

IMZ-Ural

(Russian: Ирбитский мотоциклетный завод, romanized: *Irbitskiy Mototsikletnyy Zavod*, lit. 'Irbit Motorcycle Factory') is a Russian maker of heavy sidecar motorcycles.

In 1940, the Soviet Union acquired the design and production techniques for BMW R71 motorcycles and sidecars. The first M-72 model was finished in 1941. Originally, factories were to be located in Moscow, Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), and Kharkov, but due to the approach of Nazi German troops, the Moscow facilities were moved to Irbit, and the Leningrad and Kharkov facilities to Gorkiy (now called Nizhny Novgorod).

Plans for the M-72 were later sold to the Nanchang Aircraft Manufacturing Corporation, a Chinese industrial firm, to build the Chang Jiang.

History

The origins of the IMZ-Ural are linked to developments in the Eastern Front during World War II. The Soviet Union was preparing for possible military action by Nazi Germany. Joseph Stalin ordered the Soviet military to prepare in all possible areas, including the ground forces that would be defending the Soviet Union against invading German tanks and infantry. Mobility was especially stressed after the Soviet Union had witnessed the effect of the blitzkrieg on Poland.

A meeting was held at the Soviet Defence Ministry to devise a motorcycle that would be suitable for the Red Army. The Red Army wanted to modernize its equipment after the suspension of the Winter War with Finland. The motorcycles used up to that point had not been satisfactory; their technology was outdated and the manufacturing quality was inadequate to endure the harsh Russian climate and terrain.

The motorcycle was "modelled after a late-1930s BMW sidecar bike called the R71, which Nazi Germany provided to the Soviet Union after the countries signed the nonaggression Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in 1939."

According to official accounts, after lengthy discussion, the BMW R71 motorcycle was found to closely match the Red Army's requirements. Five units were covertly purchased through Swedish intermediaries. Soviet engineers in Moscow dismantled the five BMWs, reverse engineered the BMW design in every detail and made molds and dies to produce engines and gearboxes in Moscow. Early in 1941, the prototypes of the Ural M-72 motorcycle were shown to Stalin who made the decision to enter mass production. One of the original BMWs purchased through the Swedish intermediaries survives, and is displayed in the IMZ-Ural factory museum.

In 1941, BMW began series production of the R75 and ended production of the R71.

As production escalated, the Moscow Motorcycle Plant was established, producing hundreds of Russian M-72 sidecar motorcycles. The Nazi Blitzkrieg was so fast and effective that Soviet strategists worried that the Moscow factory was within range of German bombers. The decision was made to move the motorcycle plant east, out of bombing range and into the resource rich Ural mountain region. The site chosen was the town of Irbit, located on the fringe of Siberia in the Ural mountains. Irbit had been an important trade centre in Russia; the site of the second largest fair in Russia before the Revolution of 1917.

The only available substantial building was a brewery outside of town, beyond the railway line. It was converted into a research and development building to prepare for the construction of a massive new facility to build the M-72 motorcycle. On October 25, 1942 the first batch of motorcycles went to the front. During WWII a total of 9,799 M-72 motorcycles were delivered for reconnaissance detachments and mobile troops.

After WWII the factory was expanded, and in 1950 the 30,000th motorcycle was produced.

Initially, the "URAL" was built for the military only. In the late 1950s, the KMZ plant in Ukraine assumed the task of supplying the military, and the Irbit Motorcycle Works (IMZ) focused on making bikes for domestic consumers. In the late 1950s the full production of the plant was turned over to non-military production. In 1957, the M-72 production lines were sold to the People's Republic of China.

The export history of URALs started in 1953, at first to developing countries. Between 1973 and 1979, Ural was one of the makes marketed by SATRA in the UK as Cossack motorcycles.