

Russian Evolution



As more watches from the former Soviet Union enter western markets, it's time to review their long-running history

BY CHESTER HOPKINS


In closed societies, like the former Soviet Union, vertical manufacturing is a natural outgrowth of the inherent isolationism. When imports are restricted by choice, you literally have to make every part of an end product.

The Soviet watchmaking apparatus reflected this as much as any other manufacturing industry before 1992. From crystal to

case-back, and the movements in between, Russian watchmakers churned out utilitarian timepieces for their military and citizenry like a ballistic missile factory without the radiation—well, at least after the radiated luminescent dials were eliminated.

While there also existed significant export to Asia and parts of Europe, the dynamics of this

structure were driven by price and mass production, not necessarily quality. So, the words “good enough for government work” spring to mind when veterans of Russian watch collecting think about those days before the true free-market opening of Russia.



Aviator watches, by Volmax, are the official watch of the SWIFTS – the Russian equivalent of America’s Thunderbirds. Pictured here are three of their MiG 29 Fulcrums in formation during a recent show near Moscow.

“We were too complacent,” says Igor Zubovskij, the managing director of Vostok-Europe, a Russian watchmaker based in Lithuania. He’s referring to, or perhaps lamenting, the past culture of Russian watch companies, which lingered even for several years after the destruction of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War.

What a difference a decade makes.

In a collapse reminiscent of the Union itself, the First Moscow Watch Factory (1st MWF) and the ubiquitous Poljot Company dismantled in the 1990s under the weight of not being able to survive as it once was—essentially a mass government and proletariat supplier. While there had been significant export to Asia and Europe as well, the new open market altered forever the dynamics of this structure.

Poljot

At its zenith, Poljot, which means “Flight” in Russian, employed some 7,000 professionals. As a comparison, there were only 910 companies in the U.S. employing more than 5,000 people in 2003, according to the census bureau. Poljot was no small enterprise.

Indeed, Russian watch production in general remained massive throughout the Soviet period. In 1980, Vostok—the other major name in Russian timekeeping—produced 4.5 million pieces. That’s enough watches for every man, woman and child in Colorado to wear the name Vostok on their wrist. Vostok itself grew from the original breakup at the 1st MWF in 1942, ultimately ending up in Chistopol to escape the war’s impact on Russia’s capital city. The firm still makes watches and movements there.

Out of the later splintering of Poljot, many aggressive young watchmakers emerged, develop-

Igor Zubovskij, managing director of Vostok-Europe, works at his desk in Vilnius, Lithuania.



A SWIFTS pilot walks across the tarmac wearing his uniform adorned with the Aviator watch logo.

ing their own brands and learning from past mistakes. They are now truly competing on the world stage, with interesting, not-so-utilitarian designs, vastly improved quality, and prices that are remarkably affordable.

Aviation history

No discussion of Russian watchmaking is complete without exploring its rich aviation and military history. Just look at the names of the brands – Aviator, Buran (which bears the name of the Soviet space shuttle), Poljot, Vostok (named for the Gagarin space orbiter) and Sturmskie, which means “navigator,” just to name a few.

Russian aerospace history and Russian watches are indissolubly connected.

For instance, all Soviet battle airplanes of the WWII era were equipped with the airborne clocks made by the 1st MWF. The Red Air Force pilots and navigators flew with watches on their wrists with the “The 1st MWF Kirova” and later the “Poljot” trademarks. During the Second World War even defense production—including ammunition, aviation glass, aviation clocks, navy and aviation chronometers and some parts for the first Katyusha rocket launcher—was conducted in the watch factory.

But the war had not yet ended when the factory started peaceful production. In 1943 it started to make machining tools for the watch industry again, and in 1944 it made fireplace, table and automobile clocks.

In April 1945 the factory stopped ammunition production and started preparation for a new K26 Pobeda (Victory) watch model. Production of the Pobeda with a side seconds hand started in 1946. Josef Stalin approved the name, design and specifications of this watch personally. The watch became quite popular, as the 1st MWF was making the K26 model until 1953. Today, it is still in production in other factories around the country. In 1949, the Sturmskie (Navigator’s) watches were put into production. They were specially designed for military aviation and were not available in the general market.

