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THE LIGHT CAR CONTROVERSY

For several years now the Soviet press has been talking intermittently about the new dawn which eventually would bring a people's car within the reach of the masses. Great expectations were aroused by the announcement that a factory had at last been selected to begin production during 1960 of the Zaporozhets, which has a specification strikingly similar to that of the Volkswagen.<sup>1</sup> However hopes began to fall again when it was learnt that output of the baby cars would not reach the level of 100,000 p.a. until almost the end of the seven year plan.

Shortly afterwards there was another disappointment when Khrushchev, who has often admitted that he does not plan to provide private transport for his workers for many years to come, began trying to sell the idea of taxis for everyone.

Radio Moscow (8 October 1959) quotes him as saying in Vladivostok:

"it is not our aim to compete with the Americans in the production of vast numbers of cars. In our country cars will be used more rationally than in America. Taxi pools will be widely developed where people will obtain cars when they need them. Why should one rack one's brains over where to put the car, why be bothered with it?"<sup>2</sup>

However, there are plenty of Soviet citizens who disagree with Khrushchev on this point, and Kommunist (No. 14, 1959) has recently published a letter from one of them in which he persuasively argues the case for the small car. Papkovsky, the author of the letter, is an engineer from Leningrad, and he is mainly concerned with the unfortunate tendency of officials in the automobile industry to concentrate on building light cars "of the highest class." He points out that with the exception of the Moskvich there is no cheap or economical car in production. (Nor is the Moskvich cheap by Western standards, but that is not mentioned in his letter.)

Papkovsky lists the disadvantages of the "highest-class" cars as being: too much cubic capacity (4-6 liters); too much horse-power (150-300 or more); too many expensive and unnecessary

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Radio Moscow, September 18, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> This was a telling question, since there are virtually no private garages in the USSR.

gadgets and ornamentation, and consequently a very irrational use of non-ferrous metals and other materials in short supply; too great weight and excessive cost, both to buy and to operate; and finally poor performance on bad roads.

Papkovsky then goes on to examine the well-known virtues of the small and baby car, pointing out that "even in a country as 'saturated' with automobiles as the USA", the compact car is making headway. Here he sounds just like any salesman for American Motors, although the only compact car he actually names is the Corvair, perhaps because, like the Zaporozhets, it has the engine behind the passengers. In passing he makes a cutting reference to the "top class" Soviet cars, "such as the Zil-111 which has 220 h.p. although the Zil-158 bus, which carries 60 passengers, has only 109 h.p."

A true egalitarian, Papkovsky makes a frontal attack on other forms of conspicuous consumption, such as the electrically operated front seat of the Zil-111, and the electric control of the windows on the Gaz-13 Seagull. As he puts it, they waste material, drive up costs, raise the "dead weight" of the car, and spoil its performance. Then he lectures his readers on the virtues of the Fiat, admitting that in 1956 it was already being made at the rate of up to 1,000 a day, and the Vespa, "of which 4,000,000 had been made by April 1956". Papkovsky clearly must find it hard to believe in the myth of the exploitation of the worker in capitalist countries.

In contrast to Khrushchev, Papkovsky urges that the USSR should exceed the Italian level of automation in the car industry, and points out that this could only be done by eliminating the "top-class" cars, mass production of which is not economically possible.

"It is perfectly obvious", he writes, "that if the resources and material, which for many years have been and still are being expended on 'top class' automobiles, had been used in time to produce technically advanced and economical cars, the national economy would have gained a lot as a result."

This champion of mass transportation defines the main task of the industry today as being to build small cars and baby cars of different types, motor scooters, motor cycles, mopeds and bicycles. He shows no sign of being aware of the high mortality rate associated with motor-cycles and scooters in the West. His final argument is that a sharp reduction in the output of "top-class" cars, which would free resources for the mass production of small cars, would enable the seven-year plan for light automobiles to be fulfilled ahead of schedule.

Although Papkovsky stands little chance of winning official support for his view in the face of Khrushchev's opposition, it is certain that time is on his side. In the face of the rising standard of living in the West, and the increasing embourgeoisement of the USSR, Khrushchev's proposal for massed taxi-ranks is unlikely to satisfy the ambitions of Soviet citizens for long - even if it ever materializes.

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