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SANTA CRUZ

**STORMING FORTRESSES:
A POLITICAL HISTORY OF CHESS IN THE SOVIET UNION, 1917-1948**

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Michael A. Hudson

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The Dissertation of Michael A. Hudson is
approved:

Professor Peter Kenez, chair

Professor Jonathan Beecher

Professor Walter Goldfrank

Tyrus Miller
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

Michael A. Hudson

STORMING FORTRESSES: A POLITICAL HISTORY OF CHESS IN THE SOVIET UNION, 1917-1948

From the end of the Second World War through the demise of USSR, Soviet chess players dominated world chess. Not only did they control the world champion title after 1948 (except for the Fischer interlude), they also monopolized all other areas of international chess competition. When the Soviets captured the world title in 1948, this was the culmination of a long, carefully cultivated program to foster a chess community in the Soviet Union. The rationale for this initiative, which engaged the attention of the highest levels of the Soviet state, had deep ideological roots.

This dissertation explores the social/political history of chess in the Soviet Union, particularly its utility to Party and State. The story of Soviet chess begins in the Civil War, when chess was enlisted as a training tool for military recruits. After the Bolshevik victory, a very similar rationale was used to promote chess as an instrument for training Party cadre in the burgeoning Communist Party. The same attributes desired in soldiers were also desired in Party activists, and chess was seen as a tool for nurturing these attributes.

In the early 1920s, the state-sponsored chess program was greatly enlarged, and at the same time its ideological rationale shifted. Faced with the reality of building socialism in a backward country, the Party believed that chess could be of great utility in raising the cultural level of the laboring masses. A culturally developed

proletariat was one of several prerequisites for socialism that the Soviet Union lacked. Chess became closely tied to the State labor organizations, although officially attached to the government's sport and physical education bureaucracy. Whether chess refashioned Soviet society is debatable, but official encouragement refashioned chess, which became a significant cultural component in the lives of Soviet citizens. Chess achieved a stature in Soviet society that was entirely without precedent.

One outcome of the popularity and status of chess was, by the mid-1930s, the cultivation of a generation of world caliber players. Soviet ability to stand toe-to-toe with the world's best exemplified by the Stalinist slogan, "catch up and overtake." Soviet chess now reinvented itself as a propaganda device for touting the superiority of Soviet culture. The world championship was conquered in 1948, and Soviet domination of world chess was a very important weapon in the cultural front of the Cold War.

Although this concept of three stages—martial emphasis, chess for the workers, and Cold War chess—is a convenient way to divide up the formative period of Soviet chess, the shifting emphases do not supplant their predecessors. Chess continued to be an important part of military culture, while the wide dissemination of chess in Soviet society remained a priority of the Soviet chess organization, even as the top Soviet players dominated international chess. All of these aspects of Soviet chess have outlived the Soviet state, and chess can be seen both as a positive achievement by the Soviet state and as a positive legacy of Soviet rule.

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The staff at the White Collection at the Cleveland Public Library was always helpful, courteous and kind. The director of the St. Petersburg Chess Club, who remembered me from the “old days,” helped me obtain access to private collections in Petersburg, and I am in his debt. Friend of my youth, Sasha K., now an official at the Lenin Library, allowed me to access parts of the collection closed to the public at that time.

On a personal note, I want to thank my wife, Natnicha, and our son, Fluke, who granted me the incredible gift of a year to write this paper. I will make it up to you. I am also very grateful to my sister, Chris, for her herculean efforts in receiving, storing, repacking and shipping my research library. Guess what, Chris, I’m send it some of it back to you! Finally, I dedicate this work to my late mother, Theola Kennicott, a life-long educator who played an enormous role in shaping my intellectual habits. She instilled in me the habit of finishing my work, and that is probably the principal reason I couldn’t rest comfortably until this work was finished.

Introduction

The title of this work, “Storming Fortresses,” comes from a claim made in 1927 by Soviet economist, Stanislav Gustavovich Strumilin (1877-1974), who wrote: “Our task is not to study economics, but to change it. We are bound by no laws. There are no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm.”¹ Strumilin was a powerful influence on Stalin, who used very similar phrases in his speeches and writing.² In each case, the meaning was the same: Bolsheviks could disregard objective material realities and reach their objectives by the application of human will.

Strumilin played a leading role in the Soviet Union’s planned economy in the 1920s. Lenin appointed him to Gosplan, the central economic planning committee, in 1921, and he would later become a leading figure in the development of the first five-year plan.³ Strumilin was a founder of the “teleological” school of planned economics, maintaining that economic planning should be guided by the goals of the state and should not be limited by the possibilities seemingly dictated by material reality. In other words, production goals should serve as the starting point in economic planning. Goals, he believed, should be based on the desired political, economic and social

1. S. Strumilin, “Industrializatsiia SSSR” [Industrialization of the USSR], *Planovoe khoziaistvo* [Planned Economy] 7 (1927), quoted in Robert Vincent Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 349.

2. Robert Vincent Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 349.

3. Vincent Barnett, *The Revolutionary Russian Economy, 1890-1940: Ideas, Debates and Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 2004), 87.

benefits. Once the goals were set, then the necessary means could be developed to reach them.⁴

Strumilin's economics highlighted one of the principal tensions that permeate Marxism: the conflict between determinism and voluntarism. Marx postulated laws of historical development that suggested a kind of economic determinism, where human will seemed largely or even completely irrelevant. And yet, in one of Marx's best known aphorisms, he admonished the crude determinists with his observation: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."⁵ Classical Marxists generally reconciled these divergent strains by arguing that material realities certainly determined what was possible, but, since people created material reality, it was malleable, and the realm of the possible was greatly enlarged.

Leninism, the founding ideology of the Soviet Union, was a variant of Marxism that was based much more on voluntarism than determinism. Lenin took the idea of telescoping history, an idea found in embryonic form in classical Marxism,⁶ and made it the centerpiece of his revolutionary theory. In Leninism, telescoping history meant skipping a stage of historical development—specifically, moving

4. Peter John de la Fosse Wiles, *The Political Economy of Communism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 47.

5. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm> (assessed June 8, 2013).

6. Martin E. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 266.

directly from a bourgeois to a proletarian revolution. When Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917, they were consciously acting outside the laws of economic determinism. Material realities (Russia's relatively low level of industrial development) ruled out a proletarian revolution in the classical Marxist sense. But since material conditions are malleable, Lenin realized that, given the proper historical situation, a vanguard Party, largely through an act of will, could seize power on behalf of the proletariat.

The Bolshevik seizure of power was predicated on the assumption that when Russia, the weakest link in the capitalist chain, succumbed to revolution, other European countries would follow like dominos. This supposition, of course, proved faulty; the expected wave of revolutions failed to materialize, laying bare the flaw in Lenin's telescoped history. The resulting dilemma was resolved by the awkward concept of socialism in one country.

The solution was awkward because the Bolsheviks, by opting to retain power and press ahead, were attempting to build a socialist society on a foundation that had not been properly prepared by mature capitalism. This was contrary to classical Marxism, which postulated the emergence of a socialist society only when capitalism had exhausted its productive potential and become a fetter to production. Therefore, the creation of socialism in Russia was itself an act of human will rather than historical development—an epic example of voluntarism that not just disregarded, but even defied, material realities. The Bolsheviks inverted the historical process, employing forced industrialization to build a developmentally-appropriate economic

foundation under their socialist state. One defining aspect of a proper foundation was a proletariat that had attained the proper level of cultural development and an understanding of its historic mission. Russia lacked such a proletariat.

The subsequent drive to elevate the cultural level of the masses brought chess into the Soviet narrative. Although Marx and Lenin, as well as many of their associates, were skilled and avid chess players, there is no evidence that they viewed chess as much more than an idle and, sometimes, guilty passion. Chess was chosen for the critical task of elevating the cultural level of the proletariat because of its perceived ability to shape the character of its practitioners.

The idea of chess as a character-shaping tool emerged in the Soviet Union during the latter part of the Civil War. A connection was formed between chess and military prowess, and chess was enlisted as part of the training program for military recruits. The initiator of the military chess program and founder of the Soviet chess organization was Bolshevik administrator and chess master, Aleksandr Fedorovich Il'in-Zhenevskii (1894-1941). Appointed Chief Commissar of the *Vsevobuch*, which oversaw military training, Il'in-Zhenevskii used his position to introduce chess into the military training program. He put into practice his theory that skills developed on the chessboard would generalize into life—specifically, developing attributes important for military personnel. He believed that chess nurtured attributes desired in a good soldier: “boldness, inventiveness, will power, and . . . strategic ability.”⁷ In

7. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, trans. Bernard Cafferty (Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986), 22.

1920, as one component of this program, he used the military to organize the first Soviet championship, which would be remembered as one of the oddest tournaments in chess history.

After the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, a very similar rationale was used to promote chess as an instrument for training Party cadre in the burgeoning Communist Party. This was a somewhat less martial version of the same general theme, drawing close parallels between qualities instilled by chess and the characteristics of the ideal Communist. Both the chess player and the Communist needed to be resourceful and inventive, have a feeling for both strategy and tactics, and, especially, possess an iron determination to overcome all obstacles and storm any fortress.

By 1923, the idea of chess as a mold of human material matured into more sophisticated forms, and a struggle for the control of Soviet chess took place. One group, advocates of “apolitical chess,” was based largely in Leningrad and led by pre-revolutionary organizers. The apolitical group would have been happy to have the state’s benign neglect, allowing them to build a chess organization analogous to those found in the West. The other group, centered in Moscow and led by Il’in-Zhenevskii, wanted a state-supported chess organization that played an important political role. Moscow’s political chess won the day, but Il’in-Zhenevskii’s position in the organization was usurped by Nikolai Vasil’evich Krylenko (1885-1938).

Krylenko’s concept of political chess was somewhat different from Il’in-Zhenevskii’s martial ideas. By the mid-1920s there had been a shift in official

ideological rationale for the role of chess—away from an elitist view of chess as a tool to train military officers and Party cadre and toward the idea that chess could serve as a tool to improve the cultural level of the masses. Faced with the reality of building socialism in a relatively backward country, the Party became persuaded that chess could raise the cultural level of the laboring masses. A culturally-developed proletariat was one of several prerequisites for socialism that the Soviet Union lacked. Chess became closely tied to the official labor organizations, although it remained official attached to the government’s sport and physical education bureaucracy. With official encouragement, chess became a significant cultural component in the lives of many Soviet citizens. Chess achieved a stature in Soviet society that was entirely without precedent. The choice of the prominent Bolshevik, Krylenko, to head the government’s Chess Section illustrates the importance now ascribed to chess by the Party. Under Krylenko, Soviet chess became a political weapon, as demonstrated by the slogans adopted by the Chess Section: “Chess is a powerful weapon of intellectual culture!” “Take chess to the workers!” “Chess must become a feature of every [workers’] club and every peasant reading room!”⁸

Beyond its principal task of elevating the cultural level of the people, Krylenko’s chess organization also embraced the goal of producing a cadre of world-class chess master able to hold their own with the world’s best. This enterprise, however, got off to a shaky start when Russia’s two greatest pre-revolutionary talents

8. M. S. Kogan and I. L. Rabinovich, *Istoriia shakhmatnoi igry v Rossii* [History of Chess in Russia] (Leningrad: Rabochee izd-vo “Priboi”, 1927), 41.

both decided to pursue their careers outside the Soviet Union. Undeterred, Krylenko worked to nurture a new generation of truly Soviet chess masters that would showcase Soviet culture. These two goals—uplifting the workers and creating an elite cadre of Soviet masters—came into conflict in an unlikely but interesting manner.

The simultaneous pursuit of both goals was Krylenko's motivation for organizing a great chess spectacle: the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925. Most of the world's best players came to Moscow in November to compete. At home, the tournament generated enormous interest and helped launch the huge propaganda effort on behalf of mass chess.

In addition, a remarkable, state-sponsored psychological study conducted during the tournament reached two very pivotal conclusions. First, it confirmed the dialectical nature of chess, giving it the critical stamp of ideological approval. Second, the study found that skills developed in chess would generalize to other activities, raising the overall cultural and intellectual level of the player. The assumptions that underlay political chess now had ideological and psychological authority.

Unfortunately, Krylenko's 1925 spectacle complicated relations between Soviet chess and the international workers' chess movement, based primarily in Germany. Workers' chess organizations in central and eastern Europe were loosely organized into a Workers' Chess International (*Shakhintern*). The Soviets joined the organization in 1926, but the relationship was troubled from the beginning. The Germans, who effectively controlled the Chess International, did not allow any contact between their affiliated clubs and any aspect of bourgeois chess. Krylenko,

however, maintained the Soviets could not afford the luxury of such ideological purity. Chess served an important political function, and it made use of bourgeois specialists in a manner analogous to Soviet technology.

This dispute between the Soviets and the *Shakhintern*, framed by the animosity between Communists and Social-Democrats, grew increasingly bitter in the latter 1920s. By the early 1930s, an open rupture between the factions largely destroyed the international workers' chess movement.

After the international tournament, Moscow 1925, the Soviet chess organization, partly in response to German criticism, backed away from hosting tournaments and allowing Soviet players to participate in bourgeois competitions abroad. Krylenko turned his attention to implementing chess's domestic political program, which saw the penetration of chess into all corners of Soviet life. The emphasis was on the workers, and this was where the political chess made its most significant inroads. But there were also important initiatives in the military, the schools and among the peasants.

In the 1930s, with the emergence of world-class Soviet players, the focus began to shift back to international competition, which had been largely abandoned since 1926. A select few Soviet players were allowed to play in tournaments abroad, and international chess tournaments returned to Moscow in 1935 and 1936. When the new Soviet star, Mikhail Moiseyevich Botvinnik (1911-1995), scored a ground-

breaking victory in Nottingham, England in 1936, *Pravda* called the Soviet Union, “the classical land of chess.”⁹

The 1930s were also, however, a time of enormous strife and uncertainty at home. Having wedded itself to the state, Soviet chess paid a heavy price when the politics of the state become twisted and bizarre. The Soviet chess organization did not escape the Great Terror. Many in Soviet chess were purged for the largely imaginary crime of “formalism”—indulging in chess for its own sake rather than for political ends. Krylenko himself became a victim of the Terror in 1938.

When the Germans attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, all of the country’s resources were poured into the war effort. In total war, even chess had a role to play. Even so, the country’s human chess resources were consciously shepherded for anticipated postwar cultural battles.

After the war, the Soviets returned to the quest temporarily abandoned during the war—the quest for a Soviet world chess champion. Botvinnik won the world crown in 1948, and the Soviets began an era of hegemony in world chess. The last fortress had been stormed. But even with the new emphasis on international competition, the original plan for uplifting the masses was never abandoned. Chess, as a tool for the cultural elevation of the masses, continued to play a role in Soviet culture.

While the history of Soviet chess itself is a relatively neglected area, there are virtually no scholarly examinations of the state's use of chess as a tool for lifting up

9. “Shakhmatisty nashei strany” [The Chess Players of our Homeland], *Pravda*, August 29, 1936.

the masses. Except for David Richards's *Soviet Chess: Chess and Communism in the USSR* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), there are no scholarly works on Soviet chess in English. Even Richards' book (written when Soviet archives were inaccessible) was not based on archival research. There have also been numerous memoirs published since 1965 that allow a fuller picture of these events. Richards' work was general, covering many subjects but lacking detail on some individual issues. For example, Richards gave Soviet relations with the international workers' chess movement a paragraph. In this work, the subject has a chapter.

There are also a number of popular works in English, German and Russian purporting to detail the history of Soviet chess, but they are primarily game collections, geared toward serious chess players, not academics. One of the best popular histories is Andy Soltis's *Soviet Chess, 1917-1919* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2000), which features a wonderful game collection, but the historical sections are anecdotal, unverified, and sometimes misleading or wrong. A more recent work, Daniel Johnson's *White King and Red Queen: How the Cold War was Fought on the Chessboard* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) is primarily concerned with the postwar period of Soviet hegemony in world chess.

My work is intended to fill the gap by providing a detailed history of the earliest period of Soviet chess—from the Revolution through the conquest of the world title in 1948. This was the formative period of Soviet chess, which saw chess utilized as a tool for social engineering. Special emphasis is placed on the rationale and motivation of the leadership, the methods by which the campaign was conducted, and

the manner chess was actually used in the factories, the collective farms, and the military. This was also the period that saw the gradual shift in emphasis from a domestic to an international focus, which, in turn, helps set the stage for works like Johnson's study of Cold War chess.

On the issue of transliterating Russian works and names, this work uses the United States Library of Congress transliteration system. The Library of Congress system, with its consistent correspondence between Russian and Latin characters, allows words to be easily converted back into Cyrillic. I also decided to use the Library of Congress system uniformly—not deviating in the case of some arbitrary names and terms. I hope no confusion is caused by my use of, for example, “Gorkii” as opposed to the conventional “Gorky.”

Chapter One

Chess in Pre-revolutionary Russia

The game of chess is generally believed to have originated in India in the sixth century. This was the conclusion of the great chess historian, H. J. R. Murray (1868-1955), more than a century ago, and there are still no serious, evidence-based challenges to his view. Murray's conclusion was partially conjectural, based on extrapolation from the earliest reference to chess in Sanskrit literature, which occurs in a prose romance in the early seventh century.¹ There are many similar allusions to chess in the literature over the next several centuries, steadily increasing in both frequency and geographic range.² Although the references are largely metaphorical, they do establish the game's existence and suggest something about its cultural appeal and geographic spread. They also allow some further generalizations about Indian chess to be made.

First, Indian chess had an obvious military character, and it was closely linked with military prowess.³ The pieces (shape, name and movement) and their arrangement on the board clearly represented military organization: "In the Indian game, the king commanded four branches of the military: foot soldiers, cavalry, war

1. H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (1913; repr., Northampton, MA: Benjamin Press, 1986), 51.

2. *Ibid.*, 52-53.

3. Harry Golombek, *A History of Chess* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 19.

elephants and battle wagons.”⁴ In addition, Indian literary references to chess usually occurred in martial context.⁵

Second, it is also almost certainly true that Indian chess was much slower-paced than modern chess (slower in the sense that, on average, a game required considerably more moves to reach a conclusion.) The pieces were less powerful than their modern counterparts; their movements were more circumscribed and restricted.⁶

From its origins in India, chess spread along trade routes, which moved in two general directions. Chess spread to the east, eventually reaching China, Korea and Japan, where it evolved and thrived. Chess also moved west, first taking root in Persia. The western branch is the primary concern here, and in Persia, chess was adopted widely and quickly. By the middle of the seventh century, the frequency and type of literary references indicate that it had become a kind of national game.⁷

Chess diffused from Persia into the Byzantine Empire, but here it was less welcome. Its infidel origins and its association with gambling and drinking earned it the enmity of the theocratic state.⁸ In contrast to the poetic references in India and Persia, many of the Byzantine literary sources came from Church admonishments and prohibitions of chess. For example, an influential eleventh century monk, John

4. Joachim Petzold, “Tezisy ob istorii shakhmat” [Theses on the History of Chess], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, March 1988, 12.

5. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 54.

6. Golombek, *A History of Chess*, 19-20.

7. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 155.

8. Golombek, *A History of Chess*, 24.

Zonares, composed a commentary on the Orthodox canons, which included the following rule: “Because there are some of the Bishops and clergy who depart from virtue and play chess or dice or drink to excess, the Rule commands that such shall cease to do so or be excluded; . . . and if laymen be given to chess playing and drunkenness they shall be excluded. . . .”⁹ In spite of clerical hostility, chess (*zatrikian*) was played, but it didn’t thrive in Byzantium as it did in Persia. Russian chess historian, I. M. Linder (1920-), said it this way: “Chess in Byzantium reminds one of a flower planted in poor soil that withered before flowering.”¹⁰ The hostility that chess aroused in Constantinople would later have a strong echo in Russia.

In addition to bringing chess to Byzantium, Persia was also the source of chess in Islamic civilization, which came with the Arab conquest of the Persian Empire in the mid-seventh century. As in Byzantium, chess in Islam had an ambiguous relationship with the religious-political authorities. In the Islamic world, the status of chess was ambiguous. Although there were certainly potential objections to chess, Mohammed had made no pronouncements about it, and the lack of an official statement from the Prophet left chess in a religious gray area.¹¹

The status of chess in the Islamic world was further complicated by the Sunni–Shia schism. Both factions were ambivalent about chess, but for different

9. John Zonares, *Kormchai*, quoted in Murray, *A History of Chess*, 167.

10. Isaak Maksovich Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, trans. Martin P. Rice (Zürich: M. Kühnle, 1979), 86.

11. Golombek, *A History of Chess*, 31.

reasons. Simply put, the former objected to the idol-like chess pieces; the latter associated chess with gambling, which was forbidden.¹² Neither objection, however, amounted to a prohibition, and both were open to dispute. Highly abstract designs for pieces addressed the issue of idolatry. The gambling prohibition was challenged with the argument that chess is a game of pure prowess, not luck. Although intermittently out of favor, chess generally flourished in the Arab/Islamic world. The first known “blindfold” play (play without sight of board and pieces) took place in the Islamic Empire in the eighth century, as did the first recorded tournaments. The art of chess problem composition was perfected, and the first chess book was published c. 850.¹³ The Islamic world became a great center of chess distribution, introducing the game over vast areas through conquest and trade.¹⁴

Russia was one of the recipients of Islamic chess. The source of Russian chess was once a matter of controversy, but extensive Soviet linguistic and archaeological investigations have replaced conjecture with convincing evidence. Chess entered Russia along trade routes linking Kievan Russia and the Bagdad Caliphate during ninth and tenth centuries.¹⁵

12. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 187-188.

13. Jerzy Gizycki, *A History of Chess*, trans. A. Wojciechowski (London: Abbey Library, 1972), 14.

14. Raymond D. Keene, *Chess: An Illustrated History* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1990), 16.

15. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 44.

Once introduced, chess spread rapidly in Kievan Russia. Plentiful literary evidence can be found in the *byliny* (heroic romances and epics) of Kievan Russia. *Byliny* from the tenth through twelfth centuries were especially rich in chess references. Chess is portrayed as an integral component in the arsenal of martial attributes essential for the typical Kievan hero.¹⁶ For example, Dobrynya Nikitich, a heroic dragon-slayer who appeared in a number of *bylini*, was depicted as “a musician and chess player, an archer and wrestler.”¹⁷

The extent of chess dissemination in Kievan Russia suggested by the *byliny* was confirmed by Soviet-era archaeology. Chess pieces have been found throughout Kievan Russia in dozens of sites.¹⁸ Literature and archaeology together provide strong evidence that chess was widespread and popular in Kievan Russia.

After the Kievan adoption of Christianity at the end of the tenth century, however, the virtues of chess were no longer universally appreciated. The Russian Church’s hostility to chess was part of the Byzantine religious and cultural inheritance. Once established, clerical hostility in Russia was sustained by the association of chess with the pagan past.¹⁹ Even so, the persecution of chess was never sustained or systematic outside of the Church itself. In fact, chess in Kievan

16. D. Konstan and K. A. Raaflaub, *Epic and History* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 231-233.

17. James Bailey and T. G. Ivanova, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 81.

18. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 62.

19. *Ibid.*, 87.

Russia survived and even thrived in the face of Church hostility. But in 1240, Kiev itself succumbed to the Mongol onslaught.

The Mongol domination undoubtedly had an enormous impact on Russia's subsequent political/geographic development. But the extent to which Russian culture was shaped by the Tatars has been questioned. Some have argued that Russian culture was little influenced by the conquerors.²⁰ Pushkin famously maintained: "The Tatars were not like the Moors. Having conquered Russia, they brought her no gift, neither algebra nor Aristotle."²¹

Nor did the Mongols bring the gift of chess to Russia, but not because they didn't have it to give. The Mongols were skilled and enthusiastic chess players; their ability was legendary. In fact, a Mongol origin for Russian chess once assumed but later debunked by linguistic studies.²² Mongol chess was obviously very different from Russian chess in both rules and nomenclature; the two chess variants derived from different parentage. Mongol chess had its origins on the eastern side of the initial split in India, mentioned above.²³ Russian chess, on the other hand, traced its

20. This, in part, is the argument of Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

21. Tatiana Wolff, ed., *Pushkin on Literature*, trans. Tatiana Wolff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 352.

22. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 88-89.

23. *Ibid.*

parentage from the western side of the split—back to India via the Arabs and the Persians.

Russian chess largely escaped Mongol influence during the two hundred years of domination. The Mongols stayed on the southern steppe, while the Russia essentially relocated to the forested north. The resulting “ethno-religious frontier”²⁴ was somewhat more of a barrier than the other frontiers of this kind. The geographic divide limited exchanges, making this frontier less culturally porous.

The stability of Russian chess through the period of the “golden yoke” supports the theory of minimal cultural exchange with the Mongols. Chess in Russia did not change during the centuries of Mongol control. Nomenclature remained constant; no Mongol-inspired rules or figure designs were introduced.²⁵ On the other hand, Mongol chess certainly influenced or supplanted indigenous chess in the lands actually occupied by the Tatars.²⁶ Mongol chess, including a four-handed variant, was sometimes played in the boyhood home of Lenin, and it persisted until at least 1945 in the area around Lake Baikal.²⁷ But Moscow and other principalities of the North, largely free of an actual Mongol presence, retained chess in its original, pre-Mongol form.

24. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 1.

25. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 89.

26. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 379.

27. “19th Ulan-Ude Championship,” *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, June 1944, 24.

Moscovy emerged from Mongol domination in the fifteenth century with its chess culture intact and its fortunes closely linked to the Church. Chess and Church, however, remained estranged. Clerical hostility flared up again in the middle of the sixteenth century. The archpriest Silvester in his household manual, *Domostroi* (c. 1549), was clear in his denunciation of chess. In a chapter titled, “How to Express Gratitude to God while Entertaining Guests,” he called chess “the devil’s game” and placed it prominently among dinner table activities that outraged God and delighted Satan.²⁸ In another chapter called “On the Unrighteous Life,” Silvester stated that chess was incompatible with Christianity.²⁹ The archpriest Silvester was influential; he was an advisor to Ivan IV (the Terrible) (1530-1584), and the Church was able to enlist state support in its anti-chess campaign. In 1551, Ivan, probably at Church instigation, banned chess from his realm. This seems to have been entirely *pro forma*, however. Ivan himself was reputed to be a keen player, and chess continued to be a popular pastime at court. According to tradition, Ivan died during a game.³⁰ In any case, no concerted, systematic effort was made to enforce the ban.

28. Carolyn Pouncy, ed., *The “Domostroi”: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, trans. Carolyn Pouncy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 77.

29. *Ibid.*, 120.

30. Nikolai Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, trans. Theodore Reich (New York: Capricorn Books, 1949), 2.

In the early Romanov dynasty, chess achieved a place of honor at the royal court. The Russia chess historian, Linder, used the term “chess cult”³¹ to describe the passion for the game at the court of Aleksei Mikhailovich (r.1645-1676). Chess was Aleksei’s favorite pastime, and chess prowess became a very useful social attribute in elite society.³² At court, beautiful chess sets were exchanged on special occasions and also served as diplomatic gifts.³³ The demand was so high that specialized chess craftsmen (*shakhmatniki*) were employed in the royal armory to manufacture artistic chess sets.³⁴

Travel accounts provide evidence for the popularity of chess inside and outside the royal court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Jacob Reutenfels, a Vatican envoy who visited Moscow in the early 1670s, made this revealing observation about the pastimes of the royal children: “The Russians do not at all permit dancing, fist fights, and other noble exercises that are widespread among us. They play so-called chess, the famous Persian game, a truly royal game by its name and nature; they play daily, and they develop their intellect with it to a surprising degree.”³⁵ Travel accounts praise the skill of Russian players and indicate that chess was a commonly played game. For example, when the English poet George

31. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 127.

32. Ibid.

33. Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, 2.

34. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 129.

35. Jacob Reutenfels, *De rebus Moscoviticis* [About the Situation in Moscow] (1680), 149, quoted in Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 127.

Turberville (1540-1597) described his visit to the court of Ivan the Terrible, he wrote of the popularity of chess and the skill of Russian players.³⁶ Another example comes from a 1616 chess manual by the German Duke, Augustus of Brunswick-Lüneburg (1579-1666), writing as Gustavus Selenus, who praised the chess prowess of Muscovites, claiming that their skill and diligence was so great that other nations could not compete with them.³⁷ These accounts also suggest that chess was not confined to court; it also became especially popular among Russian merchants. The great commercial fairs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were centers of both trade and chess competition.³⁸

The chess described in these accounts, the chess played in pre-Petrine Russia, was not the modern game. Modern chess evolved in Western Europe between 1350 and 1450.³⁹ Before the advent of modern chess, the European and Russian games were similar. Both derived from a common parentage; European chess, like Russian chess, was adopted from the Islamic world. Chess entered Europe via Italy (through trade) and Spain (via Moorish conquest) between the ninth and eleventh centuries.⁴⁰ It became popular among aristocrats and royalty: the game of knights and kings. The

36. Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, 2.

37. Gustavus Selenus, *Das Schach–Oder Königsspiel* [Chess or the Game of Kings] (Wolfenbüttel: 1616), quoted in A. Kotov and M. M. Iudovich, *Sovetskaia shakhmatnaia shkola* [The Soviet School of Chess], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1955), 5.

38. Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, 2.

39. Gizycki, *A History of Chess*, 67.

40. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 402.

association with the martial culture of the time was undoubtedly an important part of its rapid acceptance. Elite interest in chess grew rapidly during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. During this period, chess took its modern form.⁴¹ Beginning in Italy, European chess underwent a radical transformation. The relatively slow, ponderous Arabic game developed into a faster, more dynamic game—the game as it is played today. The reasons for this extremely dramatic and relatively sudden change are open to discussion.

One explanation readily suggests itself: a direct link between the advent of modern chess and the Renaissance. There is almost certainly a connection, but the revolution in chess might be better understood as taking place in the context of an overarching Renaissance dynamic. Some of the same factors credited with bringing about the Renaissance—the quickening of economic life in Italian commercial cities and the concurrent changes in the understanding of space, time and perspective—probably also influenced chess evolution.

Another, somewhat more grounded, explanation is based on the association of chess with martial affairs. Advances in military technology, especially artillery, radically changed the nature of war in Renaissance Europe. Many chess historians portray the radical changes in chess as mirroring warfare's rapid development.

Certainly the increased range and firepower of the queen and the other long-range

41. Helena M. Gamer, "The Earliest Evidence of Chess in Western Literature: The Einsiedeln Verses," *Speculum* 29, no. 4 (1954): 734.

pieces could be seen as reflecting contemporary advances in artillery.⁴² Interestingly, prominent Polish chess player and author, Karol Irzykowski (1873-1944), described the Renaissance modifications as having had an explosive effect on chess comparable to invention of gunpowder on human history.⁴³

Irzykowski's characterization was correct: the new rules radically changed the nature of the game. Pawns, bishops, and, especially, the queen received greatly enhanced powers. Pawns were granted a two-square option on their initial move, and then, as a corrective adjustment, the *en passant* capture (which has bedeviled beginners ever since). Bishops, too, took on enhanced powers. They now controlled diagonals across the entire board, not just a few squares. The queen, a feeble piece in the old game, was endowed with mighty powers: the moves of rook and bishop. All manner of fast, long-range assaults were now possible. In addition, the empowerment of the queen indirectly, but significantly, enhanced pawn power. Pawns had always enjoyed the power of promotion, but now they could be promoted to a powerful queen was usually decisive. Finally, the castling maneuver was invented. Castling allowed a player to quickly shunt the king away from the center. It also facilitated rapid deployment of the rooks.

These innovations had the net effect of speeding chess up—making it more exciting and less forgiving. Under the new rules, even serious games might be played in an hour or two; it was no longer necessary to commit the better part of a day. The

42. Keene, *Chess: An Illustrated History*, 24.

43. Gizycki, *A History of Chess*, 67.

new chess was rapidly and widely accepted, and literary evidence indicates that the Renaissance rules quickly became more-or-less standardized throughout Western and then Central Europe.⁴⁴

Russia, however, did not share in these developments; Russian chess remained close to its original form. The subsequent divide that grew up between chess in Europe and Russia is both indicative and illustrative of Russia's estrangement from the West, especially during Mongol domination. The divide would not close until the westernizing crusade of Peter the Great (r.1682-1725).

Peter was a passionate chess player throughout his life. Among his personal effects still displayed at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg is a portable leather chess board, designed for travel and apparently well used. True to his reputation as a hands-on tsar, he fashioned his own pieces, turning them on a lathe. Peter also strongly encouraged chess in his family and, especially, his court.⁴⁵ But Peter's most important contribution to Russian chess was its westernization. The new chess was among the innovations Peter imposed upon Russia, and he insisted on its adoption at court.⁴⁶ At the Petrine Assemblies, the obligatory aristocratic gatherings mandated by Peter, a

44. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 789.

45. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 154.

46. H. J. R. Murray, "On the History of Chess in the Russian Empire," *The British Chess Magazine*, February 1907, 52.

great deal of chess was played, and Peter insisted that his nobles play the western game.⁴⁷

Western chess was not, however, immediately embraced outside of Peter's immediate influence. Like many of Peter's reforms, the new chess took root in the newly-westernized aristocracy, but the masses of the Russian people were not exposed to it. Soviet writers described this as a chess schism, separating the chess of the aristocracy from the chess of the rest of the people.⁴⁸ In spite of slow progress in reaching the masses, the official Russian adoption of the new chess, now the standard in Europe, allowed Russia to participate in Europe's rich chess culture, which included a rapidly developing chess literature.

The first chess book printed in Russia (St. Petersburg 1791) was a translation of Benjamin Franklin's *The Morals of Chess*. Interestingly, Franklin's short book was not a typical chess book; it was neither a manual of play nor a game collection. Instead, it was an extended essay, extolling the character-shaping attributes of chess. Franklin anticipated the Bolshevik position on the utility of chess when he wrote: "The game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement. Several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired or strengthened by

47. Linder, *Chess in Old Russia*, 154-155.

48. Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, 3.

it, so as to become habits, ready on all occasions.”⁴⁹ These qualities of mind, according to Franklin, included foresight, circumspection, caution, and optimism.

More than thirty years after Franklin’s book, the first important chess book written in Russia was published. In 1824, Aleksandr Dmitrievich Petrov (1794-1867) released a general manual: *The Game of Chess*.⁵⁰ Petrov is generally considered the first Russian master and the first Russian player to become known, if only by reputation, in Europe. Today his name is associated with a popular, aggressive opening system for Black, which he investigated and popularized. His true strength is difficult to gauge. Few of his game scores exist, and he never competed in European. He was invited to the historic London 1851 tournament (considered the first international chess tournament), but he could not accept.⁵¹

Another Russian player, Major C. F. Jaenisch (1813-1872) accepted the invitation to play in London in 1851, but he had travel difficulties and arrived too late. Jaenisch authored a two-volume work on opening theory in 1843, the second important work by a Russian player.⁵² Although it was published in St. Petersburg, it

49. Ralph Hagedorn and Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin and Chess in Early America: A Review of the Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958), 5.

50. I. M. Linder, *A. D. Petrov, pervyi Russkii shakhmatnyi master* [A. D. Petrov, the First Russian Chess Master] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1955), 110.

51. *Ibid.*, 139.

52. Kotov and Iudovich, *Sovetskaia shakhmatnaia shkola*, 10.

was printed in French.⁵³ His intended audience was the French-speaking Russian aristocracy, which was further evidence of the continuing class-based nature of chess in the nineteenth century.

The first Russian chess master to make a reputation outside of Russia was Michael Ivanovich Chigorin (1850-1908). In addition to his world-class play, Chigorin was also the great propagandist of chess in Russia. He founded a club in St. Petersburg, and he struggled mightily, but not altogether successfully, to organize an All-Russian Chess Association. He also published a chess magazine, “*Shakhmatnyi listok*” (“*Chess Page*”), intermittently from 1876 to 1881.⁵⁴ The name, *Shakhmatnyi listok*, self-consciously established a link with Russia’s first chess magazine, published briefly in the late 1850s under the same name.⁵⁵ Later, in the 1920s, the Soviets would again breathe life into the name.

Probably every serious chess student has played through the games of Chigorin’s unsuccessful matches against the world champion, Wilhelm Steinitz (1836-1900). These games are discussed and analyzed in countless texts. But there is an interesting difference between the way they were portrayed in the West and East. Western chess books have generally cast Chigorin as representing the old, outmoded, romantic school, and Steinitz as the founder of the modern, scientific school. In

53. C. F. Jaenisch, *Analyse nouvelle des ouvertures du jeu des échecs* [New Analysis of the Chess Openings] (St. Petersburg: Gärtner Press, 1843), i-ii.

54. Kotov and Iudovich, *Sovetskaia shakhmatnaia shkola*, 14-15.

55. Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, 11.

Soviet Russia, however, Chigorin would be portrayed as the upholder of creative thinking, launching a revolution against the dogmatic laws that characterized the scientific Steinitz school.⁵⁶ This West-East split on Chigorin as either reactionary or revolutionary came when he was apotheosized as the founder of the “Russian school of chess.” He became a patriarchal figure for Soviet chess. His games were said to epitomize the creative imagination and freedom from dogma, attributes that would later be claimed by the “Soviet school of chess.”⁵⁷

While interpretation of his style is open to debate, his contribution to Russian chess is undeniable. Chigorin’s efforts gained a strong foothold for chess, especially in St. Petersburg. Largely as a consequence of Chigorin’s work, by the turn of the century, Russian masters were longer a novelty in international tournaments. In the early twentieth century, Russian chess was mature enough to hold its own international tournaments. Two historically important tournaments, appropriately dedicated to Chigorin’s memory, were organized in the early nineteenth century: St. Petersburg 1909 and 1914.

St. Petersburg 1909 marked Russia’s coming of age in the chess world. The world’s elite competed: ten foreign masters and ten Russians.⁵⁸ The top prizes were carried off by world champion Emanuel Lasker and the other foreigners, but the

56. Kotov and Iudovich, *Sovetskaia shakhmatnaia shkola*, 16-17.

57. Grekov, *Soviet Chess*, 12.

58. Emanuel Lasker, *The International Chess Congress, St. Petersburg, 1909* (New York: Press of E. Lasker, 1910), vi.

future still looked bright for Russian chess. An “All-Russian Minor Tournament,” held simultaneously with the international tournament, was won decisively by a Russian schoolboy named Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Alekhin (1892-1946), who will figure prominently in this story.

The Imperial State was closely involved in the tournament. The organizing committee for the event was chaired by Peter Petrovich Saburov (1880-1932), a prominent diplomat from a family closely connected with the diplomatic service. Tsar Nicholas II donated one thousand rubles to the prize fund for the main tournament, and to the All-Russian Minor Tournament prize fund he contributed a “magnificent vase of Imperial porcelain manufacture.”⁵⁹ The balance of the expenses was met by contributions from wealthy chess patrons.

Five years later, St. Petersburg 1914 was also a very successful tournament. Although international tensions precluded invitations to players residing in Austrian territory, the tournament was still very strong. Lasker took first place as expected, but a young Russian, Alekhin (winner of the 1909 All-Russian Minor Tournament), placed third.

Again Tsar Nicholas subscribed one thousand rubles to the prize fund. In fact, the Tsar took a great deal of interest in the tournament, spoke at the closing dinner, and bestowed the title of “grandmaster” on the top five competitors.⁶⁰ Again the

59. *Ibid.*, xii.

60. Fred Wilson, *A Picture History of Chess* (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), 65.

diplomat, Saburov, played a prominent role in organizing St Petersburg 1914. During the tournament he engaged Lasker in preliminary conversations toward creating an international chess federation. These discussions attracted a great deal of interest, and they were scheduled to continue in August at an international tournament at Mannheim, Germany.⁶¹

In August 1914 many of Russia's top players were competing in the international tournament in Mannheim. In the middle of the tournament, however, the Great War broke out. The Russians, along with other enemy nationals, were interned. The Russian internees included: Alekhin, Efim Dmitrievich Bogoliubov (1889-1952), Fedor Parfenovich Bogatirchuk (1892-1984), Abram Isaakovich Rabinovich (1878-1943), Petr Arsenievich Romanovskii (1892-1964), and Samuil Osipovich Vainshtein (1894-1942).⁶² Each of these players has an important place in this work. The Russian diplomat and organizer, Peter Saburov, was also interned. He had come to Mannheim not to compete, but rather to continue his discussions with the World Champion Lasker about their optimistic plans for a world chess body.

When the tournament was cancelled on August 1 (with Alekhin holding a comfortable lead), the tournament hall was seized by the German military, the tournament director hurried off to join his reserve unit, and the Russians were taken to the local police station. Then they were held briefly at the military prison at

61. Edward Winter, "The Saburovs," <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/saburovs.html> (accessed December 9, 2012).

62. Sergei Soloviov and Evgeny Ermenkov, *Bogoljubow* [Bogoliubov]: *The Fate of a Chess Player* (Sofia: Chess Stars, 2004), 19-20.

Ludwigshafen, where conditions were severe. The detainees were soon transferred to Rastatt prison, where the circumstances improved considerably. At Rastatt, Alekhin shared a large cell with Bogoliubov, Rabinovich and Vainshtein—all very strong players. The internees did not have access to chess sets, but played countless games “blindfold.” Alekhin later claimed that his legendary skill at blindfold chess (play without sight of board and pieces) was developed during his detention at Rastatt.⁶³

Alekhin was released on 14 September. His family, wealthy and influential, may have arranged for a Red Cross medical certificate declaring him unfit for military duty.⁶⁴ He apparently suffered from some sort of heart condition.⁶⁵ His cellmate, Vainshtein later claimed that Alekhin had secured his release by feigning mental illness.⁶⁶ Accounts are confused and contradictory, but after a series of adventures Alekhin returned to Russia where he promptly joined the Russian Army.⁶⁷

63. Aleksandr Alekhin, *Na puti k vysshim shakhmatnym dostizheniiam* [The Road to the Highest Chess Achievement] (Minsk: Polymia, 1982), 17.

64. Boris Evgenievich Maliutin, “Mannheim Turnier” [Mannheim Tournament], *Schweizerische Schachzeitung*, May 1915, 54.

65. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Match Alekhin-Capablanka* [Match Alekhin-Capablanca] (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1927), 21.

66. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 41.

67. Hans Müller and A. Pawelczak, *Schachgenie Aljechin: mensch und werk* [Alekhin Chess Genius: The Man and His Work] (Berlin: Engelhardt, 1974), 13.

Saburov and Bogatirchuk were released later in September.⁶⁸ Romanovskii was freed in 1915, and returned to Petrograd.⁶⁹ The others remained interned for the duration.

At the end of November 1914, the Russians were moved to an internment camp at Triberg. Here conditions were very relaxed and the Russians were reunited with the other interned tournament participants. At Triberg, authorities placed no restriction on chess activities. The Red Cross delivered chess books and equipment. Internees passed the time playing countless matches among themselves and staging a series of monthly tournaments. Bogoliubov, especially, developed into a world class player at Triberg.⁷⁰

68. Soloviov and Ermenkov, *Bogoljubow*, 21.

69. I. Z. Romanov, *Petr Romanovskii* (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1984), 20.

70. William Winter, *Kings of Chess, Chess Champions of the Twentieth Century: Lasker, Capablanca, Euwe, Alekhine and Botvinnik* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 140.

Chapter Two

Karl Marx's Chess Problem

Karl Marx (1818-1883), the ideological father of the Soviet Union, was an avid chess player. In fact, at times he exhibited what would be characterized as an unhealthy obsession with the game. This was especially true in the early 1850s, the first years of London exile, when he would spend entire nights playing one game after another against his fellow German exiles.¹

One of Marx's frequent chess opponents was Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900), his sometimes colleague and comrade. Liebknecht (father of the famous Spartacist, Karl Liebknecht), wrote a revealing, firsthand account of Marx's passion for chess. Liebknecht—himself an interesting example of revolutionary/chess player, of which there are several in this work—was, by his own account, strong enough to have considered a career as a chess professional.² His memories of Marx's chess play are uniquely valuable in constructing the following portrait of Marx as chess player.

Marx's Chess Style

Liebknecht described Marx as a very enthusiastic chess player who “tried to make up what he lacked in science by zeal, impetuosity of attack and surprise.”³

1. Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (New York: Norton, 2000), 123.

2. Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoir*, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1901), 122.

3. *Ibid.*, 119.

This assessment must be viewed with some caution. Liebknecht wrote many years after the events he described, and his sense of chess history was somewhat confused. “Science” was not a word associated with chess until the mid-1870s, when world champion, Wilhelm Steinitz (1836-1900), introduced a novel style of play that he characterized as “scientific.” Steinitz was the pioneer of modern chess—positional, materialistic and scientific.

If Marx had been playing chess in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he might well have adopted a scientific style; most players did. But Marx in the 1850s played in the spirit of the age—and that spirit was infused with romanticism. In chess, romanticism was characterized by speculative material sacrifice, creating opportunities for attack. The point was the relentless pursuit of the beauty created when material was transcended, when the player with less material won the game. To succeed, a romantic player required those attributes that Liebknecht disparagingly attributed to Marx: “zeal, impetuosity of attack and surprise.” Marx’s chess epitomized the romantic style. Beyond his romantic orientation, Marx also had an interesting personal approach to his chess.

Marx’s Chess Personality

Marx was not in any sense a casual player; his games were conducted in earnest, with deadly seriousness. “When Marx was hard pressed,” Liebknecht related, “he lost his temper, and when he lost a game, he was furious.”⁴ Marx’s chess

4. Ibid., 119.

personality was very loud, often disagreeable, and emotionally volatile—happy and companionable when he was winning, obnoxious when he was losing.

Marx's fascination with chess sometimes bordered on obsession. Liebknecht described grueling all-day, all-night marathon sessions in which Marx, losing game after game, insisted on repeatedly testing and refining an opening innovation or a middlegame variation until he was finally able to win.⁵ Only after he had finally won a game would Marx release his exhausted opponent.

Playing strength

Marx's playing strength was, is and must remain a matter of dispute. Liebknecht, who was the stronger player, declared that while Marx was an excellent checkers player, his chess "did not amount to much."⁶ Liebknecht's opinion, while perhaps not entirely objective, was based on his first-hand observation; he contested numerous games with Marx and observed many more games that Marx played. His assessment is the most dependable available. Chess author Gerald Abrahams also addressed the question of Marx's strength, conjecturing that Karl Marx was a very weak chess player.⁷ Abrahams, however, based his assessment on analysis of a single game—that's not Abrahams' fault, there is only one known score of a game played by Marx. Clearly this is too small a sample for a definitive assessment, so unless

5. Ibid., 120-121.

6. Ibid., 118-119.

7. Gerald Abrahams, *Not Only Chess: A Collection of Chessays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), 14.

additional, authentic game scores are discovered, judgments must be considered tentative and speculative. Nevertheless the evidence we do have can be examined.

Marx v. Meyer, 1867

The game in question was a miniature (a game with fewer than thirty moves) played in Germany in late April or early May 1867, more than a decade after obsessive period of chess play described by Liebknecht. The game was took place in Hanover when Marx was there to oversee the publication of his *magnum opus*: the famous *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [Capital: Critique of Political Economy]. The occasion was a party hosted by a world-class chess player, Gustav Neumann (1838-1881).⁸ Marx was not in the habit of keeping a score (writing down the moves) of his games, but another chess player who watched the game kept a record. Marx's opponent was an unknown player identified only as "Meyer." Many facets of this game are noteworthy, but the opening is especially interesting. The full score of this game, along with some analysis, is included in the Appendix.

Marx, playing White, chose to open with the King's Gambit, an aggressive line, in which White offers an early pawn sacrifice in exchange for good attacking chances. Gambits (sacrificing one or more pawns in the opening) were at the heart of romantic play, and the King's Gambit was the gambit of choice for romantic-minded players in the nineteenth century. Meyer accepted the offered pawn; declining a gambit was considered unsporting. The game became infinitely more interesting on

8. Wheen, *Karl Marx*, 389.

move five, when Marx adopted the Muzio variation of the King's Gambit. Having already sacrificed a pawn, in the Muzio White sacrificed a piece, his king's knight, giving up even more material in return for an advantage in space and time—in exchange for attacking opportunities.

Marx's choice of opening system epitomized romantic idealism in chess—sacrificing substantial material in return for less tangible advantages, thus transcending material reality. The transcendental mechanism was the romanticism of the speculative attack. Enormous complications, too intricate to be fully calculated, were introduced, and the players were forced to rely on intuition and employ their imagination.

Commentators, more knowledgeable about chess than Marxism, have been quick to point out the obvious but superficial contradiction: Marx, the scientific materialist, played an opening that defined romanticism in chess. Implied in this observation was the criticism that Marx ought to be playing in a scientific style. There are two major flaws in this analysis.

The first flaw is a logical one: the argument is ahistorical. As pointed out above, the scientific and unapologetically materialistic approach to chess introduced by World Champion Wilhelm Steinitz would not be unveiled until the mid-1870s (and did not really trickle down to the chess masses for at least another decade, probably longer). Marx's romantic chess style was in the spirit of the age. In practice that meant adopting a romantic opening and, in general, taking a romantic, idealistic approach to the game. So chiding Marx for his failure to play scientific chess is a

violation of the iron law of chronology. But the chronological flaw is not the only problem with this assessment; it is also based on an overly mechanistic view of Marxism. Marx's own claim to the contrary notwithstanding, Marxism was not consistently scientific.

As many scholars have pointed out, Marxism contains a strong current of romanticism. Martin Malia made a strong and elegant case for this, calling Marxism "the supreme synthesis of the Enlightenment and the Romantic traditions, a combination of opposites so frequent in early nineteenth-century culture."⁹ Malia found many romantic and idealist elements in Marx's political theory, but most notably (for purposes of this discussion) he located romanticism in the engine of history: the dialectic of the class struggle. Inherent in Marx's dialectic, claimed Malia was an element of "voluntarism," which elevated human will over historical laws. For example, Malia cited a strong component of voluntarism in Marx's writings about Germany, which was relatively backward: economically, socially and politically behind France and Great Britain. Marx, however, postulated that Germany might leapfrog into full modernity.¹⁰ German revolutionaries, properly schooled in scientific socialism, could telescope (collapse) the revolutionary process through an act of

9. Martin E. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 257.

10. *Ibid.*, 264-266.

political will, moving directly into socialism—a process that Leon Trotskii (1879-1940) later termed “permanent revolution.”¹¹

The concept of permanent revolution, haunted by the specter of voluntarism, contributed significantly to a Marxist variant: Leninism. Lenin knew that Russia, according to Marx’s laws of historical development, was not sufficiently advanced to usher in socialism alone. But Lenin convinced his Bolsheviks, that an act of political will could telescope the revolution. Russia could leap from its bourgeois revolution directly to the next stage, socialism. As Malia pointed out, “this dynamic, Romantic element of the Marxist synthesis . . . eventually proved to be the entering wedge for creating the world’s first socialist society.”¹²

Neither Marx nor Lenin explicitly acknowledged the subjective, romantic voluntarism of permanent revolution; the contradictions were smoothed over. Nevertheless, the idea endured. The laws of history, properly understood, could allow revolutionaries to circumvent these historical laws and, through an exercise of political will, telescope history. This concept, that revolutionaries could actively make history (instead of being passively swept along by its inexorable logic), was a romantic element in the Marxist mix.

11. The term is misleading. Permanent revolution is not never-ending revolution, but rather a term describing a process, possible in the flux of a revolutionary situation, where a backward area, like German or perhaps even Russia, could leap from its bourgeois revolution directly to the next stage, socialism.

12. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes*, 264.

So, in the same way that Marx's romanticism added richness and flexibility to a rather rigid social science, Marx's romantic chess style complemented rather than clashed with his historical materialism. Romanticism was tactical—a flexible response to a changing situation. The game of chess, like the physical world, is objective, with a complex set of material rules and contingencies. But through acts of the will, through acts of creative imagination, a skillful player can bend those rules to the advantage of the intrepid. If a player gave up material in the opening, objectively speaking that player should be lost in the endgame. But material advantage does not always reign supreme in chess. As an often-quoted German master observed, “between the opening and the endgame, the gods have placed the middlegame.”¹³

The first thirteen, or so, moves of Marx's game with Meyer conformed to what was already known theory in 1867. The King's Gambit (2. f2-f4), offering a pawn sacrifice, was an old opening dating back, certainly, to the Renaissance, which saw the adoption of the modern rules allowing the option of a two-square initial move for each pawn. The Muzio variation of the King's Gambit (5. 0-0), with it daring knight sacrifice, had been played for generations prior to Marx's game, and the main variations had been worked out long before. So these same twelve initial moves had been played in countless games—worked out by the masters and copied by lesser players. This indicates two important facts. It is certainly significant, first, that Marx and his opponent knew enough opening theory to parrot the “book” lines. Clearly,

13. Siegbert Tarrasch, *The Game of Chess; a Systematic Text-Book for Beginners and More Experienced Players*, trans. George Ernest Smith (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1940), 152.

neither was a “patzer.” Both men were serious chess players who had memorized masterly lines of play. The second significance is that Marx consciously adopted this highly speculative line of play. Nothing in this opening was accidental. Safer lines of play were certainly known and could have been chosen. Marx, playing the white pieces, set the tone for the game, and a romantic/speculative temperament was reflected in Marx’s choice of opening lines.

After move twelve, once they were “out of the book,” the players were thrown onto their own resources. Now Marx pursued his quarry with great energy; he had to. He had sacrificed material, crossed the Rubicon; the game was lost if Meyer successfully defended. So Marx pressed Meyer hard for the next six moves, using multiple threats, direct and veiled, to further disturb the coordination of black’s pieces. The pressure paid off when Meyer stumbled slightly on his eighteenth move (18. Qg4). Meyer erred in trying to formulate an active plan; having chosen the defensive posture, he should have stuck with it.

Marx seized on the inaccuracy with a series sharp sorties against the unfortunate king, un-castled and imperiled. Marx, in turn, stumbled on move twenty (20. Bh5); now the outcome was less clear. Marx continued to press, and Meyer defended. The turning point came on move twenty-two. Marx took time out from his incessant attack to play a subtle consolidating move (22. c2-c3). In the heat of desperate struggle, Marx had the presence of mind to shore up his foundation. Mayer, in his response (22 . . . a5), makes his most critical error. Perhaps unnerved by Marx’s confident twenty-second, perhaps despairing that any move would only speed his

downfall, Meyer played a strategically flawed move and overlooked a plausible defensive option.

Two moves later, Marx stumbled a second time. He missed a probable win on his twenty-fourth move (24. Rf1xf8+). This was Marx's only significant error. Once again, Meyer might prevail. It came down to a question of who would make the last error—common in games played at this level. Meyer settled his own fate, making back-to-back errors on his twenty-fifth (25. . . Ra8-a6) and twenty-sixth (25. . . Qf8-g7), Now Marx's task is much easier. He missed a somewhat more direct win on move twenty-seven (27. Bg4), but the outcome was no longer in doubt, as he found the right move on his twenty-eighth (28. Rf7), which compelled Meyer, who faced imminent checkmate, to concede defeat.

Keeping in mind the cautions appropriate to the limited sample for analysis, what follows is an attempted assessment of Marx's strength. First, there were just too many errors, large and small, to classify either player as master strength—far from it, in fact. Marx seems to fit into the not very clearly defined category of the “strong club player.” He would probably be a category II player under the Soviet system, low class A in the United States. Taking into account Liebkecht's observations on Marx's volatile chess personality, Marx might best be likened to a well-know type of category II player, striving to rise to Class A, but lacking the discipline, steadiness, and emotional detachment required.

Marx's View of Chess

With an analysis of Marx's style and an assessment of his strength as a chess player, it would be useful to know how he viewed the game. Did he find value beyond diversion? Did he appreciate the dialectic essence of the game? Did he see it as an uplifting diversion for proletarians? The answer to each of these questions is "apparently not." An electronic search of Marx's collected works finds no mention of chess. And there is but one, brief, incidental allusion to chess in the writings of Frederick Engels. Discussing Russian foreign policy, Engels criticized David Urquhart for "reduc[ing] all modern history since the French Revolution to a diplomatic game of chess between Russia and Turkey."¹⁴ The use of chess as a metaphor in foreign policy is hardly original, and this mention of chess by Engels is significant only because it stands so utterly alone.

In addition to the absence of chess references in the Marx's works, neither Marx's daughters nor his wife mentioned chess in any of their published correspondence and articles. With the exception, of course, of Wilhelm Liebknecht's account, none of the personal memoirs of Marx's contemporaries discussed his chess playing. The secondary sources that mention chess all use the Liebknecht memoir.

It is extraordinary that chess is not mentioned at all in this corpus. With such a keen interest in chess, surely Marx would have referred to it in his writing, if only

14. Frederick Engels, "Foreign Policy of Russian Tsardom," *Time*, April and May 1890, in "Works of Frederick Engels 1890," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/russian-tsardom/> (accessed June 10, 2013).

metaphorically. Since chess figured so largely in Marx's life in London, so much that it eventually disturbed the household and brought out the wrath of Marx's housekeeper, why doesn't it find its way into the correspondence or memoirs of family members? Chess is not just absent, it is *conspicuously* absent.

Chess may have been the dirty secret in the Marx household—the unmentioned and vaguely shameful vice of the patriarch. The negative evidence (the lack of chess reference) certainly suggests this interpretation. There is also evidence of a more traditional kind supporting the infamy of chess in Marx's inner circle. In the early 1850s, obsessive chess seemed to be taking a toll on Marx's work, his health, and his home life. A sort of “chess intervention” was staged by his wife and their housekeeper. Again, Liebkecht is the source.

In his memoir, Liebkecht recalled an unpleasant incident that culminated in his expulsion from the Marx home. The episode occurred in the early 1850s during the period of loud, continuous chess activity at the Marx house. A grueling chess marathon was being contested between Liebkecht and Marx. After a series of games that lasted all day and well into the night, the two men finally broke off play at Liebkecht's insistence. Marx, who did not like to stop when he was losing, reluctantly agreed, but “grimly demanded revenge for next morning.”¹⁵

When Liebkecht dutifully returned the next morning to face Marx's vengeance, he could sense the tension in the Marx household: “Mrs. Marx was invisible, Lenchen [the housekeeper] did not make an over-friendly face. Before I

15. Liebkecht, *Karl Marx*, 120.

could ask whether anything had happened Marx entered, shook hands, and at once fetched the chess board.”¹⁶

Play commenced; Marx was in a grim humor. Apparently he had not retired when Liebknecht had left the night before. Instead, he had stayed up, working out improvements in his favorite lines of play. He had, in fact, found some new moves, and at first he held the upper hand against his nemesis.

As Marx won, his humor improved, and he ordered his unusually stern housekeeper to bring them lunch. But the players did not take any meal breaks; they only picked at the meat, cheese and bread that the housekeeper grudgingly delivered. As on the previous day, play continued all through the afternoon and far into the night. Liebknecht soon found an antidote to Marx’s innovation, and he began to accumulate his usual victories. As he lost, Marx became increasingly loud and angry. Meanwhile, “Mrs. Marx remained invisible, neither did any one of the children dare to enter—and thus the battle raged.”¹⁷

When play again extended past midnight, Liebknecht was ready to finish. He had won the last two games in a row, and the issue, whatever it might have been, seemed settled. But Marx loudly demanded another game, and the pieces were arranged for yet another contest. At this point, Lenchen, the housekeeper, “the dictator of the house under the supremacy of Mrs. Marx,”¹⁸ finally put her foot down.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 121.

18. Ibid.

In a tone that left no room for misunderstanding, she commanded, “Now you stop!” The tipping point in the Marx household had been reached. A thoroughly chastened Liebkecht left the Marx house and retired to his own lodging. But, the episode didn’t end there.

The next morning, Lenchen visited a very surprised Liebkecht in his rooms, carrying a curt message from Mrs. Marx: no more chess would be tolerated in the Marx household. Jenny Marx, through Lenchen, complained to Liebkecht that whenever her husband lost a game, he was “most disagreeable.”¹⁹ As Liebkecht finally realized, Marx’s obsessive chess playing had become a burden to his hard-pressed family, and “his bad humor had vented itself so severely that Jenny [Marx] lost her patience.”²⁰

Liebkecht, of course, complied with the demand. Marx continued to issue challenges, but, after the incident of the housekeeper, they played no more chess.²¹ In fact the chess circle around Marx broke up after the incident. Perhaps the other chess players were also visited by Lenchen. Or, as Liebkecht explained: “Chess playing . . . was forced to the background in proportion to our regaining regular occupations.”²²

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

Marx clearly continued to play chess after the early 1850s. The game with Meyer, discussed above, was played in 1867, and it is not unreasonable to assume that other games took place. Unfortunately there is no record of any chess activity by Marx after the incident with Liebknecht except the 1867 game with Meyer, and there is no record of any chess after 1867.

The focus in the next chapter shifts to Russia and to yet another revolutionary/chess player, one whose chess playing is much better documented. This chess player is Vladimir Il'ich Ul'ianov (1870-1924), better known as Lenin, who was arguably Marx's greatest disciple.

Chapter Three

Lenin's Game

Many leading Bolsheviks were avid chess players; some were moderately skilled and a few were master strength. The most notable of the chess-playing Bolsheviks was Vladimir Il'ich Ul'ianov (Lenin), the founder and leader of the Bolshevik Party. He played chess through most of his life, sometimes with an intensity that mirrored Marx's obsessive play.

The richest materials for detailing Lenin's chess life come from the personal memoirs of family and associates. Since many of these works were published in the years immediately following his death, the years of Lenin's apotheosis, these sources must be regarded with appropriate caution. However, they do establish that Lenin was a strong, frequent and serious chess player. This is consistent with the view of the old Bolshevik and Lenin's fellow Siberian exile, Panteleimon Nikolaevich Lepeshinskii (1868-1944), who observed that Lenin, like Marx, found in chess an appropriate outlet for his "restless warrior psychology."¹ For the period that begins with his first arrest in 1895, Lenin's letters to relatives provide a more reliable font of information about his chess life, although memoirs continue to be an important source here as well.

1. P. Lepeshinskii, *Vokrug Il'icha: dumy, zametki, vospominaniia* [In Connection with Il'ich: Thoughts, Notes, Memories] (Kharkov: Proletarii, 1925), 68-69.

Vladimir Il'ich² spent his early years in the small southern city of Simbirsk (now Ul'ianovsk), on the Russian steppe. The Ul'ianovs were an educated, moderately wealthy family, and chess was part of their cultural life. The lifelong fascination Vladimir Il'ich had for chess began in his childhood. His father, Il'ia Nikolaevich Ul'ianov (1831–1886), an educator and strong player, believed in the instructional value of chess and taught Vladimir Il'ich and his elder brother, Aleksandr Il'ich Ul'ianov (1866-1887), the moves when they were eight or nine years old.³ Both boys loved to be summoned to their father's study for a chess lesson.⁴ The girls also learned, although they were never as passionate about it as their brothers.⁵ The youngest daughter, Maria Il'ichina Ul'ianov (1878-1937), described how in due time she was also taught the moves like all the other children. Although she played many games with her brother, Vladimir Il'ich, she preferred playing against her father. Her father usually let her take moves back; her brother never allowed it.⁶

The chess usually played in the Ul'ianov household was modern, European chess. But since chess was a family activity, they sometimes liked to play an older,

2. This work uses the name “Vladimir Il'ich” until referring to events after 1901, when the pseudonym “Lenin” was adopted.

3. M. I. Ul'ianova, *Otets Vladimira Il'ich Lenina, Il'ia Nikolaevich Ul'ianov, 1831-1886* [Father of Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, Il'ia Nikolaevich Ul'ianov] (Moscow: Sotsekgiz, 1931), 65.

4. A. I. Ul'ianova, *Detskie i shkol'nye gody Il'icha* [Childhood and School Years of Il'ich] (Moscow: Detskaia lit-ra, 1965), 15.

5. Ibid., 16.

6. Ul'ianova, *Otets Vladimira Il'ich Lenina*, 67.

traditional, four-handed version of chess (played by four players).⁷ This variant was a cultural artifact from the period of Mongol rule. It was not usually seen in the cities or in North, where modern, Western chess reigned, but it survived in some parts of the countryside, particularly in the steppe areas like the Ul'ianov's native Simbirsk. Here the Mongols had once dominated, and one of their legacies was their own peculiar version of chess.⁸

The most enthusiastic chess players among the children were the two elder brothers, Vladimir Il'ich and Aleksandr Il'ich, who competed fiercely in numerous games throughout their childhood. Although neither was able to consistently master the other, both boys were equally frustrated by their inability to defeat their father. One day, however, a chess manual somehow came into their possession. They studied it secretly, conspiratorially, pouring over it by candlelight, gleaning its secrets, and eventually they both began to win a few games against their father. The elder Ul'ianov, however, soon discovered the chess manual, and apparently he, too, had a penchant for stealth. He began to secretly borrow the book for his own study when the boys were out. Vladimir Il'ich once caught him red-handed.⁹

The chess rivalry between the brothers grew even more intense as they grew older. The isolation of provincial life probably fed this obsessive competition. They

7. Ul'ianova, *Detskie i shkol'nye gody Il'icha*, 16.

8. See Chapter One for a discussion of Mongol chess.

9. N. K. Krupskaja, *Vospominaniia o Lenine* [Memories of Lenin] (Moscow: Politicheskoi literatury, 1931), 34.

scrutinized the few chess manuals they could obtain, and they played nearly every day.¹⁰ Vladimir Il'ich also continued to play against his other siblings, the girls and his younger brother Dmitri Il'ich Ul'ianov (1874-1943), but he always gave them odds.¹¹ Sometimes they would object out of pride, but Vladimir insisted. He saw no point to playing games that involved no real contest. According to his younger brother Dmitrii Il'ich, against whom many games at odds were played, Vladimir Il'ich's main interest in chess was the struggle—the search for the best move or finding a win in a seemingly hopeless situation. Winning and losing, Dmitrii Il'ich insisted, mattered little to his brother. He took pleasure in good moves of the opponent, but he also ridiculed weak play. When Dmitri Il'ich lost by a blunder, Vladimir Il'ich taunted him with the observation that he himself had not won the game, but rather Dmitrii Il'ich had lost it. In all games, however, Vladimir Il'ich demanded a strict adherence to the rules, both from himself and his opponents. The same rules that governed serious competition prevailed: “touch-move” (a touched piece must be moved) and absolutely no retracting of moves.¹²

The summer of 1886 saw the zenith of the fraternal chess competition between the elder brothers. This was the first summer after the death of their father the previous January. When Aleksandr Il'ich returned home from his studies in St.

10. Ul'ianova, *Detskie i shkol'nye gody Il'icha*, 16.

11. In chess, a player gives odds by choosing the black pieces (a slight disadvantage) and starting without one or more pieces.

12. Dm. Ul'ianov, “Kak Lenin igral v shakhmaty - I” [How Lenin Played Chess - I], 64. *Shakhmaty i Shashki v Rabochem Klube*, April 15, 1926, 9.

