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Selected Games, Selective History

by Taylor Kingston

Botvinnik's Best Games, Volume 3: 1957-1970, by Mikhail Botvinnik, 2001 Publishing House Moravian Chess, Olomouc, Czech Republic, Hardcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 464pp., \$39.00.

This book concludes the most extensive collection available of self-annotated games by Mikhail Botvinnik (1911-1993), chess world champion for all but two years from 1948 to 1963. The four-volume set first appeared in Russia in the mid-1980s under the title *Analiticheske i kriticheskie raboty* (Analytical and Critical Works), but now has been published as three volumes in English, translated by Ken Neat. The first two volumes covered 1925-1941 and 1942-1956, respectively, and reviews may be found in the [ChessCafe Archives](#).



This third installment deals with the last 14 years of Botvinnik's long chess career. Like the previous two books, it is easily outlined. There are about 15 pages of autobiographical narrative, followed by annotated games, 142 in all, 130 from high-level matches and tournaments, plus an appendix of 12 training games played at various times from 1936 to 1961. This is similar to the previous two volumes, which had 124 and 143 games,



respectively. The games are followed by 30 pages of crosstables and tournament/match results, an appendix of translator's notes and analytical corrections, and an index of openings. 24 pages of black-and-white photos are also included. At 464 pages, volume 3 is larger than volume 1 (392 pages) but slightly smaller than volume 2 (492 pages).

On the technical side, the book is adequate, though some problems are evident. The photo section was edited carelessly. A picture captioned "Analysing on a pocket set" clearly shows Botvinnik at a table with a full-size inlaid board. Another captioned "With Gligoric, 1970" shows a boy of perhaps 18, clearly not Gligoric, who was then 47. The cover, though technically a hard-back, is not of high quality and tends to warp and wrinkle too easily.

However, these flaws are minor and we will spend no more time on them. The most important aspects of the book are, one, its artistic and instructive value as a game collection, and two, its worth as historical narrative. For the former we have high praise, about the latter we have definite reservations.

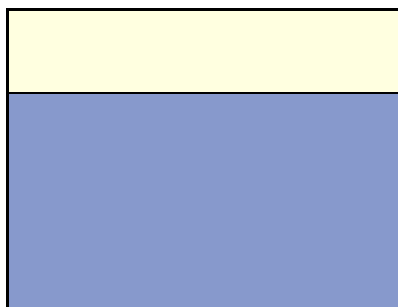
The first half of the book, covering 1957-1963, is concerned mainly with the last five of Botvinnik's seven world championship matches. In those matches he lost the title to Smyslov in 1957, regained it in a 1958 rematch, lost it to Tal in 1960 and again regained it in 1961, thus becoming the only man ever to win the title three times, before finally losing it for the last time to Petrosian in 1963. As we noted in the review of volume 2, Botvinnik sets a very high standard as an annotator. That continues here. A positionally oriented example is this endgame from Botvinnik-

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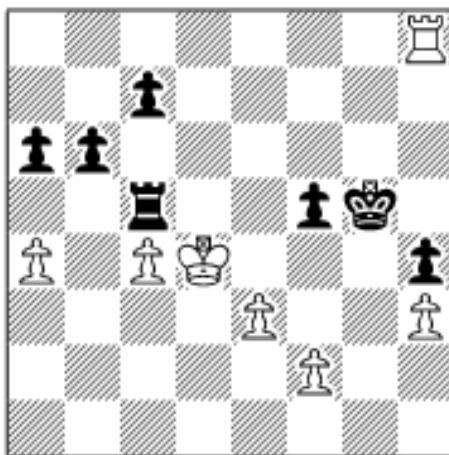
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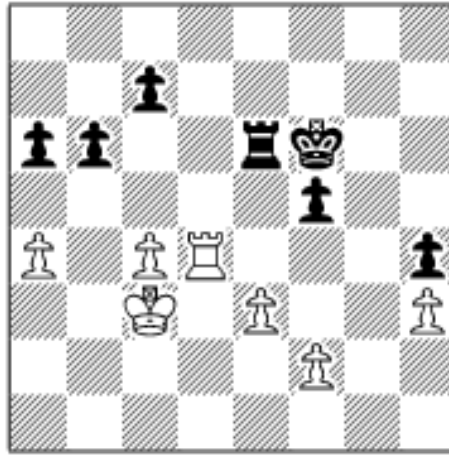


Smyslov, 14th match game, 1957.



