

Importation into the UK

Various models of Soviet motorcycles had been imported up to around 1970, but in very small numbers. Most motorcyclists knew nothing of Soviet motorcycles.

In around 1970 Mr Fred Wells of Manor Park East London decided to import the Ural M63, he did this until around 1972. He did good work for the owners, issuing repair instructions (as if they needed them!) in English etc. He also rode a Ural M63 outfit across the Sahara, but details of this trip are now lost, sadly.

Then SATRA (believed to stand for Soviet American Trade Association) got the concession to import all Soviet motorcycles from around 1972 to 1979. They introduced the 'Cossack' trade name that was registered in Great Britain (ie NOT a Soviet trade name) which they applied to every Soviet motorcycle they sold in the UK or re-exported. They had a very professional approach, but struggled to make a commercial success of it.

Nevals took over importation of selected models in 1979 and survived until the late 1990s. They brought in bikes from the same factories, but ran the venture with a lower cost base.

Other importers tried the Minsk in the UK, including Regent and Britane, but were perhaps limited in approach and success.

After Nevals the importation was taken over by a UK company Ural Moto UK working very closely with the Russian Ural IMZ factory. This close working relationship must be a good sign.

The following pages give some idea of the importation of the Soviet bikes into the UK, with examples of the models from their brochures. Permission to reproduce parts of the Cossack publicity material has been given by the company that took over the commercial interests of SATRA, though they now import into the UK Tata 4x4 utility vehicles from India.

Every effort has been made to be accurate in the dates quoted in these sections on the importers.

It is interesting to see the different approaches made to import and sell these wonderful motorcycles. In my view it is difficult to match the demands of the enthusiasts who want to own and ride the bikes, the importers and salesmen who try to create an image and the factories who try to make bikes that will sell.

SATRA – Cossack – UK Importer & re-Exporter

SATRA (believed to be Soviet American Trade Association) set up in the UK to import vehicles from the USSR in 1973. They were originally based in Byfleet, Surrey, England. In around 1975 they moved to Carnaby near Bridlington in NE England. They started off by importing Moskvich cars then Lada cars from Russia. They also formed SATRA Belarus to bring in the Belarus tractor from Belarus and a selection of Soviet motorcycles. In the Carnaby site the cars were on one site and the bikes and tractors were on another in industrial units on the WWII Carnaby airfield. Also on the airfield was a motorcycle race circuit used occasionally for races but also by SATRA for testing.

The Cossack trade name was chosen for the motorcycles, although unknown to the customers the bikes came from many factories from three different Soviet states, Russia (Ural & Ishevsk), the Ukraine (Dnieper) and Belarus (Minsk). The factory names were discarded in favour of the Cossack name, but the model names were kept.

A great deal of money was spent on the import and sales venture, far more than they could ever have got back from sales. There were new workshops, good spares area and pleasant offices. The Cossack stands at the London motorcycle shows were lavish, with specially prepared bikes, colour brochures and posters and pretty young ladies handing out the publicity materials. There were around 210 Cossack dealers set up in the UK, most were not sole Cossack agents, but some had big premises. One name associated with the bikes at that time that keeps cropping up is Terry Dobney who ran the Cossack side of things at the Camberley Honda Centre. He went on to support the Naval activities in the USA, but then went on to involvement in the American 'Indian' motorcycles, last seen he was a Druid Adviser and 'Keeper of the Stones of Avebury' in the south west of England!

The actual motorcycle in the poster below went to the Camberley Honda Centre after the Cossack era finished, but is now owned by a member Cossack Owners Club. The whereabouts of the rider is still sadly unknown!



Colour Poster distributed by SATRA of a M66

The only non standard parts on the bike are:
the air pipe straps 'Jubilee clips instead of standard items, why? and of course the rider.

Initial bikes imported in 1973 were the 175cc Voskhod 2 & 3, the Jupiter 3, and the Ural M63. Later the Ural M66, Dnieper MT9, Planeta Sport and Minsk were imported. Samples of the Tula scooters, Planeta 3 and Ural M67 were also imported but not marketed.



Ural. 650ccs.



Voskhod. 175ccs.



Jupiter. 350ccs.



Dnieper. 650cc.



Ural. 650cc.



Ish sidecar modified by the English “Thruxton Tuning Shop” for SATRA.



Top row from left - Jupiter 3 outfit, Jupiter 3, Jupiter 3 with “Thruxton” sidecar conversion.

Bottom row from left - Planeta Sport, Voskhod 3 and Minsk,

The motorcycles sadly got a poor reputation, they were being presented as modern motorcycles but they were not. Most had poor brakes and would suffer with high speed use in Europe. The ‘retro’ angle was never exploited. I always got the impression that although the bikes SATRA sold were export specification with chrome rims etc, but they were often not the latest models. The M66 Urals were sold when the M67 was in production, similarly with the MT10-36 that came in whilst MT9s were still being sold.

Many of the bikes had damage to them due to the shipping from the USSR and standing around in crates outside for up to three years. Ural M66s that were prepared and sold in 1977 were made in 1975, and most MT9s sold in 1978 were 1976 manufactured. Chrome work was often pitted and needed replacement, engines, gearboxes and final drives had water in them, paint work often needed re-sprays. Many UK parts were fitted to meet UK regulations and to improve performance, these included headlamps, rear lamps, spark plug caps, front brake cables, spark plugs and of course some sidecars were converted from right to left.

SATRA did also re-export Cossacks to other countries including Australia, but in limited numbers.

I worked for the importers in 1977 as a fitter and test rider so I saw a lot of what they were up against. I think that considering the quality of the bikes they bought they did really well to put out well prepared bikes with a really professional approach. Sadly the purchasers of the bikes often neglected them, resulting in poor reliability.

The Service Manager at Satra Belarus for the bikes during this period was Mr S B Manns (Bob) who had been a British Six Day Trials competitor in his youth. His input was essential to keep the effort going.

In around 1979 they gave up the concession to import the bikes to Neval Motorcycles who had already been importing the Minsk for a few years. Nevals had a more cost conscious approach without the big workshops, offices, massive bike show stands etc.