



Luxury for the People

⌚ Lada cars, Zenit cameras, Ural motorcycles, Sukoi aircraft - Simon de Burton has always appreciated the engineering brilliance of the Eastern bloc. He is no less impressed by Russia's latest watch brand... even if it *is* made in Germany. *QP* enjoys Alexander Shorokhoff's lavish new pieces, and explores the Soviet heritage behind father brand, Poljot - Moscow's first watch factory and winner of the 1950s horological space race.

Simon de Burton

"From Russia, with love," is how Alexander Shorokhoff likes to present his rugged range of watches. His firm, Poljot International, has been selling them since 1992, when the end of the Cold War and the USSR shifted Poljot's outlook from Russia towards the worldwide market. The Germany-based 'International' branch builds watches using movements supplied by the Russian movement maker, offering primarily military-styled wristwatches all modestly priced in the €500-€1,000 range. In mid-2004, however, 45-year-old Shorokhoff took the fight directly to the Swiss, introducing an additional, eponymous brand founded on the catchline, "Great Russian Masters, Past and Present."

As the words suggest, the philosophy behind his 'Alexander Shorokhoff' brand - which, to my mind, is one of those names that somehow looks right on a watch dial - was to create a luxury wristwatch inspired by Russia's proud cultural heritage and constructed to uncompromising standards. The first models do not disappoint.

The 40 mm Shorokhoff 'Peter Tchaikovsky' features a hand-wound Poljot 2612 alarm movement. Entirely disassembled and rebuilt at the Shorokhoff workshops in Alzenau, the majority of its components are refined with gold or rhodium plating, mirror polishing and hand engraving. Its neatest feature, however, is the unusual

(Left) The 'Fedor Dostoevsky' (€1,998) from new Russian brand, Alexander Shorokhoff. Its eponymous founder (born in Moscow, 1960) started distributing Poljot watches worldwide from Frankfurt in 1992, before setting-up Poljot International in 1994.



(Above left) The Peter Tchaikovsky model (€2,520) owes its musical name to its sonorous alarm function. Look carefully and you'll notice the treble-clef symbol on the alarm hand. (Above right) Like a travel alarm clock, the Peter Tchaikovsky can be lifted out its case for easy visibility on a bedside table. This also allows the decorated movement to be viewed through the caseback while the watch is still on the wrist. (Below) The Tchaikovsky's movement is a hand-finished Poljot 2612. Each bridge is hand-engraved and the wheels are guillochéed.



(Above) Shorokhoff's chronograph (from £2,350) is named after the Russian poet Leo Tolstoi (1828-1910) (Below left) The Tolstoi's base movement is the Poljot 3133, modelled on the popular Swiss calibre, ETA 7734. ETA movements themselves were first incorporated into Poljot International watches in 1998.

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officer-style 'double case', which is hinged to allow the full beauty of the embellished movement to be admired through the back without the wearer having to fully remove the watch from his or her wrist. Being an alarm watch, this also allows the face to be propped-up and serve as a bedside-table clock!

The 'Leo Tolstoi' chronograph meanwhile (you may, by now, have noticed a theme emerging), offers moonphase and date functions from a refined Poljot 3133 movement, also housed in a 40 mm case. Each model looks far more expensive than its respective price tag - the Tchaikovsky starts at €3,200 in steel, rising to €5,000 in gold and the Tolstoi goes from €3,000 in steel to €6,000 in gold. Both recently became available in the UK through Watches of London - a small retail distributor currently operating out of offices in the capital's Grosvenor Gardens.

Reworked and refined

Shorokhoff has now added to the range with the introduction of its first square-cased watch, called the Fedor Dostoevsky (how long before they run out of famous Russian names?). It is available in automatic or hand-wound versions with optional power reserve and small seconds. It will be some months, however, before the Dostoevsky makes it to Britain as only a handful - barely more than a wristful, in fact - have been made

to date. "Our intention is to produce one or two new models per year for the foreseeable future," Shorokhoff told *QP*.