The 1950s

By 1955, 1.1 million mechanical wristwatches were made by the

1st MWF. With this foundation of success they followed in 1956 with production of the first Russian automatic watches, under the Rodina (Fatherland) brand. With little break in speed, in 1957 they

developed an elite Antarktida (Antarctic) watch, under government order, for the participants of the first Soviet expedition to the South Pole.

These watches were antimag-

netic with a 24-hour dial, and the watch movement was based on the Pobeda (Victory) watch movement.

The Space Race:

In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite into space. The whole world peered at a slightly flashing light in the night sky. To mark this event, the 1st MWF produced the Sputnik (Satellite) watch, based on the Pobeda model.

Then, in 1960, the first Poljot (Flight) brand watch with the 2414 caliber appeared. A Shturmanskie (then under the Poljot banner) made history on April 12, 1961, when the Soviet Union launched the first successful manned space flight and ushered in the era of space travel. Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, wore the Shturmanskie watch on his wrist during that celebrated flight. The watch operated flawlessly in a weightless environment and became the first watch ever to go into the cosmos. Later, this legendary watch was given to the factory museum.

Astronauts from France, Russia, Germany and the Ukraine took Poljot watches on space flights. The 3133 chronograph movement actually set a record for the longest duration of a space flight when cosmonaut V.V. Poljakov wore it. A commemorative edition of the Gagarin watch flew in space on the wrist of current cosmonaut Yuri Shargin in just the last two years.

Cosmonauts Pavel Beliaev and Aleksej Leonov also wore

Every SWIFTS aerobatic plane carries the Aviator logo.



these watches when they became the first in the world to walk in space. During the next twenty years, 100,000 of the 3017 watches were made. The Antarktida and the Sputnik have become much-sought-after collectors items because they were in production for just one year.

Around the same time, the Strela, another Russian watchmaking achievement, came along. A wrist chronograph with a stopwatch function and a 45-minute counter, the watch was exclusively designed for the officers of the Air Force and produced according to strict military specifications. This case and face style is still widely used today in Russian watch production.

The 1970s and 1980s

In 1971, the 1st Moscow Watch Factory produced 2.5 million wristwatches, and 1.6 million were exported to sixty-three different countries. In 1972, the factory increased production of mechanical wristwatches up to 2.7 million. Since up to seventy percent of the production was sold on the export market, the factory decided to design and to put into production a number of new watch movements which could satisfy the requirements of exacting foreign customers and would be useable for automatic technological processes.

As a result, in 1972 new designs of watches with the 26 series caliber movement were developed and had a distinct mark of a letter "H": 2609H, 2614H, 2616H, etc. The factory's designers, technologists and stylists paid particular



Below: Vostok-Europe is the official watch to the Expedition Trophy, the longest winter off-road race in the world. Tested in these rugged conditions, each watch comes with a certificate of authenticity and reliability from Expedition Trophy and Vostok-Europe.

attention to its reliability, technological aspects and reparability.

In 1976, the factory started production of new wristwatches with a stopwatch function: chronograph model 3133.

For this development, the factory staff was awarded with a State Bonus Reward. At the beginning, watches were intended for the Navy officers and were produced under the Okean (Ocean) brand name.

Later, the factory started to make modifications intended for the Air Force, with a Shturman'skie brand name (model 31659, a watch with a second hand arrester and pointer of time zones)



Watch assembly line at Vostok-Europe in Vilnius



and another Shturmanskie watch with a pointer of time zones (model 3133). The production of these watches was limited and subjected to strict military inspections.

Only nine years later, in 1983, watches with a 3133 movement were made available to the public. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the factory put into production the quartz 30 series caliber watches, and later, 24 and 16 calibers. The quartz movements were mainly exported to Hong Kong and Singapore. In some years, export achieved up to three to four million pieces per year.

Volmax

For decades, the name Poljot remained synonymous with Russian watches. Outside of the Vostok company, (the largest and oldest continuously intact Russian watchmaker in Chistopol,) Poljot held the number-one worldwide brand recognition of all the Russian watch companies.

A key player in building this brand, the Volmax Company spent years as the chief wholesale distributor of Poljot watches abroad. By 1997, how-

ever, it had become clear to Volmax that the range and quality of products provided by Poljot were actually stifling its ability to grow and expand.