Petersburg, the brothers, now aged sixteen and twenty, played a lengthy match for the unofficial championship of the Ul'ianov family. The youngest brother Dmitri Il'ich remembered that the match dominated the summer, both for the brothers and the rest of the family as well. Aleksandr finally won the match, and he celebrated his victory with a bit of showboating: trying his hand at "blindfold" chess, while simultaneously playing a game of billiards.¹³

Dmitri Il'ich also recalled another, more ominous, event from the match. One evening, he and the other young neighborhood children were playing in the courtyard. Looking up toward the house, they could clearly see the brothers bent over the chess board through a grated window. One young girl remarked that they looked like two old convicts.¹⁴

The girl's offhand comment proved prescient. Aleksandr Il'ich was already deeply involved with student radicalism at Petersburg University, and he would be arrested, tried and executed the following spring (1887) for his role in a plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander III. Naturally, Vladimir Il'ich was deeply affected by the death of his brother. The unfortunate family, which had only recently lost its patriarch, now suffered this second, more tragic loss. The circumstances of his brother's death made Vladimir Il'ich and the rest of the family into social pariahs. Even an old

13. Ibid., 10.

14. Ibid.

schoolmaster, a friend of their father who had stood in as Vladimir Il'ich's chess opponent while his brother was away at school, abruptly stopped visiting.¹⁵

In spite of the family tragedies, Vladimir Il'ich entered Kazan University to study law in August 1887. In Kazan, he resumed his chess activities, adding, in emulation of his late brother, "blindfold" chess to his repertoire, a skill which he honed in his games with his younger brother Dmitrii Il'ich.¹⁶ It was not only in chess that Vladimir Il'ich emulated his brother. He also became immersed in the radical politics of Kazan, which were primarily populist. His brother in law, Mark Timofeevich Elizarov (1863-1919), married to Maria Il'ichina, was very helpful in Vladimir Il'ich's initiation into the secretive world of the radicals. Elizarov, who had also been a friend of Aleksandr Il'ich in his radical Petersburg years, made the necessary introductions.¹⁷

In addition to his radical contacts, Vladimir Il'ich's brother-in-law, Elizarov, also had very impressive chess skills. In fact, Elizarov was probably much stronger than his brother-in-law, although it's not clear if they ever played. At the same time that Elizarov was introducing Vladimir Il'ich to radical Kazan, he also used his chess influence to persuade one of Russia's leading players to conduct a correspondence game (a game played by post) with Vladimir Il'ich—a great honor for the young

15. Krupskaja, *Vospominaniia o Lenine*, 6.

16. Ul'ianov, "Kak Lenin igral v shakhmaty - I," 10.

17. N. Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 62.

student. The opponent was a nearby Samara lawyer, Andrei Nikolaevich Khardin (1842-1910), a player of national stature.¹⁸ Khardin had a distinguished tournament record, was a contender for the national championship, and had beaten some of Russia's best, including the great Chigorin, in a tournament in Petersburg in 1878.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Vladimir Il'ich quickly lost the correspondence game, but he was very impressed with Khardin's play; he had never encountered a player of this caliber. In the spring of 1889 when the Ul'ianovs moved from Kazan to Samara, he was able to meet Khardin in person, and they contested many games at odds.²⁰

The years spent in Samara (1889-1893) were the richest years in Vladimir Il'ich's chess development. In the chess circle that surrounded Khardin, he found many worthy opponents. He played hundreds of informal games and competed in local tournaments, often with good results.²¹ This interaction with Khardin, especially, was instrumental in Vladimir Il'ich's chess development, and it provides a basis for estimating his playing strength. This is important since, surprisingly, no scores of any games played by Lenin survive.²²

18. I. M. Linder, *Pervye Russkie mastera* [The First Russian Chess Masters] (Moscow: Fiskul'tura i sport, 1979), 246.

19. *Ibid.*, 230-234.

20. Ul'ianov, "Kak Lenin igral v shakhmaty - I," 10.

21. Linder, *Pervye Russkie mastera*, 247-248.

22. There is score from a game alleged to have been played between Lenin and Gorkii in 1908, but it is widely considered to be a hoax.

In view of their unequal ability, initially Khardin gave Vladimir Il'ich odds of a knight, and Khardin occasionally lost. By 1893 he gave only odds of “pawn-and-move” but at these odds Khardin always won.²³ The gap between odds of knight and odds of pawn-and-move is the widest in the hierarchy of traditional chess odds, and Vladimir Il'ich's inability to win consistently at knight odds strongly suggests that in 1893, the zenith of his chess, he was not close to master strength. His failure to win any games at pawn-and-move reinforces this assessment. Dmitri Il'ich suggests that, had his brother chosen to make a serious, systematic study of chess literature, he could have made a career as professional.²⁴ This seems dubious. More likely he was closer to a category I player in modern Russia (class A in the United States)—certainly respectable, but far short of mastery.

Vladimir Il'ich, however, had no interest in becoming a chess professional. He always maintained that chess was a game—suitable as a hobby, not as a vocation.²⁵ It was also, apparently, a very effective professional networking tool. After completing his law degree, he was offered a much coveted position as an “assistant barrister” in Khardin's law office, which seemed to have functioned as a kind of internship.²⁶

23. Ul'ianov, “Kak Lenin igral v shakhmaty - I,” 10.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Isaak Borisovich Sternik, *V. I. Lenin, iurist: iuridicheskaiia deiatel'nost' V. I. Ul'ianova (Lenina)* [V. I. Lenin, Lawyer: Legal Activities of V. I. Ul'ianov (Lenin)] (Tashkent: Izd. Uzbekistan, 1969), 74.

In addition to witnessing the launching of a professional career and his maturation as a chess player, the Samara years saw the transformation of Vladimir Il'ich's vaguely socialist beliefs as he moved away from the populist influences surrounding him in Kazan and embraced Marxism. He translated *The Communist Manifesto* into Russian, read the works of the Russian Marxist, Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918), and wrote a paper on peasant economics.²⁷ Law was now his profession, chess was still his hobby, but his real passion in life was clearly radical politics. Khardin, incidentally, may have been an influence on Vladimir Il'ich's politics as well as his chess. Although Khardin was more of a liberal than a socialist, his own political opinions were radical enough to bring him to the attention of the authorities and eventually to warrant police surveillance.²⁸

In autumn 1893, Vladimir Il'ich left Samara for St. Petersburg. Here, with the help of Khardin's connections, he quickly found employment in a law office. He soon became so immersed in radical political activity that his chess activities were drastically curtailed, and he had little opportunity to participate in the rich chess life of the capital.²⁹ His political activities, however, soon brought him to the attention of the police, and in 1895 Vladimir Il'ich was arrested on a charge of sedition. In 1897

27. Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 77-80.

28. Sternik, *V. I. Lenin, iurist*, 78-80.

29. Lepeshinskii, *Vokrug Il'icha*, 30.

he was sentenced, without trial, to three years of exile in Siberia, specifically at Shushenskoe in the Minusinskii District.³⁰

He remained as politically active as possible throughout his imprisonment and exile, and he also began to play a great deal of chess again. During his lengthy solitary imprisonment in St. Petersburg, Lenin's blindfold chess abilities were put to good use. He played chess with the inmate of an adjacent cell, using code to tap out moves.³¹ When he was finally settled in Siberian exile in Shushenskoe in 1897, he was relieved to discover that, contrary to his fears, there were many chess players among the other exiles in the district. He had neglected to bring a chess set, so he asked his mother to send him one.³² She delighted him by sending the chess set of his youth: his father's hand-carved wooden set, the same set that he and Aleksandr Il'ich had used for their marathon matches.³³

Chess was an important part of Vladimir Il'ich's program for keeping himself mentally and physically well during his exile, and he fought his chess battles with good-humored enthusiasm.³⁴ His wife, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaja (1869-

30. Service, *Lenin*, 107-108.

31. H. Rappaport, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 18.

32. Lenin to his mother and sister, Anna, Shushenskoe, March 8, 1898, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, trans. George H. Hanna, vol. 37 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), 165.

33. Ul'ianova, *Detskie i shkol'nye gody Il'icha*, 15.

34. Gleb Maksimilianovich Krzhizhanovskii, *O Vladimire Il'iche: доклад na vechere vospominanii o V. I. Lenine, 3 Fevralia 1924 g.* [About Vladimir Il'ich:

1939), who joined him in exile, described their first New Year celebration in Siberia: “Volodya [Vladimir Il’ich] battled on the chessboard from morning till evening and ... won all the games, of course.”³⁵ Christmas was celebrated in similar fashion: “People played [chess] literally from morning to night. . . . Even I [Krupskaia] caught the infection and played once against a poor player and checkmated him.”³⁶

Lepeshinskii, a fellow exile in a neighboring village, gave an interesting description in his memoirs of a game that he and two fellow exiles played in consultation against Vladimir Il’ich. The situation seemed hopeless for Vladimir Il’ich, and the happy allies believed they had won the game. Their celebrations were premature; Vladimir Il’ich was still unvanquished. He pondered his reply, sitting motionless and rigid with his head bent low to the board. Lepeshinskii likened him to Archimedes of Syracuse—oblivious to his surroundings and totally absorbed in the problem at hand. His massive forehead with its “characteristic ‘Socratic’ bulges” was dotted with beads of sweat; “bluish veins” tensed in his broad temples. He sat as if “carved from stone.”³⁷ Finally, this profound intellectual effort bore fruit. By what

Report on an Evening of Reminiscences about V. I. Lenin, February 3, 1924] (Moscow: Glavpolitprosvet, 1924), 26.

35. N. Krupskaia to Lenin’s mother, Shushenskoe, January 10, 1899, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 574.

36. N. Krupskaia to Lenin’s sister, Maria, Shushenskoe, January 24, 1899, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 576.

37. P. Lepeshinskii, “Vechno Zhevoi” [Alive Forever], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, April 1964, 1.

appeared to be an act of pure will, Vladimir Il'ich found a move that refuted the allied attack. Lenin's will had prevailed even when the cause seemed lost.

His brother, Dmitri Il'ich, confirmed his brother's ability to block out all environmental stimuli and focus single-mindedly on the game. The brothers played a game in a Geneva coffeehouse in 1903, the last game they ever played. Dmitri Il'ich described a contest that continued for four hours, during which his brother never looked away from the board. This spectacle provoked considerable amusement among the coffee shop patrons, but Vladimir Il'ich was completely oblivious to the comments of onlookers.³⁸

In addition to his revealing description of Vladimir Il'ich's chess demeanor in the game against the allies, Lepeshinskii also makes some interesting observations about his chess style. Like any strong player, Vladimir Il'ich was familiar with the main opening lines. But instead of following opening theory blindly, he was always ready to hazard an innovation, taking his opponent "out of the book" and creating tense situations where both players were thrown back on their own resources. Vladimir's novel moves gave him a psychological initiative; his opponent felt confused and not entirely in control.³⁹ Much later, when claims were made for the existence of a "Soviet school of chess," (see Chapter Eleven) these attributes were among those associated with the Soviet school.

38. Dm. Ul'ianov, "Kak Lenin igral v shakhmaty-II" [How Lenin Played Chess-II], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, April 30, 1926, 8.

39. Lepeshinskii, *Vokrug Il'icha*, p. 178.

During the three years of Siberian exile, Vladimir Il'ich also played postal games. Many of these games were played with Lepeshinskii, his comrade in a neighboring village, who described how important these games were for keeping up his spirits, even though it hurt his pride when Vladimir Il'ich insisted on giving him odds.⁴⁰ Krupskaiia remembers that Vladimir Il'ich was very enthusiastic about these correspondence games—so much so that he dreamed about them and cried out moves in his sleep.⁴¹

Released from exile in 1900, Vladimir Il'ich soon made his way to Western Europe where he devoted himself full time to politics. In 1901, he adopted the revolutionary pseudonym, Lenin (used henceforth in this work), and he began to develop the variant of Marxism that became known as Leninism. His dogmatism would lead to many fractures among the Russian Social Democrats, reflected in personal animosities between Lenin and some of his opponents.⁴² A dispute over tactics led to personal estrangement between Lenin and Lepeshinskii, his erstwhile chess partner and comrade in exile. One day in 1904, Lenin unexpectedly called on Lepeshinskii in Munich. The latter was quite surprised, as very harsh words had been exchanged, but now Lenin was calm and friendly, asking for a game of chess. Lepeshinskii agreed, and the two old comrades played several games. By the end of

40. P. Lepeshinskii, *Na povorote* [At the Turn] (1922; repr., Moscow: Izd-vo Staryi Bol'shevik, 1935), 90-91.

41. Krupskaiia, *Vospominaniia o Lenine*, 33-34.

42. Service, *Lenin*, 137-144.

the visit, friendly relations had been restored.⁴³ Although Lenin, in general, played much less chess after his Siberian exile, he still found it a good tool for mending fences and wooing wayward disciples.

In 1905, Lenin returned to Russia and played an important part in the 1905 revolution. After its collapse, he fled with Krupskaja and Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Bogdanov (1873-1928) to Finland in the summer of 1907. With the hope of immediate revolution rapidly fading, Krupskaja wrote to her sister-in-law that Lenin began to play a lot of chess again. His favorite opponent was his friend and comrade, Bogdanov.⁴⁴

Even as the two Bolsheviks played congenial chess in Finland, the seeds of their estrangement were being sown. The immediate issue was competing positions on Bolshevik participation in the Duma. The October Manifesto, the Tsar's concessions to 1905, had introduced new potential areas of disagreement for the fractious Russian left. Many of Lenin's comrades, including Bogdanov, advocated a Bolshevik boycott of the Duma. They wanted the Party to continue engaging in direct revolutionary activity instead of participating in the constitutional sham. Lenin, however, argued against the Duma boycott. He believed that the Duma could be used as a forum to strengthen the Bolshevik position and make propaganda points.⁴⁵

43. Lepishinskii, *Na povorote*, 231-232.

44. Lenin and Krupskaja to Lenin's sister, Maria, Stjernerund, June 1907, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 369.

45. Lenin and Krupskaja to Lenin's sister, Maria, Stjernerund, June 1907, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 368.

The Duma boycott dispute, essentially a difference of opinion on tactics, became increasingly bitter as it moved into the realm of ideology. Bogdanov and his supporters considered themselves Marxists, but they wanted to supplement Marxism with new social theories, among them the scientific philosophy of the Austrian physicist and philosopher, Ernst Waldfried Josef Wenzel Mach (1838-1916).⁴⁶ Lenin vehemently disapproved, and he disparaged Bogdanov and his followers as Machists. The Machists, Lenin complained, had contaminated their Marxism with relativism and a thinly disguised sort of idealism.⁴⁷ Lenin, who characterized himself as “just an ordinary Marxist in philosophy,”⁴⁸ always claimed to be an uncompromising materialist.

While Bogdanov’s deviation had not seemed terribly serious to Lenin in the heat of revolutionary tumult, after 1905 the two Bolsheviks were increasingly estranged. They argued about the Party press, Party funds, and ultimately about the Party leadership. By 1908, the battle lines were drawn, and Lenin declared a preference for

46. Among other things, Mach advanced a scientific philosophy claiming that knowledge of the world was unreliable, since it could be acquired only through the senses.

47. Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1930), 144.

48. Lenin to A. M. Gorkii, February 25, 1908, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: June 1902-April 1908*, trans. Bernard Isaacs, vol. 13 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 449.

being drawn-and-quartered compared to cooperating with the Machists.⁴⁹ This quarrel would set the stage for Lenin's most famous chess game.

The writer and political radical, Maksim Gorkii (1880-1936), had influence in both camps. Bogdanov was his close comrade, and they collaborated on several ambitious projects. Gorkii was also on good terms with Lenin. He invited Lenin to his villa on Capri, a Mediterranean island off the west coast of Italy, and after several delays, Lenin finally agreed. Bogdanov and his friends were also long-term guests, and Gorkii's intention of attempting a *rapprochement* was obvious. Lenin, however, was not interested. His first words to Gorkii when he got off the boat were: "I know . . . you're always wanting to reconcile me with those Machists. I told you in my letter [February 1908] it's pointless, so don't even try."⁵⁰ Apparently he meant it. When Bogdanov dutifully tried to talk to Lenin about their differences, Lenin was unreceptive and curt. "Drop it," Lenin pointedly suggested.⁵¹

Someone must have proposed a nice friendly game of chess to alleviate the tension. The contest did not go well for Lenin. As his position deteriorated, so did his temper. In fact, Gorkii was amazed at how angry, how petulant, Lenin became in

49. Lenin to A. M. Gorkii, February 25, 1908, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: June 1902-April 1908*, trans. Bernard Isaacs, vol. 13 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 450.

50. Maksim Gorkii, *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* (Leningrad: Gos. izd-vo, 1924), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1924/01/x01.htm> (accessed January 24, 2013).

51. Maksim Gorkii, *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* (Leningrad: Gos. izd-vo, 1924), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1924/01/x01.htm> (accessed January 24, 2013).

defeat.⁵² The famous photo and Gorkii's detailed account have made this episode well known, and some biographers have even suggested that Lenin was habitually a bad loser. There is no other evidence to support this. Besides, clearly Lenin was upset by issues much weightier than the chess game. At any rate, no political fences were mended that day, and a year later Bogdanov was expelled from the Party.⁵³

Lenin played very little chess over the next several years. Perhaps his weak play in the game with Bogdanov continued to annoy him, but more likely it was lack of time and opportunity. He complained to his mother in 1910: I have so few opportunities to play here [Paris] that I have probably forgotten everything.⁵⁴ In a letter to his brother he was more detailed: "It must be a year since I played and, in general, during the past few years I have only played a few lightning or very rapid games."⁵⁵ Even so, Lenin's enduring enthusiasm for chess still showed through. Dmitrii Il'ich had sent his brother a chess problem⁵⁶ of his own composition in a previous letter, and Lenin confessed that solving it had dramatically reawakened his

52. Ibid.

53. Z. A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 7.

54. Lenin to his mother, Paris, February 13, 1910, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 454.

55. Lenin to his brother, Paris, February 17, 1910, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 455.

56. Problem composition is an esoteric branch of chess considered an art form. It has its own criteria for beauty, its own master composers, and a small, passionate following. Lenin does not specifically mention problems elsewhere, but he apparently was interested in this aspect of chess also.

enthusiasm for chess. Lenin claimed to have quickly solved his brother's problem. In return, he sent Dmitrii Il'ich a problem that had caught his eye in a German newspaper, which he described as a "beautiful bit of work."⁵⁷

In 1914, Lenin and Krupskaja were living quietly in the small town of Poronimo in Austrian Poland. Their refuge, however, became precarious when the Great War broke out. They were roused as suspected spies by the local authorities. They were soon allowed passage to Switzerland, but not before townspeople pillaged their property. Among the stolen possessions was his father's hand-carved chess set, the same set his mother had sent to him in Siberia. Certainly, the couple had long ago learned not to be sentimental about their possessions, but this was still a difficult loss for Lenin.⁵⁸

With the outbreak of war, Lenin's political life quickened. There was little time for chess. Then in 1917, chess was completely abandoned. His brother explained that under the conditions of revolutionary ferment, Lenin found chess too tiring and time-consuming.⁵⁹ Krupskaja related that after the return to Russia, chess had to be put aside. There wasn't time for serious play, and Lenin did not do things halfway.⁶⁰ When Lenin's old friend, Siberian comrade and chess opponent Lepeshinskii, arrived

57. Lenin to his brother, Paris, February 17, 1910, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, 455.

58. Ul'ianova, *Detskie i shkol'nye gody Il'icha*, 15.

59. Ul'ianov, "Kak Lenin igral v shakhmaty-II," 8.

60. Krupskaja, *Vospominaniia o Lenine*, 34.

in Petrograd in November 1917, Lenin greeted him with the joking suggestion that they should sit down immediately to a game of chess. Roaring with laughter at the absurdity of the suggestion, Lenin sadly acknowledged that chess was no longer on his agenda.⁶¹

By 1920, with the worst of the Civil War over, there was finally a chance for a little recreation. In August 1920, Krylenko and Lenin visited the village of Minino, near Moscow, for a vacation. They stayed at the family dacha of Nikolai Mikhailovich Zhukov (1894-1980), one of Krylenko's assistants.⁶² The old comrades came primarily to hunt in the nearby forests, but they played at least one game of chess. Zhukov, who was present, told Krylenko's daughter that this was the last game of chess Lenin played. He related the following anecdote to Krylenko's daughter.

It was evening and the men were relaxing after a day of hunting. Lenin suggested a game of chess and Krylenko happily obliged. But Lenin insisted on a set of conditions. First, they would play just one game. Second, there would be no retraction of moves. Third, there would be no sulking or bragging. Krylenko readily agreed, and play commenced. At first Krylenko seemed to have the advantage, but Lenin eventually prevailed—much to the visible annoyance of his opponent. Lenin teased him about his sportsmanship, and added insult to checkmate by pointing out

61. Lepeshinskii, *Vokrug Il'icha*, 199-202.

62. Anatolii Aniutenkov, "Na okhote v Minino" [Hunting in Minino], *Almanac Guslitsa* (Moscow: Il'inskaia Sredniaia Shkola, 2005), <http://ilschool-guslitsy.ru/a2-ohota-v-minino.html> (accessed June 10, 2013).

that, since they had agreed to play only one game, there would be no opportunity for Krylenko to extract revenge.⁶³

Zhukov's claim that this was Lenin's last game may well be true. Lenin remained completely preoccupied with affairs of state until his first stroke in early 1922. The game with Krylenko may have also been the only game he played after spring 1917. But Lenin's old comrade in exile, Lepeshinskii, understood differently. In a poetic flourish, he shows that Lenin had been playing a kind of virtual chess all through the Revolution and beyond. The scope had become enormous and the stakes had increased exponentially, but the game was analogous. And so, just as Lenin, through sheer intellectual will, had bested Lepeshinskii and his allies in the consultation game in Siberia back in 1899, now he outplayed the capitalists. The Revolution, itself, represented an opening attack—Lenin putting forward a pawn against the strongholds of capitalism, and the enemy counterattacking in force. The strategy of Brest-Litovsk involved, in chess terms, a classical trade of space for time. The subsequent removal of the capital from Petrograd to Moscow was akin to a defensive castling maneuver. The cooperation between the workers and the peasants was comparable to the harmony a skilled chess player evokes from his own pieces. Lepeshinskii, looking around himself in 1922, saw the birth of a new world where the sons and daughters of factory workers were becoming Russia's new intelligentsia—skilled administrators and technocrats, promoted like pawns to major pieces. And

63. M. N. Krylenko-Simonian, "Vspominaia ob ottse" [Remembering My Father], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, July 1972, 16.

after the final, inevitable victory, Lepeshinskii predicted, Lenin's "game" will be studied and admired by future generations "for hundreds of thousands of years."⁶⁴

Shortly after Lenin's death two years later, Lepeshinskii, in like fashion, reassured his comrades that while Lenin had left the game, he had bequeathed them a favorable position and a plan that would lead to final victory.⁶⁵

64. Lepeshinskii, *Na povorote*, 93.

65. Lepeshinskii, *Vokrug Il'icha*, 73.

Chapter Four

Il'in-Zhenevskii and the Origins of Soviet Chess

Although Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks were avid chess players, the Soviet government initially saw no special significance for chess in the new society. Chess acquired importance due to its perceived utility—initially as a training tool for military and party cadre, secondly as a cultural tool for refashioning Russian society, and finally as a propaganda tool for touting the superiority of Soviet culture.

If one person can be singled out as uniquely responsible for setting the unique course that Soviet chess would take, that person would be Aleksandr Fedorovich Il'in-Zhenevskii (1894-1941). This singularly remarkable man merits close examination. For our purposes, his importance stems from his dual identities: he was both a deeply committed Bolshevik and a world-class chess master. Significantly, Il'in-Zhenevskii found these two roles neither contradictory nor coincidental; in fact, he believed they were closely linked. He held that chess players, in general, were natural revolutionaries, natural soldiers, and natural Communists. This linkage, so central to Il'in-Zhenevskii's thinking, was one factor in the development of a favorable official attitude toward chess in the fledgling Soviet state. There was another reason, which can also be found in Il'in-Zhenevskii's thinking. He maintained that chess required no special gifts, instead taking the view that anyone of good faith and diligence could, by virtue of effort, develop skills in chess.¹ This view

1. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, trans. Bernard Cafferty (Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986), 1.

of human beings as eminently malleable would provide the second general underpinning of the early Soviet attitude toward chess.

Born Aleksandr Fedorovich Il'in ("Il'in-Zhenevskii" is a revolutionary pseudonym) in 1894, young "Sasha" had an older brother, Fedor Fedorovich Il'in (1892-1939), who was three years his senior.² Their parents were not married; the father, Fedor Aleksandrovich Petrov was a widowed cleric—the archdeacon of Sergiev cathedral). Orthodox clergy could marry, but did not have the right to remarry. Their mother, Antonia Vasilevna Il'ina, worked as a clerk and served in a wine shop.³

Aleksandr Fedorovich was politically precocious. He was heavily influenced by his older brother who, at age thirteen, was an instigator of a student strike called in conjunction with the 1905 Revolution. The action nearly got the brother expelled from school. Aleksandr Fedorovich was only ten years old, but he described the incident as a determining influence on his subsequent political development. By the time he was 14, he had read works by Marx, Engels, Lassal, Lafarg, and Kautsky. He credited the latter with being the most influential on his early political development.⁴

When Aleksandr Fedorovich was thirteen years old, his father took his own life, ostensibly because of a controversy involving sexual impropriety. Aleksandr

2. Aleksandr's older brother, Fedor, also a Bolshevik chess player, likewise had a colorful revolutionary career (see Chapter Twelve).

3. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Moei shakhmatnoi avtobiografii" [My Chess Autobiography] (1929), GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 86, listy 2-3.

4. Ibid., 4

Fedorovich was reticent on the subject, stating only that his father died,⁵ but his older brother reported at length on the episode, even revealing that there had been other suicides in his father's family.⁶ One can only speculate about the psychological ramifications for the thirteen year old Aleksandr Fedorovich, but perhaps it was significant that soon after his father's death, he discovered chess.

The man who opened up this alluring new world was one Andrei Aleksandrovich Molodtsov, who Aleksandr Fedorovich described as “a frequent visitor to our household, who always overwhelmed me by the force of his presence.”⁷ Aleksandr Fedorovich played chess with Molodtsov, and was soon swallowed up by the game's complexities. His elder brother, Fedor Fedorovich, also became involved, and the two played practice games and prepared lines of attack against Molodtsov's predictable formations. Chess became an obsession; Molodtsov became their great nemesis. Aleksandr Fedorovich reported that his sleep became disturbed by chess dreams and nightmares. In his words: “Chess took us . . . by the throat.”⁸ Finally, Aleksandr Fedorovich won a game against the unfortunate Molodtsov. Then both

5. Ibid.

6. F. F. Raskol'nikov and I. P. Kossakovskii, *Fedor Raskol'nikov—o vremeni i o sebe: vospominaniia, pis'ma, dokumenty* [Life and Times of Fedor Raskol'nikov: Memoirs, Letters, Documents] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989), 19.

7. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 2.

8. Ibid.

brothers began to beat him regularly. Finally the brothers advanced to the point that they would give him rook odds (that is, play without the queen's rook).⁹

The boys' fascination with chess outlived the rivalry with Molodtsov. Aleksandr Fedorovich soon became the champion of his school; he played first board on his school's team, and the team dominated scholastic chess in St. Petersburg. His school chums even composed poems about his chess exploits.

Aleksandr Fedorovich's political activism also began in his early teens. He took a leading role in publishing an underground student newspaper. He suggested that chess was a factor in his own precocious political acumen and that of his comrades. Chess players held leading roles in the underground circles; every member of the editorial board of the underground student newspaper was a chess player.¹⁰ Apparently the authorities were not blind to the menace posed by free-thinking chess players. The high school administration responded to the threat with "a wild and barbarous measure"—chess was banned from the campus.¹¹

In 1912, at age seventeen, Aleksandr Fedorovich joined the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDRP).¹² Faced with the necessity of choosing between the feuding Party factions, Il'in—young, gifted, dynamic and restless—gravitated toward the more activist Bolshevik wing of the party, rather than the more theoretical

9. Ibid., 3.

10. Ibid., 3-4.

11. Ibid., 4.

12. Ibid., 8.

Mensheviks. At the same time, he resolved to give up chess and devote himself completely to the revolution.

Aleksandr Fedorovich's career as a high school activist was short-lived, as was his self-imposed alienation from chess. He was arrested at the end of 1912 in the so-called Vitmer Affair. Aleksandr Fedorovich had been elected as a Bolshevik delegate from Vvedenskaya high school to the Inter-school Organization, which was an umbrella group linking radical student organizations in the St. Petersburg area. In December 1912, the authorities raided a meeting of the Inter-school Organization at the Vitmer girls' school in St. Petersburg, netting some thirty-four of these young radicals.¹³ The case was something of a sensation, even becoming the subject of special inquiries in the Duma.

The intervention of the Duma, the widespread publicity given the case, and the tender age of the reprobates saved them from the harsh punishments routinely meted out to revolutionaries. Nevertheless, all were expelled from high school, and as additional punishment, denied the opportunity to take their exams "externally."¹⁴ This meant that they would not even be allowed to study independently and then take university entrance exams. Alexander Fedorovich's academic career seemed to be over, but help came, ironically, from the bourgeoisie. Nikolai Aleksandrovich

13. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Moei shakhmatnoi avtobiografii," 3.

14. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 9-10.

Shakhov, described as a liberally-inclined “Moscow millionaire,” offered to sponsor Il’in and his rebellious comrades at schools in Geneva, Switzerland.¹⁵

Aleksandr Fedorovich was accepted into Geneva University in 1913. In Geneva, he returned to chess competition with a vengeance, winning the Geneva city chess championship and generally taking the local chess establishment by storm. In Geneva, he also made contact with local Bolsheviks, most notably Viacheslav Alekseevich Karpinskii (1880-1965). Karpinskii encouraged Alexander Fedorovich to choose a different revolutionary alias and pseudonym. He had been signing articles with his surname (Il’in), and Karpinskii knew that Lenin had also signed some works as “Il’in.” So, Alexander Fedorovich decided to append “Zhenevskii” to his name in honor of his chess triumphs in Geneva. At the next Bolshevik conference, the pseudonym was approved.¹⁶ Henceforth he will be referred to here as Il’in-Zhenevskii.

Il’in-Zhenevskii also met Lenin during his stay in Geneva. Lenin spent a day in Geneva in 1913, meeting with party comrades at the home of the Karpinskii and then speaking at a socialist conference in the evening. Il’in-Zhenevskii, just nineteen years old, was enormously excited when he heard that the great Lenin was coming to Geneva. Karpinskii, who hosted Lenin, invited Il’in-Zhenevskii to come early, have

15. Raskol’nikov and Kossakovskii, *Fedor Raskol’nikov*, 23.

16. Oleg Skuratov, “Soldat Leninskoi Gvardii” [Soldier of the Lenin Guard], *64: ezhenedel’noe prilozhenie k gazete “Sovetskii sport,”* May 1, 1979, 4.

an informal chat, and maybe even play a game of chess (which, unfortunately, seems not to have occurred).

Karpinskii introduced Il'in-Zhenevskii to Lenin as a "Vitmerist" in reference to the above-mentioned Vitmer Affair. Lenin, it seems, already knew about the case. The Duma hearings on the Affair had caught the attention of Lenin, who had commented on them in writing.¹⁷ Lenin immediately began to pepper Il'in-Zhenevskii with questions about the nature of the student movement that had been suppressed, complaining that newspaper accounts had been contradictory. He showed immense interest in revolutionary activities among the younger generation that Il'in-Zhenevskii represented. Il'in-Zhenevskii, in turn, was impressed with the depth of Lenin's knowledge and flattered by Lenin's attention.

When lunch was served, Lenin noticed that Il'in-Zhenevskii ate no meat, and he pointed asked why. Il'in-Zhenevskii, a strict vegetarian, accepted the conversational gambit and made an ardent case for his dietary choice. His vehemence amused Lenin, who cautioned Il'in-Zhenevskii not to trigger yet another split in the Party—this time between carnivores and vegetarians.¹⁸

17. V. I. Lenin, "Outline of a Report on the Political Situation," 1911, in V. I. *Lenin's Collected Works*, trans. Yuri Sdovnikov, vol. 4 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 244.

18. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Odin den' s Leninym" [A Day with Lenin], in A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, ed., *K godovshchine smerti V.I. Lenina, 1924 g.–21 Ianvaria 1925 g.: sbornik statei, vospominanii i dokumentov* [The Anniversary of Lenin's Death in 1924–January 21, 1925: Collection of Essays, Memoirs and Documents] (Leningrad: Gos. izd-vo, 1925), 169-170.

In the evening, Il'in-Zhenevskii and the other Bolsheviks accompanied Lenin to the conference, which was held in a Geneva pub. Lenin spoke on the nationality question, expounding on the necessity of internationalism, a position not universally popular in 1913 among Geneva's socialist émigré community. Il'in-Zhenevskii was mesmerized; he claimed that listening to Lenin lecture was like reading a book—a “smooth sequence of ideas of rigorous, logical consistency.”¹⁹ The audience listened, Il'in-Zhenevskii reported, in rapt silent fascination, and the speech closed to thunderous applause. Lenin left Geneva immediately after his speech. Il'in-Zhenevskii was invited to join the group that accompanied Lenin to the train station. As the train pulled out of the station, Lenin caught Il'in-Zhenevskii's eye through the open carriage window. “I suggest you give up vegetarianism,” Lenin shouted with laughter.²⁰

Lenin subsequently inquired after Il'in-Zhenevskii in May 1914 in his correspondence with Karpinskii. “What has happened,” Lenin asked, “to that young Bolshevik, the Vitmerist, that nervous vegetarian I met at your place a year ago?”²¹ There is no record of a Karpinskii answer to the query, but if he had answered, he most likely would have reported that Il'in-Zhenevskii had returned to St. Petersburg to visit his family.

19. Ibid., 172.

20. Ibid., 173.

21. Lenin to V. A. Karpinsky [Karpinskii], May 19, 1914, in *V. I. Lenin's Collected Works*, trans. Martin Parker and Bernard Isaacs, vol. 43 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 402.

Il'in-Zhenevskii's status was different than other émigrés—he was an academic exile only. He could come and go; he just couldn't attend school. But this was the fateful summer of 1914, and Il'in-Zhenevskii was trapped in Russia by the outbreak of the war. Unable to return to Geneva, he engaged in Party work. He worked at first in the party bookstore, "*Pravda*." Then he went to work for a Bolshevik newspaper. His journalistic career was interrupted, however, when he was conscripted into the Russian army at the beginning of 1915.²²

Because of his age and education, he was sent to a military school for a few months, graduating as the equivalent of a second lieutenant.²³ His ban from Russian schools seemingly no longer applied, and his known radicalism apparently no longer mattered. The training was brief, and soon he was leading his unit into the thick of the extremely heavy fighting that characterized the Eastern Front in early 1915.

He was involved in the defense of Warsaw where, at the end of May, he was a victim of one of the first gas attacks of the war. After a short period of treatment, Il'in-Zhenevskii was deployed on the Galician front. Here he was wounded and "shell-shocked" in early June. The case was severe. His legs were paralyzed—he could neither walk nor stand. His arms were partially paralyzed. He had lost his hearing and

22. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Moei shakhmatnoi avtobiografii," 3.

23. Ibid., 4.

sense of touch. His memory was greatly impaired.”²⁴ In fact, he had completely forgotten, among many other things, how to play chess.²⁵

Il'in-Zhenevskii spent the next year convalescing in various hospitals. He was treated by an experienced psychiatrist, Viacheslav Viacheslavovich Sreznevskii (1880-1942). Sreznevskii later became a professor of psychiatry, and he mentioned the case in an article as an example of treating psycho-nervous trauma with hypnosis.²⁶

His long recovery in various military convalescent hospitals gave Il'in-Zhenevskii the opportunity to see the decline in morale among troops—regular troops and officers) in the rear. He commented upon the development of revolutionary ideas among the wounded, noting that hospitals were extremely well-suited for carrying out revolutionary propaganda.²⁷

In July 1916, Il'in-Zhenevskii was released from the hospital and assigned to a reserve battalion in Petrograd, a flame-thrower and chemical unit. He was somewhat recovered, but still unfit for active duty. In fact, he never fully recovered, suffering from spells of nervous exhaustion, partial paralysis, and a variety of

24. Ibid.

25. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 16.

26. V. V. Sreznevskii, *Gipnoz i vnushenie* [Hypnosis and Suggestion] (Petrograd: Akademicheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1924), 43.

27. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Ot Fevralia k zakhvatu vlasti* [From February to the Seizure of Power] (Leningrad: Priboi, 1927), 39.

Perhaps these observations influenced the way military hospitals were organized in the Second World War (see Chapter Thirteen).

twitches and involuntary behaviors. Botvinnik later described Il'in-Zhenevskii's compulsive ritual of rubbing his hands together vigorously and spitting over his shoulder, adding that "this sometimes had an unpleasant effect on people who did not know him."²⁸

Now on reserve duty, Il'in-Zhenevskii took advantage of his enforced leisure to revive his dormant passion for chess. After relearning the game, he plunged into the chess world of war-time Petrograd. In January 1917, he played "with great enthusiasm" in a strong tournament organized by the Petrograd Chess Assembly.²⁹ The tournament was organized as a drawn-out, multi-stage affair that would take many months to complete. Il'in-Zhenevskii won his section in the first stage and prepared to advance, but during a hiatus between stages, the February Revolution broke out, presenting him with the choice that every revolutionary/chess player dreads: play chess or make revolution?

Actually Il'in-Zhenevskii did not initially realize he had a dilemma. The outbreak of revolution automatically ended chess activity, or so he thought. Assuming, mistakenly, that the tournament had been abandoned (after all, who would play chess when there was a revolution to be made?), Il'in-Zhenevskii threw himself

28. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 42-43.

29. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 16.

into organizational work.³⁰ As a Bolshevik in Petrograd (a rare and valuable commodity at the time), he was swamped with responsibility.

Il'in-Zhenevskii's unit was considered unreliable by the tsarist authorities, so during the February disturbances it remained in barracks rather than being sent out to suppress the rebellion. Nevertheless, it enjoyed the distinction of being the first military unit to recognize the Provisional Government.³¹ Ordered to stay with his unit, Il'in-Zhenevskii was more observer than participant in the overthrow of the imperial government.³²

In March 1917, Il'in-Zhenevskii was sent by the Party to the great naval base at Helsingfors (Helsinki) to agitate and form a Bolshevik organization. When they reported to the Helsingfors soviet as delegates from the Kronstadt soviet, they received a very cool welcome from the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who dominated in Helsingfors. However, they found friends among the rank and file sailors, and with their support, a Bolshevik paper, the *Wave*, was published in Helsingfors, with Il'in-Zhenevskii writing most of the articles and overseeing the technical issues involved in printing it. Il'in-Zhenevskii and his comrades also participated in a successful eight-hour-day campaign. By mid April, the Bolsheviks seemed well established at Helsingfors, and Il'in-Zhenevskii was ordered to return to

30. Ibid., 17.

31. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Moei shakhmatnoi avtobiografii," 5.

32. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Ot Fevralia k zakhvatu vlasti*, 26-27.

Petrograd. Here he had the opportunity to clarify his military status (he was, technically, a deserter).³³

As an officer with combat experience, it was natural that Il'in-Zhenevskii was chosen to assist with formation of the Bolshevik Military Organization in Petrograd. His journalistic experience was also in demand; he was also appointed to the editorial board of the new Bolshevik paper in Petrograd, the *Soldatskaia pravda* (Soldiers' Truth).

In a very strange turn of events, Il'in-Zhenevskii was also appointed by his government military commanders, apparently unaware that he was a Bolshevik, to work as personal secretary to the Provisional Government's War Minister, Alexander Ivanovich Guchkov (1862-1936). During the day, Il'in-Zhenevskii labored, ostensibly, to build up the Provision Government's military establishment; in the evenings, at the editorial offices of the *Soldatskaia pravda* he did everything he could to tear it down. He found the situation very amusing and managed to carry out a number of jokes at the expense of Guchkov and the Provisional Government. The fun ended at the end of April when the Miliukov affair brought down the government.³⁴ In the reshuffling of positions that followed, Aleksandr Fedorovich Kerenskii (1881-

33. Ibid., 28-47.

34. The Miliukov affair involved the revelation of territorial promises made in secret treaties with Russia's allies, casting doubt on the moral integrity of the Provisional Government's continued participation in the war.

1970) became War Minister. As his first official act, Kerenskii summarily dismissed Il'in-Zhenevskii from his post.³⁵

April 1917 also saw Lenin's return to Russia. Il'in-Zhenevskii was not at the Finland Station (which was only a few blocks from his home on the Viborg side of the Neva) and did not hear Lenin's famous speech on that occasion where he laid out his "April Theses." Since he was still covertly working in Guchkov's office, a request for leave to greet Lenin would have been unwise. Il'in-Zhenevskii would finally meet Lenin again in June, at the All Russian Conference of the Party Military Organizations. Lenin did not initially recognize Il'in-Zhenevskii. Reminded that this was the Vitmerist he had met in Geneva, Lenin suddenly beamed at him; "the vegetarian!" he exclaimed.³⁶

In early June 1917, when he was extremely occupied with his work on the Bolshevik Military Organization and the *Soldatskaia pravda*, Il'in-Zhenevskii was contacted by the organizers of the multi-stage chess tournament that he assumed had been abandoned back in February when the revolution had broken out. Informed that play would resume in the final stage of the tournament on June 8, Il'in-Zhenevskii asked to be excused, pleading revolutionary responsibilities and lack of time. The tournament organizers would not hear of it. They cited his responsibilities to see through what he had started; they told him that by refusing to continue, he would be ruining the tournament. Amazingly, Il'in-Zhenevskii found these arguments

35. Ibid., 46-49.

36. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Oдин den' s Leninym," 174.

persuasive, and he “felt compelled to agree.”³⁷ He even managed to take second place, a rather remarkable achievement under the circumstances.

Il’in-Zhenevskii was in the thick of events in July 1917. The crisis of the “July Days,” he said, was caused by the impatience of soldiers and Kronstadt sailors. He portrayed the Bolshevik leadership as attempting to hold back the overly enthusiastic soldiers and sailors. In the repression that followed the “July Days,” Il’in-Zhenevskii and many other second-echelon Bolsheviks remained at large. As they had done back in February, these second-tier Party activists kept the party functioning. The activities of the Bolshevik Military Organization necessarily went underground, but the newspaper continued to be published. It had a new name: *Rabochy i soldat (Worker and Soldier)*, and then, after a raid, it again re-emerged as *Soldat (Soldier)*.³⁸

In August, Il’in-Zhenevskii, who was still an officer in the army under the nominal control of the Provisional Government, was put on trial by his superior officers for his role in the July Days. Found guilty in absentia, he ignored the order to present himself to the military police for arrest. His battalion, which had grown increasingly radical, responded by electing Il’in-Zhenevskii to the Petrograd Soviet. Il’in-Zhenevskii contributed to the growing Bolshevik influence in the Soviet in the late summer and early autumn of 1917 that set the stage for October.³⁹

37. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 17.

38. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Ot Fevralia k zakhvatu vlasti*, 92.

39. *Ibid.*, 95-98.

In the preparations for the seizure of power in October, the Bolshevik Military Organization appointed Il'in-Zhenevskii as the commissar to both his own Reserve Chemical Battalion and a more tactically important regiment of Grenadiers. In the latter capacity, he received the surrender of the Women's Battalion during the siege on the Winter Palace. The women told him that they had been tricked into defending the Winter Palace; they claimed to have been summoned to the Winter Palace on a ruse. After their release the next day, they sent a delegation to Il'in-Zhenevskii thanking him for their excellent treatment during their brief captivity.⁴⁰

With Petrograd securely under Bolshevik control, Il'in-Zhenevskii accompanied his older brother, now known by his revolutionary pseudonym, Raskol'nikov, to Moscow to help in the fighting there. By the time they arrived, Moscow was under Bolshevik control, but Il'in-Zhenevskii joined with a group of Red Guards who pushed south to engage the Whites around Belgorod. Here some of the symptoms associated with the injuries suffered back in 1915 reoccurred, included a partial paralysis of his legs.⁴¹

Ordered to rest, he returned to Petrograd where he took a position under his old comrade, Nikolai Il'ich Podvoiskii (1880-1948), People's Commissar for Military Affairs until March 1918. This was a volatile period in the military history of the

40. Ibid., 106-107.

41. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *The Bolsheviks in Power: Reminiscences of the Year 1918*, trans. Brian Pearce (1929; repr., London: New Park Publications, 1984), 3.

young Soviet state: the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was negotiated, the Civil War broke out, and the organization of the Red Army began.

The negotiations at Brest-Litovsk and their breakdown would have disastrous personal implications for Il'in-Zhenevskii. In February, when an erroneous report that peace was concluded was received in Petrograd, there was general rejoicing. That rejoicing quickly gave way to uncertainty as the details of Trotskii's "no war, no peace" gambit became clear. The unsound nature of Trotskii's tactic was revealed in a few days, when the rapid German advance toward Petrograd began. Il'in-Zhenevskii describes a heavy, oppressive mood at the Commissariat; the Soviet experiment seemed doomed. In this atmosphere of dejection, the specter of suicide once again appeared in Il'in-Zhenevskii's life. In despair, his wife, Lidiia Borisovna Vitmer Il'in-Zhenevskii (18??-1918), shot herself.⁴² The event was reported in a very understated manner in Il'in-Zhenevskii's memoir, and there was probably more to this than he revealed. In fact, there may be political/family issues not directly related to Brest-Litovsk. Elsewhere Il'in-Zhenevskii related that his wife's family was closely aligned with the Social Revolutionary (SR) Party, and they were very bitterly opposed to the Soviet power. In fact, back in January 1918, on the eve of the opening of the Constituent Assembly, Lidiia Borisovna learned of SR plans for demonstrations, when she happened to overhear a meeting of the SR Military Organization in her parents' dining room. She dutifully gave the information to her husband, but he took

42. Ibid., 21-22.

no action. In his memoirs, Il'in-Zhenevskii bitterly reproached himself for his lack of vigilance.⁴³

As the German advance continued, debate raged within the Party between those, like Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin (1888-1938), who advocated a revolutionary war against the Germans, and Lenin, who argued the necessity of acquiescence to the harsh German territorial demands. Il'in-Zhenevskii, along with most of the People's Commissariat for Military Affairs, supported Lenin.⁴⁴ As a military man, Il'in-Zhenevskii was well aware of the sorry state of Soviet defenses. The old tsarist military had been effectively destroyed, while at this point the Red Army existed only in theory. In addition, both Lenin and Il'in-Zhenevskii would have been well aware of a basic tenet of defensive chess—trading space for time. The military situation was analogous: the Germans might temporarily gain huge territorial concessions from the treaty, but the Bolshevik regime would buy time to consolidate its position and prepare to undermine the Germans.

Lenin carried the day, and the harsh German terms were accepted. The German advance had underscored the vulnerable position of Petrograd, and the Council of People's Commissars decided to move the capital to the old imperial city of Moscow, deeper in the interior of Russia. Il'in-Zhenevskii, much to the annoyance of his boss, Podvoiskii, decided to remain in Petrograd when the People's Commissariat for Military Affairs relocated to Moscow. At the end of March 1918,

43. Ibid., 18.

44. Ibid., 23.

he became the office manager of the Petrograd Military Commissariat and also served as Commissar of the Central Courts-Martial Directorate.⁴⁵ By early summer he was also Commissar of the Chief Naval Directorate, as well as a member of the editorial board of *Krasnaia gazeta* (*Red Newspaper*).⁴⁶

Even with this workload (more or less typical for Party cadre at this time), Il'in-Zhenevskii chose the summer of 1918 to return to chess. The occasion was the organization in Petrograd of a “big first-category tournament.”⁴⁷ The term “first category” referred to the average strength of the invited participants. This event would serve as a kind of unofficial Petrograd championship. It was an irresistible opportunity to compete; there weren't very many tournaments being organized in 1918. Note that the event was sponsored by the Petrograd Chess Assembly and private donors; there was not yet any state involvement in chess.

It is surprising that the Petrograd Chess Assembly undertook such a task; by the summer 1918, the organization had fallen on difficult times. At the end of March 1918, Petrograd chess players were very concerned about an official announcement that had run on the front pages of the city newspapers under the foreboding heading: “By Order of the Petrograd Labor Commune.” The notice announced the immediate closure of all card and gambling clubs, with the ban enforced by the newly created

45. Ibid., 26-27.

46. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 18.

47. Ibid., 17-18.

political police, the CHEKA.⁴⁸ The problem, from the point of view of the chess community, was three-fold: first, money often changed hands in informal chess competition; second, the Russian Orthodox Church had historically linked gambling and chess as two sides of the same evil coin; and third, gambling halls often had a corner for chess, while chess clubs were often the site of informal gambling activity.

However a month later, on April 28, 1918 (a Sunday), the Petrograd Chess Assembly successfully hosted a public simultaneous exhibition (*simul*),⁴⁹ where a player of local fame took on fifteen opponents. The event went off smoothly and was “attended by many interested members of the public.”⁵⁰ The chess community took heart. Apparently respectable chess, at least for now, would not be molested.

In June, however the situation became more complicated. The playing hall of the Petrograd Chess Assembly was requisitioned by the Petrograd Labor Commune. According to A. A. Alekhin (a leading Russian player, see Chapter One), the soldiers quartered in the rooms of the Petrograd Chess Assembly trashed the premises,

48. Iakov Dlugolenskii and V. G. Zak, *Liudi i shakhmaty: stranitsy shakhmatnoi istorii Peterburga - Petrograda - Leningrada* [People and Chess: Pages from the Chess History of Petersburg - Petrograd–Leningrad] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1988), 139-140.

49. A simultaneous exhibition (hereafter called a “*simul*”) is an event in which a strong player contests multiple games at once with many other players. The tables are arranged in a large rectangle and the exhibitor walks from board to board on the inside the rectangle, responding to his opponents’ moves.

50. “Shakhmatnyi seans” [Chess Exhibition], *Vechernikh ognei* [Petrograd], April, 29 1918.

stealing chess equipment and systematically decapitating the chess pieces.⁵¹ Later, Il'in-Zhenevskii responded to Alekhin with the sanguine suggestion that the soldiers would have served the revolution better had they beheaded, instead, the principals of the pre-revolutionary Petrograd Chess Assembly. The president of the Assembly, B. E. Maliutin fled to Don in 1918 and became the editor of a prominent Kadet newspaper. Senator P. A. Saburov, one of the most prominent pillars of the Petrograd Chess Assembly (see Chapter One), engaged in underground, counter-revolutionary work; at one time briefly sheltered the fugitive Kerenskii.⁵²

With the soldiers' invasion of the quarters of the Petrograd Chess Assembly, the Petrograd club moved to a private apartment, where play continued in an outdoor courtyard. That worked for the time being, but what would become of the Assembly when winter came? As it turned out, the question was moot; the Petrograd Chess Assembly would not survive that long.

The sad state of Russian chess immediately after the revolution was, of course, a reflection of the sorry state of the society and culture in general. Il'in-Zhenevskii explained the situation in class terms. The decline of the pre-Revolutionary chess organizations, he pointed out, was the expected and natural consequence of the revolution. Before the revolution, chess organizations were the

51. A. A. Aljechin [Alekhin], *Das schachleben in Sowjet-Russland* [Chess Life in Soviet Russia] (Berlin: Kagan, 1921), 4.

52. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia* [International Working-Class Chess Movement and the Soviet Chess Organization] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i turizm, 1931), 8-9.

preserve of the elite, privileged classes. That explains the actions of the soldiers housed in the rooms of the Petrograd Chess Assembly. They had decapitated the chess pieces because of the association of chess with the Old Regime. Since the Revolution marked the end of class privilege; it must therefore also destroy the organizations of the privileged classes. Chess culture, like all other aspects of bourgeois culture had to endure the judgment of the workers. It would either be discarded or rebuilt along proletarian lines.⁵³

But in the summer of 1918, the Petrograd club still had the will and the resources to sponsor a high level tournament. Given the responsibilities he carried, along with the still delicate state of his health, Il'in-Zhenevskii probably shouldn't have entered into serious competition at this time. Nevertheless, he started the tournament very well, playing with what he characterized as "great enthusiasm."⁵⁴ He seemed destined to capture first place, but fatigue caused him to stumble in the last rounds. He had to be content with a three-way tie for third.

Il'in-Zhenevskii did not complete again in Petrograd in 1918, and at the end of the year his official duties finally compelled him to join the government in new Soviet capital in Moscow. There, he attempted again to resume his chess career.

In Moscow, Il'in-Zhenevskii hoped to find an active chess community, but he was soon disappointed. He searched high and low for signs of chess activity. The difficulty of his quest suggests something of the massive social dislocation in

53. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 18.

54. *Ibid.*

revolutionary Moscow. There were no accurate city directories. He could not locate any prominent Moscow chess players; he could not even find a current address for the Moscow Chess Circle, which, like the Petrograd Chess Assembly, was by this time defunct.⁵⁵

When Il'in-Zhenevskii finally located an opponent with whom he could contest a match,⁵⁶ the competition could not be completed. His elderly opponent was on the other side of town; there were no streetcars. The match ended when Il'in-Zhenevskii, malnourished on the scanty rations, lacked the strength to continue making the long trek by foot.⁵⁷

Eventually, however, a circle of strong Moscow chess players emerged, and by the summer of 1919, Il'in-Zhenevskii was able to compete regularly in informal competitions in chess players' flats. His description of conditions governing his twelve-game match with Nikolai Dmitrievich Grigoriev (1895-1938), a well-known composer of endgame studies, suggests something of conditions in Moscow during the Civil War. Electricity seldom functioned. Play might be by candlelight, when candles were available. Most of the time, however, candles were unavailable, in which case they played on the staircase where there was a large window. When that light failed, they played by match light. When winter came in 1919, the temperature

55. Ibid., 18-19.

56. A note on terminology: a *match* refers to a series of games contested against a single opponent; a *tournament* is a series of games against a variety of opponents.

57. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 19.

in the unheated flats (there was no firewood) dipped well below freezing. Play continued in winter coats, boots and gloves.⁵⁸ In 1920, however, the prospects for Soviet chess suddenly brightened.

After he was transferred from Petrograd, Il'in-Zhenevskii's Moscow duties continued to revolve around military affairs; he was heavily involved in the formation of the Red Army. Early in 1920, the Party transferred Il'in-Zhenevskii to the Main Directorate of Vsevobuch (an acronym for Universal Military Training), and he was soon assigned to be the Commissar of the Directorate. From this base in the Vsevobuch, Il'in-Zhenevskii launched his program for Soviet chess.

Vsevobuch had already begun incorporating sport (physical culture) into its military training program. Il'in-Zhenevskii noted that the rationale for including sport in military training was less about physical conditioning than about developing specific mental attributes like boldness and resourcefulness. He concluded that chess could teach the same lessons and more. As he pointed out: "Chess, sometimes even more than sport, develops boldness, inventiveness, will power, and something that sport cannot: strategic ability."⁵⁹ He decided that chess ought to be included along with sports in the Vsevobuch training program. This was the origin of the attachment of Soviet chess to physical culture, an association that continued right up to the end of the Soviet Union.

58. Ibid., 20-21.

59. Ibid., 22.

Il'in-Zhenevskii presented his chess proposal to the main director of Vsevobuch, N. I. Podvoiskii, who immediately approved. This is not particularly surprising. Podvoiskii, the director, was answerable to Il'in-Zhenevskii, the commissar, on all political questions. Regional military directors soon received orders to incorporate chess circles in their training programs.⁶⁰

One can imagine the reaction this directive might have produced from harried regional commanders who were feverishly training troops for participation in an ongoing civil war. Il'in-Zhenevskii, himself, admitted that “in the provinces, chess life developed pretty slowly.”⁶¹ Although he does not discuss the nature or extent of opposition to the diversion of resources from more immediate concerns, he does acknowledge its existence. Noting the importance of support from key regional chiefs, Il'in-Zhenevskii refers to this support as his “trump card in Vsevobuch when meeting opposition or doubt from its members.”⁶²

In spite of uncertainty and resistance in the provinces and in the central Vsevobuch organization, official support allowed chess to blossom in Moscow. The presence of Il'in-Zhenevskii in the city was critical, and he was supported by Vasilii Nikolaevich Russo, the chief of the Moscow Military Region Vsevobuch, who was, himself, “a well known checkers player and a passionate enthusiast of chess and

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

checkers.”⁶³ Il’in-Zhenevskii and Russo first met in person in 1920, but they had actually competed against one another in a postal chess tournament more than a decade before. Russo proved to be an enthusiastic partner in Il’in-Zhenevskii’s program. Unlike some of the provincial Vsevobuch chiefs, Russo enthusiastically implemented the chess decrees issued by the Chief Directorate of Vsevobuch. Il’in-Zhenevskii describes Russo’s devotion to chess in glowing terms:

Hardly had the word chess been mentioned in one of the instructions of the Chief Directorate of Vsevobuch than Comrade Russo was fired with enthusiasm and set to work with a will. There was no need to officially persuade him, no need to explain to him the significance of chess.⁶⁴

One of the immediate beneficiaries of Russo’s enthusiasm was the chess circle where Il’in-Zhenevskii had been shivering with his comrades only a few months before. Instead of unheated, dim rooms in private flats, they now found themselves in a “large warm, well-lit flat in the city center.”⁶⁵ The sumptuous accommodations undoubtedly helped fuel a surge in chess activity. As Il’in-Zhenevskii reported: “Moscow had not seen such a flourishing chess life for a very long time.”⁶⁶ It was in this favorable atmosphere for chess that the First Soviet Chess Championship was conceived.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., 23.

66. Ibid.

The tide in the Civil War had clearly turned in favor of Soviet power by spring 1920. After a crisis in the previous October when it appeared that both Moscow and Petrograd might fall, the Red Army had staged a dramatic comeback. The White leader and “Supreme Ruler of Russia,” Admiral Alexander Kolchak had been captured and executed in early February. By the end of March, General Anthony Denikin’s White Volunteer Army had been forced to retreat to the Crimean and the Sea of Azov. The Soviet state remained on a war footing, however, and a vicious, seesaw war was fought against Poland from the end of March through mid-October, while White forces in the south were also able to stage a comeback.⁶⁷ The dislocation and devastation wrought by six years of war—an economy destroyed by war communism and agriculture disrupted by requisitions and crippled by a severe drought—was the unlikely backdrop against which the 1920 Soviet Championship was organized and contested.

Conceived in the spring of 1920, the First Soviet Chess Championship was originally one part of an All-Russian Sports Olympiad organized by the Vsevobuch organization. It is indicative of the strong position already occupied by Soviet chess that while the Sports Olympiad itself was scrapped, the chess event went forward alone. Opening on October 1, 1920, the tournament would prove unlike any other.

67. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *The History of Russia*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 480-484.

Chapter Five

The First Soviet Championship

The First Soviet Chess Championship in 1920 was the formative event in Soviet chess. It marked the modest beginnings of state support for chess competition, and the emergence of the idea of chess as a tool in the political and cultural struggles to come. It set important precedents for Soviet chess, and it first defined and grappled with some of the issues that would dominate its development.

The First Soviet Championship was also arguably the strangest tournament in chess history. Even the name of the event was odd: the Vserossiiskaia shakhmatnaia olimpiada (All-Russian Chess Olympiad). It was only recognized in retrospect as the First Soviet Championship.¹ It was the only tournament in chess history in which the participants were conscripted. It was the only tournament marked by a strike protesting scanty rations. It was also a national championship in which the winner would soon be denounced by his country as a traitor and then, seven years later, become the world chess champion.

In early 1920, discussions began in the Vsevobuch, the military organization overseeing universal military training, for holding a Russian Sports Olympiad in the fall. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Il'in-Zhenevskii, Commissar of the Main Directorate of Vsevobuch proposed that chess be included in the program of competitions. The proposal was approved, and Il'in-Zhenevskii put together a

1. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 12.

committee, which included Alekhin, Nikolai Ivanovich Grekov (1886-1951) and Nikolai Dmitrievich Grigoriev (1895-1938).

The Vsevobuch's association with chess was the context for the first chess column to appear in a Soviet publication. In the first week in April 1920, the bi-weekly Vsevobuch paper, *The New Army*, featured a new column called, simply, "Chess." Here Il'in-Zhenevskii, the columnist, published a kind of chess manifesto, strongly making the case for the applicability of chess to military training:

Chess has much in common with the art of war. It develops in a man all the abilities that are needed in a commander, such as: self-control, composure, calculation. Calculation in chess is almost the same as that in war. It is first necessary to strengthen one's position, and find a weak point in the enemy's position that is easy to attack. Then, concentrate on his main force, to produce, if possible, a diversion to distract the enemy. Then, picking the right moment, strike with your main forces at the weak point in the enemy's position. This strategy produces the same victory in war as in chess.²

Chess had always been associated with war, of course. But to incorporate chess directly into a program of military training was much different than acknowledging the martial origins of chess.

It was one thing to publish a manifesto proclaiming the applicability of chess to military training; organizing a major tournament was another matter altogether. With little information about the location or the status of the leading Russia chess players, Il'in-Zhenevskii and his comrades on the organizing committee had taken on a formidable task. What followed was, in Il'in-Zhenevskii's words, "a military

2. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Shakmaty" [Chess], *K novoi armii* [Moscow], April 1920, quoted in A. Narkevich, "Nash pervyi otdel" [Our First Column], *Shakmaty v SSSR*, May 1967, 3.

mobilization of chess players.”³ Thus, in the spirit of the prevailing ideology of “War Communism,” Russia’s leading chess players were, in effect, requisitioned for the event. A list of prominent players was sent to regional Vsevobuch offices. Local authorities were required to utilize Red Army resources to locate any persons on the list within their jurisdiction, report the whereabouts of these persons to the Chief Directorate of Vsevobuch, and arrange their transportation to Moscow. Following is an excerpt from the report sent from a Red Army group in the city of Cherikov on September, 20 1920, upon the discovery of the whereabouts of Dmitri Nikolaevich Pavlov (1870-1942), a strong player sought by the Vsevobuch for the tournament:

We enclose herewith the filled-in questionnaire of the chess player D. N. Pavlov, and inform you that the above-mentioned Comrade Pavlov will be dispatched to Moscow by the 1st October.

[Signed]

Company Commander, Deputy Office Commander, Chief Clerk. ⁴

Il’in-Zhenevskii was sensitive to charges of coercion and adamant in denying suggestions that any kind of compulsion was applied in gathering Russia’s leading chess players in Moscow. All of the chess players, he claimed, were thrilled to participate in the event; all were happy to make the journey to Moscow. The military involvement, he said, was a matter of convenience—necessary due the chaos that ruled many parts of the former empire. Association of the event with the military authority also ensured that the players would be excused from their current employment;

3. A. F. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, trans. Bernard Cafferty (Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986), 23.

4. *Ibid.*, 24.

players' right to return to their employment after the tournament was guaranteed. Il'in-Zhenevskii's defense of the methodology sounds logical, but consider the experience of the physician/chess player Abram Isaakovich Rabinovich (1878-1943), which was not atypical.

Rabinovich was residing in Kiev in 1920. As he walked home from work one evening in the late summer of 1920, he was surprised to discover a poster on one of the city's major streets announcing that he and two other chess players believed to be in Kiev had been ordered to Moscow. He was advised to report to the local military authorities for instructions. Rabinovich was recovering from typhus and adamantly objected to making the long journey. He also cited his professional obligations. His protests were ignored, and he soon found himself on a Red Army train bound for Moscow.⁵

Once the whereabouts of a player was discovered, a dispatch was sent to his workplace demanding his release for service at the Moscow tournament. Petr Arsenievich Romanovskii (1892-1964), employed by the Soviet Bank of Petrograd, preserved his invitation; it was reprinted in his biography.

Due to the extremely great importance attached to the development of chess playing in Russia as an inherent constituent part of the obligatory preparation of working people for future military service, the Main Directorate of Vsevobuch organizes from October 1st through October 25th (1920) in the city of Moscow the All-Russian Chess Olympiad as a festival to demonstrate the refined creativity of the mind. For the success of the Chess Olympiad, it is necessary to assure the participation of the strongest Russian chess players. That is why the Main Directorate of Vsevobuch requires you to send on this

5. M. S. Kogan and I. L. Rabinovich, *Istoriia shakhmatnoi igry v Rossii* [History of Chess in Russia] (Leningrad: Rabochee izd-vo Priboi, 1927), 40.

mission P. A. Romanovskii, for him to be placed under our specific instructions for the time period from October 1st through October 25th of this year.

[Signed]

Commissar A. Il'in-Zhenevskii⁶

All of this was quite extraordinary. With a civil war still underway and the economy in shambles, the military establishment of the revolutionary government was ordering the Soviet Bank in Petrograd to release Romanovskii, a valuable employee, for temporary conscription into the Red Army in order to ensure his participation in a chess tournament. Small wonder that Romanovskii begins his memoir of the tournament with the rhetorical question: “Am I really going to the All-Russian chess tournament? The country is in the fire of civil war, the invaders fiercely attack the young Soviet Republic”⁷

In addition to the main event, a simultaneous amateur event was also planned. Lesser players were invited to apply to participate. Military resources were also used to facilitate the organization of the amateur tournament. Under the direction of Il'in-Zhenevskii, Vsevobuch sent the following telegram to its regional offices on August 17, 1920:

On the first of October in Moscow a chess tournament will take place. I order wide publicity of this tournament in the region. Board and lodging in Moscow is guaranteed by Vsevobuch. Not later than 15th of September the Chief Directorate of Vsevobuch in Moscow is to be informed of those wishing to take part with name, place of work, designation of work, degree of irreplaceability, date of birth, record of tournaments played and places taken,

6. I. Z. Romanov, *Petr Romanovskii* (Moscow: Fizkultura i sport, 1984), 27.

7. P. A. Romanovskii, “Pervyi chempionat strany” [The First National Championship], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, October 1950, 290-291.

need for accommodation in Moscow. Those selected for the tournament will be informed by telegraph.

[Signed]

Vsevobuch Deputy Director, Zaks⁸

In spite of daunting logistical problems, Il'in-Zhenevskii was able to assemble a reasonably strong tournament for the main event. Among the better known players were Alekhin (the strongest player then in Soviet territory), Romanovskii, Grigoriev, A. Rabinovich, Il'ia Leont'evich Rabinovich (1891-1942), Grigorii Yakovlevich Levenfish (1889-1961), Benjamin Markovich Blumenfeld (1884-1947), and Il'in-Zhenevskii himself.

The out-of-towners were quartered in the Vsevobuch barracks and fed in the Vsevobuch mess. According to Il'in-Zhenevskii, the players were “accommodated to their complete satisfaction.”⁹ Other evidence, however, strongly suggests otherwise. Quartering in a Vsevobuch barracks meant sleeping on hard cots in a cold, unheated dormitory. Dining in a Vsevobuch mess meant subsisting on scanty Red Army rations. But in these lean times, putting the players under military care was probably the only way to ensure they were fed and housed at all. Most of Russia was suffering, and the conditions endured by the chess players were certainly no more onerous than those faced by most of their countrymen. Still, as Levenfish related in his 1950 memoir of the tournament:

I travelled from Petrograd on the day before the tournament was due to open and was billeted in an unheated room in a military training barracks. For our

8. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 23-24.