"At the moment we have a very small staff - only around six people designing, engraving and assembling watches and another five people involved in running the business. So we are not physically capable of making more than a thousand-or-so watches per year for the entire world. But maintaining exclusivity is important, as that is what will ensure the Shorokhoff brand stands out as the maker of the premium Russian wristwatch. Although we start with a Poljot movement, the fact that every one is entirely disassembled, re-worked and improved means that it is, effectively, an entirely different, hand-made movement that goes into the completed watch," explains Shorokhoff.

Not that there should be any shame in wearing a watch powered by Poljot. The base for the Poljot 3133 movement for example - first produced for the Russian military in 1976 - is modelled exactly on the design of the ETA 7734, which is used by Breitling. And, as we well know, every Breitling leaves the factory with chronometer certification.





(Left) From Poljot International, a recent replica of the 'Strela' chronograph worn by Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov during the world's first space walk on 18th March 1965 (€495). (Centre) The first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin took the 'Sturmanskie' chronograph on his historical flight in 1961. This recent Sturmanskie from Poljot uses the famous 3133 Poljot calibre. (Right) Large 'Moscow Nights' wristwatch from Poljot International (diameter 43 mm) named after the famous Russian song. The watch has a steel case with see-through glassback and a decorated movement (€450).

The standard Poljot movement is, however, supplied unadjusted and there have been complaints among owners of Poljot-branded watches that they run too fast or too slow. But rather than being an inherent fault, it is usually a simple matter of finding a competent watchmaker to make the necessary adjustment. There should, of course, be no such problem with the higher-end Shorokhoffs.

Soviet origins

In any event, the Shorokhoff ancestry is definitely something to be proud of, founded as it is on a Russian fascination for horology

that dates back to 1404, when the first chiming clock was built into the Kremlin tower by a Russian monk called Lasar Serbin.

It was not until the 18th century that the first Russian watch schools were established, with the next major leap occurring in 1929 when the country's main watchmaking factories were established as part of the original 'five-year plan'. Originally called 'First State Watch Factory' and later 'SM Kirov' after the former head of Leningrad's regional Communist party, the First Moscow Watch Factory was at the vanguard of Russia's new watch industry. It was set up by the Bolshevik government to

meet an increase in demand from the military, the railways and the general populace after the revolution, and was realised by importing an entire watch production line from the defunct American firm Duber Hempton.

It was at the First Moscow Watch Factory that Poljot (meaning 'flight') movements originated and the Sturmanskie, or 'Navigator' wristwatch was created solely for the Soviet Air Force - a timepiece that could be regarded as Russia's answer to the Omega Speedmaster. A Sturmanskie may not have been the first watch on the moon, but Yuri Gagarin did have one strapped to his wrist when he became the first man in space in 1961. This watch was sold at Sotheby's in 1993 for £26,000. Incidentally, a Strela chronograph - a model also originally made purely for the military - was also worn by Alexei Leonov in 1965 for the first space walk.

Despite its name, First Moscow Watch Factory is actually the second largest in Russia in terms of output after Vostok (the so-called 'Second Moscow Watch Factory' founded in 1942), although Poljot watches are still favoured for military, aviation and space use, including the Sputnik watches produced to mark the Soviets' launch of the first man-made satellite.

Unlike the Swiss brands, you will not find a 'standard' Russian watch promoted with lavish advertising campaigns or being endorsed by film stars; partly because the low-cost of the



(Above) In tribute to Russia's hero, this Gagarin 2000 watch is engraved "The first cosmonaut of USSR - Yuri Gagarin." Limited to 1,000 pieces (€570).

average piece means profits have to be spent carefully, and partly because the factories are still run on a socialist-inspired system of no-gimmicks mass-production, distributing to the end user at the lowest possible cost.

Such penny-pinching austerity is, of course, of absolutely no interest whatsoever to Russia's new breed of ostentatious rich, so that should be where the more reassuringly expensive Alexander Shorokhoff brand fits in. Get one on the wrists of Roman Abramovich and all his Chelsea players and who knows? Russian might just become the new Swiss... ◯

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