

Bench View 162

The Russians are Coming



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Well before my time as a youngster, there was a saying that originally is said to have been coined in 1949 by American Secretary for Defense James Forrestal: ‘The Russians are coming’.¹ It was usually accompanied by images of huge Russian, perhaps Cossack, soldiers with snow still on their boots. Well, sadly, no such real excitement at Bench View Towers. However, we have got on the bench what I was reliably informed by my client was a Russian wall clock. To be even more precise, he claimed it was a Russian railway station wall clock.

My client, who bought the clock in the USSR, was of the opinion that the clock was made in Russia and was a railway clock showing the time in St Petersburg together with local time, St Petersburg being some hours in front of local time, **Figure 1**. The four hands are interesting: a pair of them are red and a pair black. The two minute hands are fixed together by a riveted joint, as are the hour hands, and they are driven by a normal wall clock gear train and are not variable.

Clearly, the clock has Cyrillic lettering on the dial and there is some evidence of Cyrillic lettering on the back plate of the movement but, sadly, that is the only thing I can really determine which is Russian on the clock. There are a few internet references to clocks being made in Russia before the October Revolution; those that are referenced seem to have been made as one offs and perhaps were made by non Russian clock and watchmakers. There is a strong reference to a Serbian monk who installed a clock in the Frolov Tower of the Kremlin in 1404.² I suspect there was not really a Russian clock making industry until much later, perhaps even a good few years after the revolution. However, with the gradually increasing railroad building in Russia from about 1842 there was a very vital need for accurate and, to some extent, a national time keeping system. The seminar on railway timekeeping during the Chattanooga NAWCC convention in 2015 was eye opening to those of us who had not really appreciated the requirement for accurate transportable time keeping. This must have been focused in two directions: firstly, static clocks in the stations, of which this clock is an example and secondly, of course, dynamic and transportable clocks on the trains themselves. In the UK, the clock and watch industry was well established before the construction of the railways. In Russia, I suspect this was not the case and timepieces watches and clocks were imported.

The volume of clocks and watches that were likely needed must have required a serious import industry. One thing leads to another and I suspect that any good entrepreneur, looking at this huge potential industry, must have seen the opportunity for a home grown business. It is likely that in the very early days, whatever industry there was concentrated mainly on the assembly of clock movements made outside the country and not on the manufacturing of clock movements from scratch.³ I have really struggled to find a great deal out



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

about early industrial clock and watchmaking in Russia and would welcome more information.

A glance at the back plate of the movement rather gives the game away, **Figure 2**. The clock was in fact made or, at least, originated from the Lenzkirch Clock Company. Kochmann identifies the movement as being ‘made’ by Lenzkirch.⁴ A search on the internet gives a possible manufacturing date of 1910–11.⁵ Attributing anything to anyone in the world of horology is a fraught issue and generally difficult to substantiate. Clearly, my client bought the clock in the USSR but it is not originally Russian. If it was made in 1910–11 in Germany then the interesting story is how did the clock get to a Russian railway station, if in fact it is a railway clock? If an item is assembled from parts in, say, Russia, does it become a Russian clock? It’s highly likely that the Lenzkirch clock



Figure 3.

was sold to the Russian railway organization and, during manufacture, was stamped with the Cyrillic marking on the back plate. This is supported as the Lenzkirch company made clocks in the millions and it is quite possible that many were bought by the Russian railways and either supplied as broken down parts or as complete clocks. I tend to the opinion, based on no facts whatsoever, that the units were supplied as parts and assembled in Russian factories.

The case is marked on the back, **Figure 3**, with the Lenzkirch ink stamp which, although a bit smudged, is just about legible. An internet search for images of Lenzkirch clocks reveals a wall clock of similar octagonal construction. The case is a well-made interesting octagon, having a back section with a door cut out to allow inspection of the platform. The case also has a lower door, perhaps to allow access to a pendulum so, this case could have been one which was designed for either pendulum or platform movements. The movement sits on a seat board and in my example is marked with a series of numbers. The case door is hinged at the top and, overall, the case is very well made, despite being possibly a mass produced item.

The movement is also of a high quality, **Figure 4**, and nearly all the components are stamped '1'. The only serious let down is the current platform, which is of pretty poor quality. It is obvious from the mounting holes, and the filled in mounting holes, that this current platform may not have been original, as there is clear evidence of perhaps two other sized platforms being fitted in the past. There are quite a few other repair marks, which suggests that the clock has had a long working life.

As I have said, information on the Russian clock and watch making industry is hard to find or, to be more accurate, I found it hard to find. We have become so reliant on the power of the internet, expecting to be able to find information at the very top of our search lists, that most of us are quite incapable, or perhaps impatient, of searching subsequent



Figure 4.

pages of information to find what we seek. Spoiler alert: some sweeping statements to follow. Some of us in the UK in particular, and perhaps in the USA, are so reliant on published material being in English that we are stumped when searching for information printed in another language. When I was researching information on wooden clocks I was astonished to find a large treasure trove of material written in German which, of course, I could not read. I am sure that good information on Russian horology exists but I am incapable of either finding it, or even if I could find it, being able to read it. The fault is not the lack of information, but my ignorance.

This edition of the Bench View is written for inclusion on the December Edition of the *HJ* and so I would like to wish my reader a happy and productive festive season. Remember, the festive season is a time for getting away from the family and all the over indulgence, appalling television and into the workshop. As people trained in modern customer service (now there is an oxymoron if ever there was one) say far too often, 'enjoy'!

ENDNOTES

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Russians_are_coming, accessed 25/10/17.
2. www.serbia.com, accessed 25/10/17.
3. www.allrus.me/the-state-history-museum/collection, accessed 25/10/17.
4. Karl Kochmann, *Clock and Watch Trademark Index of European Origin*, (Clockworks Pr, 2001) 428–9.
5. George Everett, *Lenzkirch Clocks: The Unsigned Story*, (G.A. Everett, 2006).