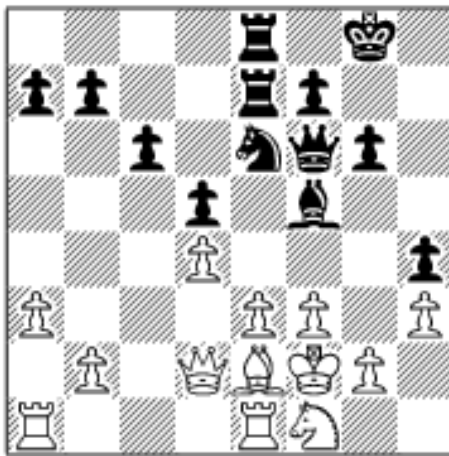
“Now about my plan. Since all the time White has to reckon with ...b6-b5, his main objective is to provoke ...a6-a5. If, for example, this move had already been made, 43.f4+ Kg6 44.Rxh4 would lead to a win.

But for the moment this is inadvisable in view of the reply 44...Ra5 45.Rh8 Rxa4 46.Rc8 c5+! 47.Kd5 Ra3. But how can Black be forced to play ...a6-a5? This cannot be done by 43.Ra8: there follows 43...Ra5. This means that White must first occupy the d-file to prevent counterplay by Black along this file, and the rook must go to d4, so that the h4 pawn is attacked.” — **43.Rh7 Kg6** — “The correct reply was 43...Rc6!, and after 44.Rd7 Kf6 45.Rd5 Ke6 46.Kc3 Rd6 Black forces the exchange of rooks, transposing to a drawn pawn ending. But it turns out that Black has not yet guessed his opponent’s plan. As for the pawn sacrifice offered, White, of course, declines it (44.Rxh4 Ra5).” Play continued **44.Rd7 Kf6 45.Rd5 Rc6 46.Kc3 Re6**, and after **47.Rd4**



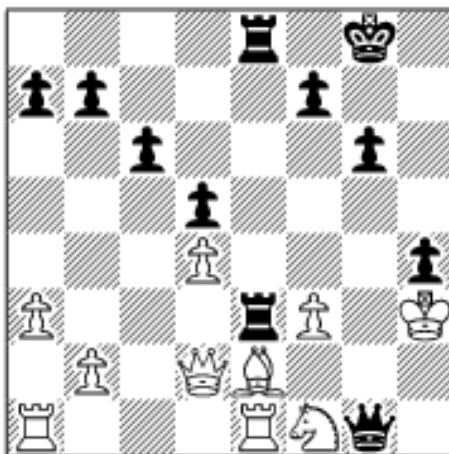
White had attained the goal described in his plan, and went on to win in 68 moves.

A tactically oriented example is Petrosian-Botvinnik, 1st match game 1963.



Here Botvinnik spends a half-page demonstrating the soundness of the piece sac 21...Ng5 22.Kg1 Bxh3! 23.gxh3 Nxh3+, a sample variation being 24.Kh1 Qg5 25.Kh2 Qg1+!

26.Kxh3 Rxe3



“when it was not easy to suspect that, despite his two extra pieces, White is helpless – he does not have a single satisfactory move.” However, Botvinnik did not actually play the sacrifice; instead

of 21...Ng5 he chose **21...Ng7**, which nonetheless gave him a definite positional advantage, enough to win in 40 moves.

