

# A brief history of IMZ-Ural

By Wes Fleming

*There are only a few manufacturers left in the world that build sidecar rigs from the ground up with a three-wheeled destiny in mind. After nearly 100 years of production, Harley-Davidson abandoned sidecars in favor of trikes after the 2010 production year, leaving IMZ-Ural as the highest capacity and most well known sidecar builder in the world. Also left building them are Hongdu and Zhuzhou (China), Watsonian Squire and Wasp Motorcycles (England), Cozy and Royal Enfield (India), and Louis Christen Racing and GG Duetto (Switzerland).*

Once upon a time, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia had a little thing called a Pact of Non-Aggression. Signed in August 1939, this mutual promise not to invade each other accompanied another treaty related to proposed economic growth for and between both countries.

Part of this economic agreement included the transfer of technology from Germany to the Soviet Union, but what the Red Army really wanted was a motorcycle

R71 to the Soviets, knowing they were providing obsolete technology to their rivals.

No matter the genesis of the rig, the rest of the war saw production of these nearly identical sidecar rigs on both sides of the Eastern Front – thousands of them. The only major change due to the course of the war was that the Soviets moved their motorcycle factory east, across the Ural Mountains and out of range of the German army, to a tiny burg called Irbit, where motorcycles displaced the local brewery and the business of war construction got underway.

After the war, things really got going. The factory underwent a much-needed renovation and kicked into high gear, producing its 30,000th rig in 1950. A few years later, the Soviet government split production into military and civilian concerns, with the military factory going to the Ukraine and the newly renamed Irbit Motorcycle Works (IMZ) sticking with domestic production and a small number of exports to developing nations.

By 1965, IMZ began exporting their Ural sidecar rigs in very small numbers to developed nations around the world. Nothing much changed until the collapse of the Soviet order; after that, the previously nationalized IMZ became the Uralmoto Joint Stock Company, often referred to as IMZ-Ural. In 1998, some Russian investors bought the company, including the governments' remaining 22% stake, making it completely private. Another renovation, this time for the motorcycles rather than the factory, took place and the Ural builders dragged their rigs into the 1970s. In addition to tighter quality control, they focused on improving materials and tolerances to address common complaints from existing Ural drivers.

Another technology update in 2007 saw Ural rigs sporting Keihin carburetors, floating disc front brakes (forever ending the effortless three-wheel interchangeability of previous models), and a transmission made with German gears.

Since that first M-72 came off the line in 1941, over 3.2 million Ural rigs have hit the streets, back roads, gravel, fire roads, muddy fields, shallow ponds, farms, forests, mountains and deserts of the world. There are more than 50 Ural dealers in the US, five within 200 miles of Washington, DC.



and sidecar rig that functioned better than what they had used against Finland.

The story of how the USSR started building their obviously BMW-derived sidecar rigs varies based on which nation's history books you read.

According to the Soviets, the Red Army bought several BMW R71 motorcycles from a dealer in Sweden and smuggled them back to Russia. They then built a factory in Moscow, dismantled and reverse-engineered the bikes, and started to produce the three-wheeled vehicles. By the time the first Soviet R71-based M-72 rolled off the production line in 1941, the Nazis had already violated the Non-Aggression Pact and were blitzkrieging across Russia.

The German version of the story involves the economic treaties signed by the two nations before the outbreak of World War 2. BMW had recently updated its production lines to pump out the new R75, leaving behind the slightly less powerful R71. They happily included the drawings and parts casting molds for the

2012 BTS



**Beemers Uber Alles**  
9248 Mike Garcia Dr  
Manassas VA 20109  
N 38.75722, W 077.53756

(571) 318 2472 voice / text  
[george@beemersuberalles.com](mailto:george@beemersuberalles.com)