

Stalin's Tobacco Preferences

Roland Boer, 2014

No less iconic than Joseph Stalin's moustache was his pipe. But what did he put in it? Once he settled on his favoured cherry root pipe, his tobacco of choice was 'Herzegovina Flor.' So close did the connection become that the tobacco was also known as 'Stalin's Choice'. But this was no ordinary tobacco, for it appeared only in cigarettes. Stalin would take two cigarettes out of a box and shred them into his pipe. Why? Pipe tobacco at the time was cheap and rough and he had become rather fond of the flavour of the cigarettes when he was a young trainee priest and revolutionary.

So what was 'Herzegovina Flor'? The smokes were produced at the Moscow 'Java' factory, which was originally established by Samuel Gabai, from Kharkov, in the 19th century. Gabai's idea was to produce a tobacco like no other, so he found a tobacco plant in Java, grew it in Herzegovina and then shipped it to Moscow. The products initially became favoured by the elite nobility and fledgling bourgeoisie. So Stalin, as the leader of the first worker's state was in a quandary. If he smoked the cigarettes, he would give the wrong impression. So he opted for the common man's pipe, but since he couldn't tear himself away from the flavour of the tobacco, he decided to use it to fill his pipe. Eventually, the elite origins of the tobacco were forgotten and it became indelibly associated with the man himself. Many others followed suit, among them the famous soviet composer, Mayakovsky.

Of course, with the propagation of the 'black legend' of Stalin, Herzegovina Flor sadly fell out of favour. Now it is produced in small amounts, although it is still notable for its rich aroma and high tar content.