

The Story of Raketa Watches: From Peter the Great to the Space Race

<https://oracleoftime.com/raketa-watches-history/>

4 May 2024

4 May 2024

by Sam Kessler

Despite what *The Great* might tell you – it's a fantastic show but it's 'occasionally true' tagline is flattering at best – Peter the Great did a lot to modernise Russia. He brought in countless reforms to transform what was a backwards country compared to the rest of 'enlightened' Europe into a contemporary powerhouse. But it wasn't all about updating laws and promoting science and culture; he also had an eye for trade – which would eventually lead to the creation of Raketa watches.

Part of that of course was making something that could be traded. This was back in the early 1700s, so options were fairly limited. You needed something that took a specialist level of skill and expertise to create. And so, the Imperial Peterhof Factory was established in 1721, a stone workshop dedicated to decorative stone objects – a factory that would help Peter the Great build his shining new stone-built capital of St. Petersburg. Yes, he had a thing for his own name.





Portrait of Peter the Great and the Great Imperial Crown of Russia which used diamonds cut by the Peterhof Factory

Working with hardstone naturally lends itself to gem-cutting and in 1782, the Imperial Peterhof Factory cut the diamonds for the Great Imperial Crown, establishing themselves as one of the most prestigious luxury manufacturers in Europe – precisely what Peter the Great intended. And by the late 1800s, there was one object of value taking the continent by storm: watches.

To get in on the act, the Imperial Peterhof Factory started working with watchmaker Tablerg and, in the first half of the 20th century, specialised in creating precision rubies specifically for horology. During World War II under the Soviet Union, this translated to precision military equipment and, later, the Kremlin-ordered watch brand Pobeda.



Pobeda, the first watch in space

Among the various missions that Pobeda was involved in was Yuri Gagarin's legendary flight as he escaped the Earth's atmosphere aboard the Vostok 1. It was a momentous milestone for not just Russia and the Space Race, but mankind – arguably more-so than the first Lunar landing. Needless to say there was an outpouring of national pride, including the factory behind Pobeda, who were proud enough of the achievement to launch a new brand, Raketa – the Russian word for Rocket.

Over the following decades, Raketa continued producing watches for Soviet endeavours, from polar exploration to the Soviet Olympic Games; enough that you can find their pieces peppering vintage watch shops across the world. They're solidly made pieces that are a world away from your classic Swiss watches. But just like the Peterhof factory before it, Raketa eventually needed to modernise and did so in 2011, producing the first Russian automatic movement of the 21st century in 2014's Raketa-Avtomat, and flexing those newfound muscles in 2015 with the world's largest mechanical watch movement.



Raketa "Sonar" 0317, a submariner's watch

In 2021, Raketa celebrated 300 years of Russian craft heritage since their initial founding by Peter the Great, and they've come a long way. Hell, they've even evolved from the Soviet-era brutalist designs that we've come to expect from Russian watches and these days make everything, from movement to screws, under one roof. Not that they've entirely left their Russian heritage behind, of course.

In fact, the main sources of inspiration for modern-day Raketa are the same heroic endeavours that Raketa of the past would have built watches for: space exploration, underwater engineering, polar expeditions, the lot. And part of that is their signature 24-hour movement, designed to keep time in environments that likely require vitamin D supplements. That's particularly evident in the exceptional Sonar, a watch designed for use aboard submarines, and features a cool mix of blue and red highlights to divide up shifts for the submariners themselves



Raketa "Russian Code" 0302

More recently however, Raketa have entered a new era of watchmaking, one where design is as important as functionality. The "Russian Code" 0302 is a stunner, one that'll have you doing a double-take as it runs counter-clockwise. The idea is to better imitate the movement of the planets around the sun, but combined with the constellation-laden dial and sleek lines, it's a world (or three) away from a tool watch, finished exceptionally right down to the red-ringed second hand.

So, while Raketa draws from a unique combination of centuries-old craftsmanship and Soviet-era utilitarianism, the modern brand is very much its own thing. Still, if you had to define them – something that we're always hesitant to do – it would actually be quite simple: Russian watchmaking at its best.