9. *Ibid.*, 24.

meals we were temporarily included among the trainees. Hunger and destruction, caused by intervention and the Civil War, were felt at every step and rations were of course less than modest.”¹⁰

Food quickly became an important source of contention. The ration—the same allowance given to Vsevobuch trainees—consisted of only two hundred grams of bread and a two-course dinner in the evening. The first course usually consisted of a thin, herring-head soup. The other course was fried herring tails. This lack of a middle game, as it were, sparked intense debate among the players, but, as Levenfish joked, in spite of intensive debate, “where the middle part of the herring had gone, we did not succeed in establishing.”¹¹

Hungry players resorted to the black market. One of the players, Vanya Golubev, described by Levenfish as an “experienced businessman,” managed to trade cigarette rations for “speculators’ grub.” Perhaps his efforts contributed to Golubev’s last-place finish in the tournament, but even so, food remained inadequate. Levenfish claimed that “lack of calories was compensated by youthful enthusiasm and passion for chess.”¹² Perhaps, but Levenfish’s memoirs were curiously silent on subsequent events.

As the tournament progressed, the sources and level of dissatisfaction grew. In addition to the rations, other complaints surfaced as well. There was the matter of

10. G. Levenfish, “Tridsat’ let nazad” [Thirty Years Ago], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, October 1950, 290.

11. G. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya* [Selected Games and Memoirs] (Moscow: Fizkul’tura i sport, 1967), 52.

12. *Ibid.*

unreimbursed travel expenses. Rumors also circulated that the generous prizes—hinted at, but never specified—would not be awarded. After the fourth round games (less than half-way through the tournament), these smoldering grievances ignited an open mutiny. A large group of key players flatly refused to play the fifth round unless their demands were met. They presented the following ultimatum, entitled “Declaration of the Participants of the All-Russian Chess Olympiad” to the organizing committee:

In view of the significant deterioration in provisions, we consider it essential to declare that in the circumstances now prevailing, we are unable to continue the tournament and are obliged to break it off from Sunday, October 17th, in the event of the non-fulfillment of the following demands:

- 1) The issue of an advance of 15,000 rubles per player
- 2) The immediate issue of the remaining cheese to the players
- 3) An increase in the bread ration, or compensation in some other form
- 4) The immediate issue of cigarettes

[signed]

P. Romanovskii, A. Kubbel, I. Rabinovich, I. Golubev, Ia. Danyushevskii, Mund, G. Levenfish.¹³

The money demanded in article one was payment of travel expenses (promised but not delivered). The demand in article two for the “remaining cheese” was puzzling. Il’in-Zhenevskii claimed in his memoir that he had earlier procured a quantity of cheese to supplement the Vsevobuch rations.¹⁴ Perhaps the supply of cheese had been depleted or maybe it had been commandeered by hungry Vsevobuch officials, but, in any event, it was not longer being issued. Puzzling, however, was the claim of another participant who flatly stated that there was no cheese to be had in 1920

13. A. F. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 25.

14. *Ibid.*

Moscow at all.¹⁵ Article three needed no explanation. The call for cigarettes in article four might have been intended to compensate for all the cigarettes already invested in the black market. Finally, note that Levenfish, who made no mention of the strike in either of his published memoirs of the tournament, was one of the signers of the ultimatum.

The strike placed Il'in-Zhenevskii in an extremely difficult position. He and Grigoriev were now the only remaining members of the tournament organizing committee, and both were participating in the event. Of the other original members of the organizing committee, Grekov had been removed for some unspecified reason, and Alekhin had "proudly declared that with the start of the Championship, he was withdrawing from any sort of participation in the organization."¹⁶ When the strike threatened, Il'in-Zhenevskii was particularly bitter against Alekhin, who lived with his family in Moscow and was not subject to the relative deprivations endured by the out-of-towners. Even so, Alekhin engaged in a kind of sympathy strike. As Il'in-Zhenevskii complained, Alekhin, "who was a member of the organizing committee and was well aware of all our difficulties, instead of trying to ease the conflict or help us with his advice, poured oil on the fires by declaring that he too would refuse to play on, since he 'could not play against hungry opponents.'"¹⁷

15. V. N. Panov, *Sorok let za shakhmatnoi doskoi: vospominaniia i 50 izbrannykh partii* [Forty Years at the Chessboard: Commentary and 50 Selected Games] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1966), 10.

16. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 25.

17. *Ibid.*, 26.

Il'in-Zhenevskii's options in the crisis were limited. He could have ordered the mutineers arrested, of course, or perhaps even have them shot for desertion—not very realistic. He could have called the strikers' bluff, continuing the tournament without them, but that would have ruined the event. And so, he acquiesced to their demands. He convinced the mutineers to finish the tournament by paying the promised expense money. He also agreed to increase the bread rations and to provide cigarettes to the players. He could not meet their demand for cheese; if there ever was any cheese, it had disappeared, and there was no more to be found anywhere in Moscow. But apparently the demand for cheese was negotiable, and the tournament was saved.

Finally, in spite of everything, the tournament was successfully completed. The winner was Alekhin, second was Romanovskii, who was awarded the title of master for his accomplishment (Alekhin had already achieved that distinction). Third place went to Levenfish.

But at the end of the tournament, there was yet another unpleasant surprise for the participants. The valuable prizes, expected by the winners, were conspicuously absent. Instead, the organizers improvised by rewarding the top competitors with sundry items confiscated from émigré class enemies. The prizes were also distributed in a very original way. They were placed in a separate room, and Alekhin, the overall winner, was allowed to enter first and make his choice. He chose a huge vase, apparently impressed with its size and weight. The second place winner, Romanovskii, then made his choice. Finally, Levenfish was awarded the remaining

item. The three winners were also awarded certificates, handwritten on cheap paper.¹⁸ The peculiar awards ceremony set an important precedent; the appropriateness of awarding cash tournament prizes in a proletarian state would be a source of controversy in Soviet chess.

The mutiny and related organizational duties took a heavy toll on Il'in-Zhenevskii, who was a participant as well as an organizer. The symptoms associated with his war injury reemerged, and he played the final games of the tournament lying in bed.¹⁹ His overall score was mediocre, although he did manage a draw against Alekhin, the tournament winner. The mutiny did more, however, than spoil Il'in-Zhenevskii's score in the tournament. First, it may have somewhat damaged his political reputation, placing him in a compromised position in the emerging struggle over the leadership of Soviet chess. As the importance of chess in the state increased, so too did the competition within the emerging organizational structure. Second, it can be argued that the mutiny compromised the reputation of the entire generation of pre-revolutionary chess players. As Il'in-Zhenevskii had observed, chess in pre-revolutionary Russia had been the exclusively the domain of the privileged classes: "Before the revolution, chess, like other sports, was the privilege, mostly, of the propertied classes. Therefore, it is clear that the revolution largely destroyed chess life. Numerous chess clubs have ceased to exist, chess columns have disappeared from the

18. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya*, 52.

19. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 26.

pages of print.”²⁰ But this was also a dialectical opportunity, he maintained, “to set up the chess life of our country on a new proletarian basis.”²¹ To reorient chess and place it on a proper proletarian basis would require the propagation of a new generation of chess masters—players who would be trained by and come to maturity in the new Soviet state.

To facilitate this dialectical shift in the foundation of chess in the new state, a conference was held at the conclusion of the tournament to discuss the future role of chess in Soviet society. Decisions taken at this conference would determine the future relationship between chess and the Soviet state.

20. A. Narkevich, “Nash Pervyi Otdel,” 3.

21. A. F. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 18.

Chapter Six

The Struggle for the Soul of Soviet Chess: 1920-1924

Upon the conclusion of the First Soviet Chess Championship in 1920, a short conference was held to plan future events and discuss the role of chess in the emerging Soviet state. Although it was unnamed at the time, Soviet chess historians later called this conference the First All-Russian Chess Congress.¹ The First Congress saw the emergence of two factions with dueling visions of the future of Soviet chess, one reactionary and the other revolutionary.

The reactionary group advocated reconstituting the old All-Russian Chess Federation, which had eked out a precarious existence in tsarist times (see Chapter One). The reactionaries hoped the new Soviet government, unlike the ever-suspicious imperial government, would be friendly or at least benign, allowing a privately-funded federation to develop naturally as it charted an apolitical course for Russian chess.² Samuil Osipovich Vainshtein (1894-1942), described as “balding, small eyes hiding behind glasses with a large, unattractive, colorful nose,”³ was the spokesman for this position. Vainshtein’s chess credentials were impeccable. A veteran chess

1. V. E. Eremeev, “Publikuem vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva o III Vserossiiskom Shakhmatnom S”esde” [Memoirs of V. E. Eremeeva of the Third All-Russian Chess Congress], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, August 1974, 10.

2. Iu. L. Averbakh, “Liudi, sobytiia, fakty” [People, Events, Facts], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, September 1977, p. 4.

3. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 41.

organizer, he had been a leading figure in the old, prewar Chess Federation he hoped to resurrect. He was also a chess master who, interestingly, had been competing at the Mannheim Tournament in Germany in August 1914, and he was interred at Triberg along with Alekhin and the other Russian participants (see Chapter One).

The revolutionary group, on the other hand, argued for political chess, meaning chess that served political ends. Il'in-Zhenevskii was the spokesman for this position. He criticized the old Chess Federation as representing everything wrong with pre-revolutionary chess. Chess under the old regime, he claimed, had been primarily a bourgeois pastime (although evidence indicates it was also a pastime of prominent revolutionaries). But in a proletarian state, chess would have to carry its own weight; it would not be allowed to exist for its own sake. Although some of the subtleties of the political position were still undeveloped, Il'in-Zhenevskii championed the utilization of chess as a mentally productive pastime for soldiers, workers and peasants. In his speech at the conference, Il'in-Zhenevskii concluded with a warning to anyone proposing a return the old days: "In this country where the workers have gained victory, chess cannot be apolitical as in capitalist countries."⁴ A more detailed statement of the political position was offered by the Soviet chess historian, Mikhail Saulovich Kogan (1898-1942): "From the point of view of the

4. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Match Alekhin-Capablanca* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1927), 9.

revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat, chess is not an end in itself, but a means of raising the cultural (and thereby also the political) level of the laboring masses.”⁵

Kogan’s more nuanced argument portrayed chess as more than just a mentally-productive leisure activity for workers, soldiers and peasants. There was a deeper agenda: the “revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat” (the Party) aspired to raise the cultural level of the masses. But why were Kogan, Il’in-Zhenevskii and Party leaders convinced that the laboring masses stood in such great need of cultural elevation? The answer requires a theoretical digression.

As discussed in Chapter Two, a key Bolshevik contribution to Marxism was the practical application of the theory of permanent revolution—telescoping history during periods of revolutionary chaos by seizing the historical moment and leaping over a stage of historical development. Permanent revolution, the possibility of catching up in one stroke, was a privilege of backwardness. But it was also the predicament of backwardness.

Since backward nations like Russia were defined by their uneven development, the telescoped revolution would necessarily leave many unresolved contradictions in its wake. This was the predicament Russia faced when the Bolsheviks took power. If, as the Bolsheviks expected, a general European revolution followed on the heels of October, then all was well. But, when the German revolution misfired and no general revolution developed in Europe, the Bolsheviks were left in

5. M. S. Kogan, *Kratkii ocherk istorii shakhmat: shakhmaty v Rossii* [Brief Essay on Chess History: Chess in Russia] (Moscow: Fizkultura i turizm, 1931), 94.

theoretically uncharted territory. The new Soviet state was fraught with contradictions. How could they be resolved?

The most glaring of Russia's numerous contradictions was found in its economic development. Russia had never experienced a proper capitalist stage in its economic development. There had been industrial growth in the 1890s, but by the end of the Civil War the industrial infrastructure lay in shambles. Eventually Lenin's New Economic Policy and then Stalin's Five-year Plans would attempt to resolve the contradiction by retroactively constructing an economic foundation under the existing political structure.

Another important contradiction was the absence of democratic traditions like those associated with the capitalist West. The Duma created in 1905 notwithstanding, Western-style democracy never had the opportunity to develop in Russia. There was no tradition of political participation; civil society was stunted. This contradiction was addressed by making indefinite the dictatorship of the proletariat, or rather the dictatorship of the vanguard of the proletariat—the Party.

The Party was also Lenin's solution to a third and, for our purposes, the most important contradiction: the problem of stunted political consciousness among Russian workers. Revolution, according to orthodox Marxism, required a proletariat that had developed class-consciousness. Russian workers, many of whom still had

“one foot in the village,”⁶ were insufficiently advanced; they failed to appreciate their historical mission. Lenin, writing of strikes in the 1890s, observed that:

[T]hese strikes were simply trade union struggles, not yet Social Democratic struggles. They marked the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers; but the workers were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, i.e., theirs was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness.⁷

The necessity of bridging this gulf between trade union consciousness and social-democratic consciousness justified the existence of the Bolshevik party. The Party filled the gap by guiding the proletariat to their historical mission. But after the Bolsheviks seized power on behalf of the workers, the Russian proletariat still lagged behind in cultural and political development. This is the third post-revolutionary contradiction: the low level of cultural development among the Soviet masses. The contradiction would be attacked with a variety of intellectual and cultural weapons, and chess figured largely in that arsenal.

With his embrace of political chess, Il'in-Zhenevskii was therefore following the Leninist line when he cited the overwhelming need to raise the cultural level of the workers. Shortly before his death, Lenin, musing on how to construct the socialist state, had observed that the workers were “not sufficient educated. They would like to build a better [state] apparatus for us, but they do not know how. They cannot build

6. Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 27.

7. V. I. Lenin, “What is to be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement,” in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna, vol. 5 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 378.

one. They have not yet developed the culture required for this; and it is culture that is required.”⁸ But Lenin gave no blueprint for developing that culture, only cautioning that it would take time. Il’in-Zhenevskii proposed to bestow that culture on the workers quickly, through the medium of chess.

The role of chess in the young Soviet state was, therefore, not a trivial question. The stakes were high. The fight between Il’in-Zhenevskii’s political chess and Vainshtein’s apolitical chess was a microcosm of the larger, looming cultural battle, a struggle over the role of art in Soviet society. In 1921, Vainshtein’s apolitical group appeared to have the upper hand, but this proved to be largely an illusion.

When Il’in-Zhenevskii and his Vsevobuch organized the First Soviet Championship in 1920, its atmosphere mirrored the then-prevailing policies and circumstances of War Communism. The players were, in effect, requisitioned for the event; they lived in army barracks and ate military rations. But War Communism ended in 1921 with the institution of New Economic Policy (NEP). The subsequent shift to the NEP also manifested itself in the chess world, as reflected in the temporary triumph of Vainshtein’s apolitical chess. The same logic that justified NEP as a tool to repair the ravaged economy also suggested that the damage inflicted on Russian chess by war and revolution would not be repaired by requisitioning chess players for tournaments and feeding them military rations. Instead, the prerevolutionary Chess Federation, privately-financed and apolitical, resurrected

8. V. I. Lenin, “Better Fewer, but Better,” in *Lenin's Collected Works*, trans. David Skvirsky and George Hanna, vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 448.

under Vainshtein's leadership, would be allowed to rebuild the organizational and popular bases for chess.

The NEP approach to chess was successful. Between 1921 and 1923, chess clubs in Russia were reborn, and with the clubs came all the activity that clubs generate: tournaments, matches, lectures, exhibitions, publications.⁹ But even during the height of this chess NEP, Il'in-Zhenevskii's political chess group held the commanding heights—the army and workers' chess organizations in Moscow.

As the political battle simmered, Moscow and Petrograd also vied for the honor of being the chess capital. This was actually a new chapter in an ongoing chess rivalry, but now it played out with an ideological coloring. Generally speaking, Moscow was the base for political chess; Petrograd, by-and-large, was the base for apolitical chess.

Moscow, as the political capital, seemed to enjoy enormous advantages in the chess struggle. Il'in-Zhenevskii and his Vsevobuch were in Moscow. In addition, Il'in-Zhenevskii used his influence in the Party to extend chess beyond the Vsevobuch and into the trade unions. The Moscow workers' clubs became centers of casual chess, and the Moscow trade unions organized formal chess competitions.¹⁰

Petrograd, on the other hand, was Vainshtein's turf. He was the central figure in the re-founding of a central chess club, the Petrograd Commune Chess Club. Soon the club began issuing a popular publication, *Listok shakhmatnogo kruzhka*

9. V. E. Eremeev, "Publikuem Vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva," 10.

10. U. L. Averbakh, "Liudi, sobytiia, fakty," 4-5.

Petrogubkommuny (Page of the Petrograd Commune Chess Club, which was soon, mercifully, renamed *Shakhmatnyi listok* (Chess Page). An optimistic editorial appearing in the first issue set the tone for the publication. It envisioned a time when Russia, led by Petrograd, would again claim a place of honor in the arena of world chess competition.¹¹

In late summer 1922, the rivalry of the two cities for chess dominance found expression, appropriately, in a chess match.¹² The Petrograd-Moscow chess match was, in itself, a significant milestone in Soviet chess history. The matches had been regular events before the war, but the last match had been played ten years earlier, in 1912.¹³ The renewal of this inter-city rivalry was a barometer of both the rebirth of chess activity in Russia and the more general return to normal life. For example, the Moscow team traveled to Petrograd by train in relative comfort. The train departed and arrived on time. And although two of Moscow's three resident masters failed to appear for the match (much to Il'in-Zhenevskii's annoyance),¹⁴ there was no requisition of players for this event. Even without its strongest players, Moscow

11. "God izdaniia pervyi" [First Year of Publication], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, January 1964, 2.

12. In team match competition, each team fields an agreed upon number of boards. Each player completes one or more games with his counterpart on the rival team. The players contest their games individually, but points are scored for the entire team.

13. Iakov Dlugolenskii, *Liudi i shakhmaty: stranitsy shakhmatnoi istorii Peterburga - Petrograda - Leningrada* [People and Chess: Pages from Chess History of Petersburg - Petrograd - Leningrad] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1988), 130.

14. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, trans. Bernard Cafferty (Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986), p. 33.

somehow managed to prevail in the chess competition. Nevertheless, the Petrograd group was able to seize the initiative in the organizational conference that followed the match.

The overriding issue at the conference was the need for a central chess organization in Russia. Everyone seemed to agree on the need for an organization, but the question of its political role was divisive. But even the political question (whether chess could exist for its own sake, or be harnessed to the needs of the state) was sometimes obscured by the closely related struggle over which city would control the envisioned organization.

Moscow in summer 1922 was at a temporary disadvantage in this rivalry. The political base of Moscow chess had been in the military, particularly the Vsevobuch, where Il'in-Zhenevskii held enormous influence. But Il'in-Zhenevskii's absence from Moscow for over a year to serve in the diplomatic corps (he returned just in time to take part in the match with Petrograd) had been a large setback for Moscow chess.¹⁵ Then the Vsevobuch program, itself, was terminated, leaving the Moscow group scrambling to secure patronage in the labor organizations.

The Petrograd group, on the other hand, was on the ascendency in the summer of 1922, when the match and conference were held. A federation, of sorts, already existed in the Petrograd area; the Petrograd Chess Club was at its center, and there were numerous satellite clubs in the suburbs. In fact, the Petrograd Chess Club was the host of both the intercity match and the subsequent conference. There was

15. Ibid., 30.

also a traditional advantage: St. Petersburg had been the center of the prerevolutionary Russian Chess Federation, which was the model for the new federation envisioned by the Petrograd group. Vainshtein went into the conference with a rudimentary organization in place and a plan in hand. The relatively disorganized Moscow group had neither. So, by default, Vainshtein's Petrograd group took the initiative in the creation of a new central federation.

Vainshtein's plan was simple; he intended to simply resurrect the old, prerevolutionary All-Russian Chess Federation.¹⁶ To inaugurate the new Federation, an All-Russian Tournament in Petrograd (later dubbed the Second Soviet Chess Championship) was announced for July 1923.¹⁷ The tournament was followed, of course, by the inevitable organization meeting. Soviet chess historians later called this meeting the Second All-Russian Chess Congress. All known chess clubs were invited to send players to the tournament and organizers to the conference. The tournament, the Congress, and the projected All-Russian Chess Federation were, like the Petrograd Chess Club itself, all privately financed through dues and donations.

At the Congress, Vainshtein's apolitical chess carried the day. Easily overcoming the disorganized political opposition in Petrograd, Vainshtein persuaded the conference to largely accept the old Federation constitution. A few cosmetic amendments (some vague statements about its obligation to advance chess for the

16. Samuil Osipovich Vainshtein, "Renewing the All-Russian Chess Federation," *Shakhmatnyi listok*, March 1923, 2.

17. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 12.

masses and bring it to workers) were offered to placate the political critics.¹⁸ Lacking instructions to the contrary, even the workers' clubs in Petrograd endorsed the Federation plan. Significantly, however, most of the Moscow clubs chose to boycott the conference. Nevertheless, the amended constitution was dutifully sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs where it was approved at the beginning of 1924.¹⁹

The Federation immediately scored a major triumph when it persuaded the former world champion, Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941), to visit Russia for a fortnight in February 1924. Lasker, a German grandmaster, was a fine choice. He was well-rounded intellectual, rare in the ranks of the world's most elite players. As the first foreign chess master to visit the Soviet state, he received a very warm welcome.²⁰ He played simultaneous exhibitions, gave a series of lectures entitled "The Meaning of Chess," and generally dazzled Soviet society.²¹

Lasker was a sensation in Leningrad. He was not a stranger to this city. He had competed in three international tournaments in St. Petersburg (1895-96, 1909 and 1914), sharing or winning first place in each tournament. A decade later, he still had

18. Vainshtein, "Renewing the All-Russian Chess Federation," 2.

19. P. A. Romanovskii, "40 let Sovetskoi shakhmatnoi organizatsii" [40 Years of Soviet Chess Organizations], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, June 1957, 290-291.

20. Samuil Osipovich Vainshtein, "Privet velichaisheму shahmatnomu myslitel'iu Emmanuilu Laskeru pervomu zagranichnomu gostiu v shahmatnoi sem'e SSSR" [Welcome Greatest Chess Player Emanuel Lasker, First Foreign Visitor to the Soviet Chess Family], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, February 14, 1924, 1.

21. Isaak Maksovich Linder and Vladimir Linder, *Lasker: filosof na trone* [Lasker: Philosopher on the Throne] (Moscow: Ripol klassik, 2005), 196-198.

many friends and acquaintances in the city. The future world champion, Mikhail Botvinnik, then a Leningrad schoolboy, watched in awe as Lasker took on Leningrad's best players in a huge simul. Many years later, Botvinnik commented that Lasker's visit was an event of great importance to both the fledgling Soviet chess movement and to his own future development.²²

Lasker was also a sensation in Moscow. Il'in-Zhenevskii's chess column in *Izvestia* called on all of Moscow's trade union clubs to host events with Lasker.²³ In Moscow, Lasker saw "thousands of workers and Red Army soldiers with heads bent over chessboards."²⁴ He also found time to have long conversations with Moscow intelligentsia, showing himself "completely in his element when talking about philosophy or literature. Following a brilliant exposition on endgame theory, he gave a witty criticism of Einstein's philosophical system."²⁵

Lasker was overwhelmed by the reception he received. Both the Leningrad and the Moscow groups were anxious to impress him, and they succeeded. He found "chess in Russia is full of energy, youthful fervor, creativity, and faith in the vastness

22. M. M. Botvinnik, *Analiticheskie i kriticheskie raboty: 1923-1941* [Analytical and Critical Works: 1923-1941] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1984), 5-6.

23. Linder and Linder, *Lasker: Filosof na trone*, 196.

24. Vainshtein, "Privet velichaisheму shahmatnomu myslitel'iu Emmanuilu Laskeru," 1.

25. Nikolai Grekov, "Lasker," *Shakhmaty*, February 1924, 1, quoted in Linder and Linder, *Lasker: Filosof na trone*, 196.

and beauty of truth.”²⁶ *Shakhmatnyi listok* expressed the hope that Lasker would tell the chess world what he had seen Soviet Russia.²⁷ If Lasker noticed the political battle raging beneath the placid surface of Soviet chess, he didn’t mention it. Instead, in a letter to his hosts, he commended the Russians for creating a “close-knit chess community.”²⁸

This close-knit chess community, however, was actually coming apart at the seams. The Lasker visit proved to be the All-Russian Chess Federation’s swan song. The Moscow group had consolidated its position and was prepared to launch its counterattack.

By late 1923, Il’in-Zhenevskii’s group had successfully shifted its base of operations out of the military and entrenched itself within the proletariat—in the trade union organizations, the workers’ clubs, and directly in the factories. Il’in-Zhenevskii’s newly formed Chess Section of the Moscow Trade Union Council convened a counter-conference shortly after the close of the Federation conference in Petrograd. The conference featured worker denunciations of the All-Russian Chess Federation and demands for the creation of a revolutionary chess organization more

26. S. O. Vainshtein, “Privet velichaihemu shahmatnomu mysliteliu Emmanuilu Laskeru,” 2.

27. *Ibid.*, 1.

28. Linder and Linder, *Lasker: Filosof na trone*, 198.

appropriate to Soviet society.²⁹ Significantly, there was no tournament—just a conference. The game of chess was becoming subordinate to its politics.

After the Moscow Trade Unions Conference, there were effectively two chess organizations claiming national leadership. In Moscow, the Chess Section of the Trade Union Council claimed the mantle; in Petrograd (Leningrad after January 26, 1924) the All-Russian Chess Federation watched nervously. Vainshtein tried to shore up his position by overseeing the publication of an extended essay by a well-known liberal intellectual, which argued that chess was far too abstract to have any practical value in teaching any lessons about life, class struggle or military strategy.³⁰

In spite of Vainshtein's efforts to elevate the argument to an intellectual plane, the period of dual power was brief. Workers' clubs, especially those in Petrograd that were affiliated with the All-Russian Chess Federation, were now urged to boycott the group. The privately-financed Federation was vulnerable to boycott, and when the Petrograd workers' clubs left the Federation *en-masse*, the economically undermined and politically vilified All-Russian Chess Federation soon capitulated.

To formalize the Federation's capitulation and inaugurate a new organization, yet another conference was scheduled for Moscow at the end of summer 1924. Soviet chess historians call this meeting the Third All-Union Chess Congress. The expressed purpose of this Congress was to confirm the victory of Il'in-Zhenevskii's trade union

29. V. E. Eremeev, "Publikuem Vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva," 10.

30. Boris N. Demchinskii, *Tragediia chistoi mysli: o shakhmatakh* [The Tragedy of Pure Thought: About Chess] (Leningrad: Vserossiiskii shakhmatnyi soiuz, 1924), 14-15.

chess, dissolve the Federation, and formally inaugurate a new national organization, which would be administered by the Soviet government in Moscow.³¹

An organizing committee that included key Party representatives was assembled, and strategy for the Congress was meticulously prepared. Nothing was left to chance, as the organizers carefully polished their arguments justifying chess as a political weapon. The chess weapon, they claimed, was urgently needed in the battle to raise the cultural level of the masses. The organizing committee sent a letter to all known chess organizations, setting out the principles of the Moscow group. The letter advocated a central role for chess as an “especially powerful instrument of intellectual culture, the weapon in the struggle for a higher level of culture.”³²

Chess was the weapon of choice for two reasons: 1) because of its value in fostering intellect, and 2) its utility for building character. First, chess developed the player’s mind in a manner analogous to mathematics. But unlike math, chess was also a game, a pleasant, mildly addictive pastime. With proper encouragement, workers would adopt chess as their recreational activity of choice. This would lead to intellectual growth, and, in turn, to an increase in the general cultural level of the proletarian class. Second, chess developed character. Character would be forged in the fires of the pure struggle that was at the heart of chess. Victory in any struggle was created through accumulated skill, knowledge, discipline, and by an effort of the

31. V. E. Eremeev, “Publikuem Vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva,” 10.

32. Ibid.

will.³³ This second point, incidentally, reflected almost perfectly Lasker's chess philosophy as he presented it in his Moscow lectures earlier that same year.

The Third All-Union Chess Congress opened on August 20, 1924, with an unprecedented 160 delegates; both the political and the apolitical positions were well-represented.³⁴ After extended and often acrimonious debate, Il'in-Zhenevskii's program of a political chess organization carried the day in a series of key votes. The Federation was formally disbanded; chess was officially incorporated into the Soviet state. An All-Union Chess and Checkers Section was formed, which was attached to the Supreme Council for Physical Culture of the Russian S.F.S.R.³⁵

As was the political custom of the day, slogans were developed: "Chess is a powerful weapon of intellectual culture!" "Take chess to the workers!" "Chess must become a feature of every [worker] club and every peasant reading room!"³⁶

Perhaps the most interesting moment came when the vanquished Vainshtein addressed the conference. Gracious in defeat, Vainshtein seemed eager to both apologize and justify himself. The Federation, he insisted, had been formed only as a matter of expediency. He now claimed to have always "regarded the Federation as a

33. M. S. Kogan and I. L. Rabinovich, *Istoriia shakhmatnoi igry v Rossii* [History of Chess in Russia] (Leningrad: Rabochee izd-vo Priboi, 1927), 21.

34. Romanovskii, "40 let Sovetskoi shakhmatnoi organizatsii," 290.

35. V. E. Eremeev, "Publikuem Vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva," 10. The checkers component of this organization was never a serious competitor to chess, which was always the principal preoccupation of the Section.

36. Romanovskii, "40 let Sovetskoi shakhmatnoi organizatsii," 291.

temporary organization.” He welcomed the fact that “state bodies are taking over control of the chess movement,” and he called for the clubs formerly affiliated with the Federation to support the new state chess organization.³⁷ The victors were generous. Valerian Evgen'evich Eremeev (1899-1980), who became Krylenko's assistant in the All-Union Chess Section, praised Vainshtein as “multifaceted,” giving him a great deal of credit for his journalistic endeavors.³⁸ Vainshtein continued to play in tournaments and publish chess materials, even retaining for a time the editorship of *Shakhmatnyi listok*, although the publication itself was taken over by the All-Union Chess Section.

By the time the Third Congress adjourned, the Il'in-Zhenevskii position had achieved total victory. Chess had been officially added to the Party's arsenal of weapons for use in the cultural revolution of the 1920s. Further, chess was safely ensconced in the government bureaucracy where it would be promoted and funded. But the laurels of the victory did not go to Il'in-Zhenevskii. He had been unexpectedly outmaneuvered by a rising star in the Party and the Soviet state: Nikolai Vasil'evich Krylenko (1885-1938), who was elected Chairman of the newly created Chess Section. Krylenko would cast an enormous shadow over Soviet chess for the next decade and a half.

Krylenko, who came from a radical, working class background, entered St. Petersburg University in 1904, where he studied history and literature. He was swept

37. Ibid.

38. V. E. Eremeev, “Publikuem Vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva,” 10.

up in the revolutionary events of 1905, aligning with Lenin's Bolshevik faction of the Social Democrats. After the 1905 revolution collapsed, Krylenko's life was typical of lower echelon Bolsheviks who continued to work inside Russia, representing the Bolshevik Party in the absence of its principal leaders. He was arrested numerous times while engaged in party activities, enduring imprisonment and exile. In spite of his clandestine existence, he managed to finish both an undergraduate and a law degree.

In 1914, Krylenko fled to Switzerland, and like Il'in-Zhenevskii a few years earlier, Krylenko met there with Lenin. Secondary sources suggest that the two spent a great deal of time in 1914 playing chess, but I found no documentary evidence to confirm this. Krylenko was, however, a strong and passionate chess-player. He left behind the scores of several games; he was probably near master strength. He and Lenin would probably have been roughly comparable in ability. Scores of two of his games are included in the Appendix.

In 1915 Krylenko returned to Russia, working in the Bolshevik underground. He was soon arrested, inducted into the army, and sent off to the front, where he agitated against the capitalist war. He was a very effective public speaker who could sway the emotions of hostile audiences. After the February revolution in early 1917, the work of soldier-agitators like Krylenko was instrumental in the Bolshevik assumption of power in the fall of 1917.

The revolution marked an extraordinary turnabout in Krylenko's fortunes—a meteoric advance into the top ranks of Bolshevik leadership, first in the military and

then in the judiciary. Lenin, impressed, perhaps, by Krylenko's chess prowess, placed him in supreme command of the armed forces.

Il'in-Zhenevskii knew Krylenko well during the rough and tumble years immediately following the Revolution. Krylenko, as Supreme Army Commander, was a frequent visitor to the People's Commissariat for Military Affairs where Il'in-Zhenevskii presided. He was favorably impressed, reporting that Krylenko's stern face and small stature produced an impression of real power. Il'in-Zhenevskii related the following anecdote. Apparently, in early 1918, Krylenko ordered the arrest of a tsarist general who was subsequently shot. The People's Commissariat for Military Affairs received complaints; officially the death sentence had been abolished. Il'in-Zhenevskii, in his official capacity, conducted an investigation. When asked why the arrest was ordered, Krylenko replied that when he had visited that army, the commander had refused to report to him—in other words, he would not recognize Krylenko's authority as Supreme Commander. Such insubordination could not be tolerated. Il'in-Zhenevskii was officially satisfied with this explanation and professed to be very impressed with Krylenko's toughness.³⁹

Not everyone, however, was impressed with Krylenko. A British diplomat, and certainly no friend to any of the Bolsheviks, met Krylenko in 1918, describing

39. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *The Bolsheviks in Power: Reminiscences of the Year 1918*, trans. Brian Pearce (1929; repr., London: New Park Publications, 1984), 13.

him as, “an epileptic degenerate . . . and the most repulsive type I came across in all my connections with the Bolsheviks.”⁴⁰

In 1918, Krylenko also began his career in the Soviet judiciary (he had a law degree). He served initially as the public prosecutor in the revolutionary tribunals; in 1931 he became Commissar of Justice. The military toughness so admired by Il'in-Zhenevskii was also apparent in his application of justice. The judicial philosophy of Krylenko was unapologetically revolutionary. Many secondary sources credit him with the following Orwellian (and probably apocryphal) observation: “We must execute not only the guilty. Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more.”⁴¹ While the quotation may be apocryphal, but is included here because its point remains valid. Soviet revolutionary justice, with Krylenko as its chief spokesman, was concerned much less with the fate of individuals than with the interests of the proletariat—as perceived by the Party. Justice, apparently, could not exist for its own sake in the Soviet state any more than chess could.⁴²

40. Robert Hamilton Bruce Lockhart, *Memoirs of a British Agent*, 2nd ed. (London: Putnam, 1934), 257.

41. Quoted in Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 822.

Tracing the original source was problematic. Pipes's source is the memoir: Isaac Nachman Steinberg, *In the Workshop of the Revolution* (New York: Rinehart, 1953). Steinberg's source is a verbal communication from Gorkii; Gorkii's source is not named.

42. Armed with this creed, Krylenko presided over many important political trials in the 1920s and early 1930s.

As chairman of the All-Union Chess Section of the Supreme Council for Physical Culture, Krylenko brought his enormous prestige and a penchant for ruthlessness to his chess work. He inaugurated a popular chess magazine called, simply, “64,” and he served as its editor. He used his enormous influence to ascertain that chess was well-funded and effectively promoted. He also embarked on a profoundly ambitious plan to usher in the Soviet chess era.

Backed by the resources of the Soviet state, Krylenko decided to produce a chess spectacle that would force the world to take notice. The now defunct All-Russian Chess Federation had organized the successful Lasker visit. Krylenko would counter the Federation by bringing to Moscow, not only Lasker, but also the rest of the world chess elite. This was the origin of the great Moscow International Tournament of 1925, the first every state-sponsored international tournament and one of the strongest tournaments of the 1920s—a decade studded with super-tournaments.

Chapter Seven

The Spectacle of 1925

After the establishment of the All-Union Chess Section of the Supreme Council for Physical Culture of the Russian S.F.S.R. at the Third Chess Congress in 1924, the government's Chess Section was officially in control of Soviet chess, and Krylenko, a rising Party star, was in control of the Chess Section. At the Third Congress, Krylenko's attack on apolitical chess had been decisive in bringing about the destruction of the All-Russian Chess Federation and ensuring the triumph of political chess. Now, armed with the financial and propaganda power of the Soviet state, Krylenko wanted to create a spectacle on a scale unprecedented since tsarist times: an international tournament attended by the elite of world chess. Certainly this goal was impressive in itself, but the envisioned tournament would also have unprecedented ambitions: educate the Soviet masses, train Soviet chess players, and capture the attention of the rest of the world.

Before Krylenko could launch his project, however, he had to apply an ideological corrective. In the heat of the battle against Vainshtein's Chess Federation, Krylenko and his political chess advocates had called for a total boycott of all bourgeois chess organizations.¹ The Federation was the target of the boycott, of course, and it was also roundly attacked for its flirtations with the international

1. V. E. Eremeev, "Publikuem vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva o III Vserossiiskom Shakhmatnom S'esde" [Memoirs of V. E. Eremeeva of the Third All-Russian Chess Congress], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, August 1974, p. 10.

(bourgeois) chess community. The Federation's 1924 application to join the world chess organization centered in Paris was attacked, as was the Federation's tentative ambition to sponsor an international chess tournament.²

In 1925, however, with Vainshtein and his Chess Federation vanquished, the total boycott of all bourgeois chess organizations had become generally inconvenient. Krylenko's proposed international chess tournament would require the Chess Section to engage in all manner of interactions with bourgeois chess. Thus in April 1925, just prior to public announcement of the tournament, Krylenko signaled a major modification of the Chess Section's position regarding bourgeois chess contacts. Formerly forbidden, such interactions suddenly became permissible when they were politically advantageous for the labor movement in general and workers' chess in particular.³ Interestingly, this change in policy was camouflaged in an unexpected attack on the German Workers' Chess Union, previously the closest international ally of Krylenko's Chess Section. Following the Soviet lead, the German Union's boycott of bourgeois chess was so total that it refused to even carry news about bourgeois events in its publication. This, Krylenko now charged, was a flawed strategy—too rigid and, therefore, self-defeating.⁴ But with this new policy, defended as analogous to the use of bourgeois experts in industry, Soviet chess now had Krylenko's blessing

2. "Po povodu uchastiia shakhmatistov SSSR v mezhdunarodnykh turnirakh" [Concerning Participation of Chess Players of the USSR in International Tournaments], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, April 15, 1925, 81.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. *Ibid.*

to make use of international bourgeois chess experts, bringing them to Russia to instruct the Soviet chess masters and propagandize chess among the masses.⁵

With this ideological corrective in place, the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925, a formative event in Soviet chess history, could now move forward. Although the idea of a large international tournament was already in the air after preliminary discussions at the Third Chess Congress, the planning officially began in April 1925 when the Council of Peoples' Commissars approved Krylenko's proposal for a month-long (November 10 to December 8, 1925) international chess tournament. It was decided to open the tournament in early November, just after the celebrations of the Revolution's anniversary had concluded. Thirty thousand rubles were released to the Chess Section for preliminary expenses.⁶

With an enormous task and limited time, an organizing committee was quickly assembled, and I. D. Grigoriev was named chairman. Grigoriev, a noted player and problem composer, had helped Il'in Zhenevskii organize the First Soviet Championship in 1920. He was assisted by Semen Semenovich Levman (1896-1943), a strong player and long-time organizer, who would continue to play a major role in the Chess Section. Grigorii Lazarevich Raskin, a veteran organizer, filled the

5. N. V. Krylenko, "Shakhmaty v SSSR" [Chess in the USSR], in *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve, 1925 goda i ego uchastniki* [International Chess Tournament in Moscow, 1925, and its Participants], ed. by G. A. Raskin (Moscow: Pressbiuro MShT, 1925), 7.

6. I. D. Grigor'ev, "Shakhmaty v SSSR" [Chess in the USSR], in *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve 1925 g.: sbornik partii* [International Chess Tournament in Moscow 1925: Collected Games] (Leningrad: Shakhmatnyi listok, 1927), 17-18.

important position of press secretary. Finally, the secretary of the Chess Section, V. E. Eremeev, would be Krylenko's personal representative on the committee.⁷ All were experienced organizers, although none had been involved with a tournament of the stature envisioned.

In addition to finding a suitable venue and managing the myriad details involved in organizing an international event, the Committee also had to draw up the list of prospective foreign participants and solicit their attendance. Here the good will and assistance of Lasker was invaluable. After his 1924 visit, he left Russia for a tournament in New York. There, he was very helpful to the Soviet organizers. He assisted in establishing contact with prospective players, and he spoke well of chess conditions in Soviet Russia, easing fears about chaos and hardships.⁸ Bogoliubov, living in Germany, was also helpful in contacting and negotiating with players in Europe. Apparently, though, he was not as convincing as Lasker in speaking well of conditions in the Soviet Union. When the Austrian master, Ernst Grunfeld (1893-1962), went through Soviet customs on his way to the Moscow tournament, his considerable luggage was found to consist entirely of canned food. He explained that rumors of rampant hunger had made him fearful of starving.⁹

7. Ibid., 18.

8. Isaak Maksovich Linder and Vladimir Linder, *Lasker: filosof na trone* [Lasker: Philosopher on the Throne] (Moscow: Ripol klassik, 2005), 199.

9. V. E. Eremeev, "Publikuem Vospomenaniia V. E. Eremeeva," 11.

Once contact with potential participants was established, negotiations began. Grigoriev, chairman of the Organizing Committee, characterized these exchanges as “long and complex,” comparing them to arduous diplomatic negotiations.¹⁰ Grigoriev must have felt nostalgic for the good old days of 1920, when he and Il’in-Zhenevskii had simply ordered players to appear.

Finally, twenty-one participants were selected: ten Soviet players and eleven foreign chess masters. The Soviet players can be divided into two groups: an older group whose members had made names for themselves before the Revolution, and a younger group, now considered the founding generation of Soviet chess. The qualifying tournament was the Fourth Soviet Championship, hosted by Leningrad late in the summer of 1925. The top eight finishers automatically qualified.¹¹ Two other players were subsequently added. One of these additions, Fedir Parfenovich Bogatirchuk (1892-1984), did not compete in the 1925 Soviet Championship, but was already recognized as a top Soviet player. The other addition, Nikolai Mikhailovich Zubarev (1894-1951), finished far below the other qualifiers in the Soviet Championship.¹² Zubarev was the champion of Moscow, but he was not a world class

10. Grigor'ev, “Shakhmaty v SSSR,” 17.

11. *Ibid.*, 18.

12. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 22.

competitor. He was, however, an influential official in Krylenko's Chess Section, and he was able to use his position to leverage himself into a place in the tournament.¹³

The strongest Soviet player to compete at Moscow 1925, Efim Dmitrievich Bogoliubov (1889-1952), was a member of the older generation. He had been the clear winner in the qualifying tournament, which also made him the reigning Soviet champion. Significantly, he had recently won the German Open Champion as well.¹⁴ These dueling titles were a product of his unique situation. He was a Soviet citizen (born in pre-Revolutionary Kiev), but his home and his heart were in Germany.

Bogoliubov, like Alekhin and Vainshtein, had been competing at the Mannheim Tournament in Germany in August 1914. With the outbreak of war, the enemy nationals among the tournament participants were interned at Triberg (see Chapter One). In sharp contrast to the experience of the others, internment agreed with Bogoliubov. He embraced his captors—literally. He married a German girl, settled down in Triberg, and started a family. Life as a German burgher suited him. Outside of chess, he was a good-natured, family man. A contemporary and close acquaintance described him this way:

He was a friendly man, simple in his manner of talking and joking, simple in his optimism and his somewhat excessive professional pride, simple even in his vices, especially his exaggerated fondness for food (a favorite delicacy was frankfurters with potato salad). Very plump and very good-natured—though boorish when joking—Bogoliubov was

13. A. Chistiakov, "Staraiia shakhmatnaia Moskva" [Old Moscow Chess], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, August 1974, 22.

14. Graham Burgess, *Chess Highlights of the 20th Century* (London: Gambit, 1999), 55.

much more amiable than his compatriot Alekhine [Alekhin]. He reminded me of the bear that slapped at a fly on his sleeping master's head, killing fly and man together.¹⁵

His oafish social demeanor, however, was deceptive. Bogoliubov was one of the best chess players in the world. His style was described by rivals as “brutal.”¹⁶ Moscow 1925 would find him at the very top of his game.

In addition to the star, Bogoliubov, Soviet representatives included Petr Romanovskii, Fedor Boaturchu, Boris Verlinskii and Il'in-Zhenevskii, who remained an important figure in Soviet chess. Il'in-Zhenevskii had retreated back to his hometown of Leningrad after losing the chess leadership to Krylenko in 1924. He quickly took over the editorship of *Shakhmatnyi listok*, replacing the hapless Vainshtein. He inaugurated his duties with a long editorial in January 1925, laying out the position that both the magazine and the Leningrad organization would follow in Soviet chess. In short, both would closely adhere to the party line.¹⁷

In addition to performing his organizational responsibilities, Il'in-Zhenevskii found plenty of time to work on his chess, and he concentrated on shoring up the weaknesses in his game. For the first time in a decade, he had some leisure, a more relaxed life, and reasonably good health. Although his best chess years had been stolen by the Revolution and Civil War, he still hoped to realize some of his potential. In his words: “Many people maintained that my chess development was at an end.

15. Hans Kmoch, “Yefim Dimitrievich Bogolyubov [Bogoliubov] (1889-1952),” in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2004), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch01.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2013).

16. Ibid.

17. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, “Kakim putem dolzhno idti razvitie shakhmatnoi zhizni” [By What Path Should Chess Progress], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, January 31, 1925, 18-19.

They thought that I had already reached my limit, but I did not concur.”¹⁸ Events proved him right; he was on the cusp of his greatest chess achievements.

In late 1924, Il'in-Zhenevskii finally gained the master title by virtue of his performance in the Leningrad Championship, where he shared first place. Then, in early 1925, he finished high enough in the Fourth Soviet Championship to earn a berth in the Moscow International Tournament.¹⁹ Il'in-Zhenevskii's concentrated efforts had won the right to compete in an international tournament, to cross swords with the world's elite—an opportunity granted to few players of his caliber.

Among the Western elite chosen to compete in the event were the current world champion, a Cuban named José Raúl Capablanca (1888-1942), and the ex-champion, Emmanuel Lasker of Germany. Also in attendance was the Czech “hypermodern” iconoclast, Richard Réti (1889-1929), praised by Krylenko for carrying out a revolution in chess.²⁰ Réti's antithesis, the neo-romantic American Frank Marshall (1877-1944), also attended. Savelii Grigor'evich Tartakover (1887-1956), noted for his eccentricities, added color to the assembly. In fact, most of the world's chess elite were in attendance, with one very notable exception. Conspicuous by his absence was Alexander Alekhin, expatriate Russian and future world champion.

18. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Notes of a Soviet Master*, trans. Bernard Cafferty (Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986), 31.

19. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 22.

20. Krylenko, “Shakhmaty v SSSR,” 5.

As Krylenko explained, Alekhin was absent because he had gone abroad and “broken his links with us.”²¹

Alekhin’s relationship with Soviet power had certainly had its ups and downs. After the Revolution, he served the Soviet state, first as police investigator (involved in criminal rather than political cases), and then in the Comintern. He did well in both positions—his analytic abilities served him in the former, his linguistic skills in the latter.²² But his social background made professional progress problematic.

Aristocratic roots were a dangerous attribute in those times. When Alekhin filed an application to join the Party in late 1919, he was rejected on account of his social origins.²³ But Alekhin had more to worry about than professional advancement.

Evidence is fragmentary and sources contradictory, but Alekhin was arrested at least once, perhaps twice, and nearly executed while trying to leave Russia via Odessa in 1917. But his chess reputation and political contacts helped him survive and eventually emigrate legally. When he left the Soviet Union in 1921, he did so with the permission, if not the blessing, of the Soviet government; his exit visa was signed by Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Lev Mikhailovich Karakhan (1889-1937).²⁴

21. Ibid.

22. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Match Alekhin-Capablanca* [Match Alekhin-Capablanca] (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1927), 22-24.

23. Ibid., 22.

24. A. A. Kotov, *Aleksandr Alekhin*, (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1973), 10.

Safely abroad, however, he wrote a pamphlet on Soviet chess that was interpreted as critical of Soviet power.²⁵ He, in turn, was sharply criticized in the Soviet press.²⁶ He subsequently relocated to Paris and began the process of becoming a naturalized French citizen.²⁷ Tensions with Moscow were not yet as acute as they would later become, but they were bad enough. In spite of his convincing victory in the very strong Baden Baden International Tournament of 1925, Alekhin was not on the list of foreign invitees. As Krylenko later said, there was never even the thought of any negotiations with Alekhin about his participation in the tournament. His talent was immaterial; no Soviet player that showed the slightest hint of hostility to the Soviet state, its workers, or its chess organization would be allowed to compete in Soviet events. And Alekhin, said Krylenko, had already revealed himself as socially alien and politically hostile to Soviet power.²⁸ Even without Alekhin, however, the organizers attracted enough foreign talent to make Moscow 1925 the strongest international tournament of the year.

25. A. A. Aljechin [Alekhin], *Das schachleben in Sowjet-Russland* [Chess Life in Soviet Russia] (Berlin: Kagan, 1921), 4.

26. A. A. Kotov, *Aleksandr Alekhin*, (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1973), 9.

27. William Winter, *Kings of Chess, Chess Champions of the Twentieth Century: Lasker, Capablanca, Euwe, Alekhine and Botvinnik* (New York: Dover, 1966), 112.

28. Ispolbiuro Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechnoi Sektsii VSKF, "Postanovlenie Ispolburo Vsesoiuznoi Shakhseksii o Chempione SSSR E. D. Bogoliubove" [Resolution of the All-Union Chess Section on Soviet Champion E. D. Bogoliubov], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, December 25, 1926, 1.

As preparations for the tournament continued, there was a parallel campaign to raise public awareness and interest in the event. The workers' clubs in Moscow were drafted into the effort. Newspapers and chess publications printed stories about the upcoming tournament designed to pique the interest of readers. For example, a low-priced, attractive booklet was published in Moscow that contained plenty of photographs of the participants, colorful biographies, discussions of their relative strengths, and predictions about the outcome (the author, like most Russians, favored Capablanca's chances).²⁹

But even in this light piece, ideological components were on display. The preface celebrated the heightened interest in the tournament, not only among chess fans, but also among the masses. It attributed the game's popularity to heroes in the Party (e.g. Krylenko) who championed a special place in Soviet cultural life for chess.³⁰

Finally, with all of the participants accounted for and most of the preparations made, the big day arrived. On November 9, the opening ceremony and dinner was held in the prestigious House of Unions, next to Red Square.³¹ Naturally, Krylenko gave the opening speech, addressing a hall crowded with senior Soviet officials,

29. E. M. Tarasov, *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve, 1925: biografii i kharakteristiki inostrannykh gostei* [Moscow International Chess Tournament Moscow, 1925: Biographies and Styles of Foreign Guests] (Moscow: Kolos, 1925), 14.

30. Vladimir Ivanovich Nenarokov, "Predislovie" [Foreword], in Tarasov, *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve, 1925*, 4.

31. Grigor'ev, "Shakhmaty v SSSR," 17.

prominent journalists, the twenty-one participants, and anyone else able to get a ticket.³² Krylenko told the throng that chess was now the property of the workers and peasants, and the tournament was conducted for their benefit. The Soviet Union would now demonstrate to the world how culture thrived under socialism.³³ Capablanca, as world champion, had the honor of speaking next. He graciously used the occasion to hold out an olive branch to his bitter rival, Lasker, the former world champion. Then it was Lasker's turn. He grudgingly acknowledged Capablanca's gesture, but the gist of his speech was political, and it was greeted with immense enthusiasm. Lasker spoke with admiration of what he had seen in Moscow and Leningrad the previous year. He had nothing but praise for political chess. Chess was being redefined in the revolutionary state. It had been "a game of kings, princes, cardinals, and statesmen, but henceforth the game of the masses."³⁴ Tartakover, too, spoke, and his use of Russian and his praise for political chess earned him sustained applause.³⁵

32. Ibid., 18.

33. Savelii Grigor'evich Tartakover, *Shakhmatnaia pravda: sovremennaia teoriia debutov s točki zreniia Moskovskogo turnira* [Chess Truth: Modern Opening Theory in Light of the Moscow-1925 Tournament] (Leningrad: Nauka i shkola, 1926), 5.

34. "Chess Rivals Bury Hatchet," *New York Times*, November 10, 1925.

35. Hans Kmoch, "Savielly Grigoriewitsch Tartakower [Savelii Grigor'evich Tartakover], Doctor Juris (1887-1956)," in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2006), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch03.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2013).

The other players took their cues from Lasker and Tartakover; it would have been ungracious to do otherwise. After all, the foreign players were all the guests of the Soviet government. All expenses—accommodations, transportation, meals, entertainment, even laundry—were paid for by the Soviet government.³⁶

Tournament play began the next day, November 10. The organizers had chosen a site worthy of the occasion; competition took place in the stately “Fountain Hall” of the majestic Second House of Soviets (today the Metropol hotel). Three large halls were used for the event, and they were jammed with spectators throughout the tournament.³⁷

The playing conditions, however, fell somewhat short of ideal. The Fountain Room was overheated and poorly ventilated, creating a stifling atmosphere that was exacerbated by the throngs of spectators who constantly filled the hall to three and even four times its capacity.³⁸ Under these circumstances, the beautiful fountains added an unwelcome tropical element to the mix. Capablanca, a Cuban who might have been accustomed to tropical conditions, was the most vocal in his complaints.³⁹

The playing conditions may have been a factor in the large number of upsets; the competition was marked by some very surprising results. For one thing,

36. Von M. Angster, “Capablanca auf Moskau 1925” [Capablanca on Moscow 1925], *Neueste schachnachrichten*, January-March, 1926, 108.

37. Grigor'ev, “Shakhmaty v SSSR,” 25.

38. Angster, “Capablanca auf Moskau 1925,” 109.

39. G. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya* [Selected Games and Memoirs] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1967), 80.

Capablanca was clearly out of form. He started slowly with a series of draws, and then he actually lost a game in the fifth round. Whenever a world champion loses a game, the chess world notices. But when Capablanca lost a game, it was a sensation. His technique was considered nearly flawless. Prior to 1924, he had managed to avoid losing a single game for eight years; at New York 1924 he had finally lost to Richard Réti, another world contender. But now the great Capablanca lost to . . . Il'in-Zhenevskii. In a highly flawed game in which Capablanca said he “played like a lunatic,”⁴⁰ the shell-shocked Bolshevik defeated the reigning world champion—a classic Cinderella story.⁴¹ Adding insult to injury, Capablanca would subsequently lose to another of the lesser Soviet lights, Boris Markovich Verlinskii (1888-1950). At this point the Soviet foreign office received official telegrams from the Cuban government, anxiously inquiring about the state of Capablanca’s health.⁴²

Capablanca’s woes seemed to open the way for the ex-champion, Lasker, but his fatigue due to advancing age (he was fifty-seven) gave an opening, in turn, to the dark horse, Bogoliubov, who played this tournament flawlessly. His spectacular first-place finish at Moscow 1925 would be his finest achievement. In fact, it would anchor his claims to the right to a match for the world title.

40. Isaak Maksovich Linder and Vladimir Linder, *Kapablanka v Rossii* [Capablanca in Russia] (Moscow: Sovetskaya Rossiya, 1988), 81.

41. The score of this game is included in the Appendix.

42. Tartakover, *Shakhmatnaia pravda*, 4.

By conventional standards, Moscow 1925 was an extremely important tournament in chess history. Although it had the distinction of being the first state-planned, state-sponsored international chess tournament, it was also famous for its creative games, theoretical advances, and surprising upsets. Some of the games, such as the “windmill attack” in Torre’s great defeat of Lasker, have become part of the catechism of any aspiring master. But, as interesting as the chess was, the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925 was never intended as an exhibition of chess for its own sake. In the eyes of the organizers, the chess was secondary; the social and political impact was primary. A political evaluation of the tournament must take this into account.

A re-enumeration and examination of Krylenko's goals supplies a useful set of evaluative criteria. His ends were three-fold. Briefly, the first goal was to advance the ends of political chess in the Soviet Union. The second was to foster the development of Soviet chess players, laying the groundwork for the day when they would dominate world chess. The third goal was to demonstrate to the world that a flourishing cultural and economic life existed in the world’s first workers’ state. Each goal is discussed below.

Goal One: Political Chess for the Masses

Krylenko’s first goal was to produce a spectacle that would be an effective vehicle to advance the primary agenda of political chess: the popularization of chess among the masses. Krylenko had seen first-hand the enthusiasm generated by the

Lasker visit in 1924. He planned to duplicate the Lasker phenomenon, and increase it exponentially. Here, Krylenko enjoyed a nearly unqualified success.

During the month-long event, the Moscow tournament generated a level of excitement without precedent. Public interest in the chess tournament was at a fever pitch, and the excitement was genuine. Spectator tickets for each round sold out days in advance.⁴³ Those lucky or important enough to watch in the Fountain Hall silently followed the action on demonstration boards attached to the walls above the players' tables. Others, less silently, watched the action on large demonstration boards that were set up in the adjacent halls. Eventually demonstration boards were even placed outside the building, where large crowds of disappointed ticket-seekers and curious bystanders collected, despite the cold. On some days, the swarms of fans paralyzed traffic on adjacent streets.⁴⁴ As Krylenko said, "Everybody, even people who did not play chess, not to mention those who did, came to the . . . Second House of Soviets where the tournament took place. Even a militiaman while dispersing the crowd, told them: 'Go home, there was a draw anyway.'"⁴⁵

All over Moscow, the daily results were posted and scrutinized by chess fans. The tournament was the main topic of conversations on the streets, trams, and

43. Angster, "Capablanca auf Moskau 1925," 108.

44. Frank J. Marshall, *Marshall's Best Games of Chess* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 24; Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya*, 80.

45. "V-i Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechy S"ezd" [Vth All-Union Chess-Checkers Congress] (August 1927), GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 2, list 26.

buses.⁴⁶ Even remote areas in Siberia sent telegrams of greeting and congratulations to the players, and tournament news was disseminated all over the Soviet Union in radio messages and newspaper articles.⁴⁷

Capablanca observed that Bogoliubov, upon winning the tournament, became an instant celebrity in Moscow. Crowds of well-wishers followed him about, and his appearance in a public place brought thunderous applause. Capablanca expressed amazement at the Russians' "genuine enthusiasm for chess, which one could even describe as a passion."⁴⁸

The enormous excitement generated by the tournament in Moscow was captured in a silent, comedy film directed by Vsevolod Illarionovich Pudovkin (1893-1953), *Shakhmatnaia goryachka* (*Chess Fever*).⁴⁹ The story is a boilerplate melodrama: a relationship is destroyed and then redeemed—by chess. One thing that makes this film remarkable is the footage from the tournament. Moscow 1925 is almost certainly the first tournament for which there is a video record.

The film itself also proved a valuable vehicle for sustaining interest after the tournament, using the images to further popularize chess. The message was simple: chess is fun. But ideological motifs were also in place. In the course of the film, a

46. Grigor'ev, "Shakhmaty v SSSR," 22.

47. Tartakover, *Shakhmatnaia pravda*, 4.

48. Angster, "Capablanca auf Moskau 1925," 108.

49. Vsevolod Pudovkin and Nikolai Shpikovskii, dirs., "Shakhmatnaya goryachka" [Chess Fever] (1925; repr. (dvd), London: Connoisseur Video, 1993).

petty criminal was reformed by chess; peasants were introduced to chess; a false beggar was unmasked by chess; a cynical woman was seduced by chess.

On closer examination, however, the film also revealed an interesting social contradiction under the New Economic Policy (NEP). Because of the enormous demand, tickets were expensive and scarce. One needed money and connections to get into Fountain Hall. So, in spite of the self-conscious staging of the proper ideological elements, the film's candid scenes of tournament spectators clearly show scores of what one observer characterized as "overdressed NEP-men" who knew nothing about chess, but considered it important to see-and-be-seen at the tournament.⁵⁰

Pudovkin's film, however, certainly served its main purpose—it helped make chess even more popular. But for the Soviet authorities, of course, popularizing chess was not an end in itself; it was the means to an end. Chess was a tool for raising the cultural level of the Russian masses, preparing them for socialism.

But this assumption—that chess would raise the cultural level of the masses — had always been always the weakest point in the ideological argument. Pressed for evidence, advocates of political chess had little more than anecdotes and conjecture based on assumptions. The tournament provided an opportunity to buttress their argument.

A Soviet-sponsored psychological study conducted during the tournament contributed enormously to the legitimization of political chess. It was the first non-

50. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya*, 84.

Freudian, scientific study of chess psychology. A team of psychologists from the Psychotechnical Laboratory of the State Central Institute of Physical Culture designed, carried out, and interpreted the experiments. The stated intention of the study was to use experimental methods to identify the mental processes that determine chess ability. A more practical question was also addressed: what mental attributes are developed by playing chess? In addition, the nature of chess—was it a game, an art, a science?—was also addressed.⁵¹ The study's principal conclusions strongly supported the political chess position.

First, the study found that the attributes associated with chess skill (memory, planning, calculation, visualization, imagination) were attainable by practice and a consciously directed program of self-improvement. Further, once they were attained, the attributes would generalize to other areas of life.⁵² In short, chess had an “explicitly wholesome influence . . . upon the mental development of all those engaged.”⁵³ These abilities associated with chess were imminently practical. For example, a worker who learned how to plan his chess games would do a better job of developing strategies for production. These findings, of course, reinforced the political position and justified state sponsorship of chess.

51. I. N. D'iakov, N. V. Petrovskii, and P. A. Rudik, *Psikhologiya shakhmatnoi igry: na osnov psikhotekhnicheskikh ispytanii uchastnikov mezhdunarodnogo shakhmatnogo turnira v Moskve v 1925 g.* [Psychology of Chess: Based on the Psychological Testing of Participants in the International Chess Tournament in Moscow 1925] (Moscow: Izdanie avtorov, 1926), 11.

52. Ibid., 152.

53. Ibid., 157.

Second, in addressing the essential nature of chess, the study reached a very important ideological conclusion. The researchers concluded that, in its essence, chess was both a science and an art. The implications were enormous. The constant tension between methodology and creativity gave chess a dialectical core. The dialectical nature of chess came, not from the alternating moves of the opponents (Il'in-Zhenevskii's relatively simplistic view). Rather, the study found that chess, part science and part art, was defined by a dialectical interplay between objective and subjective elements.⁵⁴ This conclusion about the dialectical nature of chess was an important vindication for Krylenko; it gave political chess ideological legitimacy.

The study's practical and ideological findings also gave energy and purpose to the outreach efforts of the Chess Section. Complementing the spectacle of Moscow 1925, an ambitious campaign to teach and promote chess was conducted in the factories and the countryside. Many lower-level masters, especially those of the older generation, were employed by the Chess Section as traveling propagandists. One of these vagabonds was Fedor Ivanovich Duz-Khotimirskii (1881-1965), who finished twentieth at Moscow 1925. As Duz-Khotimirskii related in his memoirs, he was drafted by the Chess Section to carry the fight to the provinces. For six years, Duz-Khotimirskii experienced, firsthand, the vastness of the Soviet Union, "from the White Sea to the Caucasus, from the Baltic to Vladivostok,"⁵⁵ promoting chess in

54. Ibid.

55. F. I. Duz-Khotimirskii, *Izbrannye partii* [Selected Games] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1954), 25.

eight Soviet republics. He organized chess sections in local physical culture committees, initiated chess columns in newspapers, gave lectures and simuls, and participated in local competitions. Most of the focus of the campaign was on workers and their children.⁵⁶ The big push into the rural countryside would begin later. Even so, Duz-Khotimirskii's account describes a political chess program incredible in depth as well as breadth.

At the end of 1926, the Chess Section sent N. Grigoriev on a ten-week fact-finding trip to evaluate the progress made in the campaign to take chess to the provinces. Grigoriev was amazed. Everywhere he went, interest was high. Chess organizations were thriving. He gave simuls, and the strength of the competition, even the children, reminded him of players in Moscow. He gave lectures, and the audiences listened with strained attention and then asked penetrating questions, not only about the game, but also about its politics. They wanted to discuss political chess, to unravel the relationship between Soviet and Western chess—bourgeois and proletarian. It was, he said, as if a “great chess wave had swept over the Soviet Union.”⁵⁷

But a letter to the editor published in *64* was more critical of the effort in the provinces. The writer explained that a wave of “chess fever” had indeed swept out of Moscow during the international tournament, and it had inundated the provincial

56. Ibid., 25-26.

57. N. Grigor'ev, “Po shakhmatnoi Rossii: putevye zametki instruktora” [Chess across Russia: An Instructor's Travelogues], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, October 30, 1926, 1-2.

cities. But there was not adequate organization in place to channel the flood of interest that was generated. Local organizers lacked guidance from the center, and a great deal of the enthusiasm was allowed to dissipate. Now, the writer urged, the Chess Section should take advantage of the lull to reorganize, break away from the attachment to political culture, and affiliate directly with the trade unions or maybe the academic organizations. At any rate, the writer continued, the Chess Section should send out more masters to hold lectures and simuls. More organizers should be sent to set up chess clubs and arrange tournaments, living chess exhibitions, and other spectacles.⁵⁸

Goal two: Training Soviet players

Building a cadre of world-class Soviet chess masters was the second goal of the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925. This can be divided into two related sub-goals. Krylenko wanted to test his current masters who, excepting Bogoliubov, had not had the opportunity to meet the world's best. He also had a related, but longer-term goal: he wanted to foster the development of a new generation of truly Soviet players—players who had grown up under Soviet power and internalized the tenets of the Soviet system.

With regard to the former, the performance of Krylenko's players at Moscow 1925 was mixed. The winner of the tournament, of course, was a Soviet player of the

58. G. Saltykov, letter to the editor, *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, August 30, 1926, 4.

prerevolutionary generation, Efim Bogoliubov, who performed brilliantly. Bogoliubov, however, posed a problem for Krylenko. As discussed above, he maintained his Soviet citizenship, but he clung to his home and family in Germany. By the end of 1925, Bogoliubov was becoming convinced that his professional interests were not compatible with Soviet power. He found that his Soviet passport made travel to some parts of Europe problematic. Further, he had been very heavily criticized in the chess press earlier in 1925 for playing at a major tournament in Baden Baden, Germany, without official permission. His presence had compromised the work of Krylenko's official observer/participant at Baden Baden, the more politically dependable I. L. Rabinovich.⁵⁹ Bogoliubov's camaraderie with Alekhin at Baden Baden had undermined Krylenko's boycott. The article repeatedly mentioned Bogoliubov by name and explicitly warned that any future transgressions would jeopardize his relationship with the Chess Section.⁶⁰ Bogoliubov had every reason to wonder if Soviet citizenship was consistent with furthering his chess career.

Standing in sharp contrast to Bogoliubov's triumph at Moscow 1925, the other Soviet representatives fared less well. Although most of the Soviet players participated more-or-less successfully, especially considering that this was their first experience in such elite circumstances, they simply couldn't compete consistently

59. N. I. Grekov and Aleksandr Alekhin, *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Baden-Badene, 1925 g.: sbornik vsekh partii turnira* [International Chess Tournament in Baden Baden, 1925: Collection of All Tournament Games] (Moscow: Izd. avtora, 1927), 5.

