a case can be made that his forte was the essay form, which was particularly well-suited to the crisp, clear prose style that

Orwell had mastered. He liked championing unpopular causes and could make a convincing case in the short essay.

Orwell conceived *Animal Farm* and *1984* as complementary works that would pack a lethal one-two punch against totalitarianism in general and Stalinism in particular, indeed against the betrayal of revolutionary dreams generally and against the Russian Revolution. It often goes unnoticed even by discerning readers that *Animal Farm* and *1984* form a unified whole. *1984* opens where *Animal Farm* ends: the pigs are in control. They have become fully humanized. They are now the Inner Party and Outer Party members (with occasional gadfly exceptions, such as rebellious Winston and Julia). Napoleon has morphed into Big Brother, Snowball has become Emmanuel Goldstein, the Seven Commandments of Animalism have been transformed into the catchphrases of Hate Week and the famous slogans in Newspeak. The pigs' tyrannical fiefdom of Animal Farm is now Airstrip One, the metropolitan capital of the Party's empire of Oceania. Any reader may easily elaborate on these analogues.

The larger point is obvious. It is all one vision. Orwell's fable and dystopia both succeed as carefully crafted works that interweave almost seamlessly the artistic and the political, the literary and the polemical. They are the masterpieces of a great writer and political adept, and they are also unforgettable mindscapes of the ultimate horrors to which dictatorial power may lead. Orwell could with complete justice joke not long after the publication of *Animal Farm*, as he enjoyed the laudatory reviews and the congratulations of colleagues, that readers had not appreciated his achievement sufficiently. He groused in mock disappointment: "Nobody said it was a beautiful book."

Indeed it is a beautiful book, and its suc-



cessor does not warrant that adjective. *1984* is a bleak, horrifying, utterly brilliant artistic and political vision. Hence these final two works ensure Orwell's place in literature. Like all great writers, he understood human nature profoundly. His honesty and his hatred of all cant—what we today would dub “political correctness”—attract new readers

as each generation comes to maturity. If he was originally adopted in the United States for the wrong reasons, time has shown the enduring validity and vitality of his artistic and political mission, as he declared about *Animal Farm*, “to fuse political and artistic purpose into one whole.” †



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