



# COLD WAR THAW

*If you thought Eastern Bloc classics were unusual in Britain, ask yourself why anyone would want to import them to the USA. Meet the man who does*

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**I**RON CURTAIN cars have rarely gained respect outside the former Eastern Bloc. They were cheap and disposable, case closed. The examples that survived in the clutches of capitalism have only ever been loved by the dedicated few.

But now a new appreciation for these automotive outcasts has sprung up in the most unlikely of places. In the land of burgers and apple pie, you might soon see a ZIL limousine waiting its turn at the local drive-thru. American aficionados of the offbeat have decided to open their hearts and chequebooks to the simple charms of classic Soviet motoring. Gary Shikhman of Brooklyn, New York, is the man behind this Russian revolution.

For the past year, Shikhman – a native of Ukraine and a New York resident for 15 years – has been importing classic Soviet cars and motorcycles for American customers. He relies on his extensive contacts throughout Russia and the Ukraine to locate the vehicles. These contacts are friends who know what to buy and what to avoid. Shikhman has had to steer clear of the customary vehicles with untold repairs hidden beneath a shiny new coat of paint, as well as cars with potentially deadly Iron Curtain quick fixes. For example, when money was tight and brake fluid ran dry, many Russians filled their cars' braking systems with wine. It's something that the average enthusiast would never think to check.

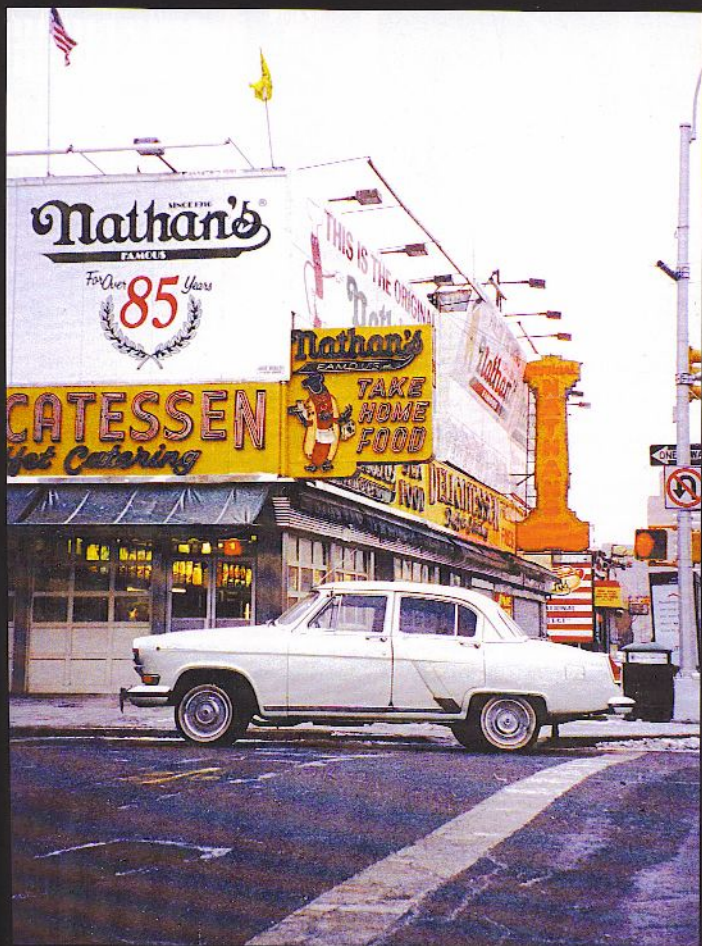
It's been barely three years since Shikhman reacquired himself with Soviet-era autos. Since coming to America

at the age of 18 he'd longed for the vehicles of his childhood. When he happened upon a 1953 Moskvitch 401 for sale in Ohio while browsing the internet, Shikhman couldn't believe his luck. He contacted the seller immediately. Yes, the car was still for sale. No, it wasn't quite roadworthy. The seller promised that the car was in solid condition and would need only minor tinkering to get it up and running. With the deal done, Shikhman convinced his father to accompany him to pick the car up with the intention of driving it back to Brooklyn.

Unfortunately for both of them, a couple of factors worked against the plan of driving the Moskvitch back to New York. Firstly, the car needed a bit more work than the seller had mentioned over the phone. It was obvious that the car would have to be towed. Secondly, had the car been roadworthy it would have been a struggle to drive it home. In his haste to buy the car, Shikhman had forgotten that a 1953 Moskvitch 401 – with its 600cc inline-four – struggles to top 40 mph. Not exactly the ideal American highway cruiser, then.