60. "Po povodu uchastiia shakhmatistov SSSR v mezhdunarodnykh turnirakh," 83.

against the world's best. The next highest place, after Bogoliubov, among the Soviet players was claimed by Romanovskii, who tied for seventh place. Il'in-Zhenevskii and Verlinskii may have humiliated the world champion, but the former finished in a tie for ninth place and the latter in a tie for twelfth. Two Soviet players took the bottom positions: Duz-Khotimirskii and Zubarev (a late admission with political connections) came in twentieth and twenty-first, respectively. Capablanca's lukewarm praise must have rankled Krylenko, but it was accurate: "The young chessplayers of the USSR survived their baptism of fire in Moscow in excellent fashion, and showed that they are worthy of the hopes placed upon them for the future."⁶¹

Krylenko tacitly acknowledged the deficit when he declared a moratorium on international tournaments. Officially, the rationale was that big tournaments were not as cost-effective as traditional organizing such as Duz-Khotimirskii's activities (see above). For now, Krylenko claimed, the Soviet Union needed to economize in the face of the needs of industrialization.⁶² Certainly this was true, but Krylenko probably also wanted to buy time to absorb the lessons of 1925 and plot his revenge. Overall, the best evidence for Krylenko's dissatisfaction with the performance of Soviet players was the ten-year hiatus that elapsed before he felt confident enough to host another international tournament.

61. Angster, "Capablanca auf Moskau 1925," 108.

62. N. V. Krylenko, foreword to *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve 1925 g.: sbornik partii* [International Chess Tournament in Moscow 1925: Collected Games], by E. D. Bogoliubov (Leningrad: Shakhmatnyi listok, 1927), 5.

In spite of his temporary disappointment, Krylenko remained optimistic about the future of Soviet chess, confidently predicting that “in the coming years the Soviet Union will find the strength to speak again on the international chess scene.”⁶³ He had good reason to be confident; he was already conducting a crash program in chess development, designed to bring a new generation of Soviet players to the fore in just ten years.

This crash program was the outcome of the second goal’s long-term facet (training a new generation of Soviet players). Krylenko realized, correctly, that he could not pin his hopes on the politically unreliable Bogoliubov, while the politically impeccable Zubarev and Il’in-Zhenevskii were simply not players of world caliber. He needed players who combined the political integrity of Il’in-Zhenevskii with the excellence of Bogoliubov. To this end he would foster the development of a new generation of stronger and ideologically-dependable Soviet players.

The strategy employed by Krylenko dovetailed nicely with the original goal of political chess: inspiring the Soviet masses. Krylenko was, in effect, playing the odds. The population had always contained potential grandmasters; the trick was to introduce them to organized chess early and supply them with the tools they needed to achieve their potential. From the newly empowered masses, the next Capablanca(s) would spring.

To this end, the foreign participants were encouraged with generous honorariums to give simuls on their free days during the tournament, some in

63. Ibid.

Moscow and some in Leningrad. These hugely popular events provided a testing ground for the new generation. A representative example was Mikhail Moiseyevich Botvinnik (1911-1995).

In 1925, young Botvinnik at the age of fourteen had already earned a reputation in scholastic chess circles. He was chosen by the organizer, Iakov Gerasimovich Rokhlin (1903-1995) as one in a group of thirty Leningrad players competing in a simul against the World Champion, Capablanca. This simul was the event of the season in Leningrad. When Rokhlin telephoned Botvinnik to give him the news, he asked if there were any special requests. Botvinnik asked for a spectator ticket for his brother; Rokhlin rudely refused. "Be grateful that you are playing," he advised.⁶⁴

Botvinnik was grateful, although he nearly missed his opportunity. Delayed by a row with his mother (who disapproved of chess), Botvinnik arrived late and breathless at the Leningrad Philharmonic on November 20. The hall was very crowded and already oppressively hot. Two of Botvinnik's classmates had taken his seat, prepared, apparently, to defend their school's honor if their champion did not arrive. They reluctantly surrendered the center of the chair to Botvinnik, but remained perched on either side, giving unsolicited (and unheeded) advice throughout the game.⁶⁵

64. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 16.

65. M. M. Botvinnik, *Analiticheskie i kriticheskie raboty: 1923-1941* [Analytical and Critical Work: 1923-1941] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1984), 7.

Botvinnik, like the other participants, was very impressed with the world champion, finding him self-confident and handsome. But Capablanca was less impressed by his schoolboy opponent, and he fatally underestimated the boy's strength. He took chances, found himself in an inferior middle game, and had to surrender a pawn to avoid catastrophe. The subsequent endgame was Botvinnik's to win.⁶⁶ Upon resigning, Capablanca exclaimed that in Europe, players of Botvinnik's caliber played in tournaments, not simul. This was reported in the Soviet press as Capablanca's praise for his young opponent. Actually, it was a complaint. Capablanca felt it was unsporting to include a player of such strength in a simul. He showed his dissatisfaction by his manner of resignation; he swept the remaining pieces off the board. Capablanca later praised Botvinnik's play in print, but at the moment of defeat, his manners were boorish, and his face bore an expression that was "not at all pleasant."⁶⁷

Botvinnik's sensational victory brought him to the attention of Krylenko and the Chess Section. Over the next decade, young Botvinnik and other emerging young talents would be groomed for success.⁶⁸ Krylenko's cadre of future Soviet grandmasters would eventually found what would be known as the Soviet school of chess, and Botvinnik would emerge as its leader.

66. Ibid., 7-8.

67. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 17.
This score of this game is included in the Appendix.

68. Botvinnik, *Analiticheskie i kriticheskie raboty: 1923-1941*, 8.

Goal Three: World Recognition

Krylenko's third goal was part of a general diplomatic outreach program. In the mid-1920s, the Soviet state was unleashing a charm offensive in international relations. Gone were the heady days of international defiance; circumstances had changed. It was clear that no general European revolution was imminent, and survival required better relations with the West. The Soviets became correspondingly less ideological in their foreign relations. In 1922 there had been a major diplomatic breakthrough with Germany: the Treaty of Rapallo. In 1924, Britain grudgingly offered the Soviets diplomatic recognition. Private businesses also began to establish commercial links during the New Economic Program (NEP) in the mid-1920s. The Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925 also played a part in the normalization of foreign relations. In general, the tournament was an opportunity to showcase a benign and cultured Moscow.

The eyes of the chess world were certainly fixed on Moscow in November and December 1925, but it wasn't just the chess world that was interested. Major newspapers featured detailed coverage of the tournament; its uniqueness made it much more newsworthy than the average tournament. Newspapers in Europe and the United States ran extensive, largely-positive stories on the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925. Krylenko exaggerated when he claimed that for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people all over the world, the tournament made Moscow the center of attention. But there certainly was press coverage, and it was generally positive. Krylenko also claimed that the world would be forced to recognize

that the Soviet Union had the cultural interest and the organizational ability necessary to successfully undertake such an ambitious enterprise.⁶⁹ It is difficult to know what people did or did not recognize, but it is significant that chess organizers in New York made preliminary contacts with their counterparts in Moscow to explore the idea that the two cities could jointly host the next match for the world championship.⁷⁰ Although it would ultimately come to nothing, such an arrangement certainly made sense in 1925, as Capablanca's next challenger was widely expected to be Bogoliubov.

Capablanca may have also played an additional role in furthering the diplomatic goals of the tournament. Capablanca was not only the world chess champion; he was also an employee of the Cuban Foreign Office, serving since 1913 as a Commercial Counsel. Interestingly, his first post had been to St. Petersburg, where he remained until he was recalled in July 1914.⁷¹

The extent of Capablanca's actual diplomatic responsibilities is disputed. Secondary sources generally agreed that his duties were light, but conscientiously performed. His wife's memoir, however, suggested that his diplomatic duties were

69. Krylenko, foreword to *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve 1925 g.*, 4-5.

70. Tartakover, *Shakhmatnaia pravda*, 4.

71. "Interview with Capablanca," *New York World*, October 25, 1925.

considerable.⁷² If his wife's assessment was accurate, the following story may have more than passing significance.

During the tournament, on the evening of November 27, Capablanca met with senior party and government officials at the home of Krylenko, ostensibly to entertain top Soviet officials with a special simul. The meeting was very private (in fact, secret); there were no contemporary references to it in the Soviet press (neither chess nor popular), which is very curious considering that all aspects of the tournament were extensively reported and highly publicized.

Capablanca, however, told the *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow about the events of that evening, and he related them in interesting detail. The World Champion reported that twenty officials attended the meeting. He also mentioned that he won all seventeen of his games. Apparently three officials in attendance did not play. Capablanca named two of them; neither Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Alexei Ivanovich Rykov (1881-1938), nor Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgy Vasil'evich Chicherin (1872-1936), played in the simul, although both were clearly present. The third non-playing official, unfortunately, was not named. It might have been Stalin (who was not a chess player), but it could not have been Trotskii. Capablanca specifically said that he regretted Trotskii's absence, as

72. Edward Winter, "The Genius and the Princess," (March 14, 2012), <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/capablancaolga.html> (accessed June 13, 2013).

Trotsky's reputation as a strong chess player was known to him.⁷³ Apparently Capablanca did not realize that Trotsky was already in the political wilderness.

Did diplomatic/commercial discussions take place between Capablanca and Soviet officials? There was no documentary record, but circumstances certainly suggested the possibility. But if there were discussions, little came from them. Formal diplomatic relations with Cuba were not established until 1943, long after even the United States had relented and granted recognition. There's no disputing, however, that Soviet officials understood and hoped to benefit from the more general diplomatic value of the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925.

Echoing *Shakhmatnyi listok's* hope that Lasker, in 1924, would tell the chess world what he had seen Soviet Russia,⁷⁴ the Soviets now hoped that the foreign participants in Moscow 1925 would report their experience in glowing terms. Many of them did. Richard Réti, whose hypermodern chess theories Krylenko had praised as revolutionary, seemed to understand the spirit of political chess better than many of the other players. At the tournament's conclusion, he wrote: "I'm happy to be in a country where chess is the people's game. The masters, aware that they are creating for the masses rather than for closed circles, are able to realize their full potential."⁷⁵

73. "Capablanca Beats 17 Soviet Experts," *New York Times*, November 19, 1925.

74. Samuil Osipovich Vainshtein, "Privet velichaisheму shahmatnomu myslitel'iu Emmanuilu Laskeru pervomu zagraničnomu gostiu v shahmatnoi sem'e SSSR" [Welcome Greatest Chess Player Emanuel Lasker, First Foreign Visitor to the Soviet Chess Family], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, February 14, 1924, 2.

75. S. G. Tartakover, "Vtoroi etap" [The Second Stage], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, November 25, 1925, 332.

The sole United States participant, Frank Marshall, wrote: “The Russians were very enthusiastic about us.”⁷⁶ During the tournament, Marshall’s patience was sorely tried by Professor D’iakov and his team of psychologists. A journalist related: “In Moscow 1925, I was present when psychiatrists were handing out questionnaires to the participants. Marshall recoiled from the horrible task of filling his out. ‘No, no,’ he protested. ‘Come after the tournament.’”⁷⁷ But aside from the psychologists’ distractions, he was happy with the tournament and very satisfied with his result (he finished fourth). Years later he wrote: “I still wear a comfortable smoking jacket that was presented to me during the [Moscow] tourney.”⁷⁸

Emanuel Lasker, the German ex-world champion, was already on record with positive observations about political chess after his 1924 trip, praising the passion and creativity of Soviet players. In 1925, Lasker had every reason to be satisfied with his second place finish at Moscow, especially since his nemesis, Capablanca had only finished third. Lasker, unlike many of his peers, had an intellectual life outside of chess, and his politics were vaguely leftist. Although he would not return for a decade, Lasker continued to speak well of Moscow and remained a sympathetic friend of the Soviet Union.

76. Marshall, *Marshall's Best Games of Chess*, 24.

77. Hans Kmoch, “Frank James Marshall (1877-1944),” in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2007), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch07.pdf> (assessed June 13, 2013).

78. Marshall, *Marshall's Best Games of Chess*, 24.

Tartakover also applauded the triumph of political chess in the Soviet Union. In a work exploring innovations in opening theory introduced or tested at Moscow 1925, he congratulated Krylenko for formulating the greatest theoretical innovation of all: chess for the masses. Tartakover also graciously pointed out that, while he fully understood that he was playing for the benefit of the masses, the Russian people more than returned the favor with their admiration and hospitality, both of which far surpassed anything he had ever seen in his career.⁷⁹ Tartakover and the Soviet state held one another in mutually high regard; many of Tartakover's books (he was prolific) were translated and printed by the Chess Section's publishing houses.

Capablanca's assessment of Moscow 1925 was more critical. He admired the position achieved by chess in Soviet society. He was astonished and impressed by the popularity of chess in Russia.⁸⁰ But speaking of the tournament itself, he was less charitable.

In an interview in Berlin shortly after the tournament, Capablanca spoke of his experiences with his usual diplomatic reserve: "All of the tournament participants were pleasantly surprised by the extraordinary enthusiasm for chess displayed by all levels of the Russian population."⁸¹ But there was more on Capablanca's mind than chess fever. Taking a slightly ominous tone, he also noted: "As to the techniques and

79. Tartakover, *Shakhmatnaia pravda*, 3-4.

80. Angster, "Capablanca auf Moskau 1925," 108.

81. *Ibid.*

methods of the Moscow tournament, I will refrain for the time being from making any judgments in this respect.”⁸²

By the time he was back in Cuba, he was no longer refraining from making judgments. In article written for a Cuban newspaper, Capablanca blamed his disappointing finish on poor playing conditions:

The tournament was organized by the Soviet government department in charge of all matters related to chess, in accord with the directors of the Moscow Chess Club. The committee responsible for directing and organizing the tournament was composed of young members who, although enthusiastic and eager to do this well, were lacking in experience. The result was deficient organization as regards the needs of players for showing all that they were capable of producing I imagine that some of the other masters left Moscow thinking the same as I did; that is, they were very grateful for being well received and well treated, but at the same time were very grieved not to have been able to show their true powers.⁸³

In fairness to Capablanca, the context for the article was his ongoing ambition to fundamentally alter chess: refashioning the board to ten-by-ten squares and adding a pair of new pieces. This was necessary, Capablanca maintained, because chess had been played out; Capablanca, who claimed he could draw at will with any master, had achieved perfection. But, after Moscow 1925, he was in the awkward position of justifying his scheme when the world had seen the limits of his perfection. So, to salvage his project, he blamed his shortcomings on unspecified problems with the playing conditions.

82. Ibid.

83. J. R. Capablanca, “El Torneo Internacional de Moscú 1925” [The 1925 Moscow International Tournament], *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, March-April 1926, 71.

Certainly there were problems: the heat and humidity of Fountain Hall has already been mentioned; the huge crowds that followed the action inside the Second House of Soviets were not always silent; the pressure on the foreign participants to give simuls on their free days was tiring; the strength of the participants in the simuls may have been unfair; the psychological testing by Professor D'iakov and his team was intrusive; the filming of the movie, "Chess Fever" added an element of spectacle to the event that made some of the tournament participants uncomfortable. But even if the playing conditions were not ideal, all the players were subject to them equally.

If any of Capablanca's grousing reached Krylenko, it would hardly have concerned him. He had gotten most of what he wanted from the foreign specialists. He was publicly confident that when next they met, it would be on more equal terms. But in the meantime, there was work to be done . . . fortresses to be stormed.

Chapter Eight

Expansion and Retrenchment

The years immediately after the Moscow 1925 tournament were a time of both expansion and retrenchment for Soviet chess. On the political front, the overriding issue confronting Krylenko and the Chess Section was the question of power: specifically, who would control Soviet chess? The issue had been partially decided at the Third Congress in 1924, which saw the triumph of political chess, the ascendancy of Moscow, and the elevation of Krylenko to leadership of Soviet chess. To ensure his victory in that fight, Krylenko had made common cause with the workers' chess organizations in the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. By the end of 1925, however, Krylenko's Chess Section was determined to end this dual power and take full control over all aspects of Soviet chess.

Control of Soviet workers' chess would have important ramifications as the Soviets began a contentious courtship with workers' chess organizations in the West. Relations with world bourgeois chess, however, atrophied as Soviet chess turned inward to a large extent, nurturing its new generation and preparing to meet the bourgeois West again when conditions were more favorable. By the late 1920s, the cautious emergence from isolation was framed by the problem of the renegade players and relations with international workers' chess.

In early December 1925, during the waning days of the Moscow International Tournament, Krylenko presided over the Fourth All-Union Chess Congress. The Fourth Congress was not as dramatic as the Third Congress (1924), which had seen

the triumph of political chess (see Chapter Six), but vitally important decisions on matters of organization, policy and power were made. At the end of December the Congress issued an official report. It was lengthy, detailed and very revealing, providing an outline of the issues that would dominate the Soviet chess organization in the second half of the 1920s.

Seventy-four delegates (fifty-seven voting delegates, fourteen non-voting observers, and a handful of foreigners) gathered in Moscow for the Fourth Congress. A presidium was elected, consisting of Krylenko, who closely controlled the proceedings and chaired the important debates; Semen Semenovich Levman (1896-1943), a well-known problemist (composer of chess problems) who oversaw the developing relations with international workers' chess; and Il'in-Zhenevskii, who played little part in the Congress—included in the presidium, perhaps, for the sake of appearance.¹

The delegates were, collectively, a much different group than the delegates who had attended the pivotal Third Congress in 1924. The Third Congress had included relatively few political delegates—delegates who understood the objectives of the labor movement, not to mention the political ramifications of Soviet cultural and educational efforts. The Fourth Congress presented quite a different picture. Most of

1. “IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S”ezd” [IV All-Union Chess-Checkers Congress] (December 1925), GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 1-a, list 4.

the delegates were closely associated with the trade unions and workers' clubs, and they were well-versed in the themes and problems of political work.²

The ascension of this politically astute group was a reflection of the marked increase in the size of the labor chess community. This growth, under the auspices of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (the union clubs now had more than 45,000 members), drove the organizational concerns at the Congress.³ In fact, some delegates felt that recruitment of workers into trade union clubs had become almost too successful, and they expressed concern at the lack of central control over the clubs. "Dizzy with success," some called for a temporary halt to worker recruitment while the organizational structures were put into place that would ensure central control.⁴ In the end, no such moratorium resolution was passed, but that a recruitment moratorium was even debated shows how seriously questions of control were taken.

In general, the Fourth Congress addressed the organizational problems in workers' chess by increasing the reach of Krylenko's Chess Section. It was decided that the organizational issues stemmed from communication problems between the Chess Section and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. The Congress' solution was the interposition of another level of bureaucracy—the Chess Commission—which would serve as an intervening body between the Chess Section and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. The Chess Commission became

2. Ibid., list 1.

3. Ibid., list 4.

4. Ibid., list 8.

the highest governing body dedicated only to overseeing workers' chess. It was staffed by All-Union Chess Section personnel under the leadership of Levman, and it was directly responsible to Krylenko.⁵

Expanding the reach of the Chess Section into the village was also addressed, but only in passing. The relatively weak position of chess among the peasantry was acknowledged and lamented, but there were no formal resolutions passed or new initiatives proposed. There was only a rather vague suggestion that peasant chess might prosper concurrently with chess in the military.⁶ The reasoning was that since most young male peasants cycled through the military, concentrating effort on promoting chess in the military would also serve to introduce chess into the villages. Until the late 1920s, this anemic approach to rural chess remained the norm.

The pressing need to take control of chess in the military (both the army and navy) was given a close scrutiny at the Congress. The rationale for including chess in the military program had not changed since 1920 when it was formulated by Il'in-Zhenevskii (see Chapter Four). The case was easy to make; chess is essentially a military conflict in the form of a game. The Fourth Congress acknowledged that chess was already popular in the military, especially among officers, but it was lagging among the rank and file. In addition to dissemination, there was also a critical question of control. Chess, like any other cultural initiative, was guaranteed the

5. Ibid., listy 19-20.

6. Ibid., list 3.

correct political component only under the direct command of the appropriate political organs.⁷

Having established the political jurisdiction of the Chess Section over military chess, the report devoted several pages to mandating in very specific detail the manner in which the Chess Section's program would be implemented, even including a calendar of military chess events.⁸ Although he relinquished his military command years before, Krylenko still had considerable influence in the military.

The need for better quality and wider dissemination of official chess publications was also on the Fourth Congress' agenda. The two official publications (*Shakhmatnyi listok* and *64*) were deemed satisfactory, and they were retained. The former would continue to serve more advanced players; the latter was ordered to emphasize chess for the masses.⁹

Although the official publications were deemed satisfactory, the chess columns in the general press—national and local—were heavily criticized in debate.¹⁰ The national press, the Congress decided, should pay more attention to public chess life, especially workers' chess. To this end, the Congress demanded the opening of a permanent chess column in *Pravda* and instructed the Chess Section to work out the details with the editors. (Interestingly, while Krylenko was comfortable dictating

7. Ibid., list 24.

8. Ibid., listy 24-28.

9. Ibid., list 8.

10. Ibid., list 9.

terms to the military, he seemed somewhat less confident with the editors of *Pravda*.) Congress also directed that regular chess columns appear in the provincial press, and they should focus on local players and regional events. Finally, Congress instructed the Chess Section to step up its own publishing activities. The Congress wanted more chess books, pamphlets and special editions relating to specific events.¹¹

Also on the agenda was the need for a uniform system of classification for players as they moved through the ranks. The method of categorizing players inherited from the Old Regime was haphazard and arbitrary. The Congress wanted a clearly delineated system of ranks, from beginner to grandmaster, spelled out and codified.¹²

Thorny questions concerning international chess were also debated at the Fourth Congress. At immediate issue was the position of the All-Union Chess Section regarding participation in the Workers' Chess International and the closely associated German Workers' Chess Union. The chairman of the Workers' Chess International (henceforth, *Shakhintern*), Kurt Spiegel, and Alfred Glaser, the head of the German Workers' Chess Union (henceforth, German Union), were both present at the Congress.¹³ The larger problem of the proper relationship between Soviet and Western chess framed the debate, which was lengthy and sometimes contentious.

11. Ibid., listy 28-29.

12. Ibid., list 6.

13. Ibid., list 3-4.

The questions surrounding international competition were complicated, nuanced and very politically sensitive. Krylenko himself presided over the debate. In his opening statement, he reiterated the general Soviet principle of nonparticipation in bourgeois chess organizations. He reminded the delegates that in 1924, the invitation from the new World Chess Federation (FIDE)¹⁴ had been curtly declined by the Chess Section.¹⁵ Founded in Paris in 1924 under the slogan, “we are one people,” FIDE committed the crime of political neutrality, which masked support for the bourgeois status quo. FIDE had sent its invitation in response to Vainshtein’s application for membership. In fact, Vainshtein’s flirtation with this bourgeois body was used against him in the coup by the advocates of political chess at the Third Congress in 1924 (see Chapter Six). Now the Chess Section’s subsequent refusal to accept the FIDE invitation was held up as proof of the Chess Section’s ideological purity. FIDE would subsequently be routinely ridiculed in Soviet publications as a decadent organization—weak and pathetic compared to the vigorous mass movement of workers’ chess.¹⁶

Ideological purity aside, Krylenko had a problem. As one component of his program to train Soviet players, he needed to allow them (limited) access to

14. FIDE is the acronym for the French name of the organization: Fédération internationale des échecs.

15. “IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechy S”ezd,” listy 11-12.

16. S. Levman, “Pod znakom upadka: o tak nazyyvaemom ‘Vcemirnom Shakhmatnom Soiuze’” [In an Atmosphere of Decline: The So-Called “World Chess Federation”], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, August 30, 1926, 1-2.

international bourgeois players and tournaments. This, of course, was one of the motivations that led him to risk the ideologically dangerous flirtation with bourgeois chess that was inherent in hosting a major international tournament. Both the Soviet participation in bourgeois tournaments like Baden-Baden 1925 (Rabinovich had participated with Krylenko's blessing) and, especially, the hosting of Moscow 1925 had received protests from the German Workers' Chess Union, which had a strict policy of zero tolerance for interactions with bourgeois chess (see Chapter Seven). But Krylenko assured the Congress that Soviet political authorities had endorsed the Chess Section's creative interpretation of the ban against contact with bourgeois chess. Only deviationists on the left, Krylenko claimed, would deny the importance of controlled interactions with the bourgeois chess organizations. A huge store of knowledge, experience and technology had accumulated in the bourgeois coffers, and it was the cultural birthright of the workers. Proletarian culture must claim, assimilate and surpass the achievements of bourgeois science and art.¹⁷ Krylenko could buttress his argument for assimilating bourgeois culture by quoting the ultimate authority—

Lenin:

Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.¹⁸

17. "IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S"ezd," listy 11-12.

18. V. I. Lenin, "On Proletarian Culture," in *Lenin's Collected Works*, trans. Julius Katzer, vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 316.

After Krylenko's opening speech, Kurt Spiegel, chair of the *Shakhintern*, spoke to the Congress. His tone was comradely, and he was willing to paper over the ideological divide on the issue of contacts on bourgeois chess. He was very anxious to recruit the Soviets into the organization. Spiegel spoke at length on the history of the *Shakhintern*. He pointed out that in Germany—unlike Russia, where proletarian chess emerged only after the Revolution—workers' chess clubs were already in existence by 1902. Many of these worker's chess clubs were loosely affiliated with the Social Democrats. A decade later, the German Workers' Chess Union was born in Nuremberg in 1912.¹⁹ After the Great War, workers' clubs had also sprung up in Austria, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Denmark. The task of linking these sundry clubs into an international organization fell to the Germans. In April 1923, a small international workers' tournament in Hamburg hosted players from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Denmark. A meeting during the tournament led to the establishment of the Workers' Chess International, or *Shakhintern*, as the Soviets called it. Its mission was to unite the various workers' chess organizations that had emerged in Central and Eastern Europe. A German Social-Democrat, Kurt Spiegel, was elected president. Politically, the Worker's Chess International contained a variety of different of socialist tendencies, but it identified itself in general terms with the international proletarian class struggle.²⁰

19. Robert Elshleger, "25 let rabocheho shakhmatnogo dvizheniia v Germanii" [25 Years of the Workers' Chess Movement in Germany], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 5, 1928, 2.

20. "IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S"ezd," list 12.

The international workers' chess movement had long desired and sought Soviet participation, but earlier attempts to establish relations had all gone awry. As early as 1920, before the creation of the *Shakhintern*, the German Union had attempted to contact Il'in-Zhenevskii. The Germans had heard about his chess initiative, but their inquiries had come during final preparations for the 1920 Soviet Championship (see Chapter Five), and Il'in-Zhenevskii was too busy to respond.²¹ The Soviets had also been invited to participate in the Hamburg Congress, which launched the *Shakhintern*. Unfortunately, the invitation had been directed to Vainshtein's Chess Federation. The apolitical Chess Federation had no interest in joining a patently political organization, and the invitation was ignored.²² After the Third All-Union Chess Congress in 1924 saw the triumph of political chess and its incorporation into the Soviet government, communication was finally established. The *Shakhintern* invited Soviet participation in a Workers' Chess Olympiad in 1925, and the invitation was accepted. Unfortunately, at the last moment German authorities denied entry to the Soviet team. In a commentary on this episode, Levman ridiculed the Germans for imagining sedition in a delegation of chess players. Perhaps, Levman mocked, "they imagined Bolsheviks lurking inside the chess knights."²³

21. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia* [International Working-Class Chess Movement and the Soviet Chess Organization] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i turizm, 1931), 12-13.

22. "IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S"ezd," list 13.

23. S. Levman, "Shakhmaty i Bol'shevistskie batsilly" [Chess and the Bolshevik Basillus], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, July 30, 1925, 1-2.

More recently, however, concerns about the Soviet chess organization were being raised, not by the German government, but rather by some elements in the *Shakhintern* and the organization with which it was loosely affiliated: the Lucerne Sport International. At issue was the Soviet relationship with bourgeois chess organizations. The immediate controversy centered on the 1925 Moscow International Tournament, which was concluding just as the Fourth Congress got underway. In fact, Spiegel was attending the Congress, in part, to investigate the issue of Soviet participation in bourgeois chess. In his speech, however, Spiegel declared himself entirely satisfied with the Soviet position. He diplomatically suggested that in countries like Germany, where the struggle was still evolving, contact with bourgeois chess organizations ought to be avoided. However, in the Soviet Union, where the workers and peasants had already emerged victorious, building on the achievements of bourgeois chess to lift the cultural level of the workers was permissible. The principal position of the *Shakhintern* was that workers' chess was one of the weapons in the fight of the international working class against capitalism and imperialism.²⁴ Since this was the Soviet position as well, Spiegel said, neither he nor the *Shakhintern* could have any fundamental objection to Soviet participation.

After a period of debate, the Congress, likewise, found no doctrinal objection to participation in the *Shakhintern*. The All-Union Chess Section was directed to negotiate Soviet entry as soon as possible.²⁵ In addition, the Congress proactively

24. "IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S"ezd," listy 12-14.

25. Ibid., list 34.

adopted a series of resolutions intended to reiterate and clarify the somewhat cloudy Soviet position regarding contacts with bourgeois chess.

After reiterating the core argument justifying political chess—that chess was a powerful weapon in the battle to raise the cultural level of the workers—it was resolved that Soviet participation in other proletarian organizations, in order to monitor and, if necessary, correct their political content, was a necessary part of the mission of Soviet chess. However, since chess development had historically taken place as a part of bourgeois culture, it was also expedient to have careful, monitored, limited contact with bourgeois chess. The complete exclusion of all contact with the bourgeoisie was an extreme and self-defeating position.

Based on these principles, the following activities were deemed permissible. First, the use of Western chess manuals and appropriate organizational techniques for the purpose of promoting workers' clubs was acceptable. Second, Soviet players were allowed to compete in bourgeois chess tournaments abroad, but only with the blessing of the Chess Section and only for the purpose of training themselves and enriching Soviet chess culture. Third, for the same purpose as the second, the Soviet chess organization may, from time to time, sponsor international events. But this highly sensitive task must only be conducted by the Chess Section, which would have complete control over all aspects of the competition, including the right to determine which players, foreign and Soviet, were invited to participate.²⁶

26. Ibid., listy 32-33.

The consequences of the decision to join the *Shakhintern* require a lengthy treatment; they are the subject of the next chapter (Chapter Nine). The trajectory of the other principal initiatives of the Fourth Congress (expanding workers' chess, penetration into the villages, organization in the military, improvement of chess journalism, and the need for a uniform system of classification) are discussed in more detail below.

The continuing campaign to take chess to the factories was highlighted by a letter published in 64. Party member, worker and volunteer chess organizer, Simon Pavlov, detailed the way he had introduced chess into his factory in the southwestern city of Tambov. In the autumn of 1924, Pavlov, acting on directives from the Third Congress (see Chapter Six), set up a chess board at lunch and invited his comrade workers to play. A curious crowd gathered; a few could already play, some were just curious, but many others were eager to learn. Within a few weeks, chess had become the factory's primary lunch break activity. Soon all available chess sets were in use every day. Because there were more potential players than sets, some of the games were played in consultation—contested between groups of players with a great deal of enthusiasm and humor.

Pavlov claimed that the benefits of factory chess were immediately obvious. The chess players returned to work in the afternoon refreshed and alert, while the workers who slept or loafed during lunch were tired and sluggish. Pavlov also observed that many workers had begun playing chess at home. Chess, he said, was

replacing coarser pastimes in the workers' apartment buildings. In Tambov, he proudly concluded, "chess is becoming a proletarian game."²⁷

Anecdotal evidence notwithstanding, workers' chess, the centerpiece of the Krylenko's work in the All-Union Chess Section, experienced continuing growing pains. The Fourth All-Union Congress had discussed organizational problems in workers' chess and addressed the issue by adding a level of bureaucracy: the Chess Commission (see above). In 1929, very similar problems persisted. Krylenko defined the issue in his speech to the Seventh All-Union Congress in Moscow in 1929. By that time, growth in the workers' organizations had stalled at about 125,000 members. Current human and material resources were hard-pressed to service this membership, and the Chess Section was not well-positioned to undertake the extensive organizational work required to bring more workers into the clubs. The problem, Krylenko explained, was that the strata of workers already organized had been the easiest; they were the "technical intelligentsia" or skilled workers. Naturally, organizers had followed the path of least resistance. The workers left unorganized were the lower proletarians—unskilled workers. In Krylenko's words, "chess playing requires certain skills of thinking and certain levels of culture, which, owing to the circumstances beyond our control, is still insufficient in the hosts of the working class."²⁸ This was all rather curious when you consider that the political task of chess

27. Simon Pavlov, letter to the editor, in "Na zavode i v derevne," 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 30, 1926, 1-2.

28. "Protokol zasedaniia plenuma Soveta shakhmatno-shashechnykh sektsii VSFK Soyuznykh Respublik" [Minutes of the Plenary Session of the Council of

was ostensibly to uplift the cultural level of the workers. In an attempt to mend this inconsistency, Krylenko admonished the Congress to delegate more resources to the lower strata of workers, while at the same time promising that the trade unions would be ordered to direct more attention to enhancing other aspects of the cultural lives of these neglected workers, thus rendering them more receptive to chess.²⁹

The embryonic effort to take chess into the countryside was represented by another letter published in *64*, which described an initiative taken in the countryside. A Red Army veteran from the village of Semeikin, V. Zakharov, detailed how he introduced chess into his village in response to the Chess Section's directive to take chess to the peasants.

Zakharov learned chess during his eight years of service in the Red Army, and he had become an avid player. He was discharged in 1925, and he returned to his home village, where most of the peasants had never even heard of chess. Undaunted, he taught the game to some young people and had soon organized an enthusiastic chess circle. A small sum was obtained from the local Soviet to procure the necessary equipment and affiliate with the Chess Section. By early 1926, Zakharov had aroused enough interest to stage a tournament, and he was able to attract eighteen contestants. The cross-table of results from the tournament was enclosed in the letter and reprinted in *64*. The tournament had a strong propaganda effect, and chess was now firmly

Chess-checkers Sections VSFK Union Republics] (March 8-9, 1929) GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 3, listy 2-3.

29. Ibid., list 4.

established in this village. Zakharov claimed the benefits of chess in his village were obvious: the young people had become more serious, and hooliganism was considerably reduced.³⁰

But anecdotal indicators notwithstanding, political chess work in the rural parts of the Soviet Union lagged far behind factory organization, and even Chess Section personnel pointed this out. When N. Grigoriev returned from an official fact-finding mission for the Chess Section, he reported that chess was firmly entrenched and thriving in the provincial cities of European Russia. He noted, however, that in the countryside, and in the Red Army, political chess work was badly needed and sorely lacking.³¹ The Chess Section, through its publication, *64*, asked readers for suggestions. One reader suggested that a vigorous program in the Red Army would eventually trickle down to the villages. This idea was commented on approvingly.³² In 1927 at the Fifth All-Union Congress, Krylenko stressed the importance of the work in the countryside, but conceded that the only direct access was through the reading rooms and other village organizations, and these were problematic. He repeated the line, introduced at the Fourth Congress and endorsed by *64*, suggesting

30. V. Zakharov, letter to the editor, in "Na zavode i v derevne," *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 30, 1926, 1-2.

31. N. Grigor'ev, "Po shakhmatnoi Rossii: putevye zametki instruktora" [Chess across Russia: An Instructor's Travelogues], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, October 30, 1926, 2.

32. Gr. R., "O chem nam pishut" [What We Write About], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 30, 1926, 3.

that that for now the most promising point of entry for chess into the villages was through furloughed Red Army soldiers.³³

The urgent need for political chess work in the Red Army was also noted at the Fourth Congress, which ordered a major initiative of organizational work in the military. A subsequent editorial in *64* reiterated the importance of chess in the Red Army and Navy. The usual arguments about the martial benefits were rehashed, and the author also repeated that since the mass of the soldiers and sailors were peasants, chess work in the military would have the added benefit of reinforcing the fledgling efforts in the village. The editorial also warned, however, that chess work in the military must be carried out by Party workers under the control of the Chess Section in order to ensure that it was accompanied by the appropriate political content.³⁴

The issue of Red Army chess was on the agenda again at the Fifth All-Union Congress in August 1927. By 1927, lack of money was an ongoing problem in all areas of chess work, and financial problems considerably handicapped efforts in the military. Krylenko had warned that the Soviet chess organizations would need to tighten their belts; the salad days of 1925 were over. Circumstances required the state to give priority to economic development.³⁵ Now organizers were feeling the pinch.

33. “V-i Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S’ezd” [Vth All-Union Chess-Checkers Congress] (August 1927), GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 2, list 2 ob.

34. V. Russo, “V Krasnoarmeiskuiu kazarmu!” [In the Red Army Barracks!], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 30, 1926, 1.

35. S. Levman, “Rezhim ekonomii i shakhmatnaia rabota” [Economizing and Chess Work], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, September 30, 1926, 1.

At the Fifth Congress (1927), organizers complained that there were simply not adequate resources to properly propagandize in the military. The mass events suggested as useful propaganda by the Chess Section could not be held without proper financing from the top, and the money was not forthcoming.³⁶

Marking the tenth anniversary (February 1928) of the Red Army's formation, an editorial in *64* again revisited the issue of political chess in the Red Army. The editorial noted that, while some progress had been made, the logistical problems were large, and the task was still largely undone. The editor pointed out that one of the anniversary slogans emphasized strengthening the link between the Red Army and the workers, which suggested that workers' organizations should take the lead. They could organize mass competitions between workers and soldiers, which would provide much needed chess propaganda.³⁷ Overall, then, the plan was to let the workers spread chess into the Red Army, and from the military it would trickle down to the village. Clearly, major, coordinated efforts in the military and the countryside were needed.

The resolutions of the Fourth Congress regarding the press were energetically acted upon. The two official publications moved immediately to institute the changes mandated by the Congress. *Shakhmatnyi listok*, the older publication based in Leningrad, grew more sophisticated, with many theoretical articles (opening theory,

36. "V-i Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechy S"ezd," list 3.

37. "Kiiubileiu Krasnoi Armii" [On the Anniversary of the Red Army], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, January 30, 1928, 1.

endgame studies), and it analyzed games played in important tournaments in the West. It began to feature a colorful cover and adopted the more sophisticated look of a Western chess publication. It had been published bi-weekly, but now it became a monthly publication. There was political content, of course, but it was relatively muted. In fact under Vainshtein's substitute editorship, *Shakhmatnyi listok* briefly took an independent line, at one point suggesting that some of the Chess Section's slogans and practices were a bit heavy-handed. The experiment was short-lived, and Krylenko answered the criticisms with a withering editorial attack on the vestiges of apolitical chess.³⁸

The other official publication, *64*, geared itself increasingly toward a popular audience. It was printed on cheaper newsprint, appeared twice a month, and featured articles that were less theoretically advanced. It concentrated on events played in the Soviet Union and also dedicated a page or two to checkers. The political content of *64* was much heavier; Krylenko himself often wrote the lead editorial.

The Congress had also ordered the provincial chess columns to print local chess news, with stories about local players and local events. This was a tougher sell. During the international tournament in Moscow, provincial chess columns had developed the habit of re-printing news directly from the Moscow press. That was understandable when the chess news was dominated by the Moscow tournament, but now, in spite of instructions to the contrary, many papers continued to reprint the

38. Andy Soltis, *Soviet Chess, 1917-1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 46.

national chess news. Others had begun just publishing a few chess problems in lieu of a real column. The authorities demanded human interest stories that anyone could enjoy. Some papers had attempted to comply, but were now publishing columns that were far too technical for most readers. A few papers, however, had managed to produce locally-oriented columns with a strong human interest component.³⁹ Even with all this attention, controversy over chess journalism persisted. At the Fifth Congress in 1927, some speakers still complained that the two official journals were redundant. More pointedly, there were also many complaints about chess columns in the provincial press, suggesting that these columns were worse than pointless unless they were under the control of someone well acquainted with chess.⁴⁰

Finally, the problem of uniform player classification was assigned to Nikolai Zubarev, an influential Chess Section official. Zubarev began to put together guidelines and instructions immediately, but his guide to classification would not be published until 1932. Afterward, there would be numerous revisions to the code, but it would remain more or less in its original form until the demise of the Soviet Union. According to Zubarev's scheme, there were eight rankings for Soviet chess players. In ascending order, they were: fifth, fourth, third, second, and first categories, and then candidate master, master and grandmaster. To enter fifth category, one had to score at least fifty percent in a tournament of not fewer than eleven unrated players.

39. V. E., "Shakhmatnye otdeley v provincial'noi pechati" [Chess Columns in the Provincial Press], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 30, 1926, 1-2.

40. "V-i Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S"ezd," list 16.

For promotion to fourth category one had to score at least fifty percent in tournament of not fewer than eleven fifth category players, and so on, until promotion to first category which required seventy-five percent in a second category tournament. Players who scored consistently high for two years were awarded the title of candidate master. The candidate master could become a full master in either one of two ways: a player must achieve at least an equal score in a fourteen game match with an established master or compete in a tournament with masters and gain at least a fifty percent score in fourteen games. The coveted title of grandmaster would be granted at the discretion of All-Union Chess Section.⁴¹ The first Soviet grandmaster, Mikhail Botvinnik, would be named in 1936. A decade later, there would be ten grandmasters in the Soviet Union.⁴²

These initiatives (workers' chess, expansion into the villages, organization in the military, improvement of chess journalism, and classification) were important issues in the second half of the 1920s and well into the 1930s. But the most important ramifications of the Fourth All-Union Chess Congress came with the Soviet decision to join the *Shakhintern*. The story of the subsequent entry into international workers' chess and the tumultuous relationship with the *Shakhintern* is the subject of the next chapter.

41. N. Zubarev, *Voprosy kvalifikatsii* [Problems of Classification] (Leningrad: Fizkul'tura i turizm, 1932), 15-46.

42. Ernst Klein and William Winter, *The Anglo-Soviet Radio Chess Match* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1947), 9.

Chapter Nine

Soviet Chess and the Workers' Chess International

As directed by the Fourth All-Union Chess Congress, the Chess Section conducted negotiations with the Workers' Chess International (*Shakhintern*) for admission into that body. To that end, a Soviet delegation led by S. Levman (who would oversee the Soviet foray into international workers' chess) traveled to Jena to attend the Congress of the German Workers' Chess Union (German Union) in April 1926. A small delegation from the German Union had attended the Fourth All-Union Chess Congress in Moscow a few months earlier (see Chapter Eight), and they, in turn, invited the Soviets to attend their Congress. The question of Soviet membership in the *Shakhintern* was on the agenda.

Levman was not particularly impressed with the German Union. He noted with disapproval that the German Union allowed workers of all leftist affiliations to join—Social Democrats, Communists, Independents, and even non-party workers. When he asked the German Communists how this was possible, Levman was told that many bitter political struggles took place *outside* the Union. But since they shared the common vision of a political role for chess, they could easily work together *within* the Union.¹ In fact, a Communist delegate was elected chairman of the Congress, even

1. S. Levman, "Ienskii s'ezd i edinstvo rabocheho shakhmatnogo dvizheniia" [The Jena Congress and the Unity of the Workers' Chess Movement], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, April 30, 1926, 1.

though Communists were a distinct minority, both at the Congress and in the Union itself.²

The German Union was the leading power in the *Shakhintern*, and its approval of Soviet membership was critical. The matter was never seriously in doubt, however, as each resolution dealing with Soviet membership passed easily.³ But the Soviet presence at Jena and their proposed induction into the *Shakhintern* still caused enormous controversy. The *Shakhintern* was loosely associated with the Lucerne Sport International, a branch of the cultural bureau of the Socialist International. The Lucerne Sport International had sour relations with the Red Sport International, a division of the Communist International based in Moscow and affiliated with the Comintern.⁴ The deep suspicion and mutual animosity that existed between the Socialist and Communist internationals framed the Soviet foray into the international workers' chess movement

The Lucerne Sport International and their allies in the German Union had deep concerns about Soviet membership in the *Shakhintern*. Lucerne accused the

2. Ibid., 2.

3. Ibid.

4. The proper names for these two sports organizations are the Socialist Workers' Sport International and the International Association of Red Sports and Gymnastics Associations, respectively. The informal names are less cumbersome and widely used.

Soviets of insincerity, of being much more interested in politics than sport.⁵ There was an element of truth in these accusations; the Soviets could hardly deny their commitment to political chess. In fact, just a year early, Krylenko had complained about the opportunism that dominated in the *Shakhintern*. He indicated that the only proper role for Communists in such an organization would be working to overcome the opportunistic influence of the Social Democratic leadership and turn the organization into a weapon of international proletarian class struggle.⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that some doubts were expressed about Soviet intentions.

The Lucerne Sport International had observers at the Jena Congress, and, not surprisingly, they saw evidence of Soviet perfidy everywhere. When the Congress elected a Communist chairman (see above), the leader of the Lucerne group, Wildungen, wrote a letter to the central committee of the German Union charging that the Congress had been intimidated by the presence of the Soviet delegation. The letter was intended to be confidential, but it was leaked.⁷ Outraged, Levman confronted Wildungen and demanded an explanation. Poor Wildungen, caught in an awkward

5. James Riordan, "The Worker Sports Movement," in *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, ed. James Riordan and Arnd Kruger (New York: Routledge, 1999), 108.

6. N. V. Krylenko, "Shakhintern" [Chess International], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, April 30, 1925, 1-2.

7. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia* [International Working-Class Chess Movement and the Soviet Chess Organization] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i turizm, 1931), 19-20.

situation, could only concede that the Soviet delegations had, in fact, behaved quite properly throughout the German Workers' Chess Union Congress.⁸

A few months after Jena (July 1926), Levman was on the road once again, this time traveling to Vienna. A few months earlier in Jena it had been decided to celebrate the Soviet admission into the *Shakhintern* with an international workers' team tournament in Vienna. Workers' teams from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Soviet Union were invited. The event fizzled when both Switzerland and the Soviet Union, locked in controversy, declined at the last minute to send teams.⁹ However, the Soviets did participate in the *Shakhintern* executive conference that took place after the tournament.

The reason for the dual boycott of the competition was political. The Lucerne Sport International had renewed its fight against Soviet participation in the *Shakhintern* by challenging the legality of the Soviet admission on a technicality. Lucerne claimed that its affiliates could only admit organizations from countries that were members of the Lucerne Sport International. The Soviet Union, of course, was not a member state in the Lucerne International. The underlying question, however, was whether or not the *Shakhintern* was actually an affiliate of the Lucerne International. If the *Shakhintern* was not an affiliate, the objections of the Lucerne

8. Levman, "Ienskii s'ezd i edinstvo rabocheho shakhmatnogo dvizheniia," 2.

9. S. Levman, "Sovetskie shakhmatisty v Avstrii" [Soviet Chess Players in Austria], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, July 30, 1926, 1.

International had no weight. Lucerne claimed that there was an official affiliation; the *Shakhintern* suggested that a more casual, nonbinding relationship existed.¹⁰

Lucerne also maintained that the Soviets had intended from the beginning to split the *Shakhintern* from the Lucerne Sport International, and Krylenko's remarks, cited above, were cited in support of the charge. But, ironically, it was Lucerne's attack on the Soviets that caused the *Shakhintern* to break with Lucerne. Faced with the stark decision offered by the Lucerne Sport International (expel the Soviets or leave the Lucerne International), an Austrian delegate summed up the pro-Soviet position, proclaiming that if he was forced to make a choice between Lucerne affiliation and Soviet membership, he would have to side with the latter. The Lucerne Sport International's tactics had completely misfired, a fact that was brought home when the executive committee of the *Shakhintern* "divorced" Lucerne, resolving that the *Shakhintern* was henceforth an autonomous organization and no longer considered itself an associate of the Lucerne Sport International.¹¹ That should have been the end of the matter.

Lucerne Sport International's anti-Soviet campaign, however, was not over. In desperation, Lucerne played the "bourgeois chess card." The Soviets, Lucerne claimed, had a long and sordid history of flirtation with bourgeois chess; Moscow 1925 tournament had been only the most egregious episode. The most recent affront, Lucerne charged, had come immediately after the Soviets were accepted into the

10. Ibid., 2.

11. Ibid.

Shakhintern. Returning home from Jena, the Soviet delegation had visited Riga in bourgeois Latvia and played a team match with the Latvians. Lucerne termed this match a “betrayal of the workers’ cause,” and cited it as one more demonstration of the necessity of excluding the Soviets from the *Shakhintern*.¹²

Outraged, Levman vigorously refuted the charge as a deliberate and vile slander. Members of the Russian team had only played a few offhand games against the Latvians at a reception hosted by the Soviet ambassador. There was no match, no formal completion, and no violation of *Shakhintern* rules. In support of his version of events, Levman produced the chairman of the Latvian Workers’ Sports Union (which was, itself, an affiliate of the Lucerne Sport International), who corroborated the Russian version of the incident.¹³ The executive committee of the *Shakhintern* resolved that the Soviets had behaved properly, and the matter was officially closed.¹⁴

The *Shakhintern* executive committee then devoted its attention to the next international team tournament to be held in spring 1927 in Berlin. Two attempts to hold an international workers’ tournament had been unsuccessful (the first time the Soviets were turned back at the frontier [see above], and more recently both the Soviets and the Swiss had boycotted), but now, on the third attempt, they hoped to unveil a truly international workers’ tournament. Planning ahead, the executive

12. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 20.

13. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

14. Levman, “Sovetskie shakhmatisty v Avstrii,” 2.

committee also placated the Soviet delegation (still smarting from the Lucerne Sport International's attacks) by agreeing on Moscow as the tentative site for the next tournament in 1928.¹⁵

The 1927 Berlin tournament should have been a huge organizational triumph for international workers' chess. Teams representing workers from Germany, Austria, the Soviet Union, Switzerland, Denmark, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary competed. But the seeds of discord, sown by Lucerne, were already germinating. The Soviets won an overwhelming success in the tournament; with Il'in-Zhenevskii leading the team, the Soviets dominated. This might have been an occasion for hailing the emergence of a new leading light in workers' chess. It could have been an opportunity to celebrate a great triumph in workers' chess for the world's first workers' state. But Soviet domination was viewed with extreme irritation. The other participants criticized the participation of Il'in-Zhenevskii (famous for his victory over Capablanca in 1925) and the other master-strength players on the team, wondering, perhaps, which factories employed them. The official results noted that the "Russians" won. Protests from the Soviets, arguing that they were a Soviet (not a Russian) team, were curtly ignored.¹⁶ This did not bode well.

The Soviets also had complaints: in addition to objecting to being described as a "Russian" team, they also decried the failure of the *Shakhintern* leadership to take

15. Ibid., 2-3.

16. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 22-23.

advantage of the plethora of working chess players in Berlin by holding a general conference in the wake of the tournament. Il'in-Zhenevskii was convinced that the absence of a general conference was a defensive maneuver by anti-Soviet elements in the *Shakhintern* who feared that the Soviets would dominate any general conference held at that time. A small executive congress was held, however, and the tentative decision to hold the next workers' tournament (and a general congress) in Moscow was officially confirmed. The event was scheduled for July 1928.¹⁷ The issue had been subject of protracted and contentious debate; enemies of the Soviet Union were well organized, and they constituted a large but noisy minority at the Congress. Nonetheless, winning the opportunity to host this event constituted a major coup for Soviet chess.¹⁸

Soviet organizers in Moscow were eager to make the most of the proposed 1928 event. In order to realize the maximum value for their investment, the Supreme Council for Physical Culture, (the parent organization of Krylenko's All-Union Chess Section) decided to follow July's *Shakhintern* events with an International Workers' Sports Festival in August, which would be organized and hosted by the Red Sport International.¹⁹ Whether or not this was a deliberate provocation, it was akin to

17. Ibid., 23-24.

18. S. Levman, "Kongress Shakhintern v Moskve" [Workers' Chess International Congress in Moscow], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, May 20, 1928, 1.

19. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 24.

waving a red flag in the face of the Lucerne Sport International and its allies in the *Shakhintern*. Predictably, Lucerne sprang into action with a series of vehement protests and obstructionist maneuvers.

First, Lucerne banned any of its affiliates from participating in the Red Sport International's events. This was hardly a surprise. But then Lucerne announced that it considered the *Shakhintern* tournament and congress part of the Red International's Sports Festival, and on that basis ordered the *Shakhintern* to boycott the event.²⁰ This latter move was dubious for two reasons. First, the two events, although held consecutively, were clearly separate events. But second, and more to the point, the Vienna conference, where the *Shakhintern* had declared its independence from Lucerne, formally ended any relationship between the two organizations. Lucerne had no authority over the *Shakhintern*. The Soviets immediately sprang to the defense of the *Shakhintern*, charging a gross interference by Lucerne in the internal affairs of the *Shakhintern*.

Nevertheless, the protests from Lucerne found some sympathy among some elements in the *Shakhintern*. An executive meeting was held at the end of 1927 to discuss Lucerne's objections; the Soviets were not represented "for some technical reasons."²¹ Taking advantage of the Soviet boycott, anti-Soviet delegates persuaded the conference to resolve that the Moscow's *Shakhintern* chess events must not

20. Ibid.

21. Levman, "Kongress Shakhintern v Moskve," 1.

coincide with the Red International's Sports Festival—ostensibly due to the danger that the latter might overshadow the former.²²

The Soviets weren't taken in by the contrived excuse for the resolution, and they were furious. As the Soviets pointed out, the two events in question were already scheduled consecutively; they did not coincide. Therefore, the resolution had no practical value except as a provocation by anti-Soviet elements in the *Shakhintern*. The Soviets very pointedly reminded the Shakhintern that the timing of the Sports Festival was an internal matter and, therefore, certainly far outside the purview of *Shakhintern*.²³ The Soviets sent spirited protests to all of the countries in the *Shakhintern*, receiving favorable responses from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. These chapters of the *Shakhintern* agreed to rescind the resolution.²⁴

In view of the controversy, yet another executive meeting of the *Shakhintern* was held in Vienna in late April 1928 (just a few months before the scheduled opening of the Moscow events) in order to officially rescind the offensive resolution. This time the Soviets participated. The *Shakhintern* backed down in the face of the angry Soviet reaction and the sympathy shown by many of *Shakhintern* affiliates. The objectionable resolution about the timing of the Moscow events was duly retracted. Other contentious issues were also resolved. The date for the Moscow International

22. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 25-26.

23. *Ibid.*, 26.

24. Levman, "Kongress Shakhintern v Moskve," 1.

Workers' Tournament and Congress was fixed for July 5-10, a full month before the Red International's Sports Festival. The organization of the tournament was approved, as was the agenda for the congress. The budget for the events was also discussed, approved and adopted. The obstacles erected by the Lucerne Sport International had apparently been overcome. Everything seemed back on track.²⁵

But all was not as it seemed. Having failed in their frontal assault, Lucerne and its allies within the *Shakhintern* continued to work behind the scenes to sabotage the upcoming Moscow international workers' tournament and congress. Three weeks before the event's scheduled opening, only Austria had confirmed its participation. All eyes were on the German Union. At this critical juncture, the Germans declared that the budget for the event, already agreed upon in Austria, was unsatisfactory. The German Union would not participate without a substantial budgetary revision. Faced with what amounted to a general boycott, the Soviets saw no alternative but to cancel the event.²⁶ A terse note appeared in the July 5 edition of *64*, announcing that the Moscow *Shakhintern* congress and international workers' chess tournament had been postponed indefinitely for technical reasons.²⁷ This short statement was inserted below a stock story about workers' chess in Tula, probably replacing an intended to article about the opening of the Congress. The Chess Section seemed to have been

25. Ibid.

26. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 27.

27. "Kongress Shakhinterna" [Workers' Chess International Congress], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, July 5, 1928, 1.

surprised by the failure of the event. The aftershocks from the cancellation were intense.

In Germany, the decision to boycott the Moscow event led to violent infighting, as the political tensions that forced the cancellation of the Moscow event played out inside the German Union. The Germans were soon in total disarray; a civil war raged between Communists and Social Democrats in the German Union, with chapters and individuals expelled willy-nilly. The Social-Democrats charged that the Soviet chess organization was behind the conflict—the master villain intent on orchestrating the split.²⁸ Anti-Soviet elements gained the upper hand, and in December the German Union formally expelled the Berlin clubs, which were dominated by German Communists.

The expulsion of the German Communists produced a sharp reaction from the Soviet Chess Section. At the end of the 1928, the Soviets strongly condemned the split in the German Union and demanded the reinstatement of the expelled chapters. They placed the blame squarely on opportunist Social Democrats in the German Union who were intent on pursuing division and fragmentation. Their intention was obvious; as direct agents of the bourgeoisie, they plotted to weaken the class solidarity of the workers.²⁹

28. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shkhorganizatsiia*, 29-30.

29. "Pod znakom raskola" [In an Atmosphere of Split], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, December 20, 1928, 1.

The Soviets justified their intervention in the internal affairs of the German Union, pointing out that the German Union was a leading force inside the *Shakhintern*, and the Soviets were a member of that body. This was the Soviet justification for demanding the reinstatement of the Berlin Communists. They further demanded an end to all separatist and anti-proletarian policies of the German Union. Above all, they demanded a review of the actions of the German Union by the *Shakhintern*.³⁰

The war of words escalated when the official publication of the German Union, the *Arbeiter Schachzeitung*, responded sharply to the Soviet charges at the beginning of 1929. The German complaints against the Soviets were threefold. First, the Germans placed the blame for the July 1928 cancellation of the Moscow international workers' tournament and congress squarely on the "Russians." The Germans sarcastically suggested that perhaps the Russians should focus on bourgeois tournaments (like Moscow 1925), and leave the organization of workers' tournaments to organizations that were actually dedicated to the workers' cause.³¹

Continuing on the theme of bourgeois cooperation, the second German complaint repeated the older charges, such as the "match" with the bourgeois Latvians (see above). Now, however, they added a new twist—Russian problemists (composers of chess problems) were accused of regularly publishing their

30. *Ibid.*, 1-2.

31. A. Klinke, "Rückblick" [Review], *Arbeiter Schachzeitung*, January 1929, 2.

compositions in bourgeois newspapers. Even more shocking, a recently published Russian book of problems and studies contained works by bourgeois problemists (Levman, the Chess Section's point-man on international workers' chess, was himself a well-known problemist). Finally, the Germans complained that the Russians continued to publish the games of the renegades Alekhin and Bogoliubov in their official publications.³² It all added up to very little.

Third and most significantly, the Germans defended the expulsion of the communist players and clubs in Berlin on the grounds that their myopic, pro-Soviet worldview hindered rather than helped the proletarian chess movement. Here, finally, was the crux of the animosity. The "Russians" were spitting the *Shakhintern* with their constant politicking. The Germans wanted chess games to take place in the chess clubs; they were tired of the ceaseless political agitation. They wanted Krylenko and Levman to stop politicizing the workers' chess movement. For political agitation and argumentation, there were other, more appropriate forums. The infighting and factionalism that characterized the left could only harm the cause of workers' chess, and the current imbroglio was a perfect example. The German Union suggested that the Communists (German and Russian) should show less interest in slogans and more interest in chess. Only then could Social-Democrats and Communists coexist in the workers' chess organizations.³³

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 3.

The Chess Section fired back in early February. First Levman responded, and then, two weeks later, Krylenko weighed in. Levman reviewed the events that led to the cancellation of the Moscow event and concluded again that the Soviets were blameless. For the first time, Levman specifically held the German Union, rather than the *Shakhintern*, responsible for the collapse of the event. He also defended the Berlin comrades.³⁴ But he saved his sharpest words for the German insinuations about Soviet chess flirtations with the bourgeois chess world.

Regarding the Moscow International Tournament of 1925, Levman correctly pointed out that the Soviets were not yet members of the *Shakhintern* when the event was held. Further, Levman claimed that such events were actually allowed, with limitations, under the charter of the *Shakhintern*. The German Union might have a rigid and counterproductive ban on all contact with bourgeois chess, but the German Union did not dictate the policies of the *Shakhintern*. The Germans had no right to impose their rules, including their extreme position on relations with bourgeois, on the other members of the organization. Finally, he pointed out that, from the moment the Soviets joined the *Shakhintern*, they had upheld their fidelity to the organization more diligently than any other affiliate.³⁵

Not surprisingly, Levman employed his sharpest words in defense of himself and his fellow problemists. Yes, he admitted, Soviet problemists sometimes published

34. S. Levman, "Oni obviniaut" [They Blame], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, February 5, 1929, 1.

35. *Ibid.*, 1-2.

in bourgeois publications. This was not forbidden in the charter of the *Shakhintern*, nor had the Germans ever previously raised the issue in their own organization or in the *Shakhintern*. What's more, Levman professed to find it very peculiar that Social-Democrats—who attended bourgeois theatre, listened to bourgeois music, and participated in bourgeois government—would take such a sharp turn to the left on the rarified issue of chess problem composition.³⁶

Krylenko also answered the Germans. Since Krylenko spoke as a representative of the Party and the Soviet government, his response took the form of a sharp partisan attack. The purpose of the Social-Democratic leadership of the German Union, he claimed, was revealed: they conspired to split the workers' chess movement. He accused the Social-Democrats of sowing confusion among its members with its slanders about the German Communists and the Soviets. Since the German Union's leadership could not reveal the true reason for the expulsion of the German Communists, it naturally resorted to slander and mendacity. The root cause of the conflict was that the Communists (German and Soviet) never forgot that they were revolutionary Marxists above all. Everything else, even chess, was secondary. Yes, Krylenko admitted, the Communists brought politics to the chess table. They always had, and, what's more, they always would.³⁷

36. *Ibid.*, 2.

37. N. V. Krylenko, "Klassicheskii primer putanitsy" [A Classic Example of Confusion], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, February 20, 1929, 1.

Regarding the German Union's suggestion that fewer slogans and more chess would permit coexistence, Krylenko was brutally frank in his rejoinder. Communists, he said, had no desire to coexist with Social-Democrats. The latter were traitors and enemies of the workers. Hence the Communists would embrace every opportunity, including the chessboard, to expose hypocrisy and betrayal by the Social-Democrats. The Social-Democrats, Krylenko argued, had split the German Union in order to avoid political debate, not, as they claimed, for the sake of chess. Rather, they split the German Union because they knew that the German workers trusted and believed the Communists when the issues were openly debated.³⁸

Then came a surprising move by the Chess Section. At the bottom of the page that contained Krylenko's incisive editorial appeared a notice that had the look of a last minute insertion and the feel of provocative gambit: the Chess Commission of the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions announced that the international workers' chess tournament, cancelled back in July 1928, had now been rescheduled for summer 1929. According to the notice, all sections of the *Shakhintern* would be invited.³⁹

In late February 1929, a *Shakhintern* Congress was held in Vienna, and here the crisis reached its climax. The Soviets were again unable to attend for "technical

38. Ibid., 2.

39. "Mezhdunarodnyi rabochii turnir v Moskve" [International Workers' Tournament in Moscow], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, February 20, 1929, 3.

reasons,”⁴⁰ but the Chess Commission of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions sent an official message to the Congress, which laid out the Soviet position. Reminding the Congress that the Chess Commission spoke for nearly 120,000 workers in hundreds of organized chess clubs, the Soviets spoke of their commitment to political chess. They were devoted to using chess as a tool to engage the working masses in the revolutionary struggle for both the immediate tasks and the ultimate goals of the proletariat. The Lucerne Sport International’s sabotage, attempting to destroy the unity of the Shakhintern, was therefore a calculated counterrevolutionary move. The German Union, by expelling its Communists, was playing directly into the hands of Lucerne.⁴¹

Responding officially to accusations against the Soviet Union, the Soviets fiercely denied responsibility for the failure of the 1928 Moscow tournament and conference. They protested vigorously against charges that they had continued to violate either the letter or the spirit of the ban on participation in bourgeois chess

40. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 30.

Interestingly, Il’in-Zhenevskii’s vague terminology was actually a cover for the fact that a delegation could not be sent because the necessary hard currency could not be spared, as seen in “Protokol zasedaniia plenuma Soveta shakhmatno-shashechnykh sektsii VSFK Soyuznykh Respublik,” list 4.

41. Shakhkomissii VTsSPS, “Obrashchenie shakhkomissii VTsSPS k 1-mu kongressu shakhinterna” [The Appeal of the VTsSPS Chess Commission to the 1st Congress of the Workers’ Chess International], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, March 5, 1929, 1.

events. They reiterated their claim that the Soviets had held more firmly to the revolutionary ideals that underlay the *Shakhintern* than any other member.⁴²

Finally, in what amounted to an ultimatum, the Soviets laid out two conditions for their continued participation in the *Shakhintern*. First, the Congress must condemn the split in the German Union and order the German Union to restore the condition of unity it enjoyed prior to 1928. Only a restored German Union could claim a leadership role in the *Shakhintern*. Second, Moscow must be allowed to host the 1929 *Shakhintern* international workers' tournament and conference, and the full cooperation and participation of all members of the *Shakhintern* must be guaranteed.⁴³

The Congress, dominated by Social Democrats, was not impressed by this display of Soviet bellicosity. It resolved that actions of the "Russian" section of the *Shakhintern* had resulted in threats to the unity of that body. Any further collaboration was possible only if five conditions were met. First, the Russians must cease their attacks on organizations and individuals inside the *Shakhintern*. Second, Russians must stop meddling in the internal affairs of the German Union. Third, in view of the fiasco of 1928 (the failed Moscow tournament and conference), no future events would be promised to the Russians without the appropriate guarantees. Fourth, the Russians must cease their disruptive tactic of boycotting important conferences and events. Fifth, the Russians must renounce all links to bourgeois chess organizations

42. Ibid., 1-2.

43. Ibid., 2.

and stop cooperating with the bourgeois chess press.⁴⁴ And just to make sure that no one missed the point, the Congress further resolved to (re)affiliate the *Shakhintern* with the Lucerne Sport International “for reasons of ideology and policy.”⁴⁵

This set of counter-ultimatums was a pretext, transparently designed to provoke a final split by precluding any possibility of continued Soviet participation in the *Shakhintern*. The Soviets accurately characterized the line taken by the *Shakhintern* as “clumsy, arrogant and rude.”⁴⁶ They described the charge that the Soviets had provoked the split in the German Union as absurd. The German Communists needed no one’s advice; they saw the reformist Social-Democrats for what they were. Similarly, the Soviets were not going to take instruction on political fidelity from bourgeois lackeys in the *Shakhintern*. The Soviets vowed that they would never abandon their criticism of opportunism and reformism in the international workers’ chess movement.⁴⁷

What’s more, the Soviets would not cease to appeal to the working masses over the heads of the reformist leaders. The upcoming International Workers Tournament, already scheduled for late August 1929 as a replacement for the cancelled *Shakhintern* event, would still take place, regardless of the outrages that had

44. “Vykriki raskol'nicheskoi politiki” [Cries of Schismatic Politics], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, July 20, 1929, 1.

45. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 35-36.

46. “Vykriki raskol'nicheskoi politiki,” 2.