Knowing that Poljot could no longer compete with the European watchmakers, Volmax made the bold move of launching its own watch production and brands. Initially they manufactured the Aviator and Buran watch lines they created for the Poljot Company. Even this proved to be burdened by the Poljot name. Then, in the year 2002, Volmax registered the trademark names of the watch lines Aviator, Buran and

Shturmanskie and redefined itself as the leading watchmaker in Russia.

From the outset, Volmax watches differed from other Russian watch brands. Their chief goal was, and remains, to produce, market and sell their own watch brands, but to also change the generally negative attitude toward Russian watches outside the borders of Russia. Unfortunately, this negative image was in many ways all too justified by poor quality control and a residual Cold War mentality.

Volmax, on the other hand, has strict quality and distribution control methods, and is striving

The 31681/6773778B Aviator. The standard bearer of the Aviator watch line. Price: \$530.



Gennadij Sukov, Vostok-Europe technical designer and engineer, can test as many as 1,000 watches in this unique mass winder.



ing the best designers and watch technicians in Russia from the former Poljot Company. Each of their watchmakers has many years of professional experience.

Today Volmax has exclusive representations in North America, Germany, Austria, England, Portugal, Japan, Greece, Holland, Switzerland and the Baltic states. As Volmax has strengthened its position abroad, company leaders turned their attention to the Russian domestic market for cultivation as well. At present, sales volumes abroad and in Russia are approximately equal. But two interesting trends have emerged in Russia.

First, interest in classical three-hand watches continues to grow. Second, there is an increasing demand for more expen-

sive and qualitatively higher-end watches. This indicates that Volmax products, which were regarded as exotics for collectors at the beginning, have found acceptance in the broader market.

Since the Russian government does not subsidize its watchmaking industry, unlike many other countries, Volmax is forced to finance everything independently. That substantially weakens the Russian watchmaking industry on the international playing field and leaves little chance for a massive growth, which might be possible with increasing market demand. →

to recapture the earlier quality and popularity of Russian watches. Volmax now competes in the West with the best watches in the world and has the potential to break the shackles of its Russian watch heritage.

At first, Volmax did not fear the risk of stepping out of the price segment of the mass-production manufacturers. The firm emphasized the production of limited editions (between fifty and 999 pieces depending upon the model) related to different historic events. For example, the series “100 Years Aviation” garnered much success and recognition for the company in 2004.

The production volumes at Volmax are relatively low. “Quality and not quantity” is an oft-used motto for their efforts. Volmax uses only the best Russian movements, and puts its team together by lur-

From the Buran gold collection by Volmax, this solid 18-karat open-heart chronograph retails for \$5,400.



Designers Konstanin Markin and Gennadij Sukov work on new watches for Vostok-Europe.



Future products

Volmax plans not only to extend its existing watch lines but also some interesting new projects. One is the production of a lady's watch collection with quartz movements, emphasizing chronographs. Since there is no similar product on the Russian market, and Western customers have shown interest in this project, too, the management decided to try this experiment. Multi-functional watches are being developed as well, suitable for extreme occupations and sports. Other brand names included in the Volmax offerings include Aviator, a brand targeted at Aviation professionals and enthusiasts, military personnel and those who appreciate sports mechanical watches; Buran and Buran VM, the classic watch brand that has a traditional dress-watch appearance in the rich heritage of Russian watchmaking; and Shturman-skie, a brand that represents the history of the Russian Space exploration program and military-purpose timekeeping.

Vostok-Europe

Against a backdrop of emerging worldwide interest in Russian watches, Vostok-Europe debuted in 2003. Its striking new vision of cost effectiveness, inherent quality and the pedigree of the oldest and largest Russian watchmaker quickly established the brand among European watchmakers.

Since being unveiled at Baselworld in 2004, the brand has steadily grown. The cornerstone of Vostok-Europe was the marriage of the enormous potential of the

watch movement factory of Vostok with a groundbreaking design and a marketing philosophy focused on good quality for the price.