Shikhman was undeterred and on his return he began to get to know the quirks of Russian cars again. He searched the internet looking for parts and information about his Moskvitch. Few took him seriously. In chat groups he was chided for wanting to restore a car that many thought he had no way of fixing.

'They would call me an idiot,' laughs Shikhman.



## IRON MONGERING

Gary Shikhman and the 1965 Volga-GAZ 21. Five-bearing 2.5-litre engine was standard, although Perkins or Land-Rover diesel engines were fitted for export



However, his persistence paid off. He found a new set of tyres for \$400. Next, he discovered a mechanic in Pennsylvania who was willing to custom-make various rubber seals and hoses, which had previously proved impossible to find. More good news arrived when a friend of Shikhman's called to say that he had located a Moskvitch 401 brake master cylinder in the Ukraine. Although the cylinder was in perfect condition, it was still attached to a rusted-out heap of a car. Gary bought the car. It was with that purchase that he began to wonder what it would take to import classic Russian autos into the US himself.

Shikhman believes that a classic Soviet car appeals to American buyers looking for something out of the ordinary. 'I'm not selling something that's for everybody', he admits.

However, from the hugely positive reactions we receive during a brief drive around New York's Coney Island theme park and Russian-flavoured Brighton Beach in a 1965 Volga-GAZ 21, it appears that the market is bigger than you might expect. At each stoplight he is inundated with questions ranging from 'What is it?' to 'How'd you get it?' and 'How much?' Each time we stop for a photo, people swarm around the car. I wonder whether a Ferrari Enzo would have caused the commotion that the humble Volga manages to create. I doubt it.

The Volga, used to the Russian climate, seems to be enjoying New York's freezing cold late winter temperature as much as I'm cursing it. Its 2.4-litre four-banger chuggs merrily along while I struggle to get some feeling back into my frozen fingers.

I had expected a crude, lumbering beast of a car. Instead, the Volga reminds me of a mix between a Jeep and a traditional British roadster. The ride and stance are definitely Jeep-ish. The seat is a bit higher than in a regular saloon and the ride is bouncy but generally well controlled. Playing with the manual choke and non-power steering quickly brings my MG Midget to mind. The three-on-the-tree manual column shift is much like you'd find on any classic Yank tank. First is used only from a dead stop and has no synchromesh. Once on the move though, slot the lever into third gear and forget about shifting. The Volga-GAZ 21 is blessed with only 70bhp but has low-end torque aplenty. The gauges may cause a moment of panic for the Cyrillically challenged (myself included). Shikhman assures me that the 'erm' is fine and we have plenty of 'aah' left. Thanks a lot, Gary.

## GAUGES CAUSE PANIC FOR THE CYRILLICALLY CHALLENGED. HE ASSURES ME THAT 'ERM' IS FINE AND WE HAVE PLENTY OF 'AAH' LEFT

Over a lunch of Ukrainian stuffed cabbage, Shikhman explains how the importation process has become easier as his knowledge of the procedure has grown. He has now imported 18 vehicles – impressive results for a man who, as a full-time software designer, imports and sells Russian vehicles simply as a hobby. From locating a vehicle, to having it titled and ready to drive in the States, takes no more than six weeks. Shikhman makes sure that all import duties, taxes and red tape are taken care of on delivery. He also makes a point to import only the best available examples.

Presently, Shikhman has two early Seventies Ladas, a 1965 Volga, a Soviet GAZ 69B military vehicle, two Ural motorcycles and a pint-sized Zaporozhets (ZAZ) for sale. Unlike his own classic, these vehicles are well up to the task of everyday city and highway driving. Gary will also gladly take a custom order from a serious buyer. 'I can find any car, any make, and any model,' he claims.

Still wary about trading-in the dull but trusty family sedan for a Pobeda, Chaika, or ZIL? Apart from the attention you'll attract, an advantage of owning a Soviet classic is the low cost of buying and maintaining it. Even the finest of Gary's cars rarely costs more than \$6000 (£4500) and finding parts is no longer a problem.

Fans of Soviet-era automobiles will argue that Russian cars are long overdue for recognition stateside. Would you be bold enough to say 'nyet' to classic American motoring and get behind the wheel of an Iron Curtain automotive icon?

To find out more about importing a Soviet car into the USA, visit Gary Shikhman's website: [www.sovietcarsinusa.com](http://www.sovietcarsinusa.com)