47. *Ibid.*

taken place at the Vienna *Shakhintern* Congress. But now, in light of events, it would serve not as a *Shakhintern* event, but rather as the founding event for a new international organization representing the “most advanced elements of the workers’ chess movement.”⁴⁸ Dispensing with the *Shakhintern* was not the first choice of Soviets. They expected that the lure of visiting the Soviet Union would sway the *Shakhintern* to give in to their demands. But they were also quite prepared to split that organization if it became necessary.⁴⁹

In August 1929 an international workers’ chess tournament and conference was held in Leningrad. The change of venue from Moscow to Leningrad made sense; Leningrad had become the de-facto leader in trade union chess, largely as an unintended consequence of the creation of the Chess Commission to oversee workers’ chess (see Chapter Eight). More important, perhaps, an event Leningrad would cost the Soviets considerably less hard currency. Foreign players and delegates were customarily reimbursed for travel expenses; for travel to Leningrad, the *Sovtorgflot* (the Soviet Commercial Fleet) could be utilized, which would minimize the expenditure of hard currency.⁵⁰

Preparations for the event had been largely made before the split was finalized, and all the *Shakhintern* affiliates, and the clubs that had been expelled from

48. Ibid.

49. “Protokol zasedaniia plenuma Soveta shakhmatno-shashechnykh sektsii VSFK Soyuznykh Respublik,” listy 24-25.

50. Ibid., list 24.

the German Union, were invited. It could have been very awkward. However, only a small number of representatives actually attended: the Communist clubs in Germany attended, of course, and some Austrian and Czechoslovakian clubs were also represented. The Soviets dominated the chess tournament, but the real action took place in the International Workers' Chess Conference that followed the tournament.⁵¹

The official documents from the conference reveal a tone of bitter animosity toward the parties of the moderate left. The use of the term "social-fascist" to describe the Social-Democrats appeared for the first time in the Soviet workers' chess movement literature. In the chess movement, as in the broader workers' movement, social-fascists split the workers as part of a general conspiracy to divide and confuse the proletariat. They were directly accused of complicity in violence against revolutionary workers, like the May Day massacres of in Berlin.⁵² This aggressive tone seen in the International Workers' Chess Conference in summer 1929 reflected the recently adopted doctrines of the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1928, which foresaw capitalism's demise and a proletarian revolution, but only if social democracy was prevented from derailing the process. The non-Communist left was revealed as the primary enemy of the revolution, and it was

51. L. F., "Mezhdunarodnaia konferentsiia proletarskikh shakhmatistov v Leningrade" [International Conference of Proletarian Chess Players in Leningrad], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, August 20, 1929, 1-2.

52. "Vsem rabochim shakhmatistam mira" [To All Working Chess Players of the World], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, September 20, 1929, 1.

unmasked as the ally of the bourgeoisie.⁵³ Levman took up the same tone in the Seventh All-Union Chess Congress, 1929, when he attributed the deterioration of relations between the German Union and the Chess Section to Social-Democratic concerns that sport in general, and chess in particular, was playing an important role in the radicalization of unorganized workers in Germany. In his speech at the Congress, Levman claimed that direct cause of the animosity of Social-Democratic elements in the German Union toward the Soviet participation in the *Shakhintern* was “the intensification of class struggle in the West and aspiration of reformists to resist the growing leftist sympathies of the working masses.”⁵⁴

The International Workers’ Chess Conference coincided with an All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions Chess Conference, also held in Leningrad. The Trade Unions Conference delegates passed a series of resolutions culminating in the formal Soviet withdrawal from the *Shakhintern*.⁵⁵ They resolved that action of the *Shakhintern*, binding itself to the Lucerne Sport International, was in violation of the agreement signed between the Soviet Union and the other members in 1926, and it voided any pretense of independence by the *Shakhintern*. Further, the Trade Unions

53. Communist International, *The Programme of the Communist International: Together with the Statutes of the Communist International* (London: Modern Books, 1929), under “The General Crisis of Capitalism and the First Phase of World Revolution,” <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/ch02.htm> (accessed March 17, 2013).

54. “Protokol zasedaniia plenuma Soveta shakhmatno-shashechnykh seksii VSFK Soyuznykh Respublik,” listy 18.

55. Il’in-Zhenevskii, *Mezhdunarodnoe rabochee shakhmatnoe dvizhenie i Sovetskaia shakhorganizatsiia*, 37.

Conference resolved that since the Soviet Union could not associate itself with an organization that allowed the expulsion of Communists by its affiliates or tried to isolate the Soviet chess organization, the Soviets were no longer an affiliate of the *Shakhintern*. Finally, the Congress resolved that the Soviet Union should take the lead in the creation of a new union of international workers' chess organizations that would lead them correctly on the path of revolutionary class struggle. This proposed organization would be under the general supervision of the Red Sports International, where a chess section had just been created, and it would lead the struggle for the unity of the working class against the divisive and treacherous policy of the reformist German Union, the Lucerne Sport International, and their puppet organization, the *Shakhintern*.⁵⁶

The International Workers' Chess Conference followed the lead of the Trade Unions Conference when it, too, recognized the need for a new international body. The Soviet withdrawal from the *Shakhintern* was also approved. Finally, it resolved to establish an international center of the proletarian movement, sponsored by the chess section at Red Sports International. An organizational committee was set up, electing four Soviet representatives (including Krylenko and Il'in-Zhenevskii), two Germans, and one representative each for Austria and Czechoslovakia and Switzerland. With so few delegates in Leningrad, the development of the

56. Ibid., 38-41.

organizational details was left to an International Congress of Proletarian Chess Organizations, scheduled for late 1930.⁵⁷

These decisions in August 1929 proved to be a milestone for international workers' chess, albeit a negative one. As Grigoriev suggested, "It appears that our entrance to the chess international did not give anything to us. We entered it with the best intents, but it turns out that we got little."⁵⁸ The Soviets had decided that the *Shakhintern* need them more than they needed the *Shakhintern*. The new Soviet-controlled organization helped the clubs that had been expelled from the German Union by providing funds for a journal. A journal, published in Berlin, gave the "German opposition" legitimacy and allowed the Soviets to present their arguments to the German workers.⁵⁹ The Soviet organization also sponsored a Congress of the German Opposition in 1930 in Cologne, which drove a deeper wedge between the German Union and the breakaway sections. The reformists of the German Union were described as being in complete disarray while German Opposition adopted the

57. "Postanovlenie: mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii proletarskikh shakhmatistov" [Ruling: The International Conference of Proletarian Chess Players], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, September 20, 1929, 2-3.

58. "Protokol zasedaniia plenuma Soveta shakhmatno-shashechnykh seksii VSFK Soyuznykh Respublik," list 24.

59. "Protokol zasedaniia plenuma Soveta shakhmatno-shashechnykh seksii VSFK Soyuznykh Respublik," list 27.

slogan, “For the international revolutionary solidarity of the worker-chess players of the world.”⁶⁰

The German Union had been the leading power in the *Shakhintern*, and the continuing feud in Germany weakened it considerably. Now chapters in Switzerland, Austria and Czechoslovakia defected to the Soviet organization, which further sapped the viability of the *Shakhintern*. The old *Shakhintern* declined all through 1930, and it finally collapsed completely in 1931 as more and more of its affiliates joined the Soviet group. Meanwhile the new Soviet-sponsored organization, while smaller and less ecumenical than the defunct *Shakhintern*, was firmly under the control of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions’ Chess Commission, which, in turn, was firmly under the control of Krylenko’s Chess Section.

Unfortunately, the fortunes of international workers’ chess declined considerably as a consequence of the splits. Workers’ chess in the Soviet Union continued to be a priority, but international competitions were limited to a few matches by telegraph, which had the enormous advantage of requiring no hard currency expenditure.⁶¹ Then, in 1933, Nazi control in Germany led to the suppression of all leftist sports organizations, regardless of whether they were

60. “V riadakh Germanskoi oppozitsii” [In the Ranks of the German Opposition], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, March 25, 1930, 167.

61. “Vyvody i predlozheniia VSFK i VTsSPS po issledovaniia sostoyaniia Shakhm.-Shash. raboty v gor. Leningrade” [Conclusions and suggestions of the VsFK and VTsSPS upon the examination of the status of chess-checkers work in Leningrad] (January 1931), GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 4, list 5.

controlled by Communists or Social-Democrats.⁶² The struggle for control over German workers' chess that had led first to the Soviet participation in the *Shakhintern* and then to the split in the German Union was rendered moot.

In the early 1930s, Krylenko and the Chess Section remained interested in international chess, but workers' chess, *per se*, no longer occupied as much attention. Instead, with the coming of age of a new generation of Soviet chess masters who could hold their own in bourgeois chess competitions, Krylenko became more and more preoccupied with traditional international competitions. Soviet players would once again appear in foreign tournaments, and Moscow, again would be host to two international tournaments. All of this would be done largely to showcase the new Soviet star, Botvinnik.

62. James Riordan, "The Sports Policy of the Soviet Union, 1917-1941," in *Sport and International Politics: The Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport*, ed. Pierre Arnaud (London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1998), 71.

Chapter Ten

Botvinnik: The New Soviet (Chess)Man

The Fourth All-Union Chess Congress back in 1925 addressed a number of concerns, including the tricky issue of relations between Soviet and bourgeois chess. In addition to spelling out acceptable interactions with bourgeois chess (see Chapter Eight), impermissible contacts were also delineated. First, no Soviet player or organization was allowed to join any international chess organization that was not proletarian in character. Second, competition in bourgeois chess events abroad was not the decision of an individual player; participation could only take place at the discretion of the Chess Section. Finally, Soviet players would not be permitted to engage in international matches for titles granted by bourgeois chess organizations.¹ These rules covering impermissible contacts seem specifically designed with Bogoliubov in mind.

After his great victory in the Moscow International Chess Tournament 1925, Bogoliubov was the toast of the town. The controversy over his participation at Baden-Baden (see Chapter Seven) was forgiven, if not forgotten. He was now considered by many to be the heir-apparent to the world title. But Moscow 1925 was destined to be the zenith of his career; 1926 brought Bogoliubov nothing but problems.

1. “IV Vsesoiuznyi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S”ezd” [IV All-Union Chess-Checkers Congress] (December 1925), GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 1-a, list 33.

First, there was the matter of the tournament book. Bogoliubov had promised to write a tournament book (a collection of annotated games) for the Moscow 1925 tournament. He had received an advance from a Leningrad publishing company, but the project had somehow gone awry. He spent much of the next year laboring over the book—even declining invitations to tournaments and cancelling a planned tour of the United States in order to work on it. The fault is debatable, but Bogoliubov lost a great deal of income.

Second, and closely related to loss of income, Bogoliubov was finding it difficult to provide adequately for his German family in Triberg. As his colleague, Hans Kmoch (1894-1973), remembered: Bogoliubov “worked hard to support his wife, two daughters, and mother-in-law—not to mention his house, the roof of which seemed to be suffering from some incurable disease and needed a constant supply of ready cash to pay for repairs.”²

Finally, and most significantly, there was the problem of his citizenship; he carried a Soviet passport. Although the international reputation of the Soviet Union had certainly improved by the mid-1920s, there were still significant complications attached to international travel for Soviet citizens. Bogoliubov discovered this first hand when he attempted to enter Italy in late 1926.

The resort town of Meran in northern Italy was the site of an important international chess tournament in December 1926. Tournament rules allowed only

2. Hans Kmoch, “Yefim Dimitrievich Bogolyubov [Bogoliubov] (1889-1952),” in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2004), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch01.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2013).

one participant from each invited country.³ Germany was invited, and Bogoliubov, who had left the Soviet Union for Berlin after Moscow 1925, claimed the German place. Soviet Russia was also invited. Krylenko's position on participation in bourgeois chess events was still flexible, and the invitation was accepted. The Chess Section had initially planned to send Rabinovich, but later changed its choice to Verlinskii, in recognition of his victory over Capablanca in Moscow.⁴

In December 1926, *Shakhmatnyi Listok* announced shocking news from Meran: the Italian authorities had denied entry visas to both Bogoliubov and Verlinskii at the border.⁵ In spite of attempted intercessions by the Italian Chess Federation, the foreign ministry maintained that it couldn't allow Soviet citizens to enter the country given the current state of relations.⁶ Bogoliubov's nonparticipation—he was expected until the last moment—was a severe blow to the tournament. It set off a chain-reaction of withdrawals by other players, wrecking the event.⁷

The reaction of Krylenko's Chess Section was furious. In the journal *64*, the blame was laid squarely at the feet of Mussolini's fascist government. Noting that the only players denied entry were the two Soviet players, Bogoliubov and Verlinskii, the

3. K. Whyld, *International Chess Tournament at Meran, December 1926* (Nottingham: K. Whyld, 1954), 2.

4. A. J. Gillam, *Meran 1926*, trans. Zoran Brkic (Nottingham: The Chess Player, 1996), 9.

5. "Meran mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir" [Meran International Chess Tournament] *Shakhmatnyi listok*, December 5, 1926, 342.

6. Gillam, *Meran 1926*, 4.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

episode belied the myth of separation of politics and chess in bourgeois Europe.

Krylenko's protest to the Italian government dripped with sarcasm: "Come then," he taunted, "tell me about 'apolitical chess.'"⁸

Bogoliubov was devastated by the refusal of Italian authorities to grant his visa for the Meran tournament. He had already negotiated a hefty appearance fee and generous travel expenses, and he hoped to score well in this very lucrative competition.⁹ In light of the visa refusal, Bogoliubov moved very swiftly. He sent two telegrams: on December 5 he sent a message directly to Krylenko; on the next day a telegram was addressed to the Chess Section.

The note to Krylenko was lengthy. Bogoliubov must have felt compelled to explain himself. He began by referencing the Meran fiasco, emphasizing his financial loss. This was a loss he could ill-afford, complaining that writing the Moscow 1925 tournament book had already cost him a great deal of money. He was now deeply in debt; he could not adequately support his family, and his wife was demanding action. Bogoliubov had previously been offered a stipend by the Chess Section, conditional on his permanent relocation to Russia. He now formally turned it down, observing that Russia was a poor country that could not afford to support him. Finally he explained that he had promised his wife that he would do whatever was necessary to provide for his family's support. She was now demanding that he fulfill that pledge,

8. "Za Granitsej" [From Abroad], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, December 25, 1926, 3.

9. Whyld, *International Chess Tournament at Meran*, 5.

and that, in turn, left Bogoliubov only one choice: he must renounce his Soviet citizenship in order to regain his freedom to travel without hindrance. Finally, anticipating Krylenko's fury, Bogoliubov declared he was indifferent to how Soviet authorities might choose to interpret his action, and he vowed that he would not respond to attacks or criticism. His actions, he maintained, were necessitated by responsibility to his family. He closed the telegram on a conciliatory note, adding a perfunctory postscript wishing continued prosperity for Soviet chess.¹⁰

The next day, Bogoliubov sent a more formal telegram to the Chess Section, officially stating his intention to file the necessary papers to terminate his citizenship at the Soviet mission in Berlin. Again he denied any political motivation, explaining that his only consideration was his family's well-being.¹¹

If Bogoliubov hoped that emphasizing his family's financial needs would strike a sympathetic chord, he was mistaken. Krylenko's reaction was swift and vengeful. He called the Chess Section into an emergency meeting. Bogoliubov was reviled and condemned for his hostility to the Soviet public, the Soviet workers and

10. Bogoliubov to Krylenko, Triberg, December 5, 1926, in Anatolii Matsukevich, "Vtoroi otstupnik" [The Second Apostate], *64-Shakhmatanoe obozrenie*, August 1991, 27.

11. Bogoliubov to the All-Union Chess Section, Triberg, December 6, 1926, in "Postanovlenie Ispolburo Vsesoiuznoi Shakhseksii o chempione SSSR E. D. Bogoliubove" [Resolution of the All-Union Chess Section on Soviet Champion E. D. Bogoliubov], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, December 25, 1926, 1.

the Soviet state. Like Alekhin before him, Bogoliubov was now branded with the label of “renegade.”¹²

The resolution passed by the emergency meeting of the Chess Section drew up a kind of criminal indictment of Bogoliubov, citing four counts against him. First, Bogoliubov had placed his own selfish material interests above issues of honor and the right of citizenship in the world’s first workers’ state. Second, he had committed this heinous treachery in spite of the fact that he was allowed the freedom to play in foreign tournaments. He had even been offered a stipend from the Chess Section. Third, Bogoliubov had placed his relationship with the bourgeois chess organizations of Europe above the working class chess organizations of the Soviet Union. Fourth, in spite of his grand words wishing prosperity for Soviet chess, Bogoliubov’s actions had inflicted real cultural and political damage on both the Soviet state and on Soviet chess.¹³

To punish Bogoliubov for these transgressions, and to discourage any other potential renegades, the Chess Section resolved the following sanctions against its erstwhile champion. First, Bogoliubov was expelled from any and all Soviet chess organizations. He would never be allowed to participate in any Soviet chess events, and he would never be allowed to return to Soviet soil. Second, Bogoliubov was

12. Anatolii Matsukevich, “Vtoroi otstupnik” [The Second Apostate], *64-Shakhmatanoe obozrenie*, August 1991, 27.

13. “Postanovlenie Ispolburo Vsesoiuznoi Shakhseksii o chempione SSSR E. D. Bogoliubove” [Resolution of the All-Union Chess Section on Soviet Champion, E. D. Bogoliubov], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, December 25, 1926, 1-2.

stripped of the title of Soviet chess champion that he had won in 1924 (see Chapter Seven). Finally, these sanctions were to be widely published so the world would know that Bogoliubov had chosen material interests over honor.¹⁴

In accordance with the instruction that the sanctions be widely published, the Chess Sections resolutions were printed in *64*, the official journal of the Chess Section. But in that very same issue, there appeared a story celebrating Bogoliubov's victory at Berlin 1926. Included were four of Bogoliubov's games from the event, all annotated and full of praise for his play.¹⁵ Eventually Bogoliubov would become a Soviet "unperson," but not yet.

As for the other renegade, Alekhin, his final, bitter break with the Chess Section came in 1928. The whole Alekhin affair was made considerably more awkward by an amazing development in the bourgeois chess world. In 1927, Alekhin, contrary to most expectations, had wrested the world chess title from Capablanca in a bitterly contested match.

During the period of prediction and speculation leading up to the match, the Soviet chess establishment generally supported the creative Alekhin over the scientific Capablanca. Levenfish suggested that Alekhin was not only the strongest challenger, but he also had a sort of moral claim to the right to challenge Capablanca. Alekhin—brilliant, intuitive, and creative—was steeped in the Russian chess tradition

14. *Ibid.*, 2.

15. G. Levenfish, "Rezultaty mezhdunarodnogo turnira v Berline" [Results of the International Tournament in Berlin], *64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, December 25, 1926, 3.

exemplified by Chigorin, the great Russian player of the late nineteenth century. Capablanca's play, on the other hand, was cold and precise, like former world champion, Steinitz. Chigorin, the creative genius, had lost a match for the world title to the scientific Steinitz. Now Levenfish portrayed the Alekhin-Capablanca match as a kind of virtual rematch of Chigorin-Steinitz (see Chapter One). Levenfish also hinted that if Alekhin won the title, his purpose in going to the West would be achieved. Maybe as world champion, Levenfish hoped, Alekhin would finally return to the motherland.¹⁶

When the match ended, Alekhin's victory was initially viewed positively in the Soviet chess establishment, which echoed the same themes as the Levenfish article. Il'in-Zhenevskii said Alekhin's victory was the triumph of artistic creativity over sterile technique.¹⁷ What's more, Capablanca's arrogance and skill at dodging challengers had garnered Alekhin sympathy among Soviet players.¹⁸ In short, the general sense was that Alekhin deserved to win.

But Alekhin's victory presented the Soviet chess establishment with a thorny problem. He was a Russian, undoubtedly, but he was certainly not a Soviet. Il'in-Zhenevskii, who had known Alekhin well, suggested that before his defection, Alekhin was a Communist in his mind, but not heart. Logic demonstrated to Alekhin

16. G. Levenfish, "Match za mirovoe pervenstvo" [Match for the World Championship], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, September 30, 1926, 2.

17. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Match Alekhin-Capablanka* [Match Alekhin-Capablanca] (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1927), 18-20.

18. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

that the path chosen by the Russian proletariat was the correct one. But in his heart he was unable to escape his social origins (his father was an aristocratic landowner) or his academic training (he was a lawyer).¹⁹

Il'in-Zhenevskii cited a letter he received from Alekhin in late 1920. Alekhin was working for the Comintern; Il'in-Zhenevskii had taken a diplomatic post in the Baltic. Alekhin wrote with great enthusiasm of the propaganda value of his work, but his excitement struck Il'in-Zhenevskii as *pro forma* and insincere. But later in the letter, when he begged for Il'in-Zhenevskii's help in arranging a chess tour in the Baltic countries, the enthusiasm rang true. This, according to Il'in-Zhenevskii, illustrated the cause of Alekhin's downfall. His commitment to socialism was fragile and conditional; his commitment to chess was all-encompassing. He never forgot that he was, above all, a chess player.²⁰ A true Soviet chess player, as Krylenko pointed out, never forgot he was a Communist first and a chess player second.²¹ Alekhin's downfall resulted from his refusal to accept that chess, as an end in itself, was incompatible with the political requirements of the workers' state.²²

The final denouement came in 1928. Shortly after wresting the world crown from Capablanca, Alekhin returned to Paris. There he accepted an invitation to a

19. Ibid., 22-23.

20. Ibid., 23.

21. N. V. Krylenko, "Klassicheskii primer putanitsy" [A Classic Example of Confusion], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, February 20, 1929, 1.

22. Il'in-Zhenevskii, *Match Alekhin-Capablanka*, 23-24.

banquet in his honor, hosted by a Russian émigré group. Perhaps it was simply the context, but Alekhin made an uncharacteristically political speech which included remarks to the effect that he looked forward to Russia's eventual liberation from Bolshevik oppression.²³ Alekhin's dream of a "free" Russia may have been well received by the émigrés, but it was the last straw for Krylenko, who demoted Alekhin from renegade to "enemy of the people."²⁴

When world champion Alekhin subsequently gave Bogoliubov first opportunity to challenge him for the world title, the Soviet chess organization must have been mortified. Even so, the Soviet press feigned indifference, suggesting that the match was of little interest. There was nothing at stake—no contrasting styles, no great conflicting schools of thought—only two individual personalities competing for individual glory. In fact, they had more in common than style: they were both ethnically Russian, both about the same age, and both (not coincidentally) shared the same political views: anti-Soviet. In short, they were both class enemies who could not accept the sovereignty of the collective over the individual.²⁵ The Soviet press

23. A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Neskol'ko slov ob Alekhine" [A few words about Alekhin] in *Match Alekhin-Kapablanka na pervenstvo mira* [Match for the World Championship: Alekhin-Capablanca], ed. G. Ya. Levenfish and P. A. Romanovskii (Leningrad: Shakhmatnyi listok, 1928), 4.

24. N. V. Krylenko, "Ob Alekhine" [About Alekhin], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, June 25, 1929, 83.

25. L. F., "Alekhin-Bogoliubov," 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, September 20, 1929, 3.

took little notice when Alekhin won their 1929 match with relative ease, retaining the world title.

Regardless of the Soviet pretense to indifference, the loss of both Bogoliubov and Alekhin was certainly a blow to Soviet chess. Krylenko acknowledged that none in his remaining pool of old masters could compete successfully on the world stage. Verlinskii, Romanovskii, Il'in-Zhenevskii were all gifted players (two of them had beaten Capablanca) and certainly dominated the workers' tournaments, but they were simply not strong enough to compete in the highest levels of the bourgeois chess world, which remained one of Krylenko's primary goals. There was, however, hope for the future: a number of stars had appeared in the new generation. One of the brightest new stars was the young Leningrader, Mikhail Botvinnik.

While still a schoolboy, Botvinnik had distinguished himself with his famous victory over Capablanca in a Leningrad simul in 1925 (see Chapter Seven and the Appendix). After this triumph, Botvinnik's rise was swift. A year later, in the 1926 Leningrad Championship, he shared second place with no less than the legendary Il'in-Zhenevskii. Botvinnik later said that this tournament, in particular, was significant in that it marked the first occasion when he fully understood the extent of his own talent.²⁶

Others also appreciated his talent. In the autumn of 1926, a twelve-board match between Leningrad and Stockholm was arranged by the Chess Section—a

26. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 18.

historic event in Soviet chess, entailing a trip abroad by a large contingent of Soviet players. Botvinnik was tapped to play fifth board, an enormous honor for the fifteen-year-old schoolboy. His mother, however, worried that he would miss too much school, and only the enthusiastic blessing of the headmaster convinced her to allow the boy to participate.²⁷

Convincing Botvinnik's mother was easy, however, compared to convincing the Soviet bureaucracy to allow the team to go abroad. The veteran Leningrad player and organizer, Rokhlin, had submitted the requiring paperwork in the belief that everything was already approved. Then came the bombshell from Moscow: the request for passports had been denied. Perhaps the foreign office was nervous. After all, the Soviets had already lost their two best players, and no one wanted to see that number increase. With the exception of Rabinovich at Baden Baden 1924 (see Chapter Seven) and Bogoliubov's activities in 1926 (see above), no Soviet chess players had competed abroad.²⁸ Now *twelve* players were proposing to go abroad at the same time. Whether there was a specific concern or just a general apprehension cannot be discerned. Certainly the team leader, Il'in-Zhenevskii, was the epitome of Party loyalty. As for Botvinnik, he claimed to have already been a staunch Communist for six years—since the tender age of nine.²⁹

27. Ibid., 19.

28. The politically reliable Verlinkii had been granted permission to play in the ill-fated Meran 1926 tournament, but he, along with Bogoliubov, was denied entry into Italy. Alekhin was not considered a Soviet player after he left in 1921.

29. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 21.

Whatever the reason, it appeared that no visas were forthcoming, and Rokhlin was in a panic. He had already confirmed Leningrad's participation with his counterpart in Stockholm. He went directly to Il'in-Zhenevskii, the captain of the Leningrad team. Il'in-Zhenevskii, who still enjoyed considerable influence in the Party, gained an immediate audience with the very powerful Leningrad Party chief, Sergei Mironovich Kirov (1886-1934). Kirov was sympathetic. He made a series of calls, and then assured Il'in-Zhenevskii that the matter was handled. The passports were delivered the next day.³⁰ The match was saved.

The contest, played on November 6-7 (the ninth anniversary of the October Revolution), was a close affair. Leningraders finally defeated the Stockholm team by a very narrow margin.³¹ On fifth board, Botvinnik contributed significantly to the Soviet victory by defeating his opponent, future grandmaster Gösta Stoltz (1904-1963), by a score of 1½-½.³²

Botvinnik also contributed to the Leningraders' success in a more material way. The Chess Section had arranged for the team's lodging in Stockholm, but had somehow neglected to provide adequately for their meals. Near the end of the match, the team was facing the prospect of real hunger. Fortunately, Botvinnik's father had

30. Andy Soltis, *Soviet Chess, 1917-1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2000), 64-65.

31. B. Turov, "Ordena Lenina" [The Order of Lenin], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, May 1970, 16.

32. Each player played two games against his counterpart. Victories gained a full point for the team; draws earned half a point from each player. The score indicates that Botvinnik won one game and the other was a draw.

given him pocket money for the trip, and he generously contributed this to the meager provisions fund. Food was procured at a neighboring market, and the hungry players gathered in the room shared by Botvinnik and Il'in-Zhenevskii, where they dined hurriedly on bread and cheese. In the middle of this rough repast, they were surprised by the unexpected visit of the president of the Swedish Chess Federation. After an awkward moment, he diplomatically ignored the obvious evidence of their modest meal. Instead he politely inquired as to whether they were enjoying Stockholm. Il'in-Zhenevskii, the only player without a mouthful of food at that moment, spoke for them all, proclaiming the city "marvelous."³³

The story of the 1926 Stockholm match has a curious epilogue; Botvinnik later hinted that he considered defecting when he was in Stockholm. Decades later, in a very different context, he heard that a Soviet master was contemplating leaving the Soviet Union. Botvinnik urged the master to reconsider, pointing out that he (Botvinnik) could have stayed in Stockholm in 1926, but decided against it.³⁴

Soon after the Stockholm match, Botvinnik finished high school. He was still just fifteen years old—too young to enter the university (one had to be seventeen to take the entrance exams). Thus he gained a valuable year to develop his chess talent. The highlight of this pleasant chess interlude was the Fifth Soviet Championship.

33. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 19-20.

34. Jan Timman, "Botvinnik, Mikhail: In Memoriam," *New in Chess*, April 1995, 10.

The Fifth Soviet Championship was held in Moscow in September and October 1927. This was Botvinnik's first appearance in a national championship. Now sixteen, he was still too young to dominate, but he made an impressive debut nonetheless. Although his play in the first half of the tournament was somewhat mediocre, in the final stretch he won four games in a row, enough to earn a tie for fifth (in a field of twenty-one) and earn the title of master.³⁵ A contemporary who met Botvinnik for the first time at the 1927 Soviet Championship described the demeanor of the new Soviet master: "He gave the impression more of an adult: his prudence, his manner of dress—wearing a jacket and tie He spoke slowly, weighing his words In general he made a good impression."³⁶

The Fifth Soviet Championship was also Botvinnik's first face-to-face meeting with Krylenko, who was eager to meet and assess the young star. Botvinnik described Krylenko as generally paternalistic toward his chess masters, but unforgiving to anyone, chess player or otherwise, who neglected his political duties. Like most Soviet players, Botvinnik both loved and feared this powerful man.³⁷

The Fifth Soviet Championship of 1927 also confirmed for Botvinnik a suspicion he had long held: the older generation was conspiring against him. Botvinnik believed that the jealousy and self-interest of the old guard caused it to

35. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 25.

36. S. B. Voronkov, "Match Botvinnik-Alekhin," *Shakhmatnyi vestnik*, May 1993, 25.

37. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 14, 22.

view him as an upstart. Romanovskii, especially, was singled out as bearing particular malice toward him. But when presented with the opportunity to strike back at his elders, Botvinnik struck, not at Romanovskii, but at Il'in-Zhenevskii, who had always been friendly to him. In 1929 at the Sixth Soviet Championship, a movement was launched to have Il'in-Zhenevskii seeded into the competition, even though he had not actually qualified. The approval of all the players was required; Botvinnik's was the lone voice raised against Il'in-Zhenevskii's participation on the grounds that rules must be obeyed by all. He later regretted his action, but Il'in-Zhenevskii bore him no particular animosity.³⁸

Two years later, in 1931, Botvinnik finally won the Soviet Championship, finishing first in the Seventh Soviet Championship. The twenty-year-old modestly minimized his victory, explaining that this tournament was not as strong as previous championships.³⁹ Apparently this was in reference to Romanovskii's absence.

In spite of this triumph, the status of Botvinnik as the new star was not yet decided. The question of which member of the younger generation would dominate was still open. Krylenko actually favored the young Moscow star, Nikolai Nikolaevich Riumin (1908-1942) over Botvinnik. This may have been because Riumin was a Muscovite, or it may have been because of Botvinnik's Jewish background—both of his parents were Jews. Botvinnik himself minimized his Jewish heritage, stating that he was “a Jew by birth, a Russian by culture, a Soviet by

38. *Ibid.*, 43.

39. *Ibid.*, 38.

upbringing.”⁴⁰ When Botvinnik managed a dramatic, last-round victory over Riumin to win the 1931 Soviet Championship, Krylenko, visibly annoyed, turned his back on Botvinnik and left without a word.⁴¹

The next championship, the Eighth Soviet Championship in 1933, was more clearly the defining competition in the generational struggle.⁴² This tournament marked the changing of the guard, as the young generation, led by Botvinnik (who finished first), finally swept out the old. Krylenko’s goal, formulated in the mid-1920s, to bring to maturity a new generation of players, fanatically dedicated and politically reliable, was realized. Now these young players craved the opportunity to compete against the world’s best. When an important Leningrad Party figure, Boris Pavlovich Posern (1893-1939), attended the final round of the Eighth Championship, the victorious youngsters seized the moment, taking their case for international competition directly to him. Posern, who had close ties to Kirov, was receptive.⁴³ The resulting “thaw” in Soviet chess relations with the bourgeois world was largely a Leningrad initiative.

Posern took the players’ case to Kirov, the Leningrad Party boss. Kirov, who had previously been accommodating of the issue of passports for the Stockholm-bound Leningrad team (see above), was sympathetic. Kirov, in turn, contacted Il’in-

40. Ibid., 205.

41. Ibid., 86-87.

42. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 34.

43. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 40.

Zhenevskii, who had recently returned to duty in the diplomatic service and was at that time conveniently stationed at the Soviet embassy in Prague. He made contact with the Czech national champion, Salomon Mikhailovich Flohr (1908-1983), with whom he enjoyed friendly relations. Flohr was a top player with a fearsome international reputation and world champion aspirations. Having established that Flohr would be interested in a match with Botvinnik, Il'in-Zhenevskii conveyed this information to Botvinnik (via Vainshtein, who had resumed editorship of *Shakhmatnyi listok* during Il'in-Zhenevskii's absence) and to Krylenko.⁴⁴

Botvinnik, with some trepidation, was prepared to accept the challenge, but Krylenko hesitated. The consensus in the Chess Section was that Botvinnik was bound to lose a match with Flohr, and this was not an unreasonable opinion. While the desirability of some sort of renewed contact with Western chess was conceded by the Chess Section (influenced by Kirov's intervention), a tournament that included Flohr and perhaps some other Western masters was seen as a safer method for testing Botvinnik and the other youngsters. In the end, however, Krylenko decided to allow the match to go forward. According to Botvinnik, Krylenko understood that a match was the best way to determine Soviet chess strength.⁴⁵

The match was well-organized and lavishly prepared. The players were housed in a fine hotel with an open tab at the restaurant. Flohr was mightily impressed, especially since he mistakenly believed that he was experiencing the

44. Ibid., 41-42.

45. Ibid., 43.

normal life of Soviet chess players. The first half of the twelve-game match was held in Moscow, and the second half was in Leningrad. In both venues it was the social event of 1933; in fact, it was 1925 all over again. In Moscow, play was in the prestigious Hall of Columns in the House of Unions. The seating capacity of the Hall of Columns was approximately 1,500, and the first game saw it filled to overflowing. Demonstration boards were placed outside. This made it possible for thousands of Muscovites to watch the game, and they saw Botvinnik completely outplayed and resoundingly defeated.⁴⁶

Krylenko must have been in despair; suddenly Botvinnik appeared hopelessly outclassed by the Czech master. Expert help was immediately dispatched from Leningrad—not a young player as Botvinnik would have preferred, but rather a veteran master of the older generation.⁴⁷ Thus fortified by sage advice, Botvinnik managed to achieve draws in the next four games. Then disaster struck again in the sixth game, the final game in the Moscow leg of the match, when Botvinnik lost again. When the players boarded the new, prestigious Red Arrow train for Leningrad, Botvinnik trailed his rival by two full points. Few in the Soviet chess world held much hope for Botvinnik.

But in Leningrad, Botvinnik had the home-field advantage, and this included the support of his family as well as the counsel of the younger masters, especially his close friend, Viacheslav Vasil'evich Ragozin (1908-1962). The Leningrad leg of the

46. *Ibid.*, 44.

47. *Ibid.*, 44-45.

match was held in the main hall of the Leningrad Conservatory. Although it was larger than the Moscow venue, this hall, too, was filled to overflowing. Again, spectators watched on exhibition boards posted outside the Conservatory. The first two games were draws, which seemed to confirm the dire portents of Botvinnik's inevitable defeat. With a two-game advantage, Flohr could now coast to victory on a string of draws. But in game nine, Botvinnik unveiled a prepared opening variation he had worked out with Ragozin. Flohr, overconfident, played right into the trap. Botvinnik finally scored his first win of the match, and he earned the rapturous applause of his hometown supporters.⁴⁸ Then Botvinnik amazed his critics and delighted his fans when he also won the next (tenth) game. With only two games to play, the score was suddenly tied.

The eleventh game was drawn, but Flohr had to fight for the draw, and he was clearly getting the worst of it. There should have been a storybook ending; it should have come down to everything riding on a tense twelfth and final game. But Flohr lost his nerve, and, instead of a bang, the match ended with a whimper. Flohr sent a message to Vainshtein (not Botvinnik or even his second!) offering, in advance, a draw in the twelfth and final game, which would mean a drawn match.⁴⁹ The offer

48. Ibid. 46-47.

49. This is not as nefarious as it might sound. It is common practice in professional chess to agree to very short draws when strategically desirable. It is less common to make the offer in advance, but not unheard of.

was accepted—not by Botvinnik, but rather by Vainshtein with Krylenko’s approval. Botvinnik says only that he did not object.⁵⁰

It was later hinted that Botvinnik’s remarkable turnabout was not quite the miracle that it seemed. Decades later, David Ionovich Bronstein (1924-2006), a fierce rival and certainly no friend to Botvinnik, suggested that Flohr was bribed by Botvinnik’s close friend and official second in the match, Grigorii Abramovich Goldberg (1908-1976): “Flohr, who used to lose on average one game each year, suddenly lost two in one week! There must have been a reason for this and there was! Goldberg’s help was instrumental in finding a shop where Flohr could ‘buy’ a beautiful fur coat very cheaply!”⁵¹ Bronstein’s accusation, however, should be viewed with caution; when he and Botvinnik later became rivals for the world championship, their mutual animosity was legendary.

The closing ceremony in Leningrad’s Hotel Astoria was packed with the stars of chess, politics, academics, and the arts. Krylenko attended; he had snubbed Botvinnik in Moscow after the disastrous first game. Now, delighted with the outcome, Krylenko told Botvinnik that he had played like a Bolshevik.⁵² This was high praise indeed. And Krylenko, of course, had every reason to be pleased with his

50. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 47-48.

51. David Bronstein and Tom Furstenberg, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1995), 83.

52. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 48.

protégé. Krylenko's goal had been realized. Botvinnik, who was then only twenty-two, had stood toe-to-toe with one of the best players the West could offer.

After the closing ceremonies, Botvinnik accompanied Flohr to the train station; the two players had developed a friendship. Flohr left Leningrad bound for England where he played in the very prestigious annual Hastings International Chess Congress, 1933-34.⁵³ At Hastings, Flohr indirectly added value to Botvinnik's reputation when he finished first, ahead of the World Champion, Alekhin. This was the final confirmation that Krylenko needed; Botvinnik was now considered ready to challenge the West on its own turf.

53. *Ibid.*, 49.

Chapter Eleven

The Classical Land of Chess

Flohr's victory in Hastings 1933-1934 was a major triumph for the Czech master, then at the height of his powers. The Hastings tournament was a prestigious event—an integral part of the European tournament circuit, held annually at Hastings, England. In addition to finishing first in the event, Flohr defeated the reigning World Champion, Alekhin, in their individual game.¹

Meanwhile, shortly after his drawn match with Flohr (see Chapter Ten), Botvinnik played a strong masters' tournament in Leningrad in 1934. Although it was not an international tournament, it featured rare and limited Western participation, most notably the Dutch master, Machgielis (Max) Euwe (1901-1981). Euwe had been selected as the next challenger to the World Champion, Alekhin, and Leningrad was among the tournaments he had selected for training for that match. Perhaps he also hoped to learn something about Alekhin's Russian chess roots. Like many other Western chess players who visited Russia in the 1930s, Euwe grossly underestimated the rising crop of Soviet players; he finished a disappointing sixth. Euwe would soon defeat Alekhin and, albeit briefly, wear the world chess crown.

Euwe was enormously impressed with Soviet Union, which he called “a chess player's dream.” He elaborated: “When you read in the paper that a family of eight challenges any other family in the Soviet Union for a [team] chess match, and that

1. V. D. Baturinskii, *Grossmeister Flor* (Moscow: Fiskul'tura i sport, 1985), 67-68.

nearly all the townspeople of Cheliuskina play chess, then you can't help making comparisons with Europe, where such things just don't exist."² Euwe also praised his competition at Leningrad:

I was remarkable how good they were in the opening, this was something I hadn't really expected. And then, they really kept fighting, till the very last moment. This kind of fighting spirit was much less common with the Western players in that time; they were much more inclined to take it easy But there was nothing like that with the Russians. Another special thing about the Russians was that they never settled for a quick draw and that even as Black they just went for the win from the word go. This was fairly uncommon in European chess circles, this unfettered aggression. There was no talk of a Soviet school of chess [see below] in those days. That came after the war. But in Leningrad 1934 you could certainly see the seeds of it.³

Botvinnik, who won the Leningrad tournament, developed friendly relations with Euwe (their individual game was a hard-fought draw, viewed by 2500 spectators). Botvinnik knew that Euwe had competed several times at Hastings, and Botvinnik was eager to learn more about the tournament. Euwe was on very good terms with the organizers, and he promised to secure Botvinnik an invitation to the next Hastings tournament.⁴ When the invitation arrived, it coincided with Krylenko's growing interest in testing the international waters. Free from the critical eye of the *Shakhintern*, the Krylenko could easily defend the ideological correctness of a decision to allow Botvinnik to play in Western tournaments.

2. Maks Eive, *Maks Eive* [Max Euwe] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1979), 79.

3. Alexander Munninghoff and Max Euwe, *Max Euwe, the Biography* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess, 2001), 110-111.

4. M. M. Botvinnik, *Polveka v shakhmatak* [Half a Century of Chess] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1978), 55-56.

Botvinnik's participation in Hastings 1934-1935—the first Western test of the Soviet champion—was not entirely triumphant. While Flohr and Euwe tied for first, Botvinnik had to settle for a fifth place tie. This was actually a respectable result; Hastings 1934-1935 was unusually strong, and Botvinnik was relatively untried. Nevertheless, for Botvinnik it was a bitter disappointment. He barely mentioned Hastings in his autobiography, blaming his poor showing on the combination of a difficult journey and his late arrival—just hours before play began. The old veteran, Lasker, was appalled at Botvinnik's late arrival, maintaining that a player should always allow ten days to rest and acclimate. Botvinnik wrote that he, or rather Krylenko, did not make this mistake again.⁵

In spite of Botvinnik's mediocre result at Hastings, Krylenko still felt confident enough to showcase his protégé (this time with a home-court advantage) in a Soviet-sponsored international tournament: Moscow 1935. The event was a major milestone in Soviet chess. It had been ten years since the last such tournament, and Krylenko was now confident that his new generation of Soviet players, led by Botvinnik, would bring glory to the Soviet chess organization.

The tournament was organized along the lines of Moscow 1925, this time with twelve Soviets and eight Western players. Among the Soviet players, there was a clearly discernible generational divide: only four were veterans of Moscow 1925—Levenfish, Romanovskii, Rabinovich and Bogatirchuk. Among the other aging Soviet

5. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 59.

stars, neither Il'in-Zhenevskii nor Verlinskii (both vanquished Capablanca in 1925—see Chapter Seven) was able to make the cut. The other eight Soviet players, led by Botvinnik and his Moscow-based rival, Riumin, were all in their early to mid-twenties. This was clearly a tournament dominated by the new generation of Soviet chess players. As Krylenko noted with great satisfaction, no Western country could field such a collection of powerful players.⁶

The Westerner players invited to Moscow 1935 can also be divided into two generations. The old guard included Lasker, now sixty-six (well beyond normal competitive age), Capablanca, and Rudolf Spielmann (1883-1942)—all veterans of Moscow 1925. Specifically not invited were Alekhin and Bogoliubov—partly because they were renegades, traitors, opportunists and hypocrites, but also, as Krylenko explained, because they were Russian-born and therefore didn't qualify as foreign masters. Since they offered nothing of Western chess culture, they offered nothing at all; their participation would have been superfluous.⁷

Among the younger players from the West were Flohr, who had drawn the 1933 match with Botvinnik (see Chapter Ten); Andor Arnoldovich Lilienthal (1911-2010) of Hungary; and Anders Gideon Stahlberg (1908-1967) of Sweden. The most

6. N. V. Krylenko, predislovie [foreword] to *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir, Moskva 1935: materialy k turniru* [International Chess Tournament, Moscow 1935: Materials for the Tournament], ed. C. O. Vainshtein and Ia. G. Rokhlin (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i turizm, 1935), 3-4.

7. Ibid.

sensational young Westerner was the female master, Vera Frantsevna Menchik (1906-1944).⁸

Menchik made her home in England, but she had been born in Moscow. Her Czech mother and English father had fled to England in 1921 when Vera was fifteen. Menchik never had Soviet citizenship although, according to Botvinnik, “she was in appearance a typical Russian woman.”⁹ In England she finished first in the British girls’ chess championship. She was subsequently tutored by a well-known Hungarian master. In her twenties she competed numerous times at the annual tournament in Hastings (but not in 1934, when Botvinnik played). She also played in several other international events. She was the women’s world chess champion from 1927-1944. As a female player, she was in a class by herself. The first woman to compete in men’s tournaments, she usually achieved respectable results. She was always considered a dangerous opponent, and many strong players were counted among her victims, who were known collectively as the “Vera Menchik Club.” Although her results were at Moscow 1935 were disappointing, her appearance there galvanized Soviet women’s chess.¹⁰

According to Krylenko, the goals of Moscow 1935 were quite similar to those of Moscow 1925. First, Krylenko wanted to test the strength of his players—this time,

8. Ibid., 3.

9. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 90.

10. Anatoly Karpov and Iu. Averbakh, *Shakhmaty: entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* [Chess: Encyclopedic Dictionary] (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1990), 252.

a new generation of Soviet chess players. Second, he wished to exploit the presence of the foreign masters in Moscow to the fullest, both in training the Soviet players and building mass enthusiasm for chess. Their very presence in Moscow was exciting, and their contracts required them to play simulms on their free days. Finally, Krylenko wanted the tournament itself as a spectacle to further the interest in chess among the workers and peasants, thus continuing the project of elevating their intellectual and cultural level of development.¹¹

The enthusiasm in the Soviet Union for Moscow 1935 mirrored the chess fever associated with Moscow 1925. Competition was held in the spacious Museum of Elegant Arts (now Pushkin Museum). Five thousand spectators showed up on the first day, and some players found the scene disturbingly chaotic. Better crowd control prevailed after that, and large exhibition boards were set up on the museum grounds to accommodate the overflow crowd.¹²

The quality and excitement of games lived up to the expectations. The tournament was marked by many great games, dramatic upsets, theoretical innovations, and some dubious off-the-board tactics. Krylenko worried that his Soviet players were handicapped, relative to their Western opponents, by their lack of experience in the wiles and tricks of bourgeois tournament chess—knowing when to play all-out for a win, when to play for a draw and conserve one’s strength, who is

11. Krylenko, predislovie [foreword] to *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir, Moskva 1935: materialy k turniru*, 6.

12. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 50-51.

likely to agree to a prearranged draw, etc. The foreign players, professionals all, were well-schooled in these tactics. The Soviet players, on the other hand, relied on their talent alone.¹³ In fact, even the tactic of an occasional short, strategic, strength-conserving draw was not available to the Soviet contingent. Krylenko had explicitly forbidden the Soviet players from offering draws when playing against foreigners.¹⁴ But if the Soviets were innocent in the sordid ways of bourgeois chess, they were certainly fast learners. In his description of the following incident, Botvinnik offered a revealing look behind the scenes.

As the players entered the last round of the tournament, Flohr and Botvinnik were tied for first place. Flohr was scheduled to play against Vladimir Alekseevich Alatortsev (1909-1987), one of the lesser Soviet players; Botvinnik was paired with Rabinovich, a fixture of the Leningrad old guard and no friend to Botvinnik. Krylenko visited Botvinnik's room at the Hotel National on the eve of the final round, wanting to gauge Botvinnik's reaction to his suggestion that Rabinovich be ordered to throw the game. Botvinnik, describing the incident, claimed that he flatly refused with a dramatic flourish: "If I understand that he is giving me the point, I will give up a piece and immediately resign the game."¹⁵ Botvinnik then softened his refusal by offering Krylenko a clever analysis of the situation. Since Flohr was probably already

13. Krylenko, predislovie [foreword] to *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir, Moskva 1935: materialy k turniru*, 4.

14. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 53.

15. *Ibid.* 52.

worried that Botvinnik's game might be thrown in the manner suggested by Krylenko, Botvinnik argued, Flohr would probably offer a draw in his game in return for the guarantee of a draw in Botvinnik's game. After all, Botvinnik pointed out, Flohr had proposed something analogous in their match (see Chapter Ten). Flohr and Botvinnik would then finish the tournament tied for first.

At that very moment, as if on cue, Vainshtein entered the room with the latest news: Flohr had just offered the exact deal that Botvinnik had predicted. Rabinovich, Botvinnik's opponent, readily agreed to the arrangement, but Alatortsev, Flohr's opponent, unexpectedly objected to his part in the farce. Let him play, was Flohr's response, arrogantly promising the game would be drawn with or without Alatortsev's cooperation. The plan, however, threatened to go awry when Alatortsev, eager to prove his point, played aggressively—only to end up with a lost position. It took a great deal of skill on Flohr's part to avoid winning the game, but he kept his word. The game was a draw.¹⁶ The outcome, as the conspirators had planned, was that Botvinnik and Flohr tied for first place overall.

A few months after the Moscow 1935 event ended, Botvinnik (who had received a cash prize, an automobile, and a doubling of his post-graduate stipend for his efforts) began to petition Krylenko for another tournament. Botvinnik argued that Moscow 1935 was flawed by the inclusion of too many relatively weak players, which introduced an element of chance and made it difficult to judge the strength of

16. *Ibid.*, 52-53.

the leading Soviet players. He proposed a smaller “match-tournament”¹⁷ with five strong foreigners and the five strongest Soviet players. Krylenko was initially only lukewarm to the proposal. Selecting the five Soviet players would be difficult and divisive given his embarrassment of riches. More to the point, there was also the expense. Tournaments with Westerner participation required hard currency, which was always in short supply. But eventually Krylenko relented—swayed, perhaps, by an offer from the Central Committee of the Komsomol (the Party youth organization), where Botvinnik had powerful friends, to help with the funding.¹⁸ Significant Komsomol involvement in the Soviet chess organization, which dates from the middle 1930s, would eventually loosen the tight hold the Chess Section had on all aspects of Soviet chess.

The Third Moscow International Chess Tournament was held in the summer of 1936. The foreign contingent consisted of Lasker, Capablanca, Flohr, Lilienthal and the Austrian master, Erich Gottlieb Eliskases (1913-1997). The younger Soviets were well represented by Botvinnik, Ragozin, Riumin and Il’ia Abramovich Kan (1909-1978). Levenfish, alone, represented the old guard.

The tournament quickly became a contest between Botvinnik and a resurgent Capablanca. Botvinnik claimed to have suffered from the heat and insomnia during

17. A match-tournament is a competition in which each player contests two or more games with each opponent. A tournament like Moscow 1936, where each player plays two games with each opponent, is also sometimes called a double, round-robin tournament in the West.

18. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 53-54.

the tournament; Capablanca, on the other hand, was inspired by love. He had just met the woman who would become his second wife, and he promised her he would regain the world title.¹⁹ Botvinnik lost to Capablanca in one of their games, and this turned out to be the margin of victory for Capablanca. Botvinnik finished one point behind Capablanca, while Flohr finished a distant third. The rest of the Soviet contingent, however, fared rather badly. Krylenko was only grudgingly satisfied with Botvinnik's play, and he was not at all pleased with his other *protégés*. In his foreword to the tournament book, he took the Soviet players to task, insisting that the most immediate lesson of Moscow 1936 was that Soviet players needed to drop their conceit, study their games, and learn from their numerous mistakes.²⁰

A curious anecdote about Moscow 1936 was related years later by Capablanca's widow, the woman whose love was said to have inspired Capablanca's victory:

It is little known, I believe, that Stalin came to see Capablanca play, hiding behind a drapery. This happened in Moscow in 1936. Capa had mentioned it to me *en passant*, so I am a bit hazy about the details, such as who had accompanied Stalin—seems to me it was Krylenko. However, the gist of this encounter remains quite clear in my mind.

Capa said to Stalin: “Your Soviet players are cheating, losing the games on purpose to my rival, Botvinnik, in order to increase his points on the score.”

19. Edward Winter, “The Genius and the Princess,” (March 14, 2012), <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/capablancaolga.html> (accessed June 13, 2013).

20. N. V. Krylenko, “Predislovie” [Foreword], in *Tretii mezhdunarodnyi shakmatnyi turnir: Moskva 1936* [Third International Chess Tournament: Moscow 1936], ed. G. Ia. Levenfish (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i turism, 1937), 8.

According to Capa, Stalin took it good-naturedly. He smiled and promised to take care of the situation.

He did.

From then on the cheating . . . stopped and Capablanca . . . won the tournament all by himself.²¹

Capablanca's charges of collusion were not ungrounded. Botvinnik's friend, the Leningrad master Ragozin, participated in both Moscow 1935 and 1936. Although his overall results were mediocre, Ragozin later (in 1946) revealed in his Party biography that he had received a special, secret prize in each tournament for the best score against foreign participants.²² No such prize was mentioned in the official tournament books.

Moscow 1936 also had an interesting epilogue. Emmanuel Lasker, now sixty-seven years old, placed a surprising and very respectable sixth in the tournament. He had emerged from retirement out of necessity. The advent of the Nazi regime in his native Germany had robbed him of his home and possessions; he and his wife were destitute.²³

Lasker had always been a friend to Soviet chess, visiting the country four times—always full of praise for Soviet chess and the Soviet state. In a revealing

21. Olga Capablanca Clark to Edward Winter, July 26, 1989, in Edward Winter, "The Genius and the Princess," (March 14, 2012), <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/capablancaolga.html> (accessed June 13, 2013).

22. Viacheslav Ragozin, "Znachitel'nye sobytiia iz moi shakhmatnoi avtobiografii" [Significant events in my Chess Autobiography] (1946), GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 86, listy 19.

23. J. Hannak, *Emanuel Lasker: The Life of a Chess Master* (New York: Dover, 1991), 268.

gesture, based at least partly on sentiment, Krylenko invited Lasker to remain in Moscow after the tournament. He engineered an invitation for Lasker to join the Moscow Academy of Science, where Lasker would do a little research, but his real work would be mentoring young Soviet chess players. Lasker gratefully accepted the offer, and he and his wife began the process of acquiring Soviet citizenship.²⁴

A few months after Moscow 1936, Botvinnik again traveled abroad, this time to compete in a major tournament in Nottingham, England. Botvinnik received his official invitation early in 1936, and his participation was quickly approved by Krylenko, even though it was already known that the renegades, Alekhin and Bogoliubov, had both been invited to Nottingham.

Botvinnik believed he had earned Krylenko's trust, and now he seemed to test its limits. He made an unprecedented request: he wanted his wife to accompany him to Nottingham.²⁵ If the request was extraordinary, so was the response. Always the pragmatist, Krylenko had seen Botvinnik's play improve in the second half of the recent Moscow event after his wife had joined him. What would be the point of sending Botvinnik to Nottingham if the authorities did not do everything possible to ensure his success? But even Krylenko would not make such a weighty decision on his own authority. He took the controversial question to the titular head of state, Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin (1875-1946), who gave his assent.²⁶

24. Ibid., 281-282.

25. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 53-54.

26. Ibid., 56-57.

Nottingham 1936 was a tournament of legendary strength. It was, in fact, the strongest chess tournament up to that time, and it is now considered one of the greatest tournaments of all time. Five former, reigning or future world champions were present, along with at least four players considered to be in contention for the crown. Further, the Soviets were represented by both a future world champion (Botvinnik) and a former world champion (Lasker). In view of his recent change of citizenship, Lasker was listed in the official tournament cross-table as representing the Soviet Union.²⁷ In fact, Lasker embraced his new status, quickly becoming a part of the Soviet team. He told Botvinnik that he felt an obligation as a Soviet citizen to play for wins against Botvinnik's chief rivals in the tournament. When Botvinnik, in deference to Lasker's age, assured him that avoiding losses against his chief rivals would be enough, Lasker was visibly relieved.²⁸

In what could have been awkward encounters, Botvinnik met the renegades over the board, drawing with Alekhin and defeating Bogoliubov. Botvinnik behaved very properly toward both of his former countrymen, and they graciously returned the gesture. Alekhin wrote a book on the tournament, and his comments on Botvinnik's games were full of praise for the young Soviet champion. For example, he wrote, "Botvinnik follows up his fine win against Bogoljuboff [Bogoliubov] with a splendid victory over Tartakover in 30 moves. Subsequently this game is awarded the special

27. Andy Soltis, *The Great Chess Tournaments and Their Stories* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Books, 1975), 161-166.

28. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 63.

prize for the most brilliant game.”²⁹ Botvinnik concluded that Alekhin, in spite of the fact that he was drinking heavily and behaving boorishly during the tournament, was well-disposed toward him. Alekhin did Botvinnik the honor of predicting a great future for the young Soviet champion.³⁰ Bogoliubov certainly had no grounds for a grudge against Botvinnik either, in spite of his loss. When Bogoliubov had absent-mindedly failed to punch his clock, Botvinnik graciously brought the oversight to his attention. After the tournament, Bogoliubov characteristically blamed his defeats on bad luck. However, he made an exception for his loss to Botvinnik. The Soviet champion’s victory, Bogoliubov conceded, could not be attributed solely to chance. The two men parted on friendly terms, although Botvinnik noted with distaste that his erstwhile countryman had become thoroughly Germanized. He spoke Russian with an affected German accent and even laughed like a German.³¹ Although Botvinnik does not mention it, Bogoliubov had also become a member of the German National Socialist Party.³²

The final round at Nottingham 1936 was filled with drama and intrigue. Botvinnik was tied with Capablanca for first place as the last round began.

29. Aleksandr Alekhin, *The Book of the Nottingham International Chess Tournament: 10th to 28th August, 1936*, trans. William Henry Watts (Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1937), 4.

30. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 63.

31. *Ibid.*, 66.

32. Hans Kmoch, “Yefim Dimitrievich Bogolyubov [Bogoliubov] (1889-1952),” in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2004), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch01.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2013).

Capablanca was paired with the always dangerous Bogoliubov; Botvinnik's, opponent was an English player named William Winter (1898-1955), who finished last in the tournament. Before play began, Capablanca proposed to Botvinnik that both of them should propose quick draws to their respective opponents and thus finish the tournament tied for first. Obviously the proposed deal would favor Capablanca, who faced a far more formidable opponent. Botvinnik, of course, recognized the inequality of the offer and refused, disingenuously claiming that while he was inclined to accept, he feared Moscow's disapproval.³³ So play began, and soon Capablanca seemed to have an advantage against Bogoliubov. Botvinnik, on the other hand, somehow managed to slip into an inferior position against Winter. Realizing that he could actually lose to Winter, Botvinnik offered a draw, which was quickly accepted. Winter's acceptance of the draw was subsequently pilloried in the English press. Undoubtedly, many of Winter's critics would have done the same, but there was a complicating factor: Winter, who had recently been imprisoned for sedition, was a well-known organizer for the British Communist Party.³⁴ Nevertheless, the charge that he agreed to the draw for political reasons is absurd; there was no logical basis for the accusation. First, Winter's action in accepting the draw was entirely rational; most players in his position would have done the same. Winter was already doomed to finish last in the tournament regardless of the result in this game, and a draw with the tournament leader would at least allow him to salvage some honor.

33. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 63.

34. Soltis, *The Great Chess Tournaments and Their Stories*, 162.

Second, the accusation itself was irrational. If Moscow was giving instructions (as Winter's detractors claimed), why not just order Winter to lose? A draw only guaranteed Botvinnik second place. Capablanca and Bogoliubov were still playing when Botvinnik's game ended, and a win by Capablanca would have guaranteed first place for the Cuban.

Meanwhile, it appeared that Capablanca was going to win his game—and the tournament. But Bogoliubov fought back valiantly, somehow finding a way to force a draw.³⁵ Thus the intended result of Capablanca's proposed bargain with Botvinnik came to pass: both games were drawn, and Botvinnik and Capablanca tied for first. Ironically, it was Bogoliubov's persistent fight for the draw in a lost position, rather than Winter's acceptance of a draw in a superior position, that guaranteed Botvinnik's tie for first.

Botvinnik's tie with Capablanca at Nottingham 1936 was the crowning achievement in this phase of Botvinnik's career. It was also a very important victory for the Soviet Union, a victory that came at a most opportune moment. During the Nottingham tournament, a very different kind of spectacle had been taking place in Moscow. From August 19 to August 24, in the House of Unions (which had hosted the opening ceremonies for Moscow 1925), one of the great show trials of 1936 took place. Kamenev, Zinoviev and their accomplices were tried and found guilty of plotting with Trotsky, murdering Kirov, and/or plotting to kill Stalin. They were

35. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 65.

shot.³⁶ The confessions of the accused stretched the limits of credulity even among the faithful.

The British press had been particularly skeptical of the whole affair, and the prestige of the Soviet Union in England had entered a new low. An official at the Soviet embassy told Botvinnik: “It’s good that the tournament ended so well. We will have a reception for the players, so something favorable can be written about the Soviet Union.”³⁷ The reception was held, and many photographs were duly taken of Lasker, Capablanca and Botvinnik having a jolly conversation over tea. Unfortunately for the Soviet diplomats, though, the reception did not work out as planned. The Soviet diplomats wanted to showcase the tournament, but the British press only wanted to talk only about the trials.³⁸

The reception in London proved awkward, and much of the remainder of Botvinnik’s journey home, which should have been a tour of triumph, was also strained. The political events in Moscow weighed heavily on the Soviet diplomats in the West. In Paris, Botvinnik learned from a journalist, rather than from Soviet officialdom, that he was being awarded the Order of the Mark of Honor.³⁹ In Berlin, the Soviet embassy hosted a celebratory banquet, but everyone seemed silent and

36. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91-105.

37. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 70.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 71.

glum—except the ambassador himself, who prattled on and on in a nervous monologue. In Minsk, however, the mood was better, and a huge crowd of journalists, photographers, chess players, and well-wishers met Botvinnik’s train.⁴⁰

The reception at Minsk prepared Botvinnik for Moscow, where he was lionized for his accomplishment in a seemingly endless succession of meetings, receptions, and parties. Botvinnik had an audience with Krylenko, who was very pleased with his protégé’s performance. He asked many questions about the tournament, his opponents, and conditions in England. Botvinnik’s Order of the Mark of Honor was officially awarded at a session of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR. The official making the presentation, however, faltered in his speech. He seemed uncertain as to the reason a mere chess player was being awarded this high honor, finally just saying that Botvinnik had conducted himself in the heroic manner expected of all Soviet citizens.⁴¹

On August 29, 1936, the day after the Nottingham tournament concluded, a front-page *Pravda* article celebrated Botvinnik’s heroic accomplishment. While probably intended partially as a respite from the news of trials, saboteurs and traitors, the *Pravda* article was also the defining statement on Soviet chess as it had developed in the mid-1930s. Botvinnik’s victory, said *Pravda*, represented the triumph of the vanguard of the Soviet chess movement who “showed the world that in chess theory

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 71-72.

and practice they had caught up with the best artists of the West.”⁴² This merely demonstrated that the masters had finally caught up to the rest of the Soviet chess organization. Chess as a mass vehicle for the cultural enlightenment of the people had long surpassed anything comparable in bourgeois chess. Building on this foundation, the elite of Soviet chess had, at last, taken their rightful place as the strongest in the world. This, in turn, would strengthen the mass chess movement; elite and mass chess existed in a symbiotic relationship.

Chess, the *Pravda* article maintained, was an appropriate vehicle for this important mission because it occupied a liminal position on the frontier between science and art. Chess was also a unique kind of struggle, and victory required analytical ability and imagination. Marx and Lenin had understood the dual nature of chess. Both were accomplished chess players, using chess as a tool for developing an iron will and as a creative outlet for nervous energy.

The article went on to describe the impressive scope of the Soviet chess organization. From the industrial cities, to remote villages of the steppe, from Central Asia, to the polar North, chess had found an important and permanent niche in Soviet society. Chess was making an indelible mark on Red Army soldiers and schoolboy Pioneers alike—shaping Soviet character. “The USSR,” the article famously concluded, “is becoming the classical land of chess. The famous chess masters of

42. “Shakhmatisty nashei strany” [The Chess Players of our Homeland], *Pravda*, August 29, 1936.

Western Europe and America look with amazement and envy at the growth of our chess culture. There is nothing like that in their countries.”⁴³

The next day the text of a telegram, ostensibly from Botvinnik to Stalin, appeared in *Pravda*. Addressing himself to his “beloved teacher and teacher,” Botvinnik’s message took on the obsequious tone that was so common during Stalin’s cult of personality. He modestly attributed his victory to the support of the Soviet people and the guidance of the Soviet leadership. His triumph, Botvinnik said, was important only because it was the triumph of socialism. Everything he had achieved was inspired by Stalin’s great slogan: “catch up and overtake.”⁴⁴

Botvinnik later claimed that he was not the actual author of this sycophantic telegram. A staff writer from *64* composed the message on Krylenko’s order and then called Botvinnik and read it to him over the phone. He asked Botvinnik if he wanted any last minute changes before “his” message was passed on to Stalin. Botvinnik went along with the charade, saying that he approved. Botvinnik’s telegram was sent to Stalin at his dacha and then subsequently printed in *Pravda*.⁴⁵

After Nottingham, Botvinnik was widely considered the heir-apparent to the world championship. Alekhin, who briefly lost the title to Euwe in 1935 and then regained it in 1937, was the victim of intemperate habits that appeared to be

43. Ibid.

44. “Dorogoi, rodnoi, liubimy i nash uchitel’ i rukovoditel’!” [Dear beloved teacher and leader!], *Pravda*, August 30, 1936.

45. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 71.

accelerating his decline. He was drinking heavily when he lost the title in 1935, and he regained it in 1937 only during a period of abstinence.⁴⁶ But Alekhin's drinking was not an impediment to a match with Botvinnik; the problem was Alekhin's political status.

Botvinnik's plan to challenge Alekhin in the aftermath of his Nottingham triumph got off to a slow start when he skipped the Tenth Soviet Championship, held in Tbilisi in spring 1937.⁴⁷ He quite reasonably decided to forego the Championship, electing instead to defend his doctoral dissertation (in electrical engineering). Although this was in line with the official position that Soviet chess players were not chess professionals, the authorities interpreted his absence very unfavorably. He was severely scolded by Il'in-Zhenevskii, while Krylenko, enraged at the perceived arrogance, threatened to report Botvinnik's behavior to the Central Committee.⁴⁸ In Botvinnik's absence, the winner of the Tenth Soviet Championship was the pre-Revolutionary veteran, Levenfish, who had actually played in the First Soviet Championship back in the dark days of 1920 (see Chapter Six). In 1937, at age of forty-eight, Levenfish was enjoying a personal renaissance—playing some of the best chess of his career.

46. Hans Kmoch, "Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine [Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Alekhin], 'doctor juris' (1892-1946)," in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2005), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch05.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2013).

47. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 41.

48. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 74.

Krylenko, once he had calmed down, ordered Botvinnik to play a match with Levenfish.⁴⁹ Botvinnik delivered the challenge, and Levenfish accepted, noting that Botvinnik was entitled to the match because he had not participated in the championship tournament.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Levenfish must have accepted the challenge with some trepidation. He had never beaten Botvinnik, who was twenty-one years younger than he. But Levenfish was offered powerful incentives. In view of his age, Levenfish was allowed three months at a Crimean resort to rest and prepare, and he was provided with a trainer. He was given “draw odds”⁵¹ in the match. Finally, he was promised the coveted title of grandmaster, obtainable only from the Chess Section, if his results were respectable.⁵²

The match began in September 1937; half was played in Moscow and half in Leningrad. Public interest was enormous, especially when Levenfish, the clear underdog, unexpectedly made a real fight of it. After the Moscow leg, he had a slight deficit, but he played brilliantly in Leningrad. To the amazement of just about everyone, he managed to draw the match, retaining the title and earning the grandmaster title.⁵³

49. Ibid.

50. G. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya* [Selected Games and Memoirs] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1967), 160.