Conceived with the intention to compete on the level of the finest and most aggressive Western watchmakers, Vostok-Europe developed a sales and marketing strategy with an unmistakable brand identity and a style to rival anything in its category. Under the slogan "the best Soviet technologies for modern watch design," each piece in the Vostok-Europe model line is inspired by, and

The Shturman-skie "Gagarin" commemorative model worn in space recently by cosmonaut Yuri Shargin. Price: \$529



Vladimir Shevchenko conducts final checks and delivery control before shipping at Vostok-Europe



christened with, a Soviet technological, architectural or cultural achievement.

From Lithuania

The seeds for this new brand were sewn in Lithuania. There, a watchmaking team in Vilnius had been building models for other major Russian brands since the early 1990s. Realizing the growing interest in Russian watches and with intent to capitalize on a vast untapped market, teams in Vilnius and Chistopol (the home of Vostok) created a joint venture of tradition and innovation now known as Koliz-Vostok.

The two companies brought together the brightest and most ingenious of the talented watch and movement designers from both bases of operation. Their collaboration resulted in the development of original and exclusive case and movement designs to create the all-new Vostok-Europe line.

Specifically, the first exclusive movement grew from the approved 2416 to give all the new Vostok-Europe styles a day & night and 24-hour indicator.

Owing to the favorable business climate in Lithuania, a European Union member nation, the home base and chief operations hub remains in Vilnius.

Harkening back to the styles of the sixties and seventies, the first models drew inspiration from space and jet-aircraft exploration pioneers of the then Soviet

Union. Building on the concept of “Soviet Techno Design,” subsequent models honored Soviet and Russian nautical, automotive and other aeronautic accomplishments, among many others.

The rectangular sharp-edged stainless steel case of the “Arktika” watch line is similar to the ship trunk of the famous icebreaker that was the first to reach the North Pole. Ship rivets on the case, the wavy relief on the dial, as well as the second hand in the form of an anchor, stress the maritime style of the “Arktika” model.

Similarly, the AN-225 “Mriya” and the N1 Rocket models incorporate key elements of their inspirations. At present the largest transport aircraft in the world, the Mriya airplane was developed at the Antonov design office and was a natural choice for a Vostok-Europe model. The rotating bezel and crown are made to resemble the turbine impellers of the “jumbo queen” and they sit on a 43mm case to reflect the size of the plane.

The world’s largest rocket, the N1, as a basis for a model, led to the new modification 2426 of

the Vostok movement 2416, with the addition of a central 24-hour hand for the first time. The form of the N1 case is reminiscent of the first stage of the Soviet rocket, built originally for implementing a moon-shot program. Still today, this rocket remains the largest and strongest of all rockets ever manufactured. The additional hour-hand and rotating bezel with 24-hour indicator made it possible for the first time to successfully carry out the “dual time” function based on a Vostok watch movement as well.

Now in North America

Now, less than three years later, Vostok-Europe is establishing a foothold in North America.

Vostok-Europe has garnered the distinction of serving as the official timekeeper of the Expedition Trophy Rally 2005, the longest winter race in a single country. This serves as a true test of reliability under difficult to extreme road and weather conditions in a rally from Murmansk to Vladivostok, covering a total distance of 12,000 kilometers. The Vostok-Europe performance led to a repeat as official watch this year.

Within one and a half years since the company’s launch, Vostok-Europe has made its way from the stage of preliminary technical drawings to a reliably functioning watch company with a sales network in fourteen highly developed countries, from the United States and Western Europe to South-East Asia. →

Other Brands and Movements

Without question, the universe of Russian watch brands is much larger than covered in this article. In fact, with the splintering of Poljot, you really need a scorecard to keep up. Of course, there is Vostok, the maker of movements for Vostok-Europe and their own watches.

Additionally there is Mak-

Time, Dennisov, Molnija, Raketa and Slava, to name just a few of the others. In fact, watches under the Poljot name are being manufactured again. However, Poljot and the 1st MWF no longer make movements.

As a part of the shake up of Poljot, it sold off the movement manufacture. The chronographs

are now produced by MakTime in Moscow and the balance of what was formally made by Poljot has moved to Vostok.

Russian watches have made the leap to players on the world stage, and it is inevitable that the Western market will only see more of these interesting and affordable timepieces in the years to come. ☺

A row of MIG fighters for the SWIFTS, whose tails are adorned with the Aviator logo.

