



## **An *Uncle Joe* for our time**

**DID YOU KNOW** that Joseph Stalin read 10,000 books? I bet you thought he was too busy scaring the wits out of people. Not a bit of it. Stalin spent most of his days quietly reading in his study, smoking his pipe and dreaming of making the world a better place. Yes, the *Stakhanovite of the Study*, got through at least one book *every day* between 1924 and 1953. Anatoly Utkin, a director of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the editor of a teachers' manual on modern Russian history, believes that students should learn about *all* aspects of Stalin's personality. "Can you tell me" Utkin recently asked, "of any other leader, an American president, for example, who read 10,000 books?"

This is indeed a sobering thought. Perhaps, if George W. Bush had stayed home and read more he wouldn't have done quite as much damage? *It's a thought*. Alternatively, if Stalin had spent more time playing golf it might have been easier for historians to iron out the wrinkles in his personality.

Still, when all is said and done, proletarian democracy made enormous intellectual and psychological demands upon the personalities of those called to embody the will of the masses and the aspirations of the people. As a result, there is a scholarly, even thoughtful, thread running through the personalities of Mao, Tito, Kim Il-sung, and a host of minor bibliophiles like Enver Hoxha and Nicolae Ceausescu down to the

fabulous orator, Fidel, and the slightly less distinguished Raúl. Not merely were they charming *raconteurs*, they were all serious readers, *every single one*, and also prodigious authors: witness the vast bulk of their *Collected Works* which if piled volume upon volume would overshadow the Pyramid of Cheops.

The mighty good works of these chaps are well known: freeing millions from party strife, confusing choices, and moral danger, while emancipating great multitudes from the burden of living altogether. Say what you like about Stalin: he was tough, at times he was even brutal, but he got the job done. Like the first Tsar of all Russia *Ivan the Awesome*, sometimes known as just “Terrible”, who dealt so firmly with those pesky boyars, that Stalin had an improving film made about him by Sergei Eisenstein. Unfortunately in the second part of the film Sergei revealed that Ivan was paranoid, guilty of many massacres, and terrorised nobles and peasants alike. Stalin found all this very hard to credit so he had Part II banned and Part III binned.

Of course, this sort of thing happens in the West all the time. In the forthcoming film, *Nottingham*, Russell Crowe will play the Sherriff of Nottingham as a good guy pitted against a Robin Hood who is simply a charismatic thief robbing the rich, and not giving anything to the poor. *How improbable it that?* It's like depicting Oliver Cromwell as a friend to the Irish or Sir William Wallace as a freedom fighter with the *saltaire* daubed, football fan fashion, across Mel Gibson's face.

Recently, the *Glorious Revolution* in which the closet Catholic, King James II, was chased out and his suitably Protestant daughter, Mary, and her Dutch husband, William, were invited to come over and be King and Queen has been presented not as a ‘Glorious Revolution’ at all, but as a *Dutch Invasion*, a Dutch take over of Britain lock stock and barrel. What is more although William of Orange, affectionately known in the North of Ireland as “King Billy”, is well

known to have been a fine man, he is now being claimed as a *Friend of Dorothy* by none other than Peter Tatchell. This, as you may well imagine, has hugely annoyed King Billy's fans, particularly the leaders of the Democratic Unionist Party who are well known for having no patience at all with buggers or buggery.

In history it seems nothing is stable, nothing can be absolutely relied upon. It's all rather postmodern. This was particularly brought home to me when I learned last week that Sir Cliff Richards has been sharing his life with John McElynn, a former Catholic priest from New York. But Cliff is "sick to death of the media's speculation about" his sexuality. "What business is it of anyone else's what any of us are as individuals?" Now Cliff has not always thought this, particularly when he was "Singing and Talking about his Faith" at Nationwide Festival of Light rallies in 1971 and 1972. Back then he thought the gay liberationists who heckled and zapped him were being terribly unfair. In those days he didn't believe that sexuality was a private matter. On the contrary, he campaigned assiduously for evangelical Christianity. Of course, it's perfectly all right for Cliff to change his mind, but he shouldn't attempt to rewrite history.

More seriously, perhaps, the makers of BBC television series, *The Tudors*, are perfectly prepared for Henry VIII to get old – the actor Jonathan Rhys-Meyers will be allowed to gently age – but he will not be allowed to grow fat. The producers think that an old twenty stone sovereign with suppurating leg ulcers who needed a specially built hoist to get him into the saddle would lose all erotic appeal. So, gone is the fat bejewelled king depicted so gloriously in the paintings of Holbein and others, and in has come a mature Henry full of life and sex appeal until the end of his days.

With all this palaver going on in the West is it any wonder that Russia's historians and academicians want a Stalin appropriate for today? They know that as Russia's leaders try to live up to their predecessor's

achievements by promulgating a 'Monroe Doctrine' for Russia's 'near abroad' there will be an urgent need for new historical models. So, taking their cue from the Siberian tiger hunter, otherwise known as Vladimir Putin, they want to lose the Stalin who dug the White Sea Canal with an army of slaves, the Stalin who shot most of his senior army officers just before he joined the Nazis in the partition of Poland. They want to lose the Stalin who was flabbergasted by Hitler's lightening invasion. They want to lose *Stalin the Terrible* and regain *Stalin the Awesome*, because *Uncle Joe* was not merely an "effective manager" and, *in the circumstances*, "entirely rational" he was also an "intellectual" and a bloody great reader.