51. In case of a drawn match, Levenfish would be named the winner and keep his title of Soviet Champion.

52. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya*, 161.

53. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 43.

Botvinnik's humiliation (which he blamed on academic distractions and Levenfish's "cheating")⁵⁴ was also very disruptive to Krylenko's plans for taking Soviet possession of the world title. By the time the match ended, the world championship had passed from Euwe back to Alekhin, and Alekhin had agreed to play a match with Flohr, the Czech champion. The match, however, was cancelled when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938.⁵⁵

The question of Alekhin's next challenger was on the agenda at the AVRO tournament⁵⁶ scheduled for autumn 1938. Invitations were restricted to the world's top eight players, and it was understood that the winner would have the right to challenge Alekhin. After some argument, Botvinnik, rather than Levenfish, was selected to represent the Soviet Union. Levenfish was justifiably upset; he believed this denial marked the end of his career.⁵⁷ Clearly he had earned the moral right to play in AVRO. Not only had he won the Tenth Soviet Championship and drawn Botvinnik in a match, he also had tied for first in the Ninth Soviet Championship in 1935 (Botvinnik was playing in Hastings at the time).⁵⁸ But Levenfish, now forty-nine, didn't represent the future, and that's where the pragmatic Soviet leadership was looking.

54. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 75.

55. Baturinskii, *Grossmeister Flor*, 24.

56. AVRO was a Dutch radio station. The tournament was played in various locations in the Netherlands.

57. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya*, 176.

58. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 38.

Botvinnik, as was his custom, asked that his wife be allowed to accompany him to AVRO, and the request, with some complications, was granted. But in spite of his wife's presence, Botvinnik's performance was disappointing. Paul' Petrovich Keres (1916-1975) and the American play, Reuben Fine (1914-1993), tied for first. Botvinnik had to be satisfied with third place.⁵⁹ This seemed to take any challenge by Botvinnik off the table, but all was not as it seemed.

Although the tournament had been organized, in part, on the premise that the winner would have first right to challenge Alekhin, the event had actually gotten off to a very confusing start when Alekhin spoke at the opening ceremony. He repudiated any promise of favoring the winner in his choice of challengers. Instead, as Alekhin informed the stunned players, he would play with any world-class player who could guarantee a prize fund of ten thousand dollars.⁶⁰

This was an opening for Botvinnik; he might still arrange a title match, despite his third-place finish. But first he needed to cover himself politically. To this end, he arranged to have lunch with the highest ranking Party member available, a diplomat in Belgium, who gave his blessing to the enterprise. At the close of the tournament, Botvinnik approached Alekhin and asked him for an opportunity to discuss a title match. Alekhin was receptive, and Botvinnik arranged a formal meeting to ascertain Alekhin's conditions for a match. Botvinnik believed that Alekhin was especially

59. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 77.

60. G. G. Toradze, *AVRO-Turnir: mezhdunarodnyi turnir grossmeisterov v Gollandii, 1938 g.* [AVRO Tournament: International Grandmaster Tournament in Holland, 1938] (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1995), 40.

happy to play him, seeing the proposed match as an avenue to reconciliation with the Soviet Union.⁶¹ Euwe confirmed this, writing, “in the early 1930s, Alekhin finds himself getting more and more homesick for Russia.”⁶²

After taking the precaution of securing Flohr to accompany him as a witness (Alekhin was still an enemy of the people), Botvinnik called on Alekhin in his hotel. They had enjoyed amicable relations at Nottingham (see above), and the same goodwill prevailed at their meeting in Amsterdam. The conditions for a match were relatively simple, which adds credence to Botvinnik’s claim that Alekhin strongly desired a match with him. The venue was up to Botvinnik, but if the match was held in the Soviet Union (as Alekhin assumed), Alekhin must be invited to a Soviet tournament at least three months prior to the start of the match in order to prepare and acclimate himself. The prize fund was ten-thousand dollars, with two-thirds going to the winner. Finally, until a formal agreement was achieved, the negotiations would remain secret.⁶³

When he returned to Moscow, Botvinnik made his report directly to a high-ranking Party official, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bulganin (1895-1975), Central Committee member and Director of the Soviet State Bank.⁶⁴ Botvinnik didn’t mention it, but most likely Botvinnik, whose field was electrical engineering, knew

61. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 83.

62. Munninghoff and Euwe, *Max Euwe, the Biography*, 103.

63. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 82-84.

64. Krylenko had been purged by this time (see Chapter Twelve).

Bulganin from the latter's official positions in electrical administration in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁶⁵

Bulganin was sympathetic to Botvinnik's request and promised to take the matter up in the Central Committee. In early 1939 Botvinnik received a telegram, ostensibly from Molotov, but, according to Botvinnik, probably from Stalin himself: "If you decide to challenge Alekhin to a match, we wish you every success. It is easy to ensure the rest."⁶⁶

Even though he now had the support from the highest quarters, Botvinnik continued to encounter opposition to the match. He interpreted the opposition as springing primarily from jealousy. But he also acknowledged that some had genuine doubts about his ability to successfully defend Soviet honor. To be fair, he had demonstrated a certain inconsistency of result over time. But Botvinnik, I think, failed to appreciate the depth of political opposition to the match. First, there was still a core of opposition within the Soviet chess organization to extensive interactions with bourgeois chess. Second and more significant, feeling against Alekhin, outlaw and renegade, persisted and recently intensified due to further anti-Soviet remarks attributed to him.⁶⁷

65. John Simkin, "Nikolay [Nikolai] Bulganin," (Spartacus Educational, 1997), <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSbulganin.htm> (accessed June 13, 2013).

66. Molotov to Botvinnik, Moscow, January 1939, in Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 85.

67. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 86.

Meanwhile, Botvinnik felt compelled to compete in strong Soviet events to prove that he was worthy of the honor of challenging Alekhin. Accordingly, he entered and won the Eleventh Soviet Championship in 1939. He finished a full point ahead of a newcomer, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Kotov (1913-1981). By chance, Botvinnik and Kotov met in the last round when they were tied for first place. Public interest had been high throughout the tournament, but the Botvinnik-Kotov game drew enormous interest. All the tickets sold out, a dozen demonstration boards were placed outdoors, and such large crowds gathered that traffic was disrupted. After a tense struggle worthy of the occasion, Botvinnik prevailed. The victory was welcome, but Botvinnik, now 29, must have felt the pressure from a rising, younger generation represented by Kotov. The old-guard player, Levenfish, triumphant in 1937, finished poorly—tied for eighth.⁶⁸

In the summer of 1939, the anticipated reply from Alekhin to Botvinnik's official challenge for a world title match finally arrived. Alekhin accepted the challenge with one modification. Where he had previously left the venue for the match to Botvinnik's discretion, he now insisted that half of the match be played in London and half in Moscow. Botvinnik was annoyed; he considered it a breach of faith, and he resented the additional complication. He wrote back to Alekhin, insisting that the original terms be adhered to.⁶⁹ Before an answer could be received, however, Germany invaded Poland and Europe was at war. Botvinnik would have to wait a

68. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 44.

69. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 90-91.

many long years for Alekhin's reply, and by then the political situation would be much more complicated.

Botvinnik's quest for the world title was not the only concern of the Soviet chess organization. Botvinnik was useful, of course. He was valued as a propagandist for mass chess and as a symbol of Soviet culture. But Botvinnik and his elite colleagues were only the tip of the Soviet chess organization, an organization that was firmly rooted in the masses, a fact that was demonstrated anew every time a major chess event was held.

In classical Marxist terms, chess was part of the superstructure of Soviet society. Like all parts of the societal superstructure, chess was dependent on the economic base—the mode of production. When the economic based shifted, so too the superstructure. In the early years of the Soviet Union, chess and other aspects of high culture became the property of the people. Already in 1924, the revolutionary state had altered the purpose of chess, which moved from being an idle passion of the bourgeoisie to a tool for mass enlightenment.

In 1936, with advent of the new Stalin Constitution, socialism officially arrived. Socialism was predicated on a definitive shift to the socialist mode of production. Since the economic base had completed the transition, the cultural superstructure was expected to mirror the change—developing in ways very distinct from the bourgeois West. Socialist music, literature, art, and chess were all expected to develop in a distinctly socialist fashion.

There had been many harbingers of the development of a unique and distinctive Soviet chess. As early as 1927, comparisons of style between challenger Alekhin and world champion Capablanca anticipated the emergence of a Soviet chess school. Alekhin was praised for his imagination and his fighting spirit, while Capablanca was characterized as dry and technical (see Chapter Ten).

After Nottingham 1936, the *Pravda* article, “The Chess Players of our Homeland” (see above), pointed out another way of differentiating between Western and Soviet players. Western players were professionals who made decisions based on their perceived monetary value, while the Soviet players had professions outside of chess, and therefore were chess amateurs. Since they did not have to weigh the financial consequences of their decisions, Soviet players could allow themselves to take risks, playing aggressively in all their games.⁷⁰ They sought truth and beauty rather than money.

In the aftermath of Botvinnik’s triumph at Nottingham 1936, Krylenko weighed in directly on the question of a distinctive Soviet style. He made his point by comparing two games from Nottingham—Fine v. Capablanca and Euwe v. Botvinnik. Both games were drawn, but there the similarity ended. Fine and Capablanca sat down to play with the intention of drawing, and after a series of *pro forma*, colorless exchanges, they abandoned the game on the twenty-first move. In his game with Euwe, however, Botvinnik played to win, unveiling a risky opening innovation. After a long battle in which the initiative changed hands many times, a draw was agreed on

70. “Shakhmatisty Nashei Strany” [The Chess Players of our Homeland].

the fifty-sixth move, but only after all possibilities had been exhausted.⁷¹ The latter game epitomized the Soviet style—hard-fighting, creative and aggressive. Soviet players, according to Krylenko, were fighters, concerned, above all, with the struggle.

Another excellent example of the importance assigned to the fighting style of Soviet players comes from this official description, quoted at length to show the tone, of a critical encounter between Botvinnik and Vasilii Vasil'evich Smyslov (1921-2010) in the Thirteenth Soviet Championship (1944):

Smyslov, playing White against Botvinnik, and being one point ahead, could have easily chosen . . . the exchange variation of the French Defence in which it is difficult for Black to create complications. . . . It is significant that he did not make the slightest attempt to come to a compromise. Desirous of proving the correctness of his view concerning the insufficiency of the defense chosen by Black, aspiring to win the main game of the tournament, he directed his attack with such force that it seemed as if Botvinnik's position would soon be shot to pieces.

Botvinnik in turn, perfectly understanding the dire consequences the loss of the game would entail for him, did not try at any time during the encounter to avoid the sharpest and most dangerous continuations and, finally, figured out an intricate combination which brought him victory. Botvinnik and Smyslov are sportsmen in the best sense of the word.⁷²

Botvinnik addressed the question of Soviet style with a broader and more nuanced perspective. He agreed with Krylenko that there was certainly a distinctive Soviet style, but Botvinnik went further, claiming that entire approach was different. He examined the various differences between Western and Soviet chess, postulating the existence of what he called a Soviet school of chess. Botvinnik's claims were

71. "U nas i u nikh [Us and Them]," *Pravda*, August 29, 1936.

72. B. S. Vainshtein, "1944 Chess Championship of the USSR," *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, June 1944, 1.

built on the work of Richard Réti, who approached chess history as a branch of intellectual history: identifying, naming and analyzing successive schools of thought. Réti was well regarded in the Soviet Union. Krylenko praised him as a chess revolutionary (see Chapter Seven), and when Réti died suddenly in 1929, Soviet chess publications paid him very respectful tribute.⁷³

According to Réti's dialectic, Steinitz founded the first modern chess school in the latter part of the 19th century. The Steinitz school developed out of the struggle between Romanticism and the quasi-scientific approach of the American, Paul Charles Morphy (1837-1884). The Steinitz school displaced the Romantics, who sought open positions that created opportunities for swashbuckling attacks. Steinitz confounded the Romantics with his closed positions, stable centers, and extended maneuvering behind the lines. Steinitz's system was described as scientific.⁷⁴

By the turn of the century, though, Steinitz's ideas seemed played out, and chess entered a period of stagnation. Steinitz was challenged by a new school, called by Réti "Storm and Stress," centered on Emmanuel Lasker. New ideas were not really a hallmark of this school, but rather a change in attitude toward play. The Romantics had sought beauty, the followers of Steinitz looked for scientific regularity, and the "Storm and Stress" school returned the emphasis in chess to the struggle itself,

73. N. Gregor'ev, "Tvorchestvo i deiatel'nost' Rikharda Reti" [Creativity and Work of Richard Réti], 64. *Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube*, July 5, 1929, 1-3.

74. Richard Réti, *Modern Ideas in Chess*, trans. John Hart (1923; repr, New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 39-40.

regardless of whether it takes the road of science or of art.⁷⁵ Thus Storm and Stress represented a synthesis of the contending scientific and romantic schools.

Lasker's "Storm and Stress" was challenged after World War I by the rise of the American school. For Lasker, with his obsession with the struggle, the best move was often a relative, subjective issue: it depended on the psychology or temperament of one's opponent. By contrast, the American school, headed by Capablanca (a Cuban), valued technique and sought its perfection. Disciples of Capablanca sought the best move; the determination of what constituted "best" was reached through objective criteria. In other words, the Americans wanted a move that would always work in a given position, rather than a move chosen for a particular opponent.⁷⁶ For Capablanca, objectivity was the path to perfection, and Capablanca's prediction that his own perfection heralded the end of chess seemed at one time entirely plausible.

At this critical juncture a new school emerged, a revolutionary school that challenged many of the sacred tenets of modern chess. Dubbed the Hypermodern school by its detractors, Réti and his followers urged the reevaluation of all traditional chess knowledge. Demanding an end to routine chess, Réti declared that the so-called laws of chess were simply maxims that may or may not apply in a particular situation.⁷⁷ For example, in traditional chess it had become an article of faith that the center must be occupied by pawns. Réti fashioned an opening system that allowed,

75. *Ibid.*, 91-93.

76. *Ibid.*, 105-106.

77. *Ibid.*, 119-122.

even provoked, the opponent to occupy the center with pawns, and then subjected the center to a blistering attack from the flanks.

Botvinnik's Soviet school was a new synthesis that absorbed the best features of the schools that preceded it. It paid homage to the objective, scientific tenets of the Steinitz and American schools, while appreciating the role of aesthetics in the Romantic approach. The idea of chess as a pure form of struggle, *à la* Lasker, was integral. Finally, the Soviet school eschewed routine chess, constantly searching for innovative moves and ideas. Botvinnik identified three principal components of the Soviet school: scientific focus, artistic focus, and training methodology.

First, Botvinnik's Soviet chess school relied on an overall scientific approach to the game. This was reflected in the quality of Soviet chess literature, which collected and analyzed chess from all over the world. The Soviet chess journal, *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, was considered the best in the world. Krylenko's controversial decisions to publish the games of the renegades and to allow limited interaction with bourgeois chess reflected the scientific tendencies of Soviet chess.⁷⁸ After Levenfish was denied permission to compete in AVRO 1938 (see above), he was compensated by a very important assignment from the Chess Section: he was entrusted to compile a theoretical encyclopedia of chess openings.⁷⁹ This task, the systematic compilation

78. M. M. Botvinnik, *Sovetskaia shakhmatnaia shkola: populiarnyi ocherk* [The Soviet Chess School: Popular Sketch] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1951), 40.

79. Levenfish, *Izbrannye partii i vospominanya*, 176-177.

and codification of existing knowledge, epitomized the scientific basis of the Soviet school.

Second, Botvinnik's Soviet school highlighted the artistic approach to the Soviet game. An aesthetic focus fostered creative advancement and avoided stagnation. Soviet players absorbed the scientific principles, and then creativity allowed them to blaze new trails in both theory and practice.⁸⁰

The great pre-revolutionary Russian player, Chigorin, exemplified both the scientific and artistic facets of the Soviet chess. Chigorin was embraced as a kind of honorary founder of the Soviet school. His games were widely circulated, studied and cited in Soviet literature.⁸¹

Third in the components of Botvinnik's Soviet school were his own methods of training and preparation, which also reflected a synthesis of the scientific and artistic chess. Botvinnik believed in physical conditioning as an essential ingredient for successful completion. He also advocated total immersion in the general chess literature. Players should be familiar with all of the important games as well as major opening lines, combinative motifs and endgame patterns. In addition, Botvinnik taught that one should prepare specifically for each opponent, studying his/her games, discovering weakness, and preparing lines of play accordingly. In order to test innovations without revealing them prematurely, secret training matches need to be played. Players should also use training matches to eliminate weaknesses in their

80. Botvinnik, *Sovetskaia shakhmatnaia shkola*, 40.

81. *Ibid.*, 14-25.

play. Extreme examples of this latter idea were Botvinnik's program for overcoming his aversion to tobacco smoke by playing training matches in smoky rooms and preparing for noisy spectators by playing matches with the radio blaring.⁸²

Later, in the 1950s, the tenets of the Soviet school of chess would be laid out more fully and officially by Kotov. The Soviet school, he said, rested on the foundation of bourgeois chess, the best parts of which had been assimilated. Without mentioning Krylenko by name, he paid homage to his position on the utility of contacts with bourgeois chess. But Soviet chess did not, of course, limit itself to that inheritance. New approaches, new understandings, and new creative views had been developed.⁸³

The mature Soviet school of the early 1950s was reduced to two key concepts, both saturated in political content. Botvinnik had neglected the ideological in his earlier conception of the Soviet school. First, the mature Soviet school incorporated the concept of the new Soviet man. Representatives of the Soviet school were patriotic and tireless—immersed in the struggle but always aware that they labored for the benefit of the Soviet people.

The second key concept was a restating of Botvinnik's synthesis of the science and art of chess. The Soviet school had a deep, scientific approach to chess, But scientific chess, alone, leads to dogmatism and scholasticism. This was the reason

82. B. S. Vainshtein, "1944 Chess Championship of the USSR," 2.

83. A. Kotov and M. M. Iudovich, *The Soviet School of Chess*, trans. Foreign Languages Publishing, Moscow (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 79.

the American school became so sterile and vacuous in the persons of Samuel Herman Reshevsky (1911-1992) and Reuben Fine. Soviet chess, on the other hand, always favored creativity and artistic expression, which were the eternal enemies of dogmatism.

In the 1930s, the Soviets wrested the creative lead away from the West, introducing new ideas into all stages of the game and, especially, in the connections among the stages—many Soviet “opening innovations” were actually deep in the middle game. The Soviet school, by positioning itself firmly in the masses and synthesizing science and art, had “created and elaborated in detail, a new theory of chess.”⁸⁴ After the war, the Soviet school—founded by Il’in Zhenevskii, nurtured by Krylenko, and personified by Botvinnik—would dominate the chess world.

84. *Ibid.*, 80.

Chapter Twelve

The Terror of Chess

Botvinnik's triumphs in the 1930s notwithstanding, all was not well in the classical land of chess. The mingling of chess with politics had allowed chess to carve out a privileged niche, but when Soviet politics became twisted and perverse, chess could not suddenly divorce itself from politics.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, all areas of Soviet culture saw a tightening of control and imposition of political content. In 1932, the creation of the Artists' Union brought the visual and literary arts more firmly under central control. But in both the imposition of central control and its saturation with political content, Soviet chess was in the vanguard. Initially with Il'in-Zhenevskii in 1920, and especially with Krylenko after 1924, chess had been subjected to the control of commissars well before other fronts in the cultural struggle. Under Stalin, chess would continue to be on the front lines of the cultural struggle, and at the end of the 1920s, Soviet chess would reorient itself with a self-conscious return to the values that had marked the formation of the All-Union Chess Section in 1924.

In 1930, a resolution from a general meeting of the All-Union Chess Section of the Supreme Council for Physical Culture forcefully reminded the Soviet chess organization of the necessity for "the saturation of all [chess] activity with political content."¹ Neither chess for its own sake nor, worse, chess for the sake of a few elites

1. "Vyvody i predlozheniia VSFK i VTsSPS po issledovaniia sostoyaniia Shakhm.-Shash. raboty v gor. Leningrade" [Conclusions and suggestions of the VsFK

was permitted. Chess had demonstrated an unfortunate tendency to backslide into its old bourgeois ways. It was in this context that in late 1930 and early 1931, the Moscow-based All-Union Chess Section conducted an audit of the activities of the Leningrad chess organization, principally its trade union chess organization and the regional government chess section.

Leningrad was found to be sorely deficient in nearly all areas. First, there was no list of organized chess players except for the 4,000 qualified (rated) players. Further, those qualified players were not taking their political duties seriously, neglecting mass propaganda and political education. As a result, chess activity in the army and the fleet was being conducted poorly, activity in the trade unions was unsatisfactory, work among school children was lagging, and propaganda in the countryside was entirely absent.²

The response in Leningrad was immediate. The trade union chess organization, especially, was jarred into action. The veteran activist and organizer, Iakov Rokhlin, was pressed into service to revitalize the chess work in the unions. Il'in-Zhenevskii was ordered to assume control of the Leningrad Regional Chess Section.³ Under the direction of these veteran chess players and Party members, the

and VTsSPS upon the examination of the status of chess-checkers work in Leningrad] (January 1931), GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 4, list 4.

2. Ibid.

3. Iakov Dlugolenskii, *Liudi i shakhmaty: stranitsy shakhmatnoi istorii Peterburga - Petrograda - Leningrada* [People and Chess: Pages from Chess History of Petersburg - Petrograd - Leningrad] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1988), 184.

Leningrad organizations worked to recapture the ideological intensity that Moscow demanded.

The shakeup in Leningrad signaled the increasing militancy in Soviet chess. In early 1931, on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Leningrad-based journal, *Shakhmatyi listok*, Rokhlin, the tough-talking Leningrad chess organizer, published an article demanding a new name for the publication. The old name, “*Shakhmatyi Listok*,” had been chosen by S. Vainshtein’s apolitical group back in 1922 to honor a pre-Revolutionary chess magazine of the same name. Rokhlin now suggested that the magazine be renamed “*Chess Front*” to reflect the increasingly militant role he envisioned for Soviet chess.⁴ The journal was, in fact, soon renamed, but it would be rechristened “*Shakhmaty v SSSR (Chess in the USSR)*.” While not as militant sounding as “*Chess Front*,” the new name still represented a sharp break with the past and reflected the Soviet chauvinism that accompanied Stalin’s policy of socialism in one country.

Initially, Stalinism was good for Soviet chess. For example, chess finally began to penetrate into rural Russia. With the advent of agricultural collectivization, Soviet chess was primed and ready to follow in its wake, finally bringing chess, if not to the village, at least to the *kolkhoz* (collective farm). The late 1920s had been marked by sporadic attempts to penetrate into rural Russia, but with only very limited

4. Ia. Rokhlin, “Shakhmatnyi front” [Chess Front], *Shakhmatnyi listok*, April 5, 1931, 193.

success. After collectivization, however, enough central control was in place to implement a more comprehensive rural chess program.

By the end of 1932, some progress had been made, although, as Ereemeev, Secretary of the All-Union Chess Section, pointed out at the Tenth Congress, “chess work in our collective farms is being led poorly. Only in a few regions are there some indications of chess work.”⁵ Nevertheless, when the Congress set its goals for the end of 1933, it ambitiously mandated that 148,000 collective farmers should be among the Soviet Union’s organized chess players.⁶

The Machine Tractor Stations (MTS), designed to ensure state control over the *kolkhoz*, were also enormously useful to chess organizers. They were the basis for the ambitious goals cited above. After 1936, the former world champion, Lasker, now a Soviet citizen, gave numerous exhibitions in the countryside, organized by MTS officials and hosted in MTS facilities. One Lasker exhibition in 1937 at Korablinskoi MTS attracted two-hundred participants. Afterward Lasker was quoted as saying: “The fact that this ancient, complex game has spread to the masses of collective farmers indicates the general cultural growth of the population.”⁷

5. “VSFK: plenum ob edinennogo sh/sh sektora VSFK SSSR i RSFSR” [VSFK: Plenary Session of the Joint Chess/Checkers section of VSFK of the USSR and RSFSR], GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 21, list 17 ob.

6. Ibid., list 23 ob.

7. N. M. Polevoi, *Vsesoiuznyi shakhmatnyi turnir kolkhoznikov 1950 g.* [All-Union Chess Tournament of Collective Farmers, 1950] (Moscow: Fizkul’tura i sport, 1951), 8-9.

By 1939 the rural chess organization was sufficiently well-established to organize an ambitious *kolkhoz* team tournament. The war slowed chess expansion in the countryside, but in 1950 a massive *kolkhoz* team tournament signaled that chess had finally stormed the rural fortress.⁸

Among the workers, of course, chess was already well-established. Workers' chess organizations had been instrumental in the victory of political chess in 1924 (see Chapter Six), and all through the remainder of the 1920s, workers' chess was the strongest component in the Soviet chess organization. With the introduction of the first five-year plan for industry, Krylenko embraced its spirit, proclaiming at the 1931 All-Union Chess Congress: "We must organize shock brigades of chess players and begin the immediate realization of a five-year plan for chess."⁹ The plan, as worked out in 1932 called for the enrollment of one million organized chess players by the end of 1933—sixty percent from the workers, nineteen percent from students in higher education, fifteen percent from the collective farmers, and the remainder from the military and police organizations. Although setting the goal for the end of 1933 was already considerably shortening the five-year plan, by the end of the Congress it was resolved to meet the goal by the summer of 1933, in time for the opening of the Red

8. V. N. Panov, *Shakhmaty i shashki v kolkhoze* [Chess and Checkers on a Collective Farm] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1952), 3-9.

9. Boris Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism*, trans. C. L. R. James (New York: Longmans, Green, 1939), 575.

Sport International's *Spartikaid* (an international workers' sporting event that included chess competition).¹⁰

Although Soviet chess had been unapologetically political since 1924, the 1932 Congress was by far the most frankly political conference to date. In his opening remarks, Krylenko spoke little about chess, but he harangued the delegates on the political significance of their work. Parroting Stalin's line, Krylenko informed the Congress that, "presently socialist building passes through such a stage when, on the one hand, it can rely on the great successes we have attained and on the other it faces very big difficulties, which are in their essence the result of the violent resistance of the remnants of the exploiting classes."¹¹ Krylenko opening speech at the Congress also vigorously defended draconian laws punishing grain theft on the collective farms and truancy in the factories. "What," he asked rhetorically, "can all this mean for a chess organization?"¹² The answer was that chess propagandists must draw their cultural work into the general work of building socialism. Since socialism had not yet been build, and since the remnants of hostile classes were desperately fighting against the establishment of socialism, the cultural revolution must adapt to the changing political struggle. In this spirit, Krylenko suggested the slogan: "to

10. "VSFK: plenum ob edinennogo sh/sh sektora VSFK SSSR i RSFSR," listy 23-27.

11. Ibid., list 3.

12. Ibid., list 4.

broaden, broaden and once again broaden, and then to deepen, deepen and once again deepen our chess activity.”¹³

If Soviet chess was precocious in submitting to central control and embracing a political agenda, it was also in the vanguard in instituting large-scale repression against its own. The initial scrutiny fell on an unlikely group: the problemists. Publication by Soviet problemists in bourgeois magazines had been one of the criticisms made by Social-Democrats in the *Shakhintern* in 1929 as they struggled against Soviet participation (see Chapter Nine). Although Krylenko ridiculed the German charge as trivial, he did not deny it, nor did he defend the Soviet problemists. He may have been unaware of the practice; problemists were a small, marginal, and insular group in the Soviet chess organization.

Since Levman was a problemist—a member of the Problemists’ Union of the All-Union Chess Section and occasional participant in problem competitions sponsored by the bourgeois press—the issue was especially tricky. At the Seventh All-Union Chess Congress in 1929, Levman engineered a compromise. The Problemists’ Union would leave the Chess Section and reformulate itself as an independent organization, taking on a new name: All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers. Now the Social-Democrats in the German Union could no longer use the issue to flail the Chess Section, and the problemists could send their compositions

13. *Ibid.*, list 5.

to competitions sponsored by bourgeois publications without fear of embarrassing Krylenko.¹⁴

But less than a year later, in 1930, Krylenko suddenly and unexpectedly turned savagely on the problemists and their new organization, the All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers. Krylenko's chief complaint about the group was that it was illegal . . . because it was not affiliated with his Chess Section. The leader of this small, esoteric group, Lazar Borisovich Zalkind (1886-1945), a well-known problemist with an international reputation, was arrested. He was accused of complicity in a Menshevik plot: the Case of the All-Union Bureau of the Mensheviks.¹⁵ Krylenko became personally involved with Zalkind's case, and he handled the prosecution himself. In March 1931, Zalkind was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in the labor camps. The All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers was disbanded, replaced by the Central Composition Committee, which, of course, was attached directly to the Chess Section.¹⁶

With the disgrace of Zalkind, a dark shadow fell over chess composition. In the summer of 1931, *64* ran a series of articles relating to the developing crisis with the problemists. They were censured for past offenses (unscrupulously submitting their compositions willy-nilly to Western publications), and they were put on notice

14. Ibid., list 22.

15. S. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit* [Lubianka Gambit] (Moscow: Terra-sport, 2004), 57.

16. S. Grodzenskii, "Iz vospominanii: Lazar Zalkind" [From Memories: Lazar Zalkind], *64-Shakhmatanoie obozrenie*, August 1989, 24-25.

that this practice would be severely punished. Nine foreign publications that carried chess compositions were designated by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) as acceptable outlets for Soviet compositions. But problemists desiring to submit works to these publications would now have to make application through the Composition Committee; they were specifically forbidden to deal directly with any foreign publications.¹⁷

Problemists were also advised that bourgeois themes should be avoided in favor of revolutionary themes. This somewhat puzzling directive actually meant that compositions were required to have a close relationship to practical play; they were not to be fanciful. Composition was justified only when it served the ends of “normal” chess. The demand for practical chess composition was the doctrine of socialist realism applied to chess. “Formalism” (art-for-art’s-sake) in chess composition was officially condemned.

In practice this meant that one-, two- and three-move compositions were out of favor, (they tended to be the most fanciful), while long, complicated problems (properly called studies), requiring analysis of multiple variations with differing numbers of moves, were in favor. The most esoteric areas of composition—“help-mates,” “self-mates,” and “fairy chess,”¹⁸—were officially disgraced.¹⁹

17. V. E. Eremeev and E. M. Rossel’e, “Vnimaniiu Sovetskikh problemistov ot shakhcektora VSFK SSSR” [Attention Soviet Problemists from the Chess Section VSFK USSR], *64. Shakhmaty v rabochem klube*, June 30, 1931, 181.

18. In help-mates, both sides cooperate to mate black in a specified number of moves. Self-mates differ in that white must find moves that compel black to mate the

The next issue of *64* had more bad news for problemists; it featured an editorial titled, “The Traitor Zalkind—Out of the Ranks of Soviet Problemists.” Signed by three prominent problemists (erstwhile colleagues of Zalkind), the article denounced the disgraced composer as a renegade and a traitor to the workers. Ominously, the authors volunteered that they, too, had deviated in the direction of formalism, and they vowed renewed vigilance to ensure that their future efforts, and those of their comrade composers, would avoid bourgeois themes and would be saturated with political content.²⁰

The next year, at the 1932 All-Union Chess Congress, the delegates were unanimous in their condemnation of formalism in chess. Krylenko left no room for interpretation regarding the official position: “We must condemn once and for all the formula ‘chess for the sake of chess,’ like the formula ‘art for art’s sake.’”²¹ This seemed to be the last word in the controversy, but vestiges of formalism remained entrenched in chess composition.

white king. Fairy chess involves problems using imaginary pieces with unusual moves and powers.

19. A. Guliaev, “Trevozhnyi signal” [Disturbing Signal], *64. Shakhmaty v rabochem klube*, June 30, 1931, 181-183.

20. N. V. Proskurnin, A. O. Gerbstman, and E. I. Umnov, “Predatelia Zalkinda—von iz riadov Sovetskikh problemistov!” [The Traitor Zalkind—Out of the Ranks of Soviet Problemists!], *64. Shakhmaty v rabochem klube*, July 15, 1931, 221-222.

21. Souvarine, *Stalin*, 575.

The debate flared up again in early 1936, this time in the pages of the other official journal, *Shakhmaty v SSSR*. An article co-authored by Botvinnik and the journal's editor, Leontii Feliksovich Spokoinyi (1900-1936), announced a crusade against formalism in chess composition, paralleling a concurrent campaign against formalism in the arts. The article argued that since the basis of political chess was practical application, composition played only a subordinate role, and it was only useful insofar as it helped to develop practical play. In the same way that chess was subordinate to the task of building socialism, existing only to serve the needs of the workers, composition was subordinate to practical chess, existing only to serve the needs of chess players. Composition for its own sake, however, had no utility and therefore could not justify its existence. Thus, any composition that did not serve competitive chess was branded as formalism, and formalism in chess composition was a grievous and unacceptable ideological error. Any composition not grounded in practical play was from this point onward “defined in two words –formalistic trickery.”²²

A socially useful composition, argued Botvinnik and Spokoinyi, had three distinctive features. First and foremost, it should center on a practical theme. A practical theme was based on a situation that might occur in practical play. Second,

22. M. M. Botvinnik and L. F. Spokoinyi, “Sumbur v kompozitsii” [Confusion in the Composition], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, March 1936, 71-72.

the solution should be challenging to discern; it should not be obvious. Third, and perhaps least important, the idea should be expressed artistically.²³

But instead of following these simple guidelines and thus serving a practical political purpose, many Soviet composers, the article charged, were engaging in all manner of decadent bourgeois themes. Small wonder that Soviet problemists had been so fond of publishing in the West; the West was home to the discredited concept of art-for-art's-sake. Formalism in composition had become a habit that too many Soviet problemists appeared unwilling to renounce. But now official patience was exhausted; it was time for Soviet composers to “make a sharp turn back toward practical chess.”²⁴

A brave problemist, the director of the composition department at 64, Mikhail Mikhailovich Barulin (1897-1943), answered Botvinnik and Spokoinyi, writing in defense of himself and his fellow composers. Barulin's main counter-argument was that chess competition and chess composition were completely different enterprises. Botvinnik's argument—that competition parented composition and therefore the child must be subservient to the parent—was ridiculed. Composition, argued Barulin, also had a long history with its own laws of development, “schools,” and aesthetic standards. It had every right to this heritage, and it was a violation of composition's autonomy to require it to serve competition. Composition was an art form in itself,

23. Ibid., 72.

24. Ibid.

and it existed in an autonomous, not subordinate, relationship with competitive chess.²⁵

Further, Barulin found no objective reason to favor competition over composition. Chess itself was not and could not be a science, and therefore such arguments about objectivity were moot. Science was dependent on immutable laws derived from nature. The laws of chess were arbitrary and based on nothing—entirely abstract. All chess, therefore, was guilty of the imagined offense of formalism. But in an attempt to cover his ideological bases, Barulin concluded by arguing that composition was, in its own right, a powerful tool for elevating the masses. Forcing composition into a subservient role to competition interfered with composition’s ability to make its own, small contribution to building socialism.²⁶

If Barulin’s plan was to initiate reasonable discourse, he was quickly disillusioned. The official response, again co-authored by Botvinnik and Spokoinyi, was immediate and harsh. Barulin was forcefully reminded that the practice of art for its own sake had already been denounced in all areas of Soviet culture, and chess had been in the vanguard of that movement. Therefore, Barulin’s use of the discredited concept of art-for-art’s-sake to mount a defense of formalism in chess composition was nothing short of a provocation. Furthermore, if Barulin really believed that composition was self-contained enough to somehow enjoy immunity from serving the

25. M. M. Barulin, “Sumbur v mysliakh” [Confusion in the Mind], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, July 1936, 199-200.

26. *Ibid.*, 200.

purposes of the Soviet state, then “so much the worse for comrade Barulin and other like-minded composers, who are good for nothing.”²⁷ Botvinnik and Spokoinyi ended their piece with a plea for support for their position from Krylenko and the Chess Section.²⁸ They did not have to wait long. Support came—officially and unconditionally—in early 1937.

A meeting of the executive committee of the Chess Section was called in January 1937 to address the controversy. After debate, a special resolution regarding chess composition was passed. It was resolved that chess composition was not a separate art form as Barulin claimed, but rather a component of competitive chess. As such, composition must contribute to the chess movement, which was based on competition, the chosen expression of the masses. Chess composition, therefore, must align itself with chess realism. There was no room for ambiguity in the final resolution: “Trickery, devoid of ideology, and disregard for the needs of the chess masses should be done away with once and for all.”²⁹

The latter stage of the struggle against deviation in chess composition was framed, of course, by the Great Terror. The infamously broad Article 58 of the Soviet penal code, enacted in 1927, set the stage. It was intended to enhance and systematize the repression and prosecution of suspected counter-revolutionaries by broadly

27. M. M. Botvinnik and Lev Spokoinyi, “O stat’e t. Barulina” [About the Article of Comrade Barulina], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, July 1936, 200.

28. *Ibid.*

29. “Plenum Ispolbiuro Vsesoiuznoi Shakhseksii” [Plenum of the Central Committee All-Union Chess Section], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, March 1937, 69.

defining counter-revolutionary activity. Article 58 was subsequently revised several times, updated by sub-articles that multiplied and clarified proscribed offenses. When Kirov, the popular Leningrad Party boss was mysteriously murdered in 1934, his death was the pretext for Stalin's escalation repression of Party dissidents, referred to as the Great Terror. The Terror peaked in the second half of the 1930s, at the same time that the struggle against deviation in composition was reaching a climax.

Arvid Ivanovich Kubbel (1889-1938) was a Soviet problemist with an international reputation. In 1937 he became a victim of Article 58. A specialist in self-mates and help-mates, he became increasingly frustrated with his inability to have his compositions published. Finally, he chose the incredibly reckless path of sending his compositions directly to the German chess magazine, *Die Schwalbe*, bypassing the Chess Section's Central Composition Committee (see above). Arrested in 1937, he was sentenced to ten years at labor without right to correspondence; he died on route to a Siberian prison camp.³⁰

Mikhail Nikolaevich Platov (1883-1938) was the co-author (with his brother) of a composition published in 1910 that was probably the most famous composition in Soviet Russia, reproduced numerous times before 1937 in the Soviet press. The reason for its fame was not the first prize it won in a Riga contest. Rather, the problem caught the eye of Lenin when it was republished in a German paper. In a

30. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 90-91.

letter to his brother, Lenin commented on the problem (see Chapter Three), which he described as a “beautiful bit of work.”³¹

Platov was arrested in October 1937. The exact charges were not publically specified; there was no trial. He was sentenced under Article 58 to ten years in a labor camp. Platov, however, survived only a few months in the camp, dying in early 1938.³²

Sergei Mikhailovich Kaminer (1908-1937?) was a problemist who once accomplished an almost unheard of feat: he defeated Botvinnik in three consecutive games. Botvinnik was thirteen at the time; Kaminer was sixteen. There were no hard feelings, and the two boys became good friends.³³

Thirteen years later, during Botvinnik’s 1937 match with Levenfish in Moscow (see Chapter Eleven), Botvinnik had a distraught visitor in his room at the National Hotel: his old friend, Kaminer, now a well-known problemist. Kaminer specialized in helpmates, which the Botvinnik and the Chess Section had condemned as formalism. Kaminer, fearing imminent arrest, thrust into Botvinnik’s hands his notebooks full of finished and unfinished compositions. When Botvinnik balked at the unexpected and unwelcome gesture, Kaminer hurriedly explained that he feared

31. Lenin to his brother, Paris, February 17, 1910, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works: Letters to Relatives 1893-1922*, trans. George H. Hanna, vol. 37 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), 455.

32. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 101-103.

33. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 11-12.

that the notebooks, his life's work, would be lost if Botvinnik refused them. Kaminer was arrested a few days later and subsequently swallowed up by the gulag. Botvinnik claimed to have sent the notebooks to Kaminer's relatives, but the books, like their author, have disappeared.³⁴

Pavel Efimovich Neunyvako (1897-1940) was a hero of the Civil War. He learned chess during his service in the Red Army, but he was attracted more to composition than competition. He published a number of his studies in the 1920s, while simultaneously rising in the Ukrainian Party organization. He became chairman of the All-Ukrainian Chess Section in 1933, and when the controversies over formalism in composition flared, he used his position to defend Ukrainian problemists. Neunyvako was arrested in 1938 and exiled to Alma-Ata, where he continued to compose. He was rearrested and shot in 1940.³⁵

Mikhail Barulin, the author of the response to Botvinnik and Spokoinyi (see above), was a problemist who had found a comfortable niche in the Soviet chess organization. After the arrest of L. Zalkind and the dissolution of the All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers (see above), Barulin became the executive secretary of the new Central Composition Committee. When the Chess Section, which now firmly controlled chess composition, established the title of "Master of Sport of Chess Composition," Barulin was its first recipient. He was

34. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 115.

35. *Ibid.*, 125-127.

subsequently honored with the post of problems editor for both of the official journals, *64* and *Shakhmaty v SSSR*.³⁶

In 1936, when Botvinnik and Spokoinyi published the article in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* that launched the attack on formalism in chess composition, Barulin rashly jumped to the defense of his fellow problemists (see above), and Botvinnik and Spokoinyi answered with threats against Barulin. Probably this episode sealed Barulin's fate, although he was not immediately arrested.

Barulin's home was the meeting place for a chess composition circle. According to Barulin's daughter, one of the members of that circle was arrested in early 1941, and he reportedly told his interrogators that the circle was often the occasion for anti-Soviet jokes. One by one the other members of the circle were taken, until only Barulin remained. He was finally arrested in November 1941, but refused to sign a confession or denounce other problemists. He died in prison in 1943.³⁷

Significantly, Botvinnik never disavowed the 1936 *Shakhmaty v SSSR* article (see above) that signaled the subsequent purge of the problemists, not even later when it would have been safe to do so. Instead, Botvinnik always justified himself, claiming that Spokoinyi had written the ideological parts of the article, while he (Botvinnik) had been only responsible for the sections dealing specifically with

36. S. Grodzenskii, "Ne podpisav nichego" [Signing Nothing], *64-Shakhmatanoie obozrenie*, November 1989, 24.

37. *Ibid.*, 26.

chess.³⁸ However the two components (ideology and chess) were so closely intertwined in the article as to render this claim dubious. Further, Botvinnik also claimed: “the article’s criticism about composition now [in 1986] seems to me quite principled and reasonable.”³⁹

Although problemists grappled directly with the issue of formalism, they were not the only members of the Soviet chess organization to draw the attention of the authorities. Many important players—some world-class—were also arrested.

Vladimirs Mikhailovich Petrovs (1908-1943) was a world-class Latvian player. His greatest success had been in 1937 at Kemeris, Latvia, where he had held his own against the world’s best. He became a Soviet player by default when the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic republics in 1940. Latvia and the other Baltic countries had strong chess traditions, but some of the top Baltic players found it difficult to adjust to Soviet political chess. Their life experiences gave them a “more Westernized, international outlook.”⁴⁰

Petrovs, however, seemed to have made the transition. He quickly became involved in Soviet competition, finishing a disappointing but nevertheless respectable

38. M. M. Botvinnik, *Analiticheskie i kriticheskie raboty 1928-1986* [Analytical and Critical Works 1928-1986] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1987), 306-307.

39. *Ibid.*, 306.

40. Andris Fride, *Vladimirs Petrovs: A Chessplayer's Story, from Greatness to the Gulags*, trans. Kon Grivainis (Yorklin, DE: Caissa, 2004), 27.

tenth in a field of twenty in the Twelfth Soviet Championship in 1940.⁴¹ He was not the first Western player to be surprised by the tenacity, fighting spirit, and overall high level of play that characterized Soviet players all across the spectrum. Like other Western players, he was also surprised by the intensity of public interest. Interviewed by the magazine, *Red Sport*, about his experience in the Twelfth Soviet Championship, Petrovs said:

I was tremendously impressed by the chess public at the Moscow USSR Chess Championship. The behavior of the Buenos Aires public [Petrovs played a tournament in Argentina in 1939] is not comparable with what I saw in Moscow. The Soviet public shows true chess enthusiasm, a true understanding of the chess art, a complete participation in the chess struggle. The best I can say about the Buenos Aires chess spectators is that they could not see much difference between a chess match and a bullfight.⁴²

When the Germans attacked in 1941, Petrovs was playing in a final round of the Soviet Championship in Rostov-on-the-Don (see Chapter Thirteen). He was stranded in Russia; his wife and daughter were trapped in Riga, which was quickly occupied by the Germans. Petrovs entered the Red Army where he served briefly in a Latvian unit, but he was soon recalled Moscow to work in the Soviet news agency, TASS, which allowed him to remain active in Soviet chess. He performed brilliantly in a tournament in Sverdlovsk in March 1942 (see Chapter Thirteen), and was planning more competition when, at the end of August 1942, he was arrested on the

41. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 48.

42. Vladimirs Petrovs, *Krasnyi Sport*, October 31, 1940, quoted in Andris Fride, *Vladimirs Petrovs: A Chessplayer's Story, from Greatness to the Gulags*, trans. Kon Grivainis (Yorklin, DE: Caissa, 2004), 27.

basis of a denunciation. He was accused of making disparaging remarks about the falling standard of living in Soviet-ruled Latvia.⁴³ Petrovs was sentenced to ten years, but he died shortly after arriving in the Gulag.⁴⁴

Pëtr Nikolaevich Izmailov (1906-1937), one of the strongest players in Siberia, competed in two Soviet Championships (1929 and 1931). In 1929 he played quite well, defeating Botvinnik in their individual game, but his academic obligations forced him to quit the multi-stage tournament before its completion.⁴⁵ In 1931 championship he played poorly, probably due to the onerous demands of his professional life (he was a geologist, working in Tomsk). From 1931 to 1936, he competed in no major tournaments. Then, in 1936, he accepted an invitation to compete in a strong tournament in Leningrad. Again lack of practice was probably a factor, as Izmailov finished sixth in a field of fifteen.⁴⁶

Leningrad was Izmailov's last tournament. Back in Tomsk, he was under close surveillance by the police. On September 10, 1936, he called his wife to warn her that he might be a little late returning from work; the local NKVD wanted to talk to him. He never came home. Izmailov was charged with membership in a counter-revolutionary Trotskyite terrorist organization. The NKVD became suspicious because of Izmailov's weak performance in Leningrad 1936. Why had he traveled so

43. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 48.

44. Fride, *Vladimirs Petrovs*, 32-33.

45. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 28.

46. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 174-175.

far, only to play so poorly? The NKVD, of course, had an answer: participation in the tournament was a ruse. The real purpose of Izmailov's trip was to meet with other members of an illegal organization and develop a plan to assassinate Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov (1896-1948), who became Leningrad party boss after Kirov's murder.

In a closed trial in April 1937, Izmailov maintained his innocence of all charges. The hearing lasted twenty minutes; Izmailov was found guilty and immediately shot. His wife was arrested as well, and she was sentenced to eight years in the labor camps.⁴⁷

Georgii G. Shneideman (Stepanov) (1907-1941) was considered one of the strongest players in Leningrad. Stepanov was his mother's name, which he used until 1937, when he began to use his father's name, Shneideman. It was a fateful decision. Like Petrovs (see above), Shneideman was competing at Rostov-on-the-Don in 1941 when the war broke out. The tournament broke up, and Shneideman hurried back to Leningrad.

With the Germans soon at the gates, Leningraders with German-sounding surnames had become a suspect class. It did not help that Shneideman shared his name with a prominent Nazi general. He was soon denounced as a spy and arrested in the autumn of 1941. Before he was shot, Shneideman managed to get a message back to his friends in Leningrad. He denied any wrongdoing, and named the author of his

47. S. Grodzenskii, "Pervyi champion" [First Champion], *64-Shakhmatanoe obozrenie*, June 1990, 26.

undoing: Petr Romanovskii. During his interrogation, Shneideman had caught a glimpse of the name on the denunciation, and he immediately recognized the distinctive signature from the many times he had seen it written on a chess score sheet.⁴⁸

Mikhail Nikolaevich Shebarshin (1882-1963) came from a military family, and he seemed destined to follow in that tradition. He graduated from military school with a specialty in constructing fortifications, and served on the southwestern front in the Great War. In the tumult of Revolution and Civil War, Shebarshin found himself in Omsk, the capital of Kolchak's rebellion. He was called up to serve in Kolchak's army, but ill-health prevented his conscription. Shebarshin moved to Leningrad in 1925 and found work as a mathematics teacher and became a major force in the city's chess scene. He organized a chess section in his school, and was instrumental in the organization of chess sections in Leningrad factories. Shebarshin also competed very respectably in Leningrad's many strong competitions. His greatest success came in October 1930 with his victory in the All-Union Championship of Education Workers.⁴⁹

Perhaps it was this victory that brought him to the attention of the authorities, but Shebarshin was arrested in November 1930. He was charged with political crimes under Article 58, probably connected to his Omsk activities during the Civil War. He

48. S. Grodzenskii, "Familiia, stoivshaia zhizni" [Surname That Cost Lives], *64-Shakhmatanoie obozrenie*, August 1989, 22-23.

49. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 196-200.

was sentenced to ten years labor and sent to work on the White Sea Canal project. Here, chess probably saved his life. He decisively won the Chess Championship of the White Sea Canal. This victory was his ticket out of grueling manual labor and into relatively soft managerial work. Thus Shebarshin lived out his term, and he eventually returned to work as a math teacher, but this time in Siberia.⁵⁰

Back in 1926, when Leningrad played its historic match against Stockholm (see Chapter Ten), along with Il'in-Zhenevskii, Botvinnik, and Rokhlin, there was also a quiet nineteen-year-old on the Leningrad team, Nikolai Konstantinovich Salmin (1907-1938?). Salmin continued to compete over the next ten years, representing Leningrad printers in workers' competitions. He was ranked among the top ten players in Leningrad in 1927.⁵¹

In May 1936 he was suddenly and unexpectedly arrested. The specifics of any charges against him could not be discovered. He was found guilty and shot, probably in 1938. He was thirty years old.⁵²

Chess administrators and organizers were no more immune to the Terror than were problemists and competitive chess players. The Terror, properly defined, refers

50. S. Grodzenskii, "Iz chempionov Rabprosa–v chempiony . . . Belbaltlaga" [From Champion of Rabprosa–to Champion of ... Belbaltlaga], *64-Shakhmatanoie obozrenie*, May 1991, 24-26.

51. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 210-211.

52. S. Grodzenskii, "Zhizn', oborvannaia v tridsat'" [A Life Cut Short at Thirty], *64-Shakhmatanoie obozrenie*, January 1992, 25.

to the repression of Party personnel, not ordinary people.⁵³ Most high-ranking administrators were Party members and government officials.

In 1936, Spokoinyi, editor of *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, had heralded the purge of the problemists with his article, “Confusion in Composition,” which he co-authored with Botvinnik (see above). In addition to his post as editor, he was also a professor at Leningrad State University, specializing in the history of philosophy and dialectical and historical materialism. He was a member of the Communist party and, according to Botvinnik, a very weak chess player.⁵⁴

Five months later, in August, Spokoinyi’s name suddenly disappeared from the masthead of *Shakhmaty v SSSR*. This same issue reprinted Botvinnik’s post-Nottingham letter to Stalin (see Chapter Eleven), but, more to the point, it also contained a blood-curdling editorial entitled, “Tremble, Enemies of the People,” which promised to reveal and punish all Trotskyites, counter-revolutionaries, and anyone who “harbors a grudge against the triumphant march of socialism.”⁵⁵ Spokoinyi was arrested in August 1936 and shot in October.⁵⁶

Another Party member closely associated with chess, Vladimir Isaakovich Fridberg (1884-1938?), worked under Krylenko in the People's Commissariat for

53. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27-28.

54. Botvinnik, *Analiticheskie i kriticheskie raboty 1928-1986*, 306.

55. “Trepeshchite, vragi naroda” [Tremble, Enemies of the People], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, August 1936, 145.

56. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 227.

Justice. Like Krylenko, Fridberg was also an ardent proponent of political chess, and in 1930, Fridberg was elected to central committee of the Chess Section. In the 1930s, Fridberg's prosecutorial activities led to important assignments in Siberia and the North Caucasus region. In each case, he also carried out official organization work in chess. In spring 1937, Fridberg was summoned back to Moscow, where he expected another promotion, but in early July he was arrested. Nearly a year later he was sentenced to ten years without right of correspondence. He had resisted the physical pressures put on him to confess, but his health was so compromised that he died soon after entering the Gulag.⁵⁷

Krylenko holds a unique position in this discussion—he was both a prosecutor and a victim. But while Krylenko had been actively involved in prosecuting the problemist Zalkind and the Mensheviks in 1930 (see above), this was one of his last high-profile cases. He was not actively involved in prosecuting any of the other victims discussed above. When the Terror began in earnest after Kirov's murder in 1934, Krylenko's rival, Andrei Ianuar'evich Vyshinskii (1883-1954), was assigned the leading prosecutorial role. Krylenko was promoted to Commissar of Justice.

The year 1938 began very badly for Krylenko. In January, in the first meeting of the Supreme Soviet, he found himself suddenly the target of an orchestrated attack. A young Stalin protégé, Miriafar Abbasovich Bagirov (1895-1956), launched the assault:

57. *Ibid.*, 229-331.

Comrade Krylenko concerns himself only incidentally with the affairs of his commissariat. But to direct the Commissariat of Justice, great initiative and a serious attitude toward oneself is required. Whereas Comrade Krylenko used to spend a great deal of time on mountain-climbing and traveling, now he devotes a great deal of time to playing chess. I am a great advocate of developing all kinds of sporting activities to the maximum in our country, including vacation travel, mountain-climbing, and chess. But I cannot in any way agree to the slightest slacking off either in the management or the functioning of such a highly important commissariat as the People's Commissariat of Justice, nor to such an unserious attitude as Comrade Krylenko's toward the work of the commissariat he heads. We need to know what we are dealing with in the case of Comrade Krylenko—the Commissar of Justice? or a mountain climber? I don't know which Comrade Krylenko thinks of himself as, but he is without doubt a poor people's commissar. I am sure that Comrade Molotov will take that into account in presenting the slate of nominees for the new Council of People's Commissars of the Supreme Soviet.⁵⁸

Krylenko was removed from the Commissariat a few weeks later, and he soon left Moscow, retreating to his dacha. At the end of January, Stalin called Krylenko and gave him his personal assurance that he was trusted, and his continued work on the new legal code was desired. A few hours later the NKVD arrived in force and took Krylenko away.⁵⁹

In the Butyrka prison, a fellow prisoner reported that Krylenko was subject to special indignities to break down his conceit. He was then subjected to the same methods of physical coercion with which he was already very familiar.⁶⁰ Krylenko soon confessed to a variety of charges, essentially claiming that even before 1917, he

58. Roy A. Medvedev, "New Pages from the Political Biography of Stalin," in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1977), 217.

59. Ibid.

60. Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 249.

had been a wrecker. He also implicated others in the Justice Commissariat. In his twenty-minute trial in July 1938, Krylenko repudiated his confessions, but to no avail. The verdict was guilty; the sentence was death.⁶¹ The All-Union Chess Section was placed under the leadership of Vladimir Evgen'evich German (1906-1988). German held that position until the outbreak of war in 1941, but never with Krylenko's power or authority.⁶²

Il'in-Zhenevskii managed, somehow, to escape the purges, even though nearly everything about him suggested a different fate: he was an old Bolshevik, he had been Lenin's comrade, he had traveled extensively outside the Soviet Union, and he lived and worked in Leningrad. Any of these facts could have made him a target. But there was more, much more: there was the matter of his older brother. F. F. Il'in (see Chapter Four). The elder Il'in (or to use his revolutionary pseudonym: Raskol'nikov) had a military/political/diplomatic career even more colorful than his famous younger brother. He wrote a very engaging autobiography detailing his exploits; they are briefly summarized below.

Like other Bolsheviks who worked in Russia before 1917, Raskol'nikov had an adventurous life. When *Pravda* began publication in 1912, Raskol'nikov was appointed editorial secretary. He was soon arrested and banished from Russia. In Germany, however, he was detained as a spy and sent back to Russia. He arrived just

61. Grodzenskii, *Lubianskii gambit*, 226.

62. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia: 1941-1945* [Chess Battle: 1941-1945] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1985), 53.

in time to take advantage of an amnesty marking the anniversary of three-hundred years of Romanov rule, and he promptly resumed his work at *Pravda*. When war broke out in 1914, he joined the navy. As a Bolshevik sailor, he played a direct part in the events of 1917. Raskol'nikov read the announcement of Bolshevik withdrawal at the Constituent Assembly. He oversaw the scuttling of the Black Sea fleet to prevent German capture and coordinated military action against the Czech legion when they rose up against the Soviets. He commanded the Volga Flotilla, which assisted in the recapture of Kazan in September, and for this Raskol'nikov received the Order of the Red Banner along with membership of the Revolutionary War Council of the Republic. At the end of December he was captured by the British in the Gulf of Finland and imprisoned in London. Conditions of imprisonment were lax, and he was able to play the role of tourist. Exchanged for British prisoners, Raskol'nikov returned to Russia where he defeated the Whites and their British allies in the Caspian Sea and earned a second Order of the Red Banner. He was made commander of the Baltic Fleet.⁶³

After the Civil War, Raskol'nikov worked for the Comintern and the diplomatic service. He was serving in Bulgaria in 1937 when he was suddenly and mysteriously recalled to Moscow. After some initial hesitation, Raskol'nikov fled to Paris where he wrote his "Open Letter to Stalin." It is quoted below at length:

You [Stalin] have calumniated, dishonored and shot those who for many years were Lenin's companions in arms: Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin,

63. F. F. Raskol'nikov, *Tales of Sub-Lieutenant Ilyin* [Il'in], transl. Brian Pearce (London: New Park Publications, 1982).

Rykov and others, of whose innocence you were well aware. Before they died you forced them to confess to crimes they never committed and to smear themselves with filth from head to foot.

And where are the heroes of the October Revolution? Where is Bubnov? Where is Krylenko? Where is Antonov-Ovseyenko? Where is Dybenko? You arrested them, Stalin.

You corrupted and befouled the souls of your collaborators. You compelled your followers to wade, in anguish and disgust, through pools of blood shed by their comrades and friends of yesterday.

In the lying history of the Party written under your direction you robbed the dead, those whom you had murdered and defamed, and took for yourself all their achievements and services.

You destroyed Lenin's Party, and on its bones you erected a new 'Party of Lenin and Stalin' which forms a convenient screen for your autocracy. You created it not on the basis of a common program and tactics, as any party is built, but on the unprincipled basis of love and devotion towards your person. Members of the new Party are not obliged to know its program, but instead they are obliged to share that love for Stalin which is warmed up every day by the press. You are a renegade who has broken with his past and betrayed Lenin's cause!

On the eve of war you disrupt the Red Army, the love and pride of our country, the bulwark of its might. You have beheaded the Red Army and the Red Navy. You have killed the most talented commanders, those who were educated through experience in the world war and the civil war, headed by the brilliant Marshal Tukhachevsky. You exterminated the heroes of the civil war, who had reorganized the Red Army in accordance with the most up-to-date military technique, and made it invincible.

At the moment of the greatest danger of war you are continuing to exterminate the leaders of the Army, and the middle-ranking and junior commanders as well.⁶⁴

The letter was published in several European newspapers, and later it would become part of the *samizdat* tradition in Soviet Russia. Raskol'nikov died in France under mysterious circumstances shortly after the letter was published.⁶⁵

64. F. F. Raskol'nikov, "Open Letter to Stalin," (Marxists Internet Library) <http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/redarmy/1918/raskolnikov/ilyin/ch08.htm> (accessed June 15, 2013).

Back in Leningrad, these events placed Raskol'nikov's brother, Il'in-Zhenevskii, in a very dangerous position. In addition to his other risk factors, a family member had now been officially declared an outlaw. But by 1939, the Terror had somewhat subsided, and Il'in-Zhenevskii would live long enough for the Great Patriotic War, rather than the Terror, to claim his life.

65. Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, trans. G.H. Shriver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 483-484.

Chapter Thirteen

Soviet Chess and the Great Patriotic War

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched a massive surprise attack against the Soviet Union. No part of Soviet life would remain untouched by the war that followed. Chess would be called upon to contribute to the war effort, and it would answer the call, just as it had in the earlier political battles.

The German attack came during the semi-final round of what would have been the Thirteenth Soviet Championship, which was being held at Rostov-on-the-Don. When the war news broke during the ninth round, the games all ended in perfunctory draws—quickly proposed and accepted. The confusion and uncertainty of the first hours and days of the war was illustrated by the Moscow sports officials who initially ordered the tournament organizers to continue with the event.¹ This proved impossible, of course, as the players left Rostov-on-the-Don *en-masse*—some headed home, and others joined their reserve units.² The remainder of the Thirteenth Soviet Championship of 1941 was cancelled. When the Soviet union finally resumed the national championship tournament in 1944, it would be dubbed the Thirteenth Soviet Championship.³

1. A. Model', "Oni srazhalis' za rodinu" [They Fought for Their Country], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, March 1975, 18.

2. N. Golovko, "Cherez gody, cherez rasstoianiiia" [Across Years and Distance], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, May 1977, 12-13.

3. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 48.

Il'in-Zhenevskii was one of the competitors at Rostov-on-the-Don in June 1941. He had not been arrested in the wake of the Raskol'nikov affair, and he still enjoyed freedom of travel. In fact, his wife⁴ had accompanied him to the tournament.⁵ None of this suggested that he was under a cloud even as late as 1941.⁶ When he learned that war had broken out, Il'in-Zhenevskii sought the advice of other Leningraders at the tournament: should he and his wife return to Leningrad? The others said they were returning, and Il'in-Zhenevskii followed suit.⁷ The decision to return was a fateful one; Rostov-on-the-Don was Il'in-Zhenevskii's last tournament.

As the scope of the disaster became apparent, other aspects of Soviet chess life seemed to collapse as quickly as the tournament at Rostov-on-the-Don. The popular Moscow-based chess magazine, *64*, ceased publication almost in mid-issue, as the staff closed the doors and left for the front. In Leningrad, *Shakhmaty v SSSR* also shut down for the duration. Chess columns in the many newspapers and magazines disappeared, at least temporarily. The All-Union Chess Section closed its

4. This was his second wife. His first wife had taken her own life back in 1918 (see Chapter Four).

5. Model', "Oni srazhalis' za rodinu," 18.

6. Many secondary sources in English mistakenly indicate that Il'in-Zhenevskii was arrested after the affair of his brother, Raskol'nikov (see Chapter Twelve). This stems from an error in a Soviet source that incorrectly claimed: "during the period of Stalin's personality cult [Il'in-Zhenevskii] was unlawfully repressed. He was rehabilitated posthumously."

Sovetskaia Istoricheskaia Entsiklopediia [The Soviet Encyclopedia of History], vol. 5 (1964), <http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/sie/6664/%D0%98%D0%9B%D0%AC%D0%98%D0%9D> (accessed June 16, 2013).

7. Model', "Oni srazhalis' za rodinu," 18.

door when its chairman, V. E. German (see Chapter Twelve), and most of the staff joined volunteer battalions and went off to the front.⁸

Interestingly, a new chess publication appeared during the war—published in English and intended for foreign consumption. The *Soviet Chess Chronicle* first appeared in 1943, publishing until 1946. It was printed, not by the All-Union Chess Section, but rather by the USSR Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.⁹ Publishing a foreign language chess publication, while the Russian language chess printing remained shuttered, was a curious move. It foreshadowed the Soviet chess organization's postwar emphasis on the utility of Soviet chess in international diplomacy and propaganda.

Soviet chess players and organizers quickly regrouped and found niches in the war effort. In Moscow, even as the German army closed in, the tradition of an annual city championship in November defiantly continued. The decision to hold the Moscow Chess Championship echoed Stalin's determination not to evacuate Moscow or relocate the government in the face of the advancing German Army. Stalin's resolve was symbolized by his decision to hold the annual Red Square military parade on the anniversary of the Revolution (November 7) as usual. This defiant gesture,

8. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia: 1941-1945* [Chess Battle: 1941-1945] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1985), 53.

9. Gino Di Felice, *Chess Periodicals: An Annotated International Bibliography, 1836-2008* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 210.

along with Stalin's speech on that occasion, proclaimed to the world that the city was calm and orderly, and normal life continued in spite of the German threat.¹⁰

The organizer of the 1941 Moscow Chess Championship was Vladimir Alatortsev, president of the prestigious Moscow Chess Club. By November 1941, Moscow was virtually on the front lines, but that did not deter Alatortsev. In fact, Moscow's perilous position was the point of holding the event, which began on November 20—a critical period in the city's defense.¹¹ The games were held in a variety of locations around the city for maximum propaganda value. The political significance of the event can be judged from the fact that it was widely reported in the Soviet media: by TASS, *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *Vecherniaia Moskva*, and *Moskovskii Bol'shevik*.¹² Considering the circumstances, public interest was very high, with many hundreds of spectators watching the games.¹³ Like the earlier staging of the military parade in Red Square, the tournament provided Muscovites with a sense of continuity and normality, and it belied enemy propaganda reports of widespread chaos and panic in the city.¹⁴

10. R. Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War* (London: Profile, 2010), 103-105.

11. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 54.

12. *Ibid.*, 58.

13. V. N. Panov, *Sorok let za shakhmatnoi doskoi: vospominaniia i 50 izbrannykh partii* [Forty Years at the Chessboard: Commentary and 50 Selected Games] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1966), 98.

14. Golovko, "Cherez gody, cherez rasstoianiiia," 12.

Although Moscow had conducted a city championship in 1919 during the Civil War, no Moscow championship was anything like the 1941 tournament. Vasilii Nikolaevich Panov (1906-1973), one of the participants, recalled that initially the noise made concentration very difficult: the air raid sirens, the thunder of anti-aircraft batteries, and the thumping of bombs. Eventually the players grew accustomed to the noise, but the frequent interruptions to go to the shelters during the air raids made the integrity of the games problematic. The normal procedure when a game was interrupted was to “seal the move.” The player having the move wrote it on his score-sheet instead of playing it on the board. The score-sheet was then sealed in an envelope that would be opened when play resumed. The point was to prevent either player from gaining an advantage by the interruption. But there was not enough time to seal a move when the sirens sounded, so the clocks were simply stopped until the game could be resumed in a shelter. Complaints arose because the player having the move when the game was interrupted gained an advantage—he could mentally analyze the game without time penalty while the players moved to the shelter. Finally they agreed to simply ignore the sirens and continue play without interruption during the raids.¹⁵ As the Chess Section’s official report on its war work boasted that, while there were attacks during every round of the tournament, “there was never an instance of a game abandoned due to the German air raids.”¹⁶

15. Panov, *Sorok let za shakhmatnoi doskoi*, 98-99.

16. “Shakhmaty v SSSR za vremia voiny” [Chess in the USSR during the War], GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 15, list 2.

