Imagine you live in a Moscow apartment in the late 1930s. In the middle of the night, the police come and arrest the entire family that lives in the apartment above you, including the children. Another night, one of the men who lives in the apartment below you disappears. You assume he has been arrested, too, but are too afraid to ask any questions. Soon, many people have disappeared, hundreds of thousands of them from around the country. Only decades later may you find out what happened to them. They were shot or sent to a labor camp where they died. Or perhaps they were sent to a labor camp and survived to tell the horrible tale.

This is what happened in the Soviet Union during the Great Terror, also known as the Great Purge. The Great Purge refers to the political terror and repression that engulfed the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin from 1936 to 1938.

Joseph Stalin
Joseph Stalin had served as the People's Commissariat of Nationalities, a job with a lot of power regarding the non-Russian population of Russia in the new revolutionary state of Soviet Russia. He became general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1922. General secretary might not sound like a fancy title, but in reality, Stalin was the leader of the entire Soviet Union.

Stalin didn't use his newfound power kindly. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s he persecuted a number of groups including prosperous peasants he called kulaks, and permitted famine to kill millions in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. While the causes of the Kazakh famine are disputed, many believe the Ukrainian famine was a man-made attempt to break any attempts at Ukrainian independence. The Great Terror would continue this ruthless consolidation of power.

Kirov's Assassination
Historians usually point to the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934, a prominent Communist leader, as an important precursor to the Terror. Stalin used Kirov's assassination to point to conspiracies within the Soviet Union that threatened the country's existence. While a few historians think that Stalin was genuinely frightened by Kirov's murder, many believe that Stalin himself organized the murder as an excuse for political repression (and to kill off a possible political rival in Kirov).

Show Trials
The Great Purge began with a number of show trials of high level political leaders. A show trial is one in which the outcome is already determined in advance, rather than a fair trial, and used for political propaganda purposes. The show trials charged many Bolshevik party leaders with counter-revolution, and many were charged with killing Sergei Kirov. Devout Communists, such as Nikolai Bukharin—one of Stalin's main political rivals—were charged with absurd crimes and executed. This allowed Stalin to both eliminate any potential political opposition to his rule and to make people think that there really were serious conspiracies around them. These alleged conspiracies were used to explain any
failures of the Soviets. Instead of Stalin being held responsible for not achieving their goals, the victims of the show trials became scapegoats. Many people often believed that the individuals who were arrested were guilty, sometimes up until the moment they themselves, or someone very close to them, were arrested.

Show trials, however, usually were just for high-level figures. Ordinary people were unlikely to face a show trial. Many people were shot without a trial, their guilt determined by a troika, or a group of three individuals from the NKVD. The NKVD stood for the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs and was the name for the secret police at the time. The members of the troika were different secret policemen acting under Stalin’s direction who acted like judges. However, the "trials" held by the troika were no such thing; they simply found you guilty.

The arrests and executions were often fairly random; your neighbor was arrested and, under torture and duress, named you and anyone else he could think of as a counter-revolutionary.

The Gulag

If you were not executed, victims of the terror might be sent to the Gulag. The Gulag was the name of the system of labor camps in the Soviet Union that spanned from Ukraine in the west all the way to the Russian Far East. The Gulag was very harsh. More than a million people died in the camps under Stalin, from being worked to death, starvation, or disease. The Gulag played a significant role in the Soviet economy, and Gulag laborers were responsible for many large construction projects, such as the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where many prisoners died working up to 14 hours a day with little food.

Fear of a Fifth Column

Some historians attribute Stalin's terror to fear of a "fifth column" within the Soviet Union. A fifth column was a group of people who would try to undermine the Soviet Union from within. Many people in the Soviet Union were afraid of war. Nazi Germany and other fascist countries had condemned the Soviet Union. Stalin and others feared that many non-Russian nationalities would not be loyal to the Soviet Union once war began. Soviet citizens of Polish nationality were targeted at a particularly high rate.

The End of the Terror

The Soviet Terror ended for reasons as mysterious as they began. Historians disagree why. Did Stalin decide that he had accomplished his purpose of cementing his power? Or did he decide it was getting out of control and needed to be stopped? Was the Terror like a virus outside of Stalin's control, that spread rapidly and then ran its course? There is no clear answer to this, and individuals continued to be persecuted after 1938 (such as the arrest and execution of the great writer Issac Babel) but not as at high of a rate as before.

The exact number of people killed in the Great Purge is unknown; estimates vary from under 700,000 to around 1.75 million.

What is the author’s overall purpose for writing this article?
4. My Concluding Thoughts and Connections to *Animal Farm*

3. Annotations:
What challenged, changed, or confirmed what I knew?

2. Annotations:
What did the author think I already knew?

1. Annotations:
What surprised Me?