This illustrates a paradox characteristic of Botvinnik's play in his later years: strategic depth, but occasional failure in tactical calculation. A striking example is this position



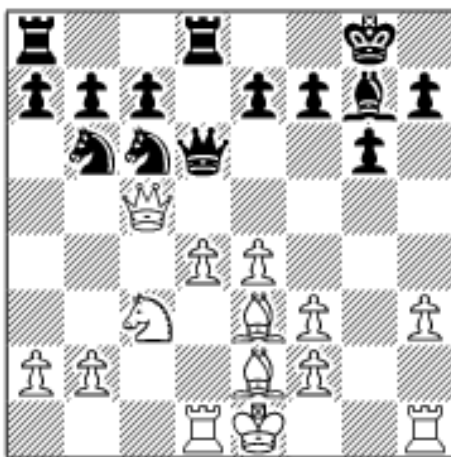
from Smyslov-Botvinnik, 7th match game, 1958. Here Botvinnik accepted a draw offer, but comments "From my old friend Abraham Model I learned that by 16...Rxf3 17.gxf3 Qc6 18.Qd1 Bd5

19.Rh3 Qe6 Black could have won the a2 pawn for the exchange, and then, by creating a second passed pawn on the queenside... he would have gained excellent winning chances ... How did I miss this possibility? What told here was my old 'illness' – weakness of combinative vision. During the game I considered the exchange sacrifice only after the preparatory exchange of queens, overlooking after 16...Rxf3 17.Qxc4 the *zwischenzug* 17...Rxe3+."

A telling passage, typical of the candor and unsparing self-criticism Botvinnik put into his annotations. This reviewer, only an above-average player, would likely not have considered 16...Rxf3 in a real game, but once into the line we quickly saw the possibility of 17...Rxe3+ before reading it in Botvinnik's analysis. It is odd to think that a world champion could miss something a club player saw quickly, but in his later career Botvinnik was occasionally prone to

such “weakness of combinative vision.” This explains, for example, the extreme lengths to which he went to keep the game closed and quiet in his 1960 match with the tactically more proficient Tal.

However, in home study, where he had leisure to analyze in depth and “combinative weakness” was not a factor, Botvinnik excelled. It was a major reason for his continued success even against younger, more talented players. He seems to have prepared innumerable theoretical novelties, and more importantly, full strategic plans, in private analysis, and then retained them in memory for years. Time and again one reads of Botvinnik employing a line he had developed, not necessarily for the specific event or opponent at hand, but many years earlier, for whenever the occasion arose. For example, in Botvinnik-Tal, 11th match game 1961, after **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 d5 4.cxd5 cxd5 5.Nf3 Nc6 6.Bf5 Bf5 7.e3 e6 8.Bb5**, he writes “The system associated with this move is one that I prepared back in 1946, i.e. 15 years before the present game, but I had never managed to employ it in practice.” Or here,



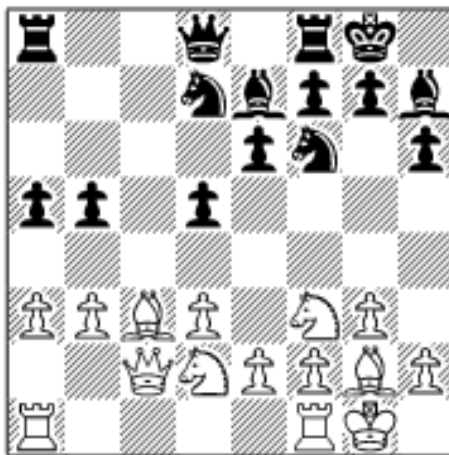
annotating Botvinnik-Fischer, 1962, he writes “It was this position that I had analysed in the winter of 1958.” Though not the first master to do this kind of thing on a regular basis (Alekhine comes

to mind as an earlier example), Botvinnik did it to an extent and depth probably beyond any of his contemporaries. Later Polugaevsky and other Soviet GMs took up the technique, and today it is *de rigeur* for Kasparov, Kramnik, Anand, Ivanchuk and most if not all of the world's top players.

It should be mentioned that many of the games in this volume are of above-average length, with the outcome usually decided in the endgame.

Botvinnik had always been strong in adjournment analysis, and as he grew older he depended on it more and more. For those seeking endgame instruction, Botvinnik's games are, along with those of Rubinstein, among the best available. We should also mention that his notes are aimed at advanced players; those under, say, Elo 1600 may find it tough going.

The most common opening is the King's Indian, followed by various lines of the English (Botvinnik often opened 1.c4). The Sicilian, Caro-Kann, Pirc, and Nimzo-Indian are also frequent, but surprisingly little in evidence is the French (only four examples), in which Botvinnik was the ultra-virtuoso earlier in his career. As might be expected, some of the opening lines are obsolete, for example no well-booked Dragon-player today would undertake **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7. f3 a6 8.Bc4 b5 9.Bb3 Bb7**, as occurred in Littlewood-Botvinnik, Hastings 1961-62. However, today's players should not dismiss the book on that basis, as Botvinnik himself makes clear in his comment on this position

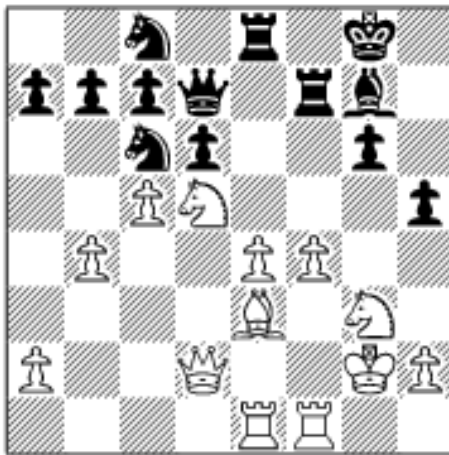


from Botvinnik-Smyslov, 12th match game 1958. On **14.b4** he writes “A serious error. By preventing ...b5-b4 in the most primitive way, White is saddled with a weak pawn at b4 without any compensation ... It is

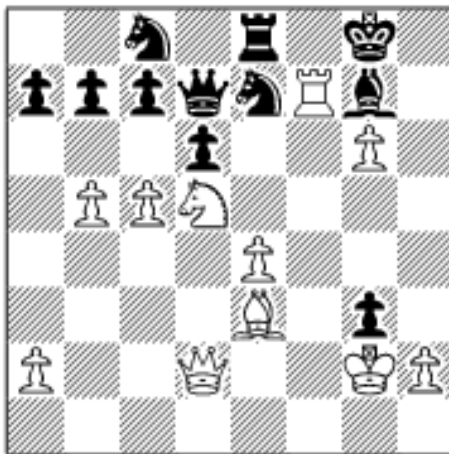
surprising that, although I expressed this opinion long ago, [GM Lev] Psakhis, annotating a game of his in *Informator* No. 37, attaches an exclamation mark to 14.b4 without any substantiation ... This episode once again demonstrates that modern grandmasters are not interested in games from the past.”

As world champion, Botvinnik had not been very active; other than title matches he played only in a few tournaments and Olympiads over 1948-1963. However, after losing to Petrosian, he gave up further title-related play but became more active in chess than he had been since the 1930s, playing not only in Olympiads and Soviet Spartakiads but in many international tournaments. His results on the whole were very good, as he took 1st at Amsterdam 1963 (+3 =2) ahead of Flohr, 1st at Noordwijk 1965 (+5 =2) ahead of Trifunovic, 1st at Amsterdam 1966 (+7 -1 =1) over Pomar, 1st at Hastings 1966-67 (+5 -1 =2) over Uhlmann and Balashov, =2nd (with Smyslov) at Palma de Mallorca 1967 (+9 -1 =7), behind Larsen but ahead of Portisch, Gligoric, Ivkov et al, 2nd at Monte Carlo 1968 (+5 =7), behind Larsen but ahead of Hort, Smyslov, Byrne, Benko et al, and

=1st (with Geller) at Beverwijk 1969, ahead of Keres, Portisch, Olafsson et al. The old lion showed he still had teeth in such games as Benko-Botvinnik, Monte Carlo 1968:



**20.b5 N6e7 21.f5! h4
22.fxg6 Rxf1
23.Rxf1 hxg3 24.Rf7**



Threatening mate by
25.Rxg7+ Kxg7
26.Bh6+ etc. But
Botvinnik finds the
best defense:

**24...Be5! 25.Bd4
Qg4 26.Rf4 Qh5
27.Bxe5 Qxh2+
28.Kf3 Qxd2
29.Nf6+ Kg7**

**30.Nxe8+ Kxg6 31.Rf6+ Kh7 32.Bxg3 Qd3+
33.Kf2 Qxb5 34.cxd6 Qxe8 0-1.**

As a games collection, then, this book gets high marks, especially for the accuracy and instructive value of the annotations. These alone are sufficient to warrant a strong recommendation. However, we would issue a strong caveat in the area of historical accuracy. While the amount of historical, biographical material is relatively light, what there is shows

some heavy bias. For example, in discussing the 1958 rematch with Smyslov, Botvinnik writes:

“... the title of champion was regained. My colleagues (and not only they) were unhappy about this ... And behind my back a campaign to abolish the return match was begun ... this decision was against the interests of the chess world ...”.

What most saw as an unfair advantage for the incumbent, Botvinnik insists was in the best interest of chess. Furthermore he puts a sinister cast on the effort to change the rule ‘behind his back.’ Yet he neglects to mention that the rematch clause was added to FIDE rules only in 1956, *at the instigation of Botvinnik’s friends Ragozin and Abramov*, according to Yuri Averbakh (as will be seen in part 2 of the interview, soon to appear in *The Skittles Room*). In Averbakh’s opinion Botvinnik actually acted in blatant self-interest behind everyone else’s back, and generally held the view that “What is good for Botvinnik is good for chess.”

Another example of selective reporting is Botvinnik’s discussion of Tal: “He would go in for difficult positions, merely in order to obtain great mobility for his pieces, when his unique ability to calculate variations might tell, as well as ... the opponent’s lack of time for thought ... [However, it] led to a prejudiced style of play, to a narrowing of his creative possibilities ... A year later, in the return match, I was able to demonstrate that the creative defects in the young Latvian’s play were more significant than his phenomenal calculating

ability.”

Thus Botvinnik gives the impression that his own merits led to victory in 1961. He omits completely the fact that Tal was quite ill in 1961 (as was Smyslov to a lesser degree in 1958), and that Tal requested a postponement, to which Botvinnik objected (again see part 2 of the Averbakh interview for more details). One can make a strong case that the 1961 result depended less on Tal’s “creative defects” than on his defective kidneys, and Botvinnik’s callous use of the advantage that offered.

A third example is Botvinnik’s discussion of Fischer. Annotating their one and only game, at the 1962 Varna Olympiad, Botvinnik writes:

“I have already mentioned that success in chess is decided not only by talent, but also by other qualities, including the character of a player. And Fischer’s character was always inadequate, as the reader will probably agree, after playing through our game.”



The only game with Fischer, in 1962.

While many, including this writer, would agree that Fischer's character is less than perfect, as has become increasingly evident in recent years, one wonders how a single 1962 game could be sufficient to justify such a sweeping conclusion. Let's see what Botvinnik offers. The following excerpts comprise all of the non-chess, character-related comments from the game's annotations:

After Black's 41st move: "This is where the character of my opponent began to tell. Reckoning that the game was easily won for him, he was angry with me for playing on, and in his fervor ... he makes a rash decision." — *After Black's 42nd move:* "Fischer's entire behaviour expressed his indignation at White continuing to resist in this 'hopeless' position. He clearly wanted to demonstrate both to the players in the Olympiad, and to the spectators, that such a position did not require any analysis." — *After White