The “Official History,” of the Ural Motorcycle

The history of the "URAL" brand motorcycle begins with the Russian pre W.W.II planning. Russia knew it would soon be going to war against the Third Reich, and Hitler. The military was ordered to gear up in all areas, including the ground forces that would be defending the Russian "motherland" from the invading German Panzer, ground troops, and German Special Forces. The German Special Forces had thousands of the BMW sidecars that the German Army loved for their maneuverability, reliability, economy and ease of maintenance. Carrying a machine gun and soldier plus supplies, the sidecar "weapon" was feared by the otherwise "fixed" Russian ground troops. The usefulness of the sidecar motorcycle was beginning its legend.

Back in the old USSR, in 1939, the Russian engineers in Moscow were busily dismantling 5 BMWs purchased from Germany through some Swedish intermediaries. The engineers copied the BMW design in all details and made molds and dies to produce their own engines and gearboxes in Moscow. (Incidentally, Harley-Davidson also copied the BMW and delivered about 1,000 Harley-Davidson model XA flat-twin shaft drive motorcycles to the US Army during World War II.) Soon a factory was set up in Moscow producing hundreds of Russian sidecar motorcycles. At this point the rig had no name. As the demand and function for the Russian sidecar rig spread in the military, the top Russian strategists worried that the factory in Moscow was within easy range of German bombers. The decision was made to move the motorcycle plant further east, out of bombing range and into the middle of the resource rich "URAL" mountain region.

A site was chosen in the small trading town of Irbit, located on the fringe of the Siberian plains. The only building on the site was a brewery and it soon was converted into the first R & D building to prepare for the construction of a massive new production complex to build the "URAL" motorcycle. Over 5,000 "URALs" as they came to be known in the military, (they still had no official name) were produced for the Russian Army during W.W.II. They fought against the Germans in many sectors and battles and must have mightily surprised the German sidecar gunners when they came up against Russians riding the "look alike" and even stronger sidecar BMW clones!
The history of the URAL had begun with the glory of helping to defeat the terror of Hitler's armies on the Russian and European battlegrounds.

The URAL was built for the military only, up until the late 1950's when another plant in the Ukraine was built to take on that job and the Irbit Motorcycle Works (IMZ) began to concentrate on bikes for domestic consumption. The popularity of the rigs grew steadily with the Russian people and in the 1960's the full production of the plant was turned over to non-military production.

The “un-official history of the Ural motorcycle (which was widely known during the Soviet era and is still commonly known, but still not officially acknowledged, in Russia today), includes some elements that are specifically not recognized by the government. The original Urals manufactured in Moscow and in Irbit, were pretty “cobby and rough” even by the low standards of Soviet manufacture in the late 1930s. The early Urals worked and were very strongly built, but the castings and “fit and finish” were pretty rough.

This problem was solved in early 1945 when the Soviet army finally crossed into Germany. It has been said that the Soviet army were like locusts spreading across Germany stealing everything that was not nailed down. This theft on a grand scale had two elements: 1) the impoverished Soviet soldiers personally stealing everything they could; and 2) the official policy of the Soviet Union was to strip every asset possible from Germany. The Soviet Union was decimated by the early years of the war, including both property destroyed and loss of life (officially 27,000,000 killed – but unofficial, and probably more accurate estimate range as high as 43,000,000). Thus the Soviet Union wanted revenge. It also wanted to specifically cripple anything that could contribute to future German war production capability.

Thus, so the unofficial story goes, the Soviet army captured and packed up the complete German BMW motorcycle plant. They took everything but the building, loaded it on boxcars returning to the Soviet Union and used the German tooling and other equipment for dramatically upgrading the Ural factory in the town of Irbit in the Ural Mountains on the edge of Siberia. Thus, the Soviets and now the Russians have been manufacturing “knock-offs” of the 1938 BMW motorcycle with little if
any design changes for upwards of 80 years. In fact, the Russkis were pretty lucky as the 1938 BMW motorcycle was a pretty good design for the purposes intended.

As Paul Harvey used to say, “and now you know the rest of the story”!!