Not to be outdone, Leningrad, too, held its city championship in December 1941. By now the city had been under blockade and bombardment for three months, and conditions were already very bad. The tournament was played in different hospitals around the city.¹⁷ Unlike Moscow, however, Leningrad would be unable to continue its city championships during the worst part of the siege, but it would resume holding the Leningrad Championship in 1943.¹⁸

As the crisis deepened in Leningrad in 1942, the Fire Brigade Headquarters, located on the western end of Nevskii Prospekt near Palace Square, became the center of chess life in the city. Several strong players had been assigned there, and the commander saw that chess was an ideal activity to pass the time between air raids. Several chess tables were strategically located in the center of the main room, and when the crews weren't out dousing fires, there were always games and spectators.¹⁹

Leningrad's chess organization, like all aspects of cultural life, suffered enormously during the blockade. This was a time of terrible violence and deprivation, and the human costs were catastrophic. Many prominent chess players of both the older and younger generations were lost. Il'in-Zhenevskii was among the first.

After leaving the interrupted tournament at Rostov-on-the-Don, Il'in-Zhenevskii with some difficulty made his way back to Leningrad, where he resumed

17. Model', "Oni srazhalis' za rodinu," 18.

18. B. Gertsenzon, "Shakhmaty v blokadnom Leningrade" [Chess in the Siege of Leningrad], in *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia: 1941-1945 [Chess Battle: 1941-1945]*, ed. B. S. Vainshtein (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1985), 76.

19. *Ibid.*, 73.

his work as the political editor at the Leningrad Publishing House.²⁰ The city wasn't under siege yet, but the Germans were bombing the city and there was already ominous difficulty with food supply.²¹

Il'in-Zhenevskii and his wife performed the mandatory labor required of all Leningraders. Il'in-Zhenevskii was put to work digging anti-tank ditches at the outskirts of the city. The work was exhausting and performed under very difficult circumstances.²² In deference to his age and Party status, Il'in-Zhenevskii was put in charge of the work crew, where he earned the praise of a young worker in his squad:

He [Il'in-Zhenevskii] remained in my memory as a modest man with soft voice, who was calm and self-possessed in any circumstances, even in cases of bomb raids. . . .

When we were trenching near the stations Batetskaia and Peredolskaia, food supplies were irregular, and we had to sleep on the bare ground in the open air. Aleksandr Fedorovich Il'in-Zhenevskii shared our hardships. . . .

Once we had to walk 35 kilometers in the night along wood tracks. Aleksandr Fedorovich saw to it that everybody was keeping up with the pace, encouraged those who were tired.²³

20. S. Morozov, "Desiat' s polovinoi nedel': voina i smert' A. F. Il'ina-Zhenevskogo" [Ten and One-half Weeks: The War and the Death of A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii] (St. Petersburg: Shakhmaty v Peterburge, 2004), <http://www.e3e5.com/article.php?id=74> (accessed April 5, 2013).

21. Model', "Oni srazhalis' za rodinu," 18.

22. T. A. Il'in-Zhenevskii and A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Dnevnik A. F. i T. A. Il'inykh-Zhenevskikh" [Diary of T. A. and A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii] (St. Petersburg: Shakhmaty v Peterburge, 2004), <http://www.e3e5.com/article.php?id=74> (accessed April 5, 2013).

23. A. K. Golubev, "Memoirs," quoted in "Desiat' s polovinoi nedel': voina i smert' A. F. Il'ina-Zhenevskogo" [Ten and One-half Weeks: The War and the Death of A. F. Il'in-Zhenevskii] (St. Petersburg: Shakhmaty v Peterburge, 2004), <http://www.e3e5.com/article.php?id=74> (accessed April 5, 2013).

On September 1, 1941, the Il'in-Zhenevskii's were evacuated by water from the besieged city. On September 3, their boat was attacked by German aircraft at Novaia Ladoga. Il'in Zhenevskii was badly wounded in the attack, and he died later that same day.²⁴ His wife was not injured, but she was overcome with despair and took her own life a few days later.²⁵

In addition to Il'in-Zhenevskii, the losses in Leningrad would eventually include a number of others whose names have been prominent in this work. For example, I. Rabinovich and S. Vainshtein died of starvation. Romanovskii somehow survived, but his wife, their three daughters, and their housekeeper all died of hunger and sickness.

The person most responsible for maintaining some semblance of chess life in the stricken city was Abram Iakovlevich Model' (1896-1976). Working in an official capacity as the Leningrad Sports Committee's Chess Inspector, he was also the *de facto* director of the Leningrad Chess Club. In addition, Model' founded a chess section in Leningrad's Pioneer Palace in late 1943. He offered lessons, gave simulms and directed tournaments at the Pioneer Palace, military units and the hospitals. Numerous strong tournaments were also held in Leningrad under his direction during

24. H. Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 281.

25. Morozov, "Desiat' s polovinoi nedel'."

the blockade, and he was the organizer behind the resumption of the Leningrad Championship in 1944.²⁶

In addition to his chess work, he was also had other critical duties. He was in overall command of the transports that evacuated children from the starving city. Model' carried dozens of chess sets on these transports; he found that chess helped keep the children calm. Among the thousands of children evacuated by Model' was a five-year-old orphan named Boris Vasil'evich Spasskii (1937-), a future world chess champion. Young Spasskii learned to play chess on the transport during his evacuation.²⁷

In Moscow, Alatortsev, the Director of the Moscow Chess Club who had organized the Moscow Championship under very difficult conditions (see above), also wanted to explore other ways that chess could help the war effort. He turned to his friend, Boris Samoilovich Vainshtein (1907-1993) (not to be confused with Samuil Osipovich Vainshtein, erstwhile proponent of apolitical chess—see Chapter Six). In addition to being a skilled chess player (category I) and dedicated organizer (instrumental in organizing official chess activity in Soviet Central Asia), B. Vainshtein, a mathematician by profession, held the rank of colonel in the NKVD, and he was the chairman and champion of the chess section of *Dynamo*, the NKVD sports organization. Chess, Vainshtein claimed, was the favorite game of the NKVD,

26. Gertsenzon, "Shakhmaty v blokadnom Leningrade," 71-78.

27. N. B. Krogus, A. N. Golubev, and L. E. Guttsait, *Boris Spasskii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe predpriatie, 2000), 1:1-2.

even though its director, Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria (1899-1953) was himself a very weak player.²⁸ Vainshtein was not, however, involved directly in police work *per se*, but rather in production planning, primarily for the aircraft industry.²⁹ Nor was he a Party member.³⁰ Nevertheless, he returned a measure of political clout to the All-Union Chess Section that had been missing since the days of Krylenko. In January 1942, he used his political connections to convince the Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Rozalii Samoilovne Zemliachke (1876-1947), to give chess an official status and make it a component of the war effort. At first she was skeptical, but after some initial hesitation, Zemliachke gave Vainshtein the authority to revive the All-Union Chess Section—with Vainshtein at the helm.³¹ Under Vainshtein, the Chess Section was focused somewhat less on ideology, and rather more on pragmatic concerns: the war effort. This was the rationale for reviving the Chess Section in wartime. In effect, this brought Soviet chess back to its military roots, back to a circumstance analogous to 1920 when Il'in-Zhenevskii represented the Party in the Vsevobuch (see Chapter Four).

Vainshtein authorized the formation of a brigade of chess propagandists, led by Alatortsev and consisting of the strongest players available. They conducted

28. S. B. Voronkov, "Match Botvinnik-Alekhin," *Shakhmatnyi vestnik*, May 1993, 23-24.

29. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 56.

30. Voronkov, "Match Botvinnik-Alekhin," 24.

31. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 55-56.

thousands of simuls and organized clubs in the hospitals, and they also visited rear and active units.³² Their work in the hospitals was in many ways the most interesting and the best documented.

Alatortsev published a booklet in early 1943, outlining the purposes and detailing the methodology for the hospital work. The main purpose of hospital chess was the very pragmatic goal of assisting the wounded to return to the fight sooner and with enhanced fighting spirit. Chess promoted more rapid healing because it was an engrossing, but sedentary, activity. It rested the body, but it stimulated the brain. It also taught military skills such as appreciating the value of attack and spirited defense, developing patience and persistence, and cultivating the ability to navigate in difficult situations.³³ This, of course, is exactly what Il'in-Zhenevskii had argued in 1920, when he advocated using chess as one facet of military training.

Alatortsev reported that in 1942 alone, Moscow masters had performed over one-hundred simuls in military hospitals in the Moscow region; over three-thousand sick or wounded soldiers had participated. In addition, they had conducted countless lectures, individual games, consultation games and lessons. There was also a series of officially sanctioned chess tournaments, which meant that participants could qualify for a chess ranking or improve an existing ranking in the Soviet chess hierarchy.³⁴

32. Ibid., 55.

33. Vladimir Alekseevich Alatortsev, *Shakhmaty v gospitale (Chess in the Hospital)* (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1943), 3.

34. Ibid., 3-4.

Chess propagandists in the hospitals were instructed to consider that there would be widely different levels of interest and ability among the patients. Some were new to chess, and their interest might only be to fill their enforced leisure with an interesting and wholesome entertainment. Many others, however, were already accomplished players who would use their hospital time to further develop their skill. And, of course, there were many who fell somewhere in between. It was up to the propagandists to make sure the chess program in the hospitals served all of its clientele.³⁵

Alatortsev laid out in great detail the methodology of conducting mass chess work in the hospitals. In order to stimulate interest, Alatortsev recommended that initially a lecture be given on a general topic of wide interest: chess history, the political value of chess, or the relationship between war and chess. The point was to conduct introductory lectures that would be interesting to players and non-players alike.³⁶

Appropriate activities for the different levels of ability should then be organized. Simuls were very useful in generating interest—they appealed to observers and well as participants. Tournaments of various kinds (qualifying, casual, blitz or team) should also be organized, and the proper way to conduct these events was described in great detail in Alatortsev's handbook. Classes for both beginners and more experienced players should be set up. Although volunteer organizers could often

35. Ibid., 4.

36. Ibid., 5.

be found among patients, overall direction must always come from representatives of the Chess Section. This was necessary because, above all, propagandists must saturate their chess activities with the correct political content. In short, a hospital chess club should have all the activities and attributes of a Soviet factory chess circle.³⁷

Hospital chess also enjoyed a protected, legal status. Hospital administrators were required to cooperate with representatives of the Chess Section.³⁸ In turn, organizers in the hospitals were directed to work closely with hospital administrators to ensure that the chess work complemented other aspects of the hospital's recreational and political activities. Organizers were told to take charge of all of the hospital's chess equipment, inventory it, and request additional materials as needed. Alatortsev also suggested a collection of chess titles appropriate for the hospital club's library.³⁹

The wartime director of the All-Union Chess Section, B. Vainshtein, was heavily invested in the hospital work that was being directed by Alatortsev. Vainshtein was especially lavish in his praise of the female chess players involved in this work. He singled out Elizaveta Ivanovna Bykova (1913-1989), future Soviet and women's world champion, for special mention. She gave 340 simulms attended by seven-thousand wounded soldiers and organized countless qualifying tournaments. Vainshtein quoted her as saying: "I've never been so glad that I can play chess,

37. *Ibid.*, 6-14.

38. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 56.

39. Alatortsev, *Shakhmaty v gosspitale*, 32.

because playing with the wounded soldiers and officers of our heroic Soviet Army gives them such pleasure.”⁴⁰ For her chess work in the hospitals, comrade Bykova was awarded an unspecified “special prize.”⁴¹

Even as more normal chess activities slowly resumed, the hospital work continued unabated. The first wartime Soviet Championship was held in spring 1944, and participants spent their free days in Moscow’s military hospitals, playing individual games, giving exhibitions, or just chatting with patients. Additional free days were set aside for all the players so they could visit hospitals as a group, much to the delight of the patients.⁴²

In Leningrad there was a parallel, if less organized, effort in the military hospitals. Boris Mironovich Gertsenzon (1920-2012), who was actually a checkers champion, was the leading force behind the chess effort in the Leningrad hospitals, which also continued throughout the war.⁴³

All in all, the chess initiative in the military hospitals during the Great Patriotic War can be seen as the moral zenith of Soviet chess. The need was enormous, and the effort was heroic. Chess activities were very popular in the hospitals, with mass participation and enormous enthusiasm. In Moscow alone, over

40. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 78-79.

41. “Shakhmaty v SSSR za vremia voiny,” listy 2.

42. B. S. Vainshtein, “1944 Chess Championship of the USSR,” *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, June 1944, 4.

43. Gertsenzon, “Shakhmaty v blokadnom Leningrade,” 71.

thirty-thousand soldiers recovering in military hospitals received chess ratings by competing in qualifying tournaments. The simuls and lectures in the military hospitals were attended by over two-hundred thousand soldiers.⁴⁴ Immobile soldiers demanded to be transported on stretchers to take part in the simuls and hear the lectures.⁴⁵ Based on his personal experience, Il'in-Zhenevskii had observed back in 1917 that the tsarist convalescent hospitals of the First World War were breeding grounds for dissatisfaction, grievance and revolutionary discontent (see Chapter Four). In the Great Patriotic War, by contrast, the hospitals became an opportunity for engaging in cultural/political work.

Vainshtein's wartime Chess Section also sent Soviet masters to air bases, naval vessels, and even to the front lines to give exhibitions for the airmen, sailors and soldiers. One of these masters, Mikhail Mikhailovich Iudovich (1911-1987), described a simul at an airbase outside of Moscow. Midway through the session, the alarm sounded and everyone jumped into action, scrambling to intercept German bombers. Iudovich was uncertain what to do, but a medical officer told him to wait. The men, he said, would return directly. Indeed, in less than thirty minutes the airmen were back at their boards, and play resumed. Iudovich noted, however, that two of the chairs were now vacant.⁴⁶

44. P. A. Romanovskii, *Chess in Russia: The Players and Their Games (Annotated)* (London: Soviet News, 1946), 12.

45. GARF fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 15, listy 2, 2.

46. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 55.

Many chess events (simuls and tournaments) were organized in the rear units of the Red Army. As a result of the efforts of Soviet chess organization over the previous two decades, chess enthusiasts were common throughout the army, and these events were very well received. Chess provided a productive relaxation for the soldiers before they returned to the front, and the long-term project to permeate all of Soviet society with chess was also served.

The front lines were not neglected either, with organizers arranging tournaments and simuls. Often the soldiers themselves took the initiative. One Red Army soldier in an active sector of the western front wrote to the Chess Section: “In our detachment, during the brief moments of rest, a chess tournament was held in which twelve people took part. Please reply to us on how we should proceed with the results in order to obtain the certificates of category ratings for the winners.”⁴⁷

For Botvinnik, the war meant that all the attempts to arrange a challenge to Alekhin for the title had come to nothing. But Botvinnik’s status as the heir-apparent still had benefits. Although all Soviet citizens were required to serve during the war—in the army, in defense industries, on construction projects—Botvinnik was shielded from the war’s menace. He, along with other top players, was protected like a national treasure, a secret weapon prepared and preserved for post-war cultural struggles.

Called up for his army military exam, Botvinnik received a certificate of exemption from military service due to “weak vision.” He applied to leave Leningrad

47. “Shakhmaty v SSSR za vremia voyny,” list 2.

for Molotov (Perm) to accompany his wife who was being evacuated with the Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre. The final decision was made by the Leningrad Party secretary, who commented: “Comrade Botvinnik, you will again be useful to the Soviet people as a chess player. Leave.”⁴⁸

Botvinnik’s old friend, S. Vainshtein, saw him off at the train station on August 19, 1941. Botvinnik later claimed he tried to convince Vainshtein to travel with him, but the old chess player—a veteran of the Tribberg internment (see Chapter One) and the fight over political/apolitical chess (see Chapter Six)—refused.⁴⁹ Two days later the rail links to Leningrad were cut by the advancing Germans.⁵⁰ Five months later, S. Vainshtein was dead of starvation.

In Molotov, Botvinnik worked as an electrical engineer (his vocation). His first child was born there. The times were hard, and everyone had to make sacrifices. Botvinnik sold his typewriter to help make ends meet.⁵¹

In January 1943, Botvinnik was suddenly assigned to work in a timber cutting detail. This was too much for the Soviet chess champion. He cashed in his political capital, calling on his patron, Molotov, who before the war had granted permission for Botvinnik’s match with Alekhin. Now he asked to be relieved of his labor

48. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 95.

49. Ibid.

50. Salisbury, *The 900 Days*, 224.

51. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 98-99.

requirements. The heavy work of timbering made it impossible for Botvinnik to prepare himself for whatever postwar chess challenges might come his way. Molotov interceded on Botvinnik's behalf and arranged for Botvinnik's labor requirements to be significantly cut and then eliminated entirely.⁵²

In spite of the war, tournament competition among the elite players, though reduced, still continued. The tournaments had propaganda value, and they helped Soviet players to maintain the edge they would need in the anticipated international struggles in postwar chess. In some cases the forced exodus of chess players from the principal cities—players who evacuated along with the industrial sectors that employed them—led to concentrations of high-level chess activity in unlikely places. The eastern city of Sverdlovsk (formerly and currently Ekaterinburg) was an excellent example. The Leningrad master and close friend of Botvinnik, V. Ragozin; the Ukrainian Champion, Isaac Efremovich Boleslavskii (1919-1977); and the veteran player/organizer, Ia. Rokhlin, all found themselves in Sverdlovsk in 1942. Consequently, in March 1942, a surprisingly and unexpectedly strong master tournament was held in Sverdlovsk under the Rokhlin's direction.⁵³ In addition to Ragozin and Isaak Efremovich Boleslavskii (1919-1977), the Latvian master, V. Petrovs (see Chapter Twelve), also found himself in Sverdlovsk just in time for the competition.⁵⁴

52. Ibid., 100-101.

53. "Shakhmaty v SSSR za vremia voiny," listy 2.

54. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 91.

Botvinnik did not compete in the first Sverdlovsk tournament, but he arranged to visit the town on business while the tournament was underway. He reported that when he tried to purchase a spectator ticket, they were sold out. But when he attended the tournament anyway, he found the crowds were very sparse. Soon Botvinnik discovered the reason: a bread roll had been included with each ticket, and they had been quickly purchased by citizens, most of whom had neither the time nor the inclination to attend the event.⁵⁵

This first Sverdlovsk event in 1942 was followed a year later by a stronger, official event in spring 1943. Sverdlovsk was again chosen as the site because it was already top-heavy with chess talent. In addition, the strongest players available in the rest of the country were invited. This second Sverdlovsk event was held under the direct sponsorship and authority of the All-Union Chess Section—the first major tournament sponsored by the Chess Section since the war began. With hospital and military chess programs well established, B. Vainshtein decided to again sponsor large-scale competition, using extensive media coverage to extract maximum propaganda value and rekindle enthusiasm among the chess masses.⁵⁶ Chess was a normal facet of Soviet life, and scheduling a tournament in the midst of a war signaled to friend and foe alike that normal life carried on.

Sverdlovsk 1943 had another purpose as well: to hone the skills of Botvinnik and his compatriots for postwar contests. By spring 1943, all indications were that the

55. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 98.

56. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 91.

Soviets were going to win the war. The previous winter's decisive defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad indicated that an eventual Soviet victory was no longer in doubt. Looking ahead to the postwar world, Vainshtein understood that chess players need tournaments to maintain and improve their skills. At Sverdlovsk 1943, Botvinnik won a convincing victory, proving that the war had not shaken his dominance. This victory reaffirmed his right to challenge Alekhin after the war. Equally important, significant theoretical innovations were unveiled and tested at the tournament.⁵⁷ One indicator of the high caliber of play at Sverdlovsk 1943 was that ten of Botvinnik's fourteen games from this event were later included in a definitive collection of Botvinnik's best games, a higher proportion of games than from any other single competition.⁵⁸

There were other examples of tournaments reflecting the diffusion of high-level chess talent to the provinces. Notable among them was an event in the city of Kuibyshev (formerly and currently Samara), where an interesting masters' tournament was organized in August 1942. The tournament was the strongest ever played in Kuibyshev, featuring two grandmasters and five masters. Smyslov won the tournament; Botvinnik did not compete.⁵⁹

57. Ibid., 92.

58. M. M. Botvinnik and V. D. Baturinskii, *Shakhmatnoe tvorchestvo Botvinnika* [Botvinnik's Chess Creativity] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1966), 2:47-67.

59. "Shakhmaty v SSSR za vremia voyny," listy 2.

Another event, worthy of note, took place in Moscow in 1942. It was not a competition, but rather a chess seminar conducted by thirteen grandmasters and several more leading masters. Anywhere else in the world, an event of this kind would have been considered unique at any time, and the fact it was held with official sponsorship in the midst of a desperate war is quite remarkable. The reports issued were considered groundbreaking in the development of chess theory. For example, Romanovskii, now recovered from his Leningrad ordeal (see above), issued a paper, “New in Rook Endgames,” which was considered to be a “theoretical revelation.” Several of the seminar’s reports dealt with opening theory, and significant advances were made. In addition, Iudovich presented a report on the psychology of tournament play that would be required reading for all participants in post-war international tournaments.⁶⁰ This seminar, even more than the war-time tournaments, is clear evidence that an important role for chess in the postwar world envisioned all through the war

Summer 1943 found Botvinnik, now relieved of his timbering duties, back in Moscow. In November he played in the 1943 Moscow Championship. Two years had passed since the defiant city championship in November 1941, and playing conditions had largely returned to normal in the capital. Although he lost his individual game to Smyslov, Botvinnik still won the tournament overall.⁶¹

60. B. S. Vainshtein, “Editorial,” *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, July 1945, 3.

61. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 104-105.

During the tournament, Botvinnik had a meeting with B. Vainshtein and Zubarev, a long-time official at the Chess Section who had survived Krylenko's fall. The occasion was a dinner hosted by Vainshtein. The subject of a postwar match with Alekhin was inevitably broached, and the news was not good for Botvinnik. Before the war, the official attitude toward Alekhin had been that, although he was a vile, treasonous enemy-of-the-people, his chess skills were acknowledged and grudgingly admired. Soviet chess couldn't just ignore the world champion. Alekhin's games were published in the USSR, and Botvinnik played against him at Nottingham and in the AVRO event. It was on this basis that the preliminary negotiations for an Alekhin-Botvinnik match had been conducted in the late 1930s (see Chapter Eleven).

But the attitude toward Alekhin had hardened during the war, largely because of rumors of his pro-Nazi sympathies and activities. Vainshtein cited that fact that Alekhin was considered a war criminal not only in the Soviet Union but also by the French underground.⁶² Alekhin, he alleged, also held the official position of Assistant for Culture under the infamous Gauleiter Hans Frank, a charge later refuted by Alekhin's widow in a letter to the British magazine, *Chess*.⁶³ Nevertheless, B. Vainshtein and Zubarev both agreed at the November 1943 dinner meeting with Botvinnik that a postwar match with Alekhin was politically unthinkable.⁶⁴ Botvinnik

62. Voronkov, "Match Botvinnik-Alekhin," 26.

63. Grace Alekhin, "letter to the editor," *Chess*, December 1946, 4.

64. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 105.

was in despair, and this meeting marked the opening of a single-minded pursuit of the world title that would test the limits of his political influence.

Initially he reacted to the changed situation with a completely different plan, complex and problematic. Botvinnik proposed that the Soviet Chess Section and the United States Chess Federation jointly declare Alekhin deposed. Botvinnik would then play a match with the young Polish-American, Samuel Reshevsky, a former prodigy who was generally acknowledged to be among the world's best. The winner of the proposed Botvinnik-Reshevsky match would be proclaimed world champion. This complicated scheme required international cooperation. To this end, Botvinnik managed to get an audience with the Ambassador to the United States, Makhxim Makhximovich Litvinov (1876-1951), who was in Moscow for consultations. Litvinov was receptive as Botvinnik laid out his alternative route to attaining a Soviet world champion, but he was unwilling to promise more than "support in principle" for Botvinnik's scheme.⁶⁵ That wasn't enough.

Frustrated, Botvinnik decided to refocus his attention on the Chess Section and return to a somewhat less complex, if not equally problematic, plan: a postwar match with Alekhin. Botvinnik concluded that he could make no progress with B. Vainshtein, but he believed he had the sympathy of other members of the All-Union Chess Section. He also had strong Party connections, and he used them to force Vainshtein out of his position. The opportunity came in a 1945 conference of the All-Union Chess Section. Vainshtein expected to be reaffirmed as Chairman, but

65. *Ibid.*, 103.

unexpected opposition arose to his leadership over the issue of a match with Alekhin. Initially the vote went against Botvinnik. But then a delegate pointed out that the Party had already ruled that the match should take place. Even though that approval had come before the war, all the Party members among the delegates reversed themselves and voted with Botvinnik.⁶⁶ Vainshtein, who had tied his leadership to his opposition to the match, tried to defend himself, but he gave up the fight when influential Party delegates began to address him in debate as “former chairman.”⁶⁷ With Vainshtein’s removal, Botvinnik had eliminated a substantial barrier to his ambition. But Botvinnik also had to continually prove that he remained worthy to be Alekhin’s Soviet challenger.

In the late spring of 1944 came the Thirteenth Soviet Championship—the first since the German invasion. The pent-up demand of the chess public made this a very popular event. Many of the spectators were in uniform—generals and privates alike, spending a precious day of furlough at the House of Unions to watch the games. But in spite of the prevalence of uniforms, this tournament bore none of the trappings of a cobbled-together, wartime event. It was self-consciously intended to serve as “a milestone in the further development and flourishing of the Soviet chess movement.”⁶⁸ By holding a strong national championship in wartime, the Soviets

66. Voronkov, “Match Botvinnik-Alekhin,” 26-27.

67. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 107-108.

68. B. S. Vainshtein, “1944 Chess Championship of the USSR,” *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, June 1944, 4.

signaled that state-sponsored chess would continue to play an important role in the nation's postwar cultural life.

Seventeen players participated, including five grandmasters; a national championship of this strength was unprecedented anywhere in the world. Among the grandmasters was Flohr (Botvinnik's opponent in the pivotal 1932 match—see Chapter Nine), who was eligible for the first time to participate in a Soviet Championship. Stateless since the Germany occupation of his native Czechoslovakia in 1938, Flohr had become a Soviet citizen during the war. Vainshtein took proud note of the addition of Flohr, predicting that under the influence of the Soviet school Flohr's play would soon become "more active, more varied," allowing him to finally realize his full potential.⁶⁹

Botvinnik won the Thirteenth Soviet Championship in a very convincing manner. But in 1944, Botvinnik was no longer the Young Turk challenging the old guard. He was now thirty-two years old, and nipping at his heels was a pair of youngsters. Smyslov, ten years his junior, led for most of the tournament and finished second. Another youngster, D. Bronstein finished fifteenth, but defeated Botvinnik in their individual game.⁷⁰ For Botvinnik, the war had become a dreadful inconvenience. He had reason to fear that he might be supplanted before he finally had his opportunity to claim the world title.

69. Ibid., 1-4.

70. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 52.

His fears of being supplanted were, however, unfounded, at least for now. A year later, in late spring 1945, the Fourteenth Soviet Championship was held. By this time, Nazi Germany was defeated, Eastern Europe was in Soviet hands, and Botvinnik was at the top of his form. He finished an unprecedented three points ahead of his nearest rival.⁷¹ After this victory, Botvinnik was in a solid position to push his argument that his match with Alekhin, as approved before the war, should now take place.

What Botvinnik failed to understand was that the postwar situation made a match with Alekhin extremely problematic. In the late 1930s, the match seemed possible, even imminent (see Chapter Eleven), but then the war had intervened. Now, after the war, there was an additional complication: the delicate matter of Alekhin's war-time behavior. Those persistent wartime rumors that he was in league with the Nazis proved to be, at least partially, true.

In 1941 Alekhin, a French citizen living under German occupation, wrote several articles for a Paris newspaper. They were subsequently reprinted in German chess periodicals, including the Nazi-controlled *Deutsch Schachzeitung*. Although the articles covered a range of chess-related topics, most controversial was Alekhin's application of Nazi racial theory to chess history. Alekhin distinguished between Aryan and Jewish chess. Aryans approached chess in a fighting spirit—aggressive, imaginative and brave. Jews, on the other hand, played cowardly chess—materialistic and defensive. A few excerpts will suffice to convey the tone of the articles:

71. *Ibid.*, 56.

What is Jewish chess, the Jewish chess idea in its real essence? It is not hard to answer this question:

1. Material profit at all costs;
2. Opportunism—an opportunism pushed to the highest point with the aim of eliminating even the shadow of a potential danger and which consequently reveals an idea (if one can apply the word “idea” to this) namely “defence, in and for itself.” As far as future possibilities are concerned, Jewish chess has dug its own grave in developing this "idea" which, in any form of combat whatever cannot mean anything else, finally than suicide. For by merely defending one's self, one may occasionally (and how often?) avoid defeat—but how does one win? There is a possible answer: by a mistake by one's opponent. What if the opponent fails to make this mistake? All that the defender-at-all-costs can then do is whine in complaint of this absence of errors.⁷²

Apart from the racial language, this sounds a bit like a typical Soviet characterization of bourgeois chess. But Alekhin took his point much further:

Do the Jews, as a race, have a gift for chess? After thirty years' chess experience I would like to answer this question in the following manner: yes, the Jews have an exceptional talent for exploiting chess, chess ideas and the practical possibilities that arise. But there has not been up to now a Jew who was a real chess artist.⁷³

Finally, Alekhin also mentioned Botvinnik in his articles. According to Alekhin, Botvinnik, like some Jewish players, showed enormous creativity and attacking spirit, and this had to be accounted for.

The Soviet chess master Botvinnik owes, in my opinion, even more than his American co-religionist [Reshevsky] to the influence of the younger Russian school. Instinctively inclined to “safety first,” he has slowly become a master who knows how to use the weapons of aggression. How this occurred, is a curious and typical story: not the ideal of attack and, if necessary, sacrifice, but—however paradoxical this might seem—the idea of procuring, by attacking possibilities, even greater security for himself, is responsible for this change. . . . That he is very strong now, there can be no doubt. Otherwise, he would hardly have been able, considering the high development of chess in

72. A. A. Alekhine [Alekhin], *Alekhine Nazi Articles*, trans. Kenneth Whyld (Olomouc: Moravian Chess, 2002), 16-17.

73. *Ibid.*, 31.

present-day Russia, to attain the championship of his country five or six times in succession All the same, most of Botvinnik's games made a dry and soulless impression. This is easily explained: there is no art in which the most perfect copy could arouse the same feelings as the original and, as far as attack is concerned, Botvinnik's chess is just no more than an excellent copy of the old masters.⁷⁴

After the war Alekhin disavowed the articles, although his story was not always consistent. In a letter to B. H. Wood, founder of the British magazine, *Chess*, Alekhin denied any connection with the articles.⁷⁵ In an interview with a Spanish newspaper, he claimed that the articles were originally innocent and theoretical, but “were rewritten by the Germans, published and made to treat chess from a racial viewpoint.”⁷⁶

Whether or not he actually wrote these infamous articles, Alekhin participated fully in the chess culture of Nazi Europe. He competed in all of the major Nazi-sponsored tournaments during the war, notably in Munich, Salzburg, Warsaw, and Prague. It was customary for players in international tournaments to have their national flag at the table; the flag at Alekhin's table was a swastika.⁷⁷

Another mark against Alekhin was his friendship with Hans Frank (1900-1946), a war criminal later tried and executed at Nuremberg. Frank was a strong and

74. *Ibid.*, 33-34.

75. A. A. Alekhin to B. H. Wood, Lisbon, December 6, 1945, Special Collections, Cleveland Public Library, Cleveland, OH.

76. “Alekhine [Alekhin] Defends Wartime Conduct,” *Chess Review*, February 1945, 14.

77. Bill Wall, “Alekhine [Alekhin] and the Nazis,” <http://www.geocities.com/siliconvalley/lab/7378/nazi.htm> (accessed April 5, 2013).

enthusiastic chess player, famous in the chess world for his vast chess library. He sponsored tournaments in the *Wehrmacht*, competed in military chess events, and at one point planned to set up a Nazi chess school under Alekhin and Bogoliubov.⁷⁸

Bogoliubov, erstwhile Soviet Champion, victor at Moscow 1925, expatriate and German citizen since 1926, became an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party in the late 1930s, when membership had become respectable. He had successfully reinvented himself over the years as a bourgeois German. He looked and sounded German (he even spoke Russian with a German accent).⁷⁹ His anti-Semitism was well documented. When he first met the American grandmaster, Reuben Fine, at Zandvoort in 1936, Bogoliubov accused the young master of being smugly happy over the recent Hindenburg disaster (Fine was a Jew).⁸⁰ Years later, Fine retaliated, accusing Bogoliubov of having conspired to have his German rivals thrown into concentration camps.⁸¹

Moscow 1925 had been the zenith of Bogoliubov's career. Subsequent successes were few. He decisively lost two world championship matches against

78. Dieter Schenk, *Hans Frank* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2006), 177.

79. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 66.

80. Hans Kmoch, "Yefim Dimitrievich Bogolyubov [Bogoliubov] (1889-1952)," in *Grandmasters I Have Known*, ed. Burt Hochberg (ChessCafe, 2004), <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/kmoch01.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2013).

81. Reuben Fine, *A Passion for Chess: Lessons from My Games* (New York: D. McKay, 1967), 128.

Alekhin, and he was happy enough to spend his declining years as a kind of court chess player for Frank and the Nazis.

Finally, in this discussion of émigré chess players in Nazi-occupied Europe, Paul Keres must be mentioned. Keres was an Estonian master, viewed as strong contender for the world championship after he tied with Fine for first place in the very strong AVRO 1938 tournament. Keres became a Soviet citizen by default in 1940 when the Soviets annexed the Baltic states. That gave him the right to compete in the Soviet Championship, and he finished fourth in the Twelfth Soviet Championship 1940.⁸²

Keres was in Estonia when it passed from Soviet to German control in the summer of 1941. During the war years, Keres, along with Bogoliubov and Alekhin, played in all four of the major wartime tournaments organized by the Nazi-controlled *Grossdeutscher Schachbund*: Munich, Salzburg, Warsaw, and Prague. He also gave exhibitions in German army units.

In the case of Bogoliubov, the association with the Nazis did not significantly harm his career, largely because it was already over. For Keres, there would be an unlikely endgame. The Soviet Union, after a period of uncertainty, uncharacteristically welcomed back its prodigal son, although there may have been onerous conditions attached. In the case of Alekhin, the situation was even more complicated. The association with Nazism effectively destroyed his postwar chess career; no organizer could invite him to a tournament without provoking a general

82. Cafferty and Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships*, 48.

boycott. This, in turn, seriously complicated Botvinnik's quest to wrest control of the world title.

In spite of the complications, all through 1945 Botvinnik continued to advocate for a match with Alekhin. Botvinnik had the support of Molotov and, he believed, of Stalin himself, so he persevered. His friend Ragozin rather brazenly spearheaded an effort on behalf of Botvinnik that included a letter to Stalin signed by leading Soviet masters. Stalin implicitly agreed.⁸³ Botvinnik and the other proponents of the match sidestepped the question of the Nazi collaboration, citing only Alekhin's dubious disavowals.⁸⁴

A breakthrough, of sorts, occurred in early 1945, when Alekhin announced his willingness to play a match with Botvinnik on the terms that had been agreed upon back in 1938-1939.⁸⁵ Botvinnik believed that Alekhin had no choice but to play the match. He had run out of options; he had placed himself in a kind of *zugzwang*.⁸⁶ Alekhin said as much in an interview in late 1944, when he was asked about his future plans:

83. S. P. Zheleznyi, "Stalin khotel, chtoby ia sygral s Alekhinym" [Stalin Wanted Me to Play with Alekhin], in *M. M. Botvinnik: 100 let so dna rozhdeniia* [M. M. Botvinnik: 100th Anniversary of His Birth], ed. V. A. Poloudin (Moscow: Olympia, 2011), 91.

84. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 111.

85. "Alekhine [Alekhin] Defends Wartime Conduct," *Chess Review*, February 1945, 14.

86. "*Zugzwang*" is a German term referring to a chess situation where the player having the move has no option that does not hasten his own demise.

Plans? What plans can I have? The best part of my life has passed away between two world wars that have laid Europe waste. Both wars ruined me, with this difference: at the end of the first war I was 26 years of age with an unbounded enthusiasm I no longer have. . . . Today, I continue to play chess because it occupies my mind and keeps me from brooding and remembering.⁸⁷

But Alekhin was playing chess only in small tournaments in Spain and Portugal. He had been invited to play in an international tournament in London in 1946, but the invitation had been withdrawn when allegations about Alekhin's Nazi sympathies led to boycott threats.⁸⁸ Alekhin must have finally understood that his wartime behavior was unlikely to be forgotten or forgiven. At least in the West, the postwar chess world was now implacably hostile to him.

In 1946, Alekhin was a sick man, living alone in a shoddy hotel in Portugal, unable to provide himself even a rudimentary living. In spite of suffering from advanced cirrhosis of the liver, he was drinking heavily. An acquaintance in Portugal noted that, "At the Commerce Hotel . . . the whole staff was frightened by the tall foreigner who would order a bottle of cognac upon retiring, leaving it empty in his room each day."⁸⁹ The only capital he still possessed was the world title, and there was even talk of stripping him of that. Alekhin had to move quickly if he was to salvage anything.

87. Ricardo Cavalle, "'Wars Ruined Me,' Says Alekhine [Alekhin]," *Chess Review*, January 1945, 13.

88. Francisco Lupi, "The Broken King," *Chess World*, September 1, 1946, 168.

89. Pablo Morán, *Alekhine [Alekhin]: Agony of a Chess Genius*, trans. Frank X. Mur (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), 2.

These circumstances explained Alekhin's eagerness to play a match with Botvinnik. He needed the money, of course, but he also wanted to use the match to fashion some sort of niche for himself in the postwar chess world. He must have known that he would surely lose (all evidence suggests he would have been trounced), but surrendering the title to the Soviets might shield him from accusations relating to his Nazi associations and perhaps even pave the way for reconciliation with his homeland. Soviet writers later claimed that Alekhin, in his last years, bitterly regretted his estrangement from his native land.⁹⁰ A wistful statement by Alekhin in 1945 seemed to confirm this. In a letter to the sponsor of the London international tournament that had cancelled its invitation to him (see above), Alekhin wrote,

Having devoted my life to chess I have never taken part in anything not directly connected with my profession. Unfortunately, all my life—especially after I had won the World's Championship, people have ascribed to me a political aspect which is entirely preposterous. For nearly twenty years I have been nicknamed "White Russian," which was particularly painful to me, for this made impossible any contact with my country of origin, which I have never ceased to love and admire.⁹¹

By the beginning of 1946, the situation was still far from settled. Botvinnik wanted the match, and he had certainly proven himself worthy. Alekhin wanted the match and had agreed to abide by the terms that had been settled upon before the war—with one important difference. There was no longer any possibility of a Moscow

90. A. Kotov and M. M. Iudovich, *The Soviet School of Chess* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 43.

91. Alekhin to Mr. Hatton-Ward, Madrid, Lisbon, December 6, 1945, in Pablo Morán, *A. Alekhine [Alekhin]: Agony of a Chess Genius*, trans. Frank X. Mur (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), 46.

venue; Alekhin could not be allowed on Soviet territory. However, the British Chess Federation seemed willing to host the match (provided Moscow paid the bill). But inside the Soviet government there was evidence of conflicting opinion. With B. Vainshtein deposed, Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov (1913-1993), the Chairman of the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and now the leading political figure in Soviet chess, was in the Botvinnik camp. But the Chess Section no longer enjoyed the influence it had exercised under Krylenko, and even in the Soviet sports organization there was a strong aversion to allowing the match to take place. The deputy chairman of the Physical Culture Council, the parent organization for the Chess Section, accepted a meeting with Botvinnik and explained to him that the French Communists were adamantly opposed to the match.⁹² The international situation, explained the deputy chair, required placating the French comrades.⁹³

Other opponents of the match with Alekhin also continued to work against it. Vainshtein used his police connections in a maneuver to deter Botvinnik. Summoned to the Chess Section offices, Botvinnik found himself alone in a small room with two NKVD officials, who asked a series of ominous questions: Had Botvinnik ever met with White Russian émigrés while abroad? Had he ever been approached by foreign diplomats while in the USSR? The answers to these questions were “yes.” Botvinnik

92. Alekhin had assumed French citizenship in 1926; it had subsequently been revoked.

93. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 112-113.

had perfectly innocent explanations, of course, but that was not the point, as he fully understood. The meeting was a transparent attempt by the NKVD to intimidate him.⁹⁴

Despite the opposition, Botvinnik's Party contacts emboldened him, and the negotiations for the match continued. The Soviets could not talk directly with Alekhin, so discussions took place through British intermediaries. Events developed swiftly when the organizer of Nottingham 1936, Job Nightingale Derbyshire (1866-1954), friendly with both Botvinnik and Alekhin, took over the discussions. In late January 1946, a breakthrough was achieved, and Derbyshire sent a telegram to Alekhin in Portugal: "Moscow offers substantial sum for chess championship of world to be played in England between you and Botvinnik suggest you appoint someone in England represent you and arrange all details wire reply."⁹⁵ A few days later Alekhin received a follow-up message, a formal challenge from Botvinnik, sent via the Embassy in Lisbon: "I regret that the war prevented the organization of our match in 1939. But I herewith again challenge you to a match for the world's chess championship."⁹⁶ Alekhin, of course, immediately agreed and asked Julius du Mont (1881–1956), editor of *British Chess Magazine*, to act on his behalf.

The next move came from Moscow on February 28, when it formally proposed to the British Chess Federation that it host a world championship match

94. Ibid., 113-114.

95. J. N. Derbyshire to Alekhin, Nottingham, January 31, 1946, in Francisco Lupi, "The Broken King, Part 2," *Chess World*, October 1, 1946, 186.

96. Botvinnik to Alekhin, Moscow, February 4, 1946, in Francisco Lupi, "The Broken King, Part 2," *Chess World*, October 1, 1946, 186-187.

between Alekhin and Botvinnik. Moscow, of course, would pay all expenses.⁹⁷ This awkward arrangement was necessitated in part by the persistent opposition to the match, particularly in the NKVD. General Stepan Solomonovich Mamulov (1902-1946), Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs and close associate of Beria, promised Vainshtein that if Alekhin attempted to return to the Soviet Union, he would be arrested the minute he crossed the border.⁹⁸

The situation in Britain was also tricky; opinion within the British chess organization was sharply divided. The prospect of hosting a match for the world championship, with Moscow picking up the tab, was very attractive. But Alekhin had been branded a Nazi, and his denials had been judged anemic and unconvincing. Finally, however, the lure of the match won out over political squeamishness. On March 23, a special meeting of the executive board of the British Chess Federation voted to host the match. A tentative, starting date was set for the event.⁹⁹ The last hurdle had been overcome and everything seemed to be in place, which was rather amazing, given the political complexities. But now another obstacle would appear; it proved insurmountable.

On March 24, 1946, the day after the British Chess Federation's decision to host the match, Alekhin died. Officially, the cause of death was asphyxiation due to a

97. "Title Chess Proposed," *New York Times*, March 1, 1946.

98. Voronkov, "Match Botvinnik-Alekhin," 26.

99. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 114-115.

piece of meat that had become lodged in his throat.¹⁰⁰ But the circumstances of Alekhin's death were obscure enough to encourage plausible conspiracy speculation. Certainly there were numerous inconsistencies in the official record, and it goes without saying that Alekhin had many enemies. Some believed he had been assassinated by French intelligence. Alekhin's son, on the other hand, was certain that the NKVD had murdered his father to prevent the match.¹⁰¹ But evidence in support of these and other theories was, and remains, speculative and circumstantial. And regardless of the circumstances of Alekhin's death, Botvinnik's quest for the world title was now back to square one.

Despite its immediate failure to secure the world title, the Soviet chess organization had emerged from the war in a very strong position. In B. Vainshtein's words: "During the difficult years of the Great Patriotic War, there developed the best traditions of the Soviet chess school: team spirit, high morals, and respect for your partner."¹⁰² Vainshtein had every right to be proud of his accomplishments as a wartime chess leader. Soviet chess had done its bit for the war effort, and at the same time the Soviet chess organization had increased and enhanced its reach. Vainshtein had also protected the human capital of Soviet chess, bringing most of its leading

100. Alekhin's Death Certificate, Lisbon, March 27, 1946, in D. L. Markl, *Xeque-Mate no Estoril: a morte de Alexandre Alekhine* [Checkmate in Estoril: The Death of Aleksandr Alekhin] (Lisbon: Campo das Letras, 2001), 112.

101. Garri Kasparov, *On My Great Predecessors Part I*, Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhin, trans. Kenneth P. Neat (London: Everyman Chess, 2003), 455.

102. B. S. Vainshtein, *Shakhmaty srazhaiutsia*, 57.

players through the war unscathed. Alone among the victorious powers, the Soviet Union had protected, nurtured, and advanced its chess program during the war. The difference between postwar and prewar chess was, according to Vainshtein, “as heaven from earth. There has been a qualitative leap.”¹⁰³ Having endured the crucible, the Soviet school of chess was now poised to dominate the postwar world.

103. Voronkov, “Match Botvinnik-Alekhin,” 24.

Chapter Fourteen

Storming the Fortress

The postwar return to normality in the Soviet chess organization was signaled by the resumption of publication of the two official journals. *Shakhmaty v SSSR* reappeared in May 1945; *64* resumed publication soon after. Chess columns also reappeared in the popular press.¹ The *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, the wartime journal printed in English and intended for foreign consumption, continued to publish through July 1946.²

The first major international chess event after the war came at the beginning of September 1945, and it was a popular spectacle laden with political overtones: a radio match between teams representing the Soviet Union and the United States. The initial proposal came from the United States. The United States Chess Federation (USCF), as part of its project to establish official relations with the Soviet chess organization, suggested a radio match back in November 1943.³ Botvinnik voiced his approval of the idea in an article written for *Chess Review*, the official magazine of the USCF, and published in summer 1944. Botvinnik wrote:

1. Gino Di Felice, *Chess Periodicals: An Annotated International Bibliography, 1836-2008* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 203.

2. *Ibid.*, 210.

3. N. Zubarev, "Kak byl organizovan radiomatch" [How the Radio Match Was Organized], in *SSSR-SShA: mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi match po radio, sbornik* [USSR-USA: International Chess Match by Radio, Collection], ed. M. M. Botvinnik (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1946), 122.

It was only recently that I read . . . the proposal to arrange a radio match between teams representing the USA and USSR. Personally, I welcome the idea. If that match takes place, I think it will prove to be an important event in the history of chess and will serve to strengthen cultural relations between the United Nations.⁴

Botvinnik's statement set the political tone for the event: improving relations between the allies by establishing strong cultural ties. Chess was the perfect medium for achieving these lofty goals in the immediate postwar period when it still appeared that continued cooperation might be possible. As New York mayor, Fiorello Henry LaGuardia (1882-1947), observed, chess was a good beginning for the uneasy allies "because there's not much talking and no arguing."⁵ N. Zubarev, representing the All-Union Chess Section, wrote on the eve of the match: "No matter what the result, one thing is clear: the cause of developing cultural, friendly ties between Soviet and American chess players will gain by it."⁶

The official invitation came from the Soviets in April 1945, who challenged the Americans to a ten-board radio match. The challenge came from the Sports Section of All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), not the old All-Union Chess Section, and it was co-signed by Botvinnik.⁷ Under

4. Mikhail Botvinnik, "How I Won the Title," *Chess Review* June-July 1944, in *The Best of Chess Life and Review: 1933-1960*, ed. Bruce Pandolfina (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 263.

5. "Russian, U.S. Teams Begin Chess Match," *New York Times*, September 2, 1945.

6. Ibid.

7. Zubarev, "Kak byl organizovan radiomatch," 122.

Krylenko's firm control, the Chess Section had dominated Soviet chess for a decade and a half. In the postwar world, chess, while it remained fiercely political, came under the authority of various parts of the government, including VOKS and the *Komsomol*. Botvinnik, who had a strong base in the *Komsomol*, had himself become an independent force in the Soviet chess organization.

The United States Chess Federation enthusiastically accepted the challenge. The sponsoring bodies in America were the USCF, *Chess Review*, and the Committee for Aid to Russia. A mid-July starting date was agreed upon, although it would later be moved to the beginning of September at American request.⁸

The United States team was guardedly optimistic. The players were largely confident that they would do well in the match. It was common knowledge, of course, that the Soviets had a major chess program. The American press conceded that the Soviets were far superior in the breadth of their chess movement, noting: "It is as hard to see a big tournament in Moscow as to get tickets for a World Series here."⁹ But the Soviets were relatively untried in team events, while the Americans had dominated international team competitions all through the 1930s. The FIDE had begun organizing international team events called Chess Olympiads in 1927, and they were usually held every two years. In 1931, 1933, 1935 and, especially, 1937 American

8. Ibid., 122-123.

9. "Battle of Peace," *New York Times*, September 1, 1945.

teams easily won these events.¹⁰ Four members of the 1937 “dream team” would be taking part in the radio match.¹¹ The Soviets, however, did not compete in FIDE events in the 1930s, and were untested in this sort of competition.

On the eve of the match, the Soviet press appeared to be trying to lower popular expectations. A feature article in *Vecherniaia Moskva* traced the history of the “American school of chess,” praising its leading proponents including Frank Marshall, still fondly remembered from Moscow 1925. Strangely, the article also extolled the virtues of the recently deceased Capablanca, who was actually Cuban. But the overall message was that the Soviet team had taken on a serious challenge and a weighty responsibility when it agreed to the match.¹² In that spirit, Smyslov and Boleslavskii praised their respective opponents, Reshevsky and Fine, in an interview with *Izvestii*. Both of the Americans enjoyed world reputations. Fine, especially, was well known and respected. He visited the Soviet Union in 1937 and had been one of the few Westerners to achieve success on Soviet territory, winning tournaments in Leningrad and Moscow.¹³ An article in *Pravda* pointed out that two members of the American team, Reshevsky and Fine, were contenders for the world championship. In

10. Walter Árpád Földeák, *Chess Olympiads, 1927-1968* (New York: Dover Publications, 1979), 66-140.

11. N. Zubarev, “USSR-USA Radio Match,” *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, August 1945, 3.

12. “Shakhmatisty Ameriki” [Chess Players of America], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, August 29, 1945.

13. “Shakhmatisty” [Chess Players], *Izvestiakh*, September 1, 1945.

addition, *Pravda* reminded its readers that the Americans had dominated FIDE-sponsored national team tournaments in the 1930s.¹⁴ The *Soviet Chess Chronicle* also took a guarded tone: “Soviet chess players are preparing for this match very seriously, realizing that they will have to deal with very strong adversaries.”¹⁵

The Soviet press needn’t have taken such pains to lower expectations. The Soviet team, representing the flower of the Soviet chess movement, was by far the strongest in the world. With the exception of Keres, who was conspicuously absent (under a cloud for his wartime activities in Nazi-occupied Europe—see Chapter Thirteen), all of the leading Soviet players were present. Play commenced on September 1, 1945. Each team consisted of ten boards; every participant played two games with his counterpart. The Americans played at Henry Hudson Hotel in New York, while the Soviets competed from the Transportation Workers’ House of Culture in Moscow. The moves were transmitted by radio, using a code developed by an American chess player and the radio technology that both countries had perfected during the war.¹⁶

On the eve of the match, both sides continued to tout the event as a milestone in developing cultural understanding between the allies. The tone in the Soviet press was captured by the *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, which opined: “No matter what the

14. “Shakhmatnyi Radiomatch SSSR-SShA” [Chess Radio-match USSR-USA], *Pravda*, August 30, 1945.

15. Zubarev, “USSR-USA Radio Match,” 3.

16. Zubarev, “Kak byl organizovan radiomatch,” 123-124.

result, one thing is clear: the cause of developing cultural, friendly ties between Soviet and American chess players will gain by it.”¹⁷ The themes of international understanding, friendship and cultural exchange also dominated the opening ceremonies in New York. Mayor LaGuardia made the opening speech, expressing the hope that the Americans and Soviets would soon be competing in a variety of sports. The mayor officially then opened the match by making the ceremonial first move on board one.¹⁸

In Moscow, Ambassador W. Averell Harriman (1891-1986) made the opening remarks. He pointed out that the radio match “makes us realize that we are really near neighbors, and that all the possibilities exist for this nearness to become a reality in all of fields of activity and thought.”¹⁹ Although the themes of developing friendly cooperation and establishing cultural ties permeated the official language, there was an American diplomat present at all times in Moscow, and his Soviet counterpart, the Soviet Consul, kept a close eye on the activities of the American team in New York.²⁰

In Moscow, a large audience was expected and provided for. The Soviets had become very adept at both generating and managing chess fever. The crowds that thronged the Transportation Workers’ House of Culture were greeted by large

17. Zubarev, “USSR-USA Radio Match,” 3.

18. “Russian, U.S. Teams Begin Chess Match,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1945.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Zubarev, “Kak byl organizovan radiomatch,” 127.

portraits of the participants and displays of American chess publications.²¹ Inside the auditorium, large American and Soviet flags decorated the stage. There were also ten huge demonstration boards on the stage, along with several Soviet masters to explain the games and answer questions. The players, however, were not visible; they were isolated in another room, closed to the public. Demonstration boards were also erected outside to accommodate the inevitable overflow crowds.²²

In the United States, the match was greeted with unprecedented enthusiasm—popular interest at this level had never been seen at an American chess event. Crowds in excess of one-thousand filled the grand ballroom of the Henry Hudson Hotel and followed the games on giant demonstration boards. In addition, the event attracted enormous attention from the American media. Major newspapers and radio stations gave the match unparalleled coverage.

When the games of the first round were completed, it was clear that predictions of a close match were erroneous. The Soviet team won a crushing victory of eight to two; the Americans managed only one win and two draws. The American performance in the second round was only slightly better, leading to a final, lopsided

21. Ibid., 129.

22. N. Viktorov, “Pechat’ o matche” [The Press on the Match], in *SSSR-SShA: mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi match po radio, sbornik* [USSR-USA: International Chess Match by Radio, Collection], ed. M. M. Botvinnik (Moscow: Fizkul’tura i sport, 1946), 139-140.

score of 15½ - 4½ in favor of the Soviets, which “exceeded the expectations of even the more optimistic of Soviet fans.”²³

In the United States, even the disappointing results could not dampen the popular enthusiasm. The closing ceremony, like the match itself, was attended by a crowd that filled the ballroom to capacity.²⁴ Maurice Wertheim (1886-1950), investment banker and chess patron, spoke at the ceremony, suggesting that the score of the match was unimportant, and that the strengthening of friendly relations between the two countries was the really significant outcome. He then presented a silver victory plaque to the Soviet Consul General and proposed a return match in one year.²⁵ The Soviets accepted, and then increased the stakes by inviting the American team to visit Moscow in person for a face-to-face encounter rather than a radio match. The invitation was accepted, and the return match was tentatively scheduled for September 1946.²⁶

Although the tone was very diplomatic throughout the match and its aftermath—with emphasis on establishing and building good cultural relations between the rival superpowers—the enormity of the propaganda victory for the Soviets was

23. P. Romanovskii, *Chess in Russia: The Players and Their Games (Annotated)* (London: Soviet News, 1946), 13.

24. “U.S. Team Crushed by USSR in Historic Radio Match,” *Chess Review*, October 1945, in *The Best of Chess Life and Review: 1933-1960*, ed. Bruce Pandolfina (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 309-310.

25. “Russians Crush Yanks in Chess,” *The Spokesman Review*, September 5, 1945.

26. “U.S. Accepts Chess Bid,” *New York Times*, September 21, 1945.

obvious to everyone. *Krasnyi sport*, a week after the match, was still trumpeting the lopsided victory of the “Soviet chess school” as proof of “absolute superiority over the Americans.” *Krasnyi sport* congratulated the Soviet chess for retaining its position in the vanguard of physical culture and leading by example. The paper called on all sportsmen to follow the chess team’s example and make a “bold assault on the world’s sporting heights.”²⁷

Many years later, Botvinnik felt safe giving the credit for the victory where it belonged—to the efforts of Krylenko. Certainly the match was the realization of Krylenko’s vision of Soviet domination of world chess, set in motion twenty years earlier with the Moscow International Tournament of 1925. But in 1945, Botvinnik was quite content to accept Stalin’s beaming approval, which was indirectly conveyed to the team as: “Well done, guys.”²⁸

In United States chess circles, after the enormity of the catastrophe finally sunk in, there was the inevitable soul-searching. Arnold Denker, United States champion and first board for the ill-fated American team (he lost both of his games to Botvinnik), gave his assessment in a letter published in *Chess Review*. America’s top players, he complained, were too busy earning a living to devote the time to chess

27. “Pobeda Sovetskoi Shakhmatnoi Shkoly” [Victory of the Soviet Chess School], *Krasnyi Sport*, September 11, 1945.

28. M. M. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli* [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 110.

required to compete with the Soviets.²⁹ Although he did not specifically say so, Denker implied that the Soviet players were full-time professionals who could devote all their time to preparation and competition. This was not entirely accurate. Botvinnik, for example, worked as an electrical engineer. Other Soviet masters were also gainfully employed. The system of stipends and sham employment for Soviet masters was still in the future. The real difference was that all Soviet players were, ultimately, state employees, and they were routinely granted generous leave for preparation and participation in important events. In essence, American players were handicapped by a system of private enterprise, where unprofitable cultural activities were not as highly valued as they were in the Soviet Union—an explanation both sides could agree upon.

Meanwhile, British chess players, feeling excluded, demanded the opportunity to suffer their own drubbing at the hands of the Soviets. William Winter, British chess master and outspoken Communist (see Chapter Eleven), was one of the principal organizers of the Soviet radio match against Great Britain, played in June 1946. Winter was a leading member of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, and was the father of its “Chess Section,” the Anglo-Soviet Chess Circle. This group, founded after World War II, issued the challenge to the Soviets and took the lead in

29. Arnold Denker, letter to the editor, *Chess Review* January 1946, in *The Best of Chess Life and Review: 1933-1960*, ed. Bruce Pandolfina (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 321-323.

organizing the subsequent radio match.³⁰ The challenge was accepted by the All-Union Chess Section—probably with great pleasure. Radio matches were relatively cheap, and they produced a fine spectacle for both foreign and domestic consumption. They highlighted not only the Soviet chess school, but also Soviet technological and organizational expertise.

Winter was under no illusions about the strength of Soviet chess. As he pointed out, while British chess during the war had been “almost moribund,” Soviet chess had continued “practically on a prewar scale.” Of course, Winter was also very aware of the recent hammering suffered by the American team at the hands of the Soviets. Nevertheless, the British seemed to believe they could somehow muddle through, or, as Winter suggested, “We could at least die with honor.”³¹

Since the match with the United States had been technically flawless, it was quickly agreed to use the same basic rules and procedures in the British match.³² There was, however, one significant difference: the British and Soviet teams consisted of twelve boards (instead of ten), and both teams reserved the last two boards for women. As Winter explained, women’s chess had made a great deal of headway before the war, thanks largely to the example and influence of Vera Menchik (see Chapter Eleven). Menchik had been killed in 1944 in a London air raid,

30. Ernst Klein and William Winter, *The Anglo-Soviet Radio Chess Match* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1947), 1.

31. *Ibid.*

32. “Rules of the Radio Chess Match Between the Teams of Great Britain and the USSR,” GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 90, listy 65-68.

but in the 1930s she had inspired a strong women's chess movement in Britain. The British organizers, who knew little about Soviet women's chess, hoped that the inclusion of two women on each team would improve British chances in the match.³³ They were mistaken. Women's chess in the Soviet Union was well-developed, and the British women lost all of their games.

Aside from the inclusion of two women, the Soviet team that confronted the British was nearly identical to the team fielded against the Americans, with one noteworthy addition: Paul Keres had begun the long road back to official favor. He played second board for the Soviets, directly below Botvinnik. The British team included all of Britain's leading players, but they were not on the same level as their Soviet adversaries. One interesting indication of this gap was generational. The average age of the British team (excluding the women) was forty-two. The average age of the Soviet team (again, excluding the women) was twenty-eight. The age statistics invite analogous comparison between the two nations. Soviet chess was young, vigorous and dynamic—poised to dominate the postwar chess world. British chess, on the other hand, had a proud history, but was now well beyond its prime and in decline. Chess was an apt metaphor for the relative positions of the Soviet Union and Great Britain in the postwar world.

The match was a disaster for the British who won only three games out of twenty-four played. The final score was eighteen to six, which was roughly equivalent to the score in the Soviet-American match. Winter's response to the

33. Klein and Winter, *The Anglo-Soviet Radio Chess Match*, 2.

British team's hammering was philosophical, taking solace in the fact that the match was conducted in "complete harmony," and was "beneficial not only to British chess but, in its small way, an undoubted contribution to the better understanding which is so essential to the future of the world."³⁴

September 1946 also saw the return match in Moscow with the United States team, as had been planned a year before at the conclusion of the radio match (see above). The political ground had shifted during the intervening year. The hard-line Stalinist, Andrei Zhdanov, was now directing Soviet cultural policy. The so-called Zhdanov doctrine redeployed Soviet culture from functioning as a tool of cooperation in international relations to serving as a weapon in the Cold War.³⁵ This change can be seen in the different political atmosphere surrounding the second meeting with the American team.

On the eve of the match with the United States, the Soviet team was tired—most of the members had just returned from a grueling international tournament at Groningen, Netherlands (see below), arriving in Moscow the night before the match opened. The Soviet team gathered at the Hotel Moscow to receive their ideological instructions from Romanov, director of the Supreme Council for Physical Culture, and Nikolai Aleksandrovich Mikhailov (1906-1982), the First Secretary of the Komsomol. Mikhailov spoke at length about the political significance of the match.

34. Klein and Winter, *The Anglo-Soviet Radio Chess Match*, 4.

35. James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 363-364.

The players were told that their instructions, as issued by the top Soviet leadership, were to humiliate the American team by an even greater margin than they had in the radio match a year earlier. This assignment was received with shock and dismay by the Soviet players. They exchanged uneasy glances, and some of them became “pale from fear.”³⁶

Botvinnik, as team captain, felt obliged to challenge Mikhailov on behalf of his comrades. With some trepidation, he politely suggested that this kind of pressure on a tired team might prove counterproductive. Botvinnik suggested a more modest, realistic goal. When Botvinnik finished, a visibly annoyed Mikhailov asked if anyone else cared to speak; not surprisingly, no one did. Clearly unhappy, Mikhailov abruptly walked out of the meeting, followed by Romanov.³⁷

The match itself was as tense as the meeting with Mikhailov. Although the Soviet team now included Keres, the Americans, too, had strengthened their team. The first round, however, went to the Soviets by the lopsided score of seven to three. In the second round, Botvinnik faced an ethical dilemma familiar to every serious chess player. His opponent, Reshevsky, made a move but neglected to punch his clock.³⁸ What should Botvinnik do? At Nottingham 1936, the same situation had developed in his game with the renegade, Bogoliubov, and in that case, Botvinnik

36. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 122.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Punching the clock (pressing the button on your side) stops your clock and starts your opponent's clock.

called his opponent's attention to the oversight (see Chapter Eleven). Now, however, in the spirit of *zhdanovshchina*, Botvinnik's sporting impulse seemed to have vanished. He simply sat and allowed Reshevsky's clock to tick away the precious seconds. Botvinnik's morally dubious tactics were rewarded when Reshevsky, now short on time, made a serious error and lost the game.³⁹

After the second round, the final score in the rematch against the Americans was 12 ½-7 ½ in favor of the Soviets. Although this was still a very one-sided competition, the American team could at least point to significant improvement over their score in the radio match the year before. Maurice Wertheim, non-playing captain of the American team, behaved as though the Americans had won the match, declaring that "the myth of invincibility which has surrounded the top flight Soviet players has been demolished."⁴⁰

On the surface, the spirit of fellowship and cooperation still prevailed, the unpleasant clock incident in the Botvinnik-Reshevsky game notwithstanding. The Americans "reported enthusiastically on the treatment they received in Russia and expressed satisfaction with the [playing] conditions."⁴¹ American chess organizer, Kenneth Harkness (1896-1972), spoke at the post-match reception hosted by the American embassy. He announced that the Americans were inviting the Soviet team to play a face-to-face rematch in 1947, this time in the United States. He also

39. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 122-123.

40. "U.S. Chess Captain Back," *New York Times*, September 28, 1946.

41. "Chess Masters Return," *New York Times*, September 26, 1946.

reminded the American and Soviet notables at the reception that, “the most important objects of the chess match—the contribution toward friendship between the two countries and the opportunity for personal acquaintanceship which are invaluable—had been accomplished.”⁴² In that spirit, the Americans presented to Romanov a gift intended for Stalin—a beautiful pipe featuring a fine carved rendition of Stalin and Roosevelt playing chess.⁴³ But in spite of the fine words and noble gestures, Cold War politics intervened, and the proposed 1947 rematch in the United States never took place.

For the Soviet team, there was an interesting epilogue to the match, perhaps related to the controversy between the Soviet team and Komsomol leader, Mikhailov (see above). Moscow authorities announced on October 2 that, in recognition of their fine victory, cash prizes were awarded to the team members, ranging from one to five-thousand rubles for each player.⁴⁴ On the same day, however, Moscow notified the organizers of an international tournament in Prague that the four-player Soviet contingent promised for that event would not participate. No explanation was given, and the unexpected, last-minute cancellation threw the Prague tournament into chaos.⁴⁵

42. “Embassy Entertains Chess Teams,” *New York Times*, September 18, 1946.

43. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 125.

44. “Soviet Chess Team Rewarded,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1946.

45. “Prague Chess Delayed,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1946.

Prague 1946, effectively ruined by the Soviets, was the second major postwar international tournament. The first major postwar international tournament was in Groningen, Netherlands, held just before the match with the United States. In August-September 1946, the world's elite gathered at Groningen to play in an event of great significance.

The Groningen tournament of 1946 was important for a number of reasons. The tournament had a propaganda purpose, demonstrating to the world that the Netherlands was rapidly recovering from wartime ravages.⁴⁶ It was also an important test of postwar Soviet chess strength. In addition, it was the first major tournament since the death of Alekhin (see Chapter Thirteen), which had left the position of World Chess Champion vacant—an unprecedented situation. As such, Groningen was potentially important in the complicated process of choosing Alekhin's successor, a process that FIDE wanted to control.

FIDE, the world chess body, had been founded back in 1924 (see Chapter Eight), but its role and influence had been strictly limited. One important factor in its relative impotence was the ongoing boycott by the Soviet Union, which had been consistently hostile to the organization. Since 1927, FIDE had been instrumental in organizing the Chess Olympiads (international team competitions) held at roughly two-year intervals.⁴⁷ But FIDE exerted little influence and no real control over the

46. Max Euwe, Hans Kmoch, and B. H. Wood, *The Groningen International Chess Tournament, 1946* (Sutton Coldfield: Chess, 1949), 4.

47. Földeák, *Chess Olympiads*, 13-14.

title of world chess championship, which remained essentially the property of whomever held the title. Subject only to public opinion and his own conscience, the world champion decided when, against whom, and under what conditions he would defend his crown. As with any autocratic system, problems arose when the ruler died without heir. In March 1946, Alekhin died in possession of the crown, and the chess world experienced what Botvinnik termed its “Time of Troubles.”⁴⁸ There was no precedent for handling a vacant throne.

FIDE, out of necessity as much as ambition, stepped into the vacuum. A few months after Alekhin’s death, an FIDE Congress met in the Swiss city of Winterthur in June 1946 to reconstitute itself after the war. The Soviet Union was explicitly invited to join the revived organization:

Europe is awaiting and expecting the affiliation of USSR chessplayers. By the collaboration of this great area, where chess is developing as perhaps nowhere else, the consolidation of European chess would be accomplished. The government and chess authorities of the USSR are urgently requested to take once more into consideration the eventuality of joining the new FIDE.⁴⁹

The Congress, however, opened without Soviet attendance; in fact, only six countries were represented.⁵⁰ Even so, a telegram was received from the Soviets requesting that

48. M. M. Botvinnik, “Stanovlenie FIDE” [The Formation of FIDE], in *Match-turnir na pervenstvo mira po shakhmatam, Gaaga-Moskva, 1948 g.* [The World Chess Championship Match-Tournament, the Haag-Moscow, 1948], ed. V. V. El’ianov (1950; repr., Khar’kov: Folio, 1999), 8.

49. “FIDE Prospectus,” in Edward Winter, “Interregnum” (Chess Notes, 2004), <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/interregnum.html> (accessed May 11, 2013).

50. Botvinnik, “Stanovlenie FIDE,” 8.

the Soviet Union be informed of future FIDE meetings. The Congress optimistically interpreted this as suggesting a Soviet intention to join FIDE.⁵¹

The issue of the world championship was, of course, on the Winterthur Congress's agenda, although it was difficult to achieve anything definitive with such limited participation. The Congress tentatively decided to accept a proposal to organize a tournament among the top players based on their prewar performance. Those candidates were the former world champion, Euwe, and the Americans, Fine and Reshevsky. The Soviets were also allotted three slots, and the Congress tentatively nominated Botvinnik, Smyslov and Keres. In addition, the winners of two impending international tournaments—Groningen and Prague—would be added if they were not among those already seeded.⁵² Finally, the Winterthur Congress mapped out a system of candidate tournaments and matches designed to select a new challenger for the title every three years, thus systematizing the process and placing it firmly under FIDE control.⁵³

The Congress requested the Soviets to confirm their participation in the proposed tournament and endorse the Soviet candidates nominated by the Congress.

51. Edward Winter, "Interregnum" (Chess Notes, 2004), <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/interregnum.html> (accessed May 11, 2013).

52. Botvinnik, "Stanovlenie FIDE," 8.

53. Winter, "Interregnum."

If any of the nominated players were not acceptable, the Soviets were requested to name replacement players, also no later than September 1.⁵⁴

Timing was important. The plan for a super-tournament to decide the issue of the world championship was not accepted by everyone. Some in FIDE suggested that former world champion, Max Euwe, should simply claim the title; he had defeated Alekhin in a match in 1935, only to be defeated in a return match in 1937. If Euwe had managed a clear win at Groningen 1946, he might have been simply made world chess champion by acclamation.⁵⁵

Unfortunately for Euwe and his supporters, the Soviet players were well-represented at Groningen, and they were very successful—Botvinnik finished first, Euwe was second, and Smyslov was third. Botvinnik and Euwe played to a draw in their individual game. In the end, the indecisive results at Groningen seemed to confirm the necessity of a tournament to determine the championship. In fact, some of the contenders for the title were not even present. The Americans, Reshevsky and Fine, were not at Groningen. Significantly, Keres did not compete either. Even though he had played second board in the radio match with the British earlier that year (see above) and he would also play in the upcoming match in September 1946 in

54. Ibid.

55. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 118.

Moscow with the Americans, he was not yet being allowed to compete outside the Soviet Union.⁵⁶

The question of Soviet participation in the proposed match-tournament for the world championship remained undecided. Romanov, in a memo to Zhdanov in late August 1946, advocated Soviet participation. He indicated that Botvinnik should be confirmed immediately as a Soviet representative, but more time should be requested to make a final decision on the other two slots. Romanov wanted to see the final results of Groningen, then in progress, as well as the performance of the Soviet team in its Moscow match with the United States, which would not start until September 20.⁵⁷ More to the point, the state security apparatus would have to approve the Soviet nominees. Botvinnik was already tried and tested, but Smyslov and, especially, Keres were problematic.

Smyslov's participation survived official scrutiny, but Keres' candidacy did not. The Central Committee CPSU Personnel Department reported that, while nothing compromising was found on Botvinnik and Smyslov, an investigation of Keres had uncovered "serious compromising material from the secret police about his collaboration with the Germans during the German occupation of the Estonian Soviet

56. Ludek Pachman, *Decisive Games in Chess History*, trans. A. S. Russell (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), 118.

57. Romanov to Zhdanov, memorandum, Moscow, August 28, 1946, in "Tovarishch Stalin razreshil..." [Comrade Stalin Authorized...], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 6.

Socialist Republic.”⁵⁸ This might have been the end of the matter, but for the intervention of Stalin himself. Stalin overruled the CPSU Personnel Department, citing the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party, who personally vouched for Keres’s political reliability.⁵⁹ Keres would be allowed to participate.

After Groningen, the Soviets hurried back to Moscow for their return match with the American team (see above). Significantly, all the recognized contenders for the world title were in Moscow for the match in September 1946. Reshevsky and Fine were members of the American team; Keres, Botvinnik and Smyslov were all playing for the Soviet team. Euwe was also present. Romanov had managed to include Euwe by offering him the honor of official arbiter for the USSR-USA match.⁶⁰ Interestingly, it had taken a decision by the Party’s Politburo to allow Euwe to visit the Soviet Union.⁶¹

58. P. Strunnikov, CC CPSU Personnel, to A. A. Kuznetsov, CC CPSU Secretary, memorandum, Moscow, August 31, 1946, in “Tovarishch Stalin razreshil...” [Comrade Stalin Authorized...], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 6-7.

59. Stalin to the CC CPSU, memorandum, Moscow, September 5, 1946, in “Tovarishch Stalin razreshil...” [Comrade Stalin Authorized...], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 7.

60. Romanov to Zhdanov, memorandum, Moscow, June 1, 1946, in “Tovarishch Stalin razreshil...” [Comrade Stalin Authorized...], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 6.

61. Excerpt from the minutes of Politburo of the SPSU, September 5, 1946, in “Tovarishch Stalin razreshil...” [Comrade Stalin Authorized...], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 7.

After the match, a meeting was held at Moscow headquarters of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) to discuss plans for choosing the next world chess champion. The Soviets seemed to be planning to outmaneuver FIDE and take control of the process. Romanov, Chairman of the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture, and Vladimir Semenovich Kemenov (1908-1988), chairman of VOKS, represented Soviet officialdom.

After protracted and sometimes acrimonious debate, an agreement was reached for a lengthy match-tournament in which each of the six players would contest four games against each of the other participants. The first half of the proposed super-tournament would be held in The Hague; the second half would be hosted by Moscow. Once the negotiations were finally concluded, a reception was held at VOKS to sign the agreement and announce it to the world.

Unfortunately a problem emerged; the reception was held, but unfortunately the agreement was not ready to sign. Romanov took Botvinnik aside and confessed that Party officials had some technical reservations about certain areas of the agreement. According to Romanov, the concerns were mostly financial. Romanov expressed his assurances that everything would be cleared up in a month, so Botvinnik suggested a plan to save the reception and the spirit of the agreement. He proposed that the players make a gentlemen's agreement, without signatures, accepting the match-tournament as planned. If no one raised objections within thirty days, the

agreement would automatically go into force. Botvinnik's plan was accepted in a spirit of trust and good will.⁶²

Thirty days went by with no objections, and the agreement for the match-tournament was then in effect. But Botvinnik was unable to reach Romanov to confirm that the problems had been worked out. Finally, in December, three months after the gentlemen's agreement in Moscow, Botvinnik gained an audience with Romanov. Botvinnik listened in stunned disbelief as Romanov told him that the agreement had been unilaterally repudiated by the Soviet leadership.

If the original misgivings had actually been financial, money was no longer the issue. Now, mirroring the spirit of *zhdanovshchina*, the Soviet leadership demanded that the entire event must take place in Moscow. Botvinnik, seeing his title slipping away, vehemently protested that the decision was wrong. Romanov was appalled at Botvinnik's presumption. "What?" he cried. "A leadership decision is wrong?!"⁶³

The agreement for a match-tournament to fill the vacant world title, which had seems so promising in the summer of 1946 was in shambles at the end of the year. In an editorial aptly titled "World Championship Bust-up," the British magazine, *Chess*, laid out its understanding of the way the impasse had developed. Soviet sensibilities, claimed *Chess*, had been terribly wounded by suggestions in the Dutch press that allowing three Soviet participants in the world championship tournament would open

62. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 125.

63. Ibid.

the door to Soviet cheating. In retaliation, the Soviets (with no tradition or understanding of a free press) now refused to participate if any part of the tournament was held in the Netherlands. Further the Soviet Union still refused to join FIDE, even though the Winterthur Congress had gone to enormous lengths to conciliate the Soviets, even going so far as to expel Spain—a founding, dues-paying FIDE member—in response to Soviet demands. Finally, said *Chess*, the frustrated officials in FIDE, weary of Soviet intransigence, had abdicated from their previous organizational role—suggesting, in effect, that Euwe and the Dutch Federation should work it out with Botvinnik and the Soviet chess organization.⁶⁴ FIDE’s slogan, “We are one people,” seemed naively incongruent with a postwar world marked by sharp ideological divisions.

Disgusted with the turn of events, Botvinnik resolved to give up competitive chess. He stopped competing and turned his attention to his engineering career. He boycotted the 1947 Soviet Championship. Botvinnik’s absence allowed Keres to win a very convincing victory, proving that he was, at least, the second strongest Soviet player.⁶⁵ The press ignored Botvinnik’s absence, leading to popular speculation that he was out of favor or perhaps even under arrest. A *Pravda* interview dispelled

64. “World Championship Bust-Up,” *Chess*, December 1946, 63.

65. Bernard Cafferty and M. E. Taimanov, *The Soviet Championships* (London: Cadogan Chess, 1998), 59.

rumors of his arrest, but Botvinnik used the opportunity to announce to the world his retirement from competitive chess.⁶⁶

While Botvinnik was boycotting Soviet chess, Romanov continued to work through channels to have the world championship match-tournament revived. Finally his efforts bore fruit. In response to Romanov's entreaties, the Politburo of the CPSU authorized him to attempt an agreement with the Dutch Chess Federation for the match-tournament under the conditions agreed to in Moscow the previous September. The Politburo also authorized all the necessary financing, as well as confirming the participation of Botvinnik, Smyslov and Keres. Romanov knew he need not fear any further problems from the Party over finances or personnel; the document was signed by Stalin.⁶⁷

The Dutch Chess Federation, however, proved unenthusiastic about making common cause with the Soviets and taking control of the event from FIDE. Many in FIDE now favored an alternative plan: handing the crown back to Euwe (who was Dutch) and then immediately arranging a championship match with a leading player, probably Reshevsky. Naturally this plan had the sympathy of many in the Dutch Federation.

FIDE held a second, larger postwar Congress at The Hague in July-August 1947. The continuing vacancy on the world chess throne was becoming a scandal,

66. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 126.

67. Stalin to the CC CPSU, memorandum, Moscow, March 19, 1947, in "Tovarishch Stalin razreshil..." [Comrade Stalin Authorized...], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 7.

and FIDE's handling of it had been the target of derision and scorn. FIDE leadership had to resolve the issue or risk becoming irrelevant. Since the Soviets had repudiated the agreement for a six-man match-tournament, a consensus developed at the Congress for returning to the alternative plan (see above): naming Euwe champion and then arranging a match with Reshevsky. In effect, FIDE had decided to call the Soviet bluff. Having gone to the brink, the Soviet leadership, facing the prospect of a non-Soviet, FIDE world champion, suddenly and abruptly offered a gambit of its own: the Soviets now announced they were ready to join FIDE.⁶⁸

The decision was groundbreaking, but its timing was problematic; the FIDE Congress at The Hague was nearly over. The physical and bureaucratic logistics of getting a Soviet delegation to the Congress in time to participate in the world championship question were considerable. Romanov contacted Botvinnik, who quickly sprang back into action, using his Party connections. He appealed directly to Aleksei Aleksandrovich Kuznetsov (1905-1950), secretary of the Central Committee CPSU, to grease the bureaucratic machinery and speed the Soviet delegation to The Hague.⁶⁹ In spite of all Botvinnik's exertions, however, the delegation would have missed the Congress, had FIDE not once again accommodated the Soviets by altering its schedule and adding an extra day to the Congress.⁷⁰

68. Winter, "Interregnum."

69. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 126-127.

70. Winter, "Interregnum."

Even with the extension, the final session of the Congress began without the Soviets. Unable to delay any longer, the delegates were preparing to vote on resolutions that would have passed the crown back to Euwe. At the very last minute, the tardy Soviet delegation dramatically entered the hall, and Dmitrii Vasil'evich Posnikov (1921-2012), the head of the delegation, requested the floor. He made two points, and together they changed everything. First, the Soviet Union would join FIDE—the bourgeois chess organization it had been reviling since 1924. Everyone understood that Soviet participation would remake FIDE. As the American delegate to the Congress observed: “Of far-reaching effect is the entry of the USSR, hitherto outside of the Federation, into closer and permanent relationship with the other leading chess-playing nations as an affiliated unit. It is understood that Russia has 600,000 registered players.”⁷¹

Posnikov’s second point was that the Soviet Union was now prepared to embrace the original gentlemen’s agreement from September 1946.⁷² The new world champion would be decided by a six-man team-tournament, half played in The Hague and half in Moscow.⁷³ The only question left to settle was where the tournament would begin and where it would end. Each side wanted to host the latter part of the

71. Paul G. Giers, “Report on the FIDE Congress,” *American Chess Bulletin*, September-October, 1947, in Edward Winter, “Interregnum” (*Chess Notes*, 2004), <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/interregnum.html> (accessed May 11, 2013).

72. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 127.

73. Winter, “Interregnum.”

event. Posnikov had been instructed to insist that the tournament must end in Moscow, but he was astute enough to realize that demanding that accommodation would mean overplaying his hand. Posnikov nervously agreed to a drawing of lots to settle the order of venues, and he was visibly relieved when Moscow won the right to host the second half. Afterwards he darkly joked with Botvinnik: “How would I have explained in Moscow my failure in drawing lots?”⁷⁴

Botvinnik now ended his retirement, returning to chess with a vengeance. He requested and received several months of paid leave from his engineering responsibilities in order to prepare. He trained primarily with his friend, Ragozin, as was his habit. He also had the assistance of his old friend and erstwhile adversary, Flohr, now a Soviet citizen. Botvinnik used the training regimen he had developed in the 1930s (see Chapter Eleven). He kept a revealing diary of his training for the 1948 World Championship, which he published years later. It laid out a schedule for six months of intensive preparation. The plan included physical training, of course, and he was careful to nurture both his scientific and creative talents. He also played secret training matches with both Ragozin and Flohr to test his innovations.⁷⁵

Botvinnik’s diary also contained psychological profiles on all of his opponents. This illustrated, again, Botvinnik’s adherence to the idea of chess as a struggle in

74. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 128.

75. M. M. Botvinnik, “Dnevnik M. Botvinnika: plan podgotovki” [Botvinnik’s Diary: The Training Plan], in *Match-turnir na pervenstvo mira po shakhmatam, Gaaga-Moskva, 1948 g.* [The World Chess Championship Match-Tournament, the Haag-Moscow, 1948], ed. V. V. El’ianov (1950; repr., Khar’kov: Folio, 1999), 25-26.

which the question of the best move was highly relative (see Chapter Eleven).

Botvinnik concluded that his most dangerous adversary would be Keres, and he set about creating a number of unpleasant surprises for him, designed specifically to keep Keres off guard and sap his confidence.⁷⁶

As preparations for the event continued, Botvinnik, always strong-willed and assertive, began to increasingly play the role of the *prima donna*. One of the Americans, Fine, had dropped out at the last minute. This left only five participants; one player would have a bye each round. This enforced idleness, Botvinnik complained, coupled with a generally relaxed schedule of play, gave players too many free days. He believed the time off would hurt his play, and he protested vigorously. Another issue involved accommodations. The players' hotel at The Hague was several miles from the playing site, and the players were to be taken by car to and from the tournament. Botvinnik, however, wanted to stay at a hotel near the site so he could walk to the games. Walking helped him to focus. But when he tried to enlist the support of the other Soviet players on these issues, they turned their backs on him (literally). According to Botvinnik, they had already conspired among themselves not to concede anything that might give him an advantage.⁷⁷ Many years later, Smyslov brushed aside suggestions that Botvinnik's behavior was less than comradely. While

76. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 128-130.

77. *Ibid.*, 130-132.

he that conceded Botvinnik acted strangely before and during the event, Smyslov graciously attributed it to nervous tension.⁷⁸

During the period between the 1947 FIDE Congress and the 1948 Match-Tournament for the World Chess Championship, significant changes had taken place in the Soviet sports organization. Romanov had been appointed Chairman of the Sports Committee in 1945, and after B. Vainshtein was forced to relinquish control of the Chess Section (see Chapter Thirteen), Romanov personally administered the Chess Section as well. Although chess was achieving unprecedented postwar triumphs—the matches with the United States, the match with the British, the tournament at Groningen—other areas of Soviet sport were not living up to the standards of the Zhdanov doctrine, which stipulated that the Soviets must be first in all areas of international competition. For example, in 1946 a European football team visited the Soviet Union, playing exhibition games in several cities. When the Europeans defeated the Stalingrad team, Stalin, predictably, took the loss personally. More seriously, in 1948 Soviet ice-skaters had performed badly in the world champion competitions.⁷⁹ A meeting of the Politburo was held to discuss the speed-skating fiasco and Soviet sport generally. According to one of the skaters present at the meeting, Romanov was attempting to deliver a prepared report on Soviet sport

78. Vasilii Smyslov and Iakov Damskii, “To byli osobyie dni” [Those Were Special Days], *64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie*, May 1998, 9.

79. James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 367.

when he was rudely interrupted by Stalin, who suggested: “Explain better how you have disgraced our sport!”⁸⁰ Beria volunteered that since the NKVD sports organization, *Dynamo*, was flourishing, perhaps the police should take over control of all Soviet sports. Beria suggested NKVD Colonel-General Arkadii Nikolaevich Apollonov (1907-1978) for the job, and Stalin agreed.⁸¹

Under Apollonov, the ideals of the Zhdanov Doctrine would be ruthlessly pursued. For example, Apollonov enacted a system of stipends for top athletes (including chess players), allowing them to train full time. Like Krylenko, Apollonov was himself a strong chess player: category-one strength, which is roughly equivalent to an American master. Iurii L’vovich Averbakh (1922-) described Apollonov as “a typical apparatchik. People were afraid of him, and with good reason.”⁸² The 1948 Match-Tournament for the World Chess Championship would be held under the watchful eye of Apollonov and the NKVD.

The opening ceremonies for the long-anticipated event were held on the evening of March 1, 1948, at the Town Hall in The Hague. A crowd of about 250 chess masters, dignitaries and members of the media filled the rooms. After a round of speeches, featuring translations into three languages (English, Dutch and Russian), the players drew numbers for pairing purposes. Botvinnik drew number one, which

80. Y. Averbakh, *Centre-Stage and Behind the Scenes: A Personal Memoir* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess, 2011), 52.

81. Averbakh, *Centre-Stage and Behind the Scenes*, 52-53.

82. *Ibid.*, 53-54.

was noted with approval by the Soviet contingent, which numbered over twenty (included a physician and other shadowy figures of unknown responsibilities). They kept mostly to themselves—described by one observer as: “close as bees in a hive.”⁸³ Play began the next day after a short speech by the chairman urging spectators to refrain from smoking (a last minute demand from the Soviet delegation). He was ignored.⁸⁴

Keres began the tournament in great form, defeating Euwe and Smyslov, but when he played against Botvinnik, he hazarded a “radically irregular opening” and eventually lost.⁸⁵ In his second encounter with Botvinnik (each player contested five games with every other player), Keres again played a weak opening and quickly succumbed to a strong attack. As one analyst noted, “Critics have wracked their brains for an explanation of Keres’ incredibly inept play against Botvinnik. It almost seems that he is psychologically barred from producing good chess.”⁸⁶ There were clues, however, that pointed toward a possible explanation—Keres may have not been entirely a free agent in the tournament. When Paul Felix Schmidt (1916-1984), an Estonian chess player who, unlike Keres, remained in Germany after the war,

83. D. A. Yanofsky and H. J. Slavekoorde, “Battle Royal...A Round-by-Round Account of the Thrilling Contest for the World’s Chess Title,” *Chess Review*, April-August 1948, in *The Best of Chess Life and Review: 1933-1960*, ed. Bruce Pandolfina (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 368.

84. *Ibid.*, 369.

85. *Ibid.*, 377.

86. *Ibid.*, 382.

attended the tournament as a spectator, he naturally wanted to speak to his erstwhile countryman. As one observer noted, “It was interesting to see the two old friends [Keres and Schmidt] chatting under the watchful eyes of the Soviet ‘team.’”⁸⁷

The first half of the tournament went well for Botvinnik. When play shifted from The Hague to Moscow, for the second part of the tournament, Botvinnik led with six points. Reshevsky was second with 4-1/2 points. Keres and Smyslov trailed with four points each, and Euwe was a distant fifth. After some misadventures at the Polish frontier and Soviet border, the players arrived in Moscow.⁸⁸ The Soviet players received a rousing welcome; a huge crowd greeted them at the train station with flowers and cheers.⁸⁹

In the Soviet Union, top Party leadership was watching events very carefully. During the rest days allowed between the two legs of the tournament, Botvinnik was summoned to Party Central Committee. He found himself in the office of Zhdanov; also in attendance was Kliment Efremovich Voroshilov (1881-1969) and head of the Sports Committee, Apollonov. The officials questioned Botvinnik closely about the tournament, the behavior of his comrades, and his prospects for winning the title. Botvinnik described a tense atmosphere with Zhdanov pacing nervously around the room, while Voroshilov and Apollonov remained seated and sullen. The point of the

87. *Ibid.*, 380-81.

88. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 134.

89. Yanofsky and Slavekoorde, “Battle Royal...A Round-by-Round Account of the Thrilling Contest for the World’s Chess Title,” 385.

meeting was never really clear to Botvinnik. The leaders seemed vaguely concerned that Reshevsky might outplay Botvinnik in Moscow, and they wanted Botvinnik to promise them that he would win. The meeting ended with the Zhdanov assuring Botvinnik that he enjoyed the full support of the Party leadership.⁹⁰

Play resumed in Moscow's House of Unions on April 11. Two thousand spectators crammed themselves into the playing hall, and twice that many waited in the streets outside. In spite of Botvinnik's assurances, Reshevsky was his most dangerous opponent in Moscow. Reshevsky completely outplayed and defeated Botvinnik in their first Moscow encounter. The Soviet audience gave Reshevsky a standing ovation. Averbakh was present for this event, and he noted that the new head of the Sports Committee and overall director of Soviet sport, Apollonov, was furious at the spectator applause. Averbakh described Apollonov's face as "black as thunder."⁹¹

It wasn't just the spectator applause that offended Apollonov. When Botvinnik resigned to Reshevsky, he did so in the traditional way: extending his hand in congratulations. The next day was a free day for Botvinnik, but he found himself summoned to the Sports Committee, where Apollonov berated Botvinnik for shaking Reshevsky's hand "at a time when the battle is being conducted against kowtowing to

90. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 137-139.

91. Averbakh, *Centre-Stage and Behind the Scenes*, 51.

the West.”⁹² Botvinnik was indignant. “You invited me for this, Arkadii Nikolaevich? Excuse me, but I have to prepare for my next game.”⁹³

Despite the setback of a loss and an unsettling interview with Apollonov, Botvinnik recovered his form, playing so strongly that his ultimate victory became increasingly evident. He defeated Keres twice more; Keres was playing well against the rest of the competitors, but he could not stand up to Botvinnik. Finally Botvinnik racked up so many victories that he was able to clinch first place before the final round.

First place and the title of world chess champion passed to Botvinnik after a short, perfunctory draw with Euwe, on May 9, 1948. It was a public holiday (commemorating the end of the Great Patriotic War) and the venue, the House of Unions, was overflowing with deliriously happy chess fans. As an observer recorded, the audience “burst into enthusiastic cheers at this triumph of Soviet chess.”⁹⁴ Euwe remembered that the other games had to be adjourned for fifteen minutes “to make room for an impromptu tribute to Botvinnik. Audience and photographers were

92. Soltis, *Soviet Chess*, 174-175.

93. Daniel Johnson, *White King and Red Queen: How the Cold War Was Fought on the Chessboard* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 71.

94. Yanofsky and Slavekoorde, “Battle Royal...A Round-by-Round Account of the Thrilling Contest for the World’s Chess Title,” 395.

uncontrollable; Vidmar and his assistant Kotov [the tournament arbiters] good-naturedly allowed the hullabaloo to run its course.”⁹⁵

The rest of the match-tournament was somewhat anti-climatic, but the second place finish of the young master, Smyslov (he was twenty-seven), boded well for the future. Interestingly, Keres finally managed to defeat Botvinnik in the final round. The outcome did not matter to Botvinnik, who had already won the title, but it allowed Keres to tie for third place with the American, Reshevsky. Thus, in the five-man tournament, the Soviets dominated the top places. Euwe finished last.

Botvinnik’s triumph was not without controversy; the debate swirled around his games with Keres. Two circumstances fueled the controversy. First, Keres was in a precarious political situation after the war. He had lived under Nazi occupation and played chess in Nazi organized tournaments. There were certainly ample grounds to arrest him under Article 58 of the Penal Code, and there was evidence that his prosecution was intended. Averbakh claimed to have spoken with a NKVD official who processed the warrant for Keres’s arrest.⁹⁶ B. Vainshtein was in Tallinn, Estonia in September 1944, the day after it was retaken by Soviet forces. He met with the head of the Estonian NKVD, and they specifically discussed Keres’s case. Vainshtein was invited by the Estonian NKVD to intervene on Keres’s behalf, but he refused. Putting personal sympathies aside, Vainshtein asserted that Keres’s crimes–

95. Alexander Münnighoff and Max Euwe, *Max Euwe, the Biography* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess, 2001), 277.

96. Averbakh, *Centre-Stage and Behind the Scenes*, 48.

cooperating with the Germans and hobnobbing with Alekhin—deserved a twenty-five year sentence under Article 58, and he refused to become involved.⁹⁷ Vainshtein also claimed that Keres was either in custody or under close surveillance from September 1944 until April 1945. It was during this time that Keres wrote a letter to Molotov, Botvinnik’s patron, begging to be reinstated into the Soviet chess family. Writing to Molotov, claimed Vainshtein, was tantamount to Keres placing his fate in the hands of Botvinnik.⁹⁸

Although he was spared the ordeal of the Gulag, Keres was not permitted to play in the USA-USSR radio match in 1945, not allowed to compete for the Fourteenth Soviet Championship in 1945, and not permitted to travel to Groningen in 1946. According to Averbakh, Keres was “still disgraced.”⁹⁹ He was, however, partially rehabilitated in time to take part in the radio match with Great Britain in 1946, the rematch with the American team in Moscow also in 1946, and the Fifteenth Soviet Championship in 1947. These latter events prepared Keres for his participation in the match-tournament that decided the world championship in 1948.

The second circumstance that fueled the controversy was Keres’s strangely weak play against Botvinnik during the 1948 event. In their first game, Keres played a bizarre opening innovation, blundered away a pawn in the middle game, and lost a

97. S. B. Voronkov, “Match Botvinnik-Alekhin,” *Shakhmatnyi vestnik*, May 1993, 24.

98. *Ibid.*, 24-25.

99. Averbakh, *Centre-Stage and Behind the Scenes*, 48.

textbook king-and-pawn ending. In their second game, Keres was crushed in only twenty-three moves. In his third game with Botvinnik, Keres again gave away a pawn and then traded down to a clearly lost ending. In their fourth game, Keres was completely outplayed and lost quickly in another “miniature.” Only in their fifth and final encounter in the match-tournament, when Botvinnik had already clinched the title, was Keres able to win a game. This win, incidentally, secured a third-place tie for Keres. The fact that Keres could lose four games to Botvinnik and still tie for third indicated that Keres was playing well enough against his other opponents. The scores of all five of Keres’ games with Botvinnik in the 1948 match-tournament are included in the Appendix A.

Many observers, in 1948 and since, have looked at the two issues discussed above (Keres’ political problems and his weak play against Botvinnik) and suggested the obvious conclusion: that Keres was pressured to lose to Botvinnik, thus helping to ensure the latter’s victory. However, all of the evidence is circumstantial. Keres never directly addressed the issue, nor did Botvinnik, except to declare that he had not thrown the last round games to Keres.¹⁰⁰ No archival material proving the allegation has come to light. In addition, it must be considered that Botvinnik had already established a winning record against Keres before 1948, and he would continue to win most of their encounters thereafter. Botvinnik, who prepared individually, subjectively, for each opponent, claimed to have discovered a chink in Keres’s

100. Botvinnik, *K dostizheniiu tseli*, 141-142.

psychological armor, allowing him to demoralize the Estonian.¹⁰¹ There were certainly precedents of analogous situations, for example, Bogoliubov's uncharacteristically weak play against Alekhin in the 1930s.

On the other hand, the charge that Soviet players worked as a team in international competitions had already been raised before 1948, and it would continue to plague Soviet chess. The issue was raised by Capablanca at the Moscow tournaments of 1935 and 1936 (see Chapter Eleven), and confirmed by Lasker's behavior at Nottingham in 1936. It would become a standard complaint during the period of Soviet hegemony that followed 1948, culminating in the famous charges made by the American player, Robert James Fischer (1943-2008), that the Russians had taken advantage of the FIDE system and fixed world chess. Fischer's article cited the 1948 tournament and controversial losses by Keres to Botvinnik. He claimed that the system of Soviet cheating had since become institutionalized, with the Soviets colluding in all of the qualifying events in FIDE's world championship cycle.¹⁰²

In a way, the charges against the Soviet players confirmed the unprecedented triumph of Soviet chess. The Soviet Union was the only country strong enough to field so many leading players in an international event; it was the only country that could realistically conduct or be accused of this kind of collusion. The Soviets had become a hegemonic force in world chess. The Soviet school of chess, in turn,

101. Ibid., 128-129.

102. Bobby Fischer, "The Russians Have Fixed World Chess," *Sports Illustrated*, August 20, 1962, 18-19.

represented the chess masses. Chess had penetrated deeply and broadly into Soviet society and the cultural level of the masses had been correspondingly elevated.

Botvinnik represented the Soviet school of chess, which represented the Soviet masses, and Botvinnik was the undisputed World Chess Champion. The last fortress had been stormed.

Conclusion

From the end of the Second World War until the demise of the Soviet Union, the Soviets dominated world chess. The world title, captured by Botvinnik in 1948, remained in Soviet hands throughout this period, except for the brief Fischer interlude (1972-1975). This hegemony, the reign of the so-called “Soviet school of chess,” proved enormously useful as a tool of international propaganda, touting the superiority of the Soviet system.

Soviet claims were well-supported by events. From 1948 until 1972 Soviet possession of the world title was never seriously threatened. FIDE control of the process provided an orderly system of tournaments and matches, culminating every three years in the selection of a new challenger. The entire process was completely dominated by Soviet players. This was aptly illustrated by first test of the FIDE system, which began in the summer of 1948 with the Stockholm interzonal tournament, the first step of the process to qualify a challenger to Botvinnik, the world chess champion.

A quick explanation will help put Stockholm 1948 in perspective. At the Winterthur Congress in 1946, FIDE, hoping to introduce order and control into the process of selecting the challengers for the world title, divided the world into eight zones. Zonal competitions were arranged to select participants from each zone for an interzonal tournament. Stockholm 1948 was the interzonal tournament in the first world championship cycle. The top qualifiers from Stockholm, in addition to seeded players, were invited to play in a candidates’ tournament in Budapest in 1950. The

winner of that competition would win the right to face Botvinnik in a match in 1951 for the world title.¹

The political significance of Stockholm 1948 for the Soviets was twofold.

First, there was the imperative of keeping the world title in Soviet hands. According to the official (secret) report filed by the head of the Soviet delegation to Stockholm:

The political significance of the . . . tournament grew . . . due to the aspiration among certain FIDE members, after Botvinnik's victory in the world championship tournament match, if not to wrench the world championship from the USSR, then at least in every possible way to complicate the struggle on the forthcoming competitions²

Second, there was an important propaganda point to be made about the depth of the Soviet chess organization's strength. The three strongest Soviet players—Botvinnik, Smyslov and Keres—were not competing in Stockholm. Botvinnik, of course, was the world champion, and he was not required to qualify. Smyslov and Keres, on the basis of their participation in the recently completed 1948 Match-Tournament for the World Championship, were seeded directly into the next stage—the candidates' tournament in Budapest—and were not required to play in Stockholm.³ Thus, the Stockholm interzonal allowed the Soviets, absent their top players, to demonstrate the depth of their chess organization:

1. William Winter, *The World Chess Championship 1951: Botvinnik v. Bronstein* (London: Chess Player, 1951), 8.

2. "Otchet o sovetskoi delegatsii na mezhdunarodnii shakhmatnyi turnir v Stokgol'm" [Report on the Soviet Delegation at the International Chess Tournament in Stockholm] GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 93, listy 4.

3. Winter, *The World Chess Championship 1951*, 9.

The victory of the Soviet chess players in the tournament would become the best testimony to the USSR possessing not only singular representative of the highest chess such as Botvinnik, Smyslov, Keres, but also a chain of excellent masters following them, capable of winning big international competitions. It would become the testimony to our chess movement being able to advance tens of talented masters.⁴

There were twenty participants at the Stockholm interzonal of 1948; seven were Soviets.⁵ Under the Apollonov regime (see Chapter Fourteen), each Soviet player was given time off before the tournament to rest and train. Each player was supplied with a trainer. They were given access to all the recent games played by the “foreign” contestants as well as psychological profiles, prepared by the NKVD. When the delegation went to Stockholm, it included two non-playing masters whose job was to “help the Soviet participants in analyzing adjourned games *with foreigners*.”⁶ (emphasis added)

Upon their arrival in Stockholm for the interzonal tournament, the leaders of the Soviet delegation immediately picked a quarrel with the organizers over the tournament schedule. When the organizers refused to adjust the schedule, the Soviets attributed this recalcitrance to forces seeking “in every possible way to complicate the conditions for the Soviet masters.”⁷ When the drawing of lots to determine the order

4. “Otchet o sovetskoi delegatsii na mezhdunarodnii shakhmatnyi turnir v Stokgol'm,” GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 93, list 3.

5. Winter, *The World Chess Championship 1951*, 9.

6. “Otchet o sovetskoi delegatsii na mezhdunarodnii shakhmatnyi turnir v Stokgol'm,” GARF, fond 7576, opis' 21, delo 93, listy 4-5.

7. *Ibid.*, list 6.

of pairings worked to Soviet disadvantage by forcing some of them to play their own countrymen in early rounds, “thus stripping one another of the points,”⁸ the Soviets accused the organizers of treachery. The point of this rather remarkable complaint was that, when the Soviet players were paired early in the tournament, they had to play real games. If they were paired later in the tournament, they could make arrangements for strategic draws, or even throw games to one another, as circumstances suggested. This was reiterated later in the official report, which contained the stark admission that, “when a game was to be held between two members of the delegation, individual talks were held on the tactic in the forthcoming competition.”⁹

In addition to the complaints detailed above, the leaders of the Soviet delegation to Stockholm objected to the size of the playing area, the noise, the smoking, the Western press coverage, and the lack of security. The last point became particularly pertinent when a bizarre disturbance took place during round nineteen:

An unknown person rushed into the tournament hall crying “Russian murderers,” “Russian bandits” and started overturning the table where Bronstein and Tartakover were playing, trying to tear apart the flag of the USSR. . . . It took a lot of effort to get the ruffian out of the tournament hall. The competition was interrupted for 30 minutes. A protest was made to the organizer of the tournament.¹⁰

8. Ibid., list 7.

9. Ibid., list 10.

10. Ibid., list 12.

The Soviet players were kept on a very short leash by the delegation leaders. The Soviets all stayed at a hotel outside the city center, and every attempt was made to either keep the delegation together during free time or, failing that, to keep all members under close observation. Political meetings were held regularly. All in all, the delegation leaders reported that “the behavior of the participants was basically satisfactory and high discipline was maintained.”¹¹

The 1948 Stockholm interzonal tournament was a great success for the Soviets. In spite of the fact that they had essentially sent their “second string,” six of the seven Soviet players finished in the top seven. D. Bronshtein finished first, a full point ahead of the pack. In the subsequent candidates’ tournament in Budapest in 1950, seven of the ten players were Soviets, and they dominated the top positions in that tournament as well. Bronshtein and Boleslavskii tied for first at Budapest.¹² They subsequently played a match, won by Bronshtein, for the honor of challenging Botvinnik.

Until 1972, no non-Soviet player was able to earn the right to play for the world title. Charges of collusion aside, Soviet domination took place in a context of indisputable Soviet chess skill. The question suggests itself: How did Soviets get so good at chess that they were able to maintain such an unprecedented hegemony.

11. Ibid., list 10.

12. N. Zubarev, “37 dnei v Budapeshte” [37 Days in Budapest], *Match-turnir v Budapeshte*, June 7, 1950, 3-4.

Winter, the British chess player instrumental in organizing the 1946 radio match, accounted for Soviet strength this way:

The reasons for the astounding triumphs of Soviet chess appear to me to be twofold. First, in the classless society of the Soviet Union every citizen is given an equal opportunity to shine in the game, whereas in the rest of the world, chess is almost entirely confined to the upper and middle classes, thus giving the Soviet Union a chess potential out of proportion to the size of the population. Secondly, chess organization is planned to encourage, from the start of a chess player's life, scientific study under first-class masters.

Soviet chess players usually commence the study of the game in their schooldays, either at the school itself or at the Young Pioneer houses or children's cultural centres. Here they receive instruction from the best masters and theoreticians.¹³

A more detailed explanation came from a Soviet description of the nurturing of the talent of Boleslavskii. On the occasion of Boleslavskii's award of the coveted title of Grandmaster of the USSR, B. Vainshtein wrote:

The fast development of Boleslavskii is to be explained not only by his chess gifts, but also by the entire system of the Soviet chess organization's activities in training masters and preparing new cadres.

Indeed, let us analyze the stages of Boleslavskii's chess career. Here he is as a schoolboy studying, in the children's chess club under the guidance of a master, the theory of play. The novice's first steps usually have an important and almost decisive significance. And it is in the Dnieporpotrovsk club indeed that Boleslavskii learns to love chess and begins to understand the beauty of it. Here it is impressed upon him that the necessary prerequisites for improvement are—objectivity, self-critical approach, daily and persistent labor.

Thus constantly associating with masters, acquiring experience and knowledge, in the course of several years Boleslavskii became a chess player of standing. The chess organization advanced his candidature for participation in serious tournaments. Here Boleslavskii received his sporting tempering, learned to swallow quietly the bitterness of some unexpected defeats.

13. Ernst Klein and William Winter, *The Anglo-Soviet Radio Chess Match* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1947), 5.

Boleslavskii is no exception. This path to success was traversed by Grandmasters Smyslov and Kotov and master Averbakh, who recently still played in the Moscow House of Young Pioneers.¹⁴

Identifying, nurturing and training young talent played a significant role in constructing Soviet hegemony, but there were also factors having to do with the position of respect occupied by chess in Soviet culture and the perks enjoyed by Soviet chess players. When future grandmaster, Averbakh, was trying to decide whether to pursue a career in chess or science, he asked his colleagues for advice. According to Averbakh, they told him: “What prospects do you have [in science]? At best, you’ll end up as one of several thousands of leading specialists in the country, whereas in chess . . . you’ll get to play in international tournaments and see the world.”¹⁵

While there is room for discussion as to why and how the Soviets achieved world hegemony, there’s no question about the fact of that superiority. Botvinnik retained the world title until 1963, with two brief interruptions. Each of his challengers was a Soviet player. In 1951 and 1954, Botvinnik played drawn matches with Bronstein and Smyslov respectively. In each case, the rules allowed Botvinnik to retain the title. Then in 1957, Smyslov defeated the champion, but lost the title a year later when Botvinnik exercised his right to a rematch. In 1960, Mikhail Nekhemevich Tal (1936-1992), a young Soviet player renowned for his sharp tactical ability,

14. B. S. Vainshtein, “Editorial,” *Soviet Chess Chronicle*, July 1945, 3.

15. Y. Averbakh, *Centre-Stage and Behind the Scenes: A Personal Memoir* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess, 2011), 58.

decisively defeated Botvinnik, but the seemingly indefatigable Botvinnik again reclaimed the title in a rematch. Finally in 1963, Soviet grandmaster Tigran Vartanovich Petrosian (1929-1984) defeated Botvinnik. Stripped of his automatic rematch right, Botvinnik declined to undertake the arduous process required to challenge the sitting champion. The Botvinnik era ended, but the Soviet monopoly seemed poised to continue indefinitely.

However, the same year that Petrosian deposed Botvinnik, an American player, Fischer, demonstrated that he, too, was a force to be reckoned with in world chess. In 1963, he swept the United States Championship, shutting out the competition without conceding even a single draw. Fischer's total domination of American chess stood in stark contrast to Botvinnik's status as first among equals. Many expected Fischer to claim the world championship in 1966 or 1969, but factors having little to do with ability hampered his quest. Fischer wrestled with a variety of demons—some seemingly personal, some certainly Soviet.

Fischer accused the Soviets of a variety of offenses, especially collusion at the candidates' tournaments, the last step in FIDE's multi-stage process for selecting the challenger to the world champion. Fischer charged that the Soviets, who were heavily represented in these events, played as a team, conceding early draws or even prearranged losses to their top players, but always playing all-out against him. Fischer claimed that he, as a lone player, could not compete with the Soviet team under the current rules. FIDE made some reforms—substituting individual matches for

tournaments in the latter stages of the process—but these reforms were too modest to lure Fischer back, and the title remained in Soviet hands.

In 1969, the United States Chess Federation (USCF) began to maneuver on behalf of Fischer, who was still boycotting the preliminary stages of the qualifying process. Another American agreed to give up his qualifying position, placing Fischer directly into the second stage, a series of individual matches where Soviet collusion was impossible. One on one, Fischer gave an unprecedented demonstration of personal world dominance, disposing of three Soviet challengers in summary fashion.

The 1972 match between the Fischer and the world chess champion, Spasskii, was staged in Reykjavik, Iceland. Billed as “the match of the century,” and framed as a Cold War clash *par excellence*, the match proceeded in a veritable circus atmosphere. Fischer, portrayed as arrogant and rapacious, seemed to represent everything unattractive about the United States. Spasskii, who maintained a calm and courteous facade throughout, appeared to represent the best of Soviet society. But Fischer was clearly the better player, and after an inauspicious start, he soundly defeated his Soviet rival.

Fischer's reign was short; in 1975 he declined to defend his title. Vying for the vacated throne were two Soviet grandmasters, Anatoly Yevgenevich Karpov (1951-) and Victor Lvovich Korchnoi (1931-). Karpov, groomed to regain the title for the Soviets, inherited the crown. Korchnoi, who felt poorly used by the Soviet chess establishment, soon defected. In 1978, when the two clashed again, the Cold War

once again provided the backdrop. The match, and the incredible spectacle surrounding it, went on for months, with Karpov the eventual winner.

Karpov, now the darling of the Soviet chess establishment in the style of Botvinnik, went on to successfully defend his title twice more: against Korchnoi in 1981, and then against a new Soviet challenger, Garry Kimovich Kasparov (1963-) in 1984-1985. The latter match, played under a new, open-ended format (draws no longer counted), refused to end. The match was terminated under murky circumstances after forty-eight games, ostensibly to protect the health of the players. A new match was begun later in 1985 under the old (best of twenty-four games) format. This time Kasparov prevailed and became the youngest world champion.

The rivals met again in 1986, with Kasparov victorious once more. In 1987, a fourth match between Kasparov and Karpov ended in a tie, but match rules allowed Kasparov to retain his title. The last Kasparov-Karpov match was held at the end of 1990, with Kasparov again winning by a decisive margin.

The long and often bitter rivalry between the two Soviet grandmasters, combined with the political relaxation of *glasnost*, split Soviet chess into two competing camps. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1992, the remnant of the Soviet Chess Federation broke into two corresponding factions. Then FIDE, which the Soviet Federation had long dominated, fragmented under the strain. Kasparov's organization left FIDE in 1993 to form the Professional Chess Association (PCA), and the rump FIDE returned the world title to Karpov. Like rival medieval popes, each world champion claimed exclusive right to the title.

More than twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the players reared in the traditions of the old Soviet school are still a strong force in world chess. Young players who came of age after the Soviet collapse are poised to continue in the same tradition of excellence, even though many now represent new independent nations. Clearly, post-Soviet players in the early twenty-first century still benefit from their Soviet inheritance.

The domination of world-class chess was one of the few success stories in the failed Soviet Union. But dominating competition at the world level was only one goal of the Soviet chess organization. The rationale for political chess was, initially, its military applications, and then was enlarged to encompass the task of raising the cultural level of the masses. The question of whether chess was able to accomplish either task is still an open one. But there is no doubt that chess eventually permeated the Soviet military and civilian society.

The penetration of chess into the Red Army was the original goal of Il'in Zhenevskii, and remained a focus of the work of Krylenko and the All-Union Chess Section through the 1920s and 1930s. The need for more chess work in the Red Army was identified as a priority at the Fourth All-Union Chess Congress in 1926, and the failure to adequately propagandize chess in the military was often a point of self-criticism by the Soviet chess organization thereafter. Chess in the Red Army received a boost in the Great Patriotic War (see Chapter Thirteen), and continued to grow in the decades after the war. By the 1960s, the annual Red Army Chess Championship was a major event, where marshals, common soldiers, and everyone in between

competed for individual and collective honors. Similar events were held in other branches of the Soviet military, and chess was officially encouraged as a productive leisure activity.¹⁶

The permeation of chess into all aspects of civilian society was largely accomplished before the Great Patriotic War. After the war, the final fortress, the countryside, was also stormed. From the chess fever of 1925 to the celebrations that marked Botvinnik's capture of the world title, the enthusiasm for chess was widespread and genuine. Whether chess actually contributed to the task of building socialism by elevating the cultural masses of the people is not a provable proposition. Nevertheless, chess became a national pastime. This, ultimately, was the fruit of the Soviet chess organization's work: it made chess the property of the Soviet people.

Krylenko's political rationale for promoting chess was, of course, that chess was an ideal tool for uplifting the cultural level of the masses. Achieving a sufficiently enlightened proletariat was a prerequisite for building socialism under Russian conditions. The same general argument would also justify teaching chess to children, hence the slowly growing emphasis on chess in the pioneer palaces, the Komsomol, culture parks, and other youth clubs in the 1930s. Development of programs for school children, however, was surprisingly slow; some major figures among Soviet chess organizers were opposed to allowing chess in the schools. Iakov

16. Arkadii Grigor'evich Gurvich, *Igra soldat i marshalov* [Game of Soldiers and Marshals] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1978), 8-10.

Rokhlin, who had only grudgingly allowed young Botvinnik to play in the Leningrad simul with Capablanca in 1925 (see Chapter Seven) complained in 1927:

“They [school children] are very fond of chess . . . and play it eagerly instead of studying. . . . The teachers . . . have lost all their authority. Schoolboys say: ‘How can he teach me if I can win a chess game with him?’ The chess movement in the schools must be given the right direction. This serious issue should be resolved by our Congress.”¹⁷

But Rokhlin’s view did not prevail, and youth chess gained more importance in the postwar era. Near the end of the Soviet period, an influential article was written by Soviet grandmaster and psychologist, Nikolai Vladimirovich Krogus (1930-), laying out the case for chess in the schools. The arguments were similar to those advanced back in 1925 by N. D’iakov, et al., which provided a psychological justification for Krylenko’s political chess (see Chapter Seven). Krogus claimed that specific and valuable skills sets were developed by chess (decision making, discipline, objectivity, creativity), and that these skill sets generalize to other aspects of children’s intellectual development.¹⁸

At the end of the Soviet period, many schools in the former Soviet Union incorporated chess directly into their curricula. In the Soviet Union, chess was not an actual part of formal instruction, although nearly all schools had chess sections. With the demise of many youth clubs after 1991, however, many individual teachers,

17. “V-i Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S”ezd,” GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 2, list 20 ob.

18. N. B. Krogus and B. S. Gershunski, “The World of Youth Hobbies: Chess Gymnastics for the Mind, a Means of Education,” *Soviet Pedagogics Magazine*, January 1987, 1-9.

especially in mathematics, began to use chess as a teaching aid in the classroom. In contemporary St. Petersburg, most primary schools teach chess in the classroom, using it in multiple parts of the curriculum.¹⁹ Of course, most of the school teachers themselves were socialized into chess during the Soviet era, and they are perpetuating the legacy.

In general, chess work among the masses was very successful for a number of reasons. First, chess has always had an intrinsic attraction for many people. In addition, chess involved only rudimentary and inexpensive equipment. It required relatively little capital investment, and powerful people believed it paid an enormous return. Further, there was already a rich chess culture, both in Russia and Europe, to build upon. Krylenko understood this when he argued against the German Social-Democrats who wanted a total boycott of bourgeois chess. Krylenko advocated, instead, the expropriation of bourgeois chess culture. Further, state support lent respectability to chess. It was no longer the guilty pleasure of Marx and Lenin. Spending one's evenings at the chess club became a feature of good Soviet behavior, a mark of strong character.

In addition, chess was relatively safe. Politics was very dangerous; other creative outlets were problematic and sterile. But chess was different than literature or the visual arts; because it was a contest, it was judged on criteria of objective merit. Thus, it was relatively free of the stifling effect that state control had on noncompetitive culture. As Lasker wrote in 1924:

19. Inna Panova, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, July 20, 2005.

On the chess board lies and hypocrisy do not survive long. The creative combination lays bare the presumption of a lie; the merciless fact, culminating in a checkmate, contradicts the hypocrite. . . . Chess is one of the sanctuaries, where this principle of justice has occasionally had to hide to gain sustenance and a respite”²⁰

In the Soviet chess organization, advancement was possible through clearly defined levels of achievement, and it was based on objective merit. Chess was an outlet for a creative impulse that Soviet culture often suppressed. Chess became the opiate of the intelligentsia.

Finally, even when the focus shifted to international competition after the World War, chess still served a domestic political role. It gave Soviet citizens a sense of pride; it increased their self-respect. The top chess players were household names, and children were taught to respect them as role models. A fine example of this was seen in a popular Soviet reader for students in third or fourth grade, which describes the trials and tribulations of four young boys who love chess and want to become grandmasters. As they play in their first qualifying tournaments, they try to emulate their chess heroes—Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spasskii and Karpov. The boys learn to respect their (chess) elders and appreciate the rich chess culture that is their birthright as Soviet citizens. In addition they learn valuable lessons about study, perseverance, teamwork and maintaining a positive attitude.²¹ In general they learn to understand and appreciate their chess heritage. As a veteran of pre-Soviet

20. Emanuel Lasker, *Lasker's Manual of Chess* (1924; repr., Philadelphia: David McKay, 1947), 235.

21. Vladimir Linder, *Grossmeisterami ne rozhdaiutsia* [There Are No Born Grandmasters] (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1978).

chess wrote, “if at the time (1896) it had occurred to some dreamer to tell me that in a few decades young chess players will learn at school, and Pioneer Palaces will have experienced chess teachers, then this eccentric would be immediately sent to a psychiatrist. ‘Seriously study chess? What folly?’”²² He warned the youngsters not to take the current (1959) state of affairs for granted:

Remembering episodes of my long chess life, I would like to say to a young reader: it was hard to get a ‘start’ in chess in pre-revolutionary times. Now, you are given all the conditions necessary to improve chess skills. And this gives you a high moral duty to have a serious, conscientious attitude toward participation in chess tournaments, developing your chess talent, and chess in general.²³

22. K. Raush, “Vek nyneshnii i vek minuvshii” [The Current Age and the Past Century], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, January 1959, 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 26.

Appendix

Game One: Karl Marx v. Meyer, off-hand game, Hanover 1867: King's Gambit Accepted /Muzio Gambit /Paulsen Variation (annotations are mine).

1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Bc4 g5 4. Nf3 g4 5. O-O gxf3 6. Qxf3 Qf6 7. e5 Qxe5 8. d3 Bh6 9. Nc3 Ne7 10. Bd2 Nbc6 11. Rae1 Qf5 12. Nd5 Kd8 13. Bc3 Rg8 14. Bf6 Bg5 15. Bxg5 Qxg5 16. Nxf4 Ne5 17. Qe4 d6 18. h4 Qg4 (*Slightly better is 18. . . Qg5-g7.*) 19. Bxf7 Rf8 20. Bh5 (*Somewhat better is 20. Bf7-e6.*) 20. . . Qg7 21. d4 N5c6 22. c3 a5 (*Much better is 22. . . Rf8-f5, leading to 23. Qe4-e2 a7-a6 24.Kg1-h2 Rf5-f6 25.g2-g3 Bc8-d7 26.Bh5-f3 Qg7-f7 27.Bf3xc6 Ne7xc6, which wins a bishop for a knight. This was black's most critical error.*) 23.Ne6+ Bxe6 24.Rxf8+ (*Better is 24.Qe4xe6, leading to 24...Ne7-g6 25.Rf1xf8+ Qg7xf8 26.Bh5-g4 Qf8-e7 27.Qe6-g8+ Qe7-f8 28.Qg8xh7 Nc6-e7 29.h4-h5 Ng6-f4 30.Re1xe7 Qf8xe7 31.Qh7-h8+ Qe7-e8 32.Qh8-f6+ Qe8-e7 33.Qf6xf4 b7-b5.*) 24. . . Qxf8 25.Qxe6 Ra6 (*Better is 24. . . Ne7-g6, leading to 26.Bh5-g4 Qf8-e7 27.Qe6-g8+ Qe7-f8 28.Qg8xh7 Nc6-e7 29.h4-h5 Ng6-f4 30.Re1-f1 Ra8-a6 31.Qh7-e4 d6-d5 32.Qe4xf4 Qf8xf4 33.Rf1xf4 Kd8-e8 34.Rf4-f3.*) 26. Rf1 Qg7 (*Much better is 26. . . Qf8-g8, leading to 27.Rf1-f7 Qg8-e8 28.Qe6-f6 Nc6-e5 29.d4xe5 d6xe5 30.Qf6-f2 Ne7-g6 31.Bh5xg6 Qe8-e6 32.Bg6-e4 Qe6xa2 33.Rf7xh7.*) 27. Bg4 (*Better is 27.Rf1-f7, leading to 27...Qg7-g8 28.d4-d5 Qg8xf7 29.Qe6xf7 Kd8-c8 30.Qf7-e8+ Nc6-d8 31.Bh5-g4+ Kc8-b8 32.Qe8xd8+ Kb8-a7.*) 27 . . . Nb8 28.Rf7 1-0

Game Two: N. V. Krylenko v. Lykum, off-hand game, Moscow 1925: Evans Gambit.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. b4 Bxb4 5. c3 Ba5 6. O-O d6 7. d4 Bd7 8. Qb3 Qe7 9. dxe5 Bb6 10. exd6 cxd6 11. Qd1 O-O-O 12. Na3 Bg4 13. Qd3 Nf6 14. Bd5 Rhe8 15. Qc4 Qd7 16. Nd4 Bc5 17. Nxc6 bxc6 18. Rb1 Kc7 19. Bf4 Bxa3 20. Qa6 Rb8 21. Qxa7 Kd8 22. Rxb8 Ke7 23. Rb7 1-0

Game Three: V. Ragozin v. N. V. Krylenko, USSR Correspondence Tournament, 1926: Albin Countergambit.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e5 3. dxe5 d4 4. Nf3 Nc6 5. Bf4 Bb4 6. Nbd2 Be6 7. e3 d3 8. Qb3 b5 9. Bxd3 Rb8 10. Be4 Nge7 11. Qc2 Bxc4 12. O-O-O Bxd2 13. Rxd2 Nb4 14. Qd1 Qc8 15. Bg5 Nxa2 16. Kb1 Qe6 17. Bxe7 Qxe7 18. Bc6 Kf8 19. Rd7 Qe6 20. Rxc7 Nb4 21. Qd6 Qxd6 22. exd6 Nxc6 23. Rxc6 g6 24. Ne5 Be6 25. Rc7 Rd8 26. Rd1 f6 27. Nc6 Rd7 28. Nb8 Rxc7 29. dxc7 Kf7 30. Rd8 Re8 31. Nd7 1-0

Game Four: J. R. Capablanca v. A. F. Il'in Zhenevskii, Moscow, 1925: Sicilian Defense

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. g3 g6 4. Bg2 Bg7 5. Nge2 d6 6. d3 Nf6 7. O-O O-O 8. h3 a6 9. Be3 Bd7 10. Qd2 Re8 11. Nd1 Rc8 12. c3 Qa5 13. g4 Red8 14. f4 Be8 15. g5 Nd7 16. f5 b5 17. Nf4 b4 18. f6 Bf8 19. Nf2 bxc3 20. bxc3 e6 21. h4 Rb8 22. h5 Rb6 23. hxg6 hxg6 24. Nd1 Nde5 25. Qf2 Ng4 26. Qh4 Nce5 27. d4 Nxe3 28. Nxe3 Qxc3 29. dxe5 Qxe3 30. Kh1 dxe5 31. Rf3 exf4 32. Rxe3 fxe3 33. Qe1 Rb2 34. Qxe3 Rdd2 35. Bf3 c4 36. a3 Bd6 37. Qa7 c3 0-1

Game Five: J. R. Capablanca v. M. Botvinnik, Leningrad simul, 1925: Queen's Gambit Declined

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. Bg5 Nbd7 5. e3 Bb4 6. cxd5 exd5 7. Qb3 c5 8. dxc5 Qa5 9. Bxf6 Nxf6 10. O-O-O O-O 11. Nf3 Be6 12. Nd4 Rac8 13. c6 Bxc3 14. Qxc3 Qxa2 15. Bd3 bxc6 16. Kc2 c5 17. Nxe6 Qa4 18. b3 Qa2 19. Qb2 Qxb2 20. Kxb2 fxe6 21. f3 Rc7 22. Ra1 c4 23. bxc4 dxc4 24. Bc2 Rb8 25. Kc1 Nd5 26. Re1 c3 27. Ra3 Nb4 28. Re2 Rd8 29. e4 Rc6 30. Re3 Rd2 31. Raxc3 Rxc2 32. Rxc2 Rxc2 0-1

Game Six: A. Alekhin v. M. Botvinnik, Nottingham, 1936: Sicilian Defense, Dragon Variation (Annotations based on Alekhin's notes).¹

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 g6 6. Be2 Bg7 7. Be3 Nc6 8. Nb3 Be6 9. f4 (*Now 9...d5 is answered with 10 e5.*) 9... O-O 10. g4 d5 (!) 11. f5 Bc8 12. exd5 Nb4 13. d6 (*If 13 fxc6 hxc6 14 Bf3 then 14...Nxc4 15 Bxc4 Bxc4 16 Qxc4 Nxc2+ 17 Ke2 Nxa1 18 Rxa1 Bxc3 19 Qxd5.*) 13... Qxd6 (*Not 13...exd6 because of 14 g5.*) 14. Bc5 Qf4 (!) 15. Rf1 Qxh2 16. Bxb4 Nxc4 (*This forces the draw.*) 17. Bxc4 Qg3 18. Rf2 (*Not 18 Kd2? Bh6+ and wins.*) 18... Qg1 19. Rf1 Qg3 20. Rf2 Qg1 ½-½

Game Seven: P. Keres v. M. Botvinnik, FIDE World Championship Match-Tournament, 1948: English Opening

1. c4 e6 2. g3 d5 3. Bg2 d4 4. b4 c5 5. b5 e5 6. d3 Bd6 7. e4 Qc7 8. Ne2 h5 9. h4 Nh6 10. O-O Bg4 11. f3 Be6 12. f4 Bg4 13. f5 Nd7 14. Nd2 g6 15. fxc6 fxc6 16. Nf3 Be7 17. Rf2 Qd6 18. Bxh6 Rxh6 19. Qd2 Rh8 20. Ng5 Nf6 21. Re1 Qb6 22. Nf3 Nd7 23. Ng5 Rf8 24. Rxf8 Bxf8 25. a4 Bh6 26. a5 Qf6 27. Nc1 O-O-O 28. Nb3 Rf8 29. Ra1 Qe7 30. Qc1 Kb8 31. Ra2 Rf7 32. Qa3 Bxc5 33. hxc5 Bd1 34. Qc1 Bxb3 35. Rb2 Bd1 36. Qxd1 Qxc5 37. Qe1 Nf8 38. Kh2 Qf6 39. Bh3 Nh7 40. Qd1 Ng5 41. b6 h4 42. Qg4 hxc3 43. Kxc3 Rf8 44. bxa7 Kxa7 45. a6 Nxc3 46. Qxc3 Qf4 47. Kg2 Qf1 48. Kh2 Rf2 49. Rxf2 Qxf2 50. Kh1 Qe1 51. Kg2 Qe2 52. Kg1 Qe3 53. Qxe3 dxe3 54. axb7 Kxb7 55. Kg2 Kb6 56. Kf3 Ka5 57. Kxe3 Kb4 58. Kd2 g5 0-1

Game Eight: M. Botvinnik v. P. Keres, FIDE World Championship Match-Tournament, 1948: Irregular Queen Pawn Opening

1. d4 d5 2. Nf3 Bf5 3. c4 e6 4. cxd5 exd5 5. Qb3 Nc6 6. Bg5 Be7 7. Bxe7 Ngxe7 8. e3 Qd6 9. Nbd2 O-O 10. Rc1 a5 11. a3 Rfc8 12. Bd3 a4 13. Qc2 Bxd3 14. Qxd3 Nd8 15. O-O Ne6 16. Rc3 b5 17. Qc2 Rcb8 18. Ne1 Nc8 19. Rc6 Qe7 20. Nd3 Nb6 21. Nb4 Rd8 22. Qf5 Rd6 23. Rfc1 Rxc6 24. Rxc6 Rd8 25. Rxb6 cxb6 26. Nc6 Qc7 27. Nxd8 Qxd8 28. Qc2 Qc7 29. Qxc7 Nxc7 30. Nb1 Kf8 31. Kf1 Ke7 32. Ke2 Kd6 33. Kd3 Kc6 34. Nc3 Ne8 35. Na2 f6 36. f3 Nc7 37. Nb4 Kd6 38. e4 dxe4 39. fxe4 Ne6 40. Ke3 Nc7 41. Kd3 Ne6 42. Nd5 Kc6 43. h4 Nd8 44. Nf4 Kd6 45. Nh5 Ne6

1. Aleksandr Alekhin, *Nottingham 1936* [Nottingham 1936] (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1962), 68-71

46. Ke3 Ke7 47. d5 Nc5 48. Nxc7 Kd6 49. Ne6 Nd7 50. Kd4 Ne5 51. Ng7 Nc4
52. Nf5 Kc7 53. Kc3 Kd7 54. g4 Ne5 55. g5 fxg5 56. hxg5 Nf3 57. Kb4 Nxc5 58. e5
h5 59. e6 Kd8 60. Kxb5 1-0

Game Nine: P. Keres v. M. Botvinnik, FIDE World Championship Match-Tournament, 1948: French Defense

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nd2 c5 4. exd5 exd5 5. Ngf3 a6 6. dxc5 Bxc5 7. Nb3 Ba7 8. Bg5
Nf6 9. Nfd4 O-O 10. Be2 Qd6 11. O-O Ne4 12. Be3 Nc6 13. Nxc6 Bxe3 14. fxe3
bxc6 15. Bd3 Nf6 16. Qe1 Ng4 17. Qh4 f5 18. Rf4 Ne5 19. Qg3 Ra7 20. Raf1 Raf7
21. Nd4 Nxd3 22. cxd3 c5 23. Nf3 Qb6 24. Rh4 h6 25. Ne5 Rf6 26. d4 cxd4
27. Rxd4 Qxb2 28. Rxd5 Be6 29. Rd4 Kh7 30. Nd7 Bxd7 31. Rxd7 Rg6 32. Qf2 Qe5
33. Rd4 Rb8 34. Qf4 Qe6 35. Rd2 Rb5 36. h3 Re5 37. Kh2 Rf6 38. Rfd1 Re4
39. Qb8 Rxe3 40. Rd8 Qe5 41. Qxe5 Rxe5 42. R1d2 g5 43. g4 Rf7 44. R8d7 Kg7
45. gxf5 Rxf5 46. a3 Rf2 47. Kg3 Rxd2 48. Rxd2 Rc7 49. Rd4 Rc6 50. a4 Kg6 51. h4
Kh5 52. hxg5 hxg5 53. Rd3 Rc4 54. Ra3 a5 55. Kh3 Rb4 56. Kg3 Rf4 57. Ra1 Rg4
58. Kh3 Re4 59. Ra3 Kg6 60. Kg3 Kf5 61. Kf3 Ke5 62. Kg3 Rd4 63. Ra1 Kd5
64. Rb1 Rb4 65. Rf1 Ke4 66. Re1 Kd4 67. Kh2 Rxa4 68. Rg1 Rc4 69. Rxc5 a4
70. Kg2 Kc3 71. Kf3 a3 72. Ra5 Kb3 0-1

Game Ten: M. Botvinnik v. P. Keres, FIDE World Championship Match-Tournament, 1948: Nimzo-Indian Defense

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 O-O 5. a3 Bxc3 6. bxc3 Re8 7. Ne2 e5 8. Ng3 d6
9. Be2 Nbd7 10. O-O c5 11. f3 cxd4 12. cxd4 Nb6 13. Bb2 exd4 14. e4 Be6 15. Rc1
Re7 16. Qxd4 Qc7 17. c5 dxc5 18. Rxc5 Qf4 19. Bc1 Qb8 20. Rg5 Nbd7 21. Rxc7
Kxc7 22. Nh5 Kg6 23. Qe3 1-0

Game Eleven: P. Keres v. M. Botvinnik, FIDE World Championship Match-Tournament, 1948: French Defense

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. Bd2 dxe4 5. Qg4 Nf6 6. Qxc7 Rg8 7. Qh6 Nc6 8. O-O
O-O Rg6 9. Qh4 Bxc3 10. Bxc3 Qd5 11. b3 Ne7 12. f3 Bd7 13. Bb2 Bc6 14. c4 Qf5
15. d5 exd5 16. fxe4 dxe4 17. Nh3 Ng4 18. Qg3 Qc5 19. Qxc7 Rc8 20. Qf4 Qe3
21. Rd2 Qxf4 22. Nxf4 e3 23. Rc2 Rg5 24. Be2 Nf2 25. Re1 Rd8 26. g3 Rf5 27. Bf1
Rxf4 28. gxf4 Nd3 29. Bxd3 Rxd3 30. Rc3 Rxc3 31. Bxc3 Nf5 32. Bd2 Kd7
33. Bxe3 b6 34. Bf2 f6 35. Kd2 h5 36. Kd3 Nh6 37. Bh4 f5 38. Re7 Kd6 39. h3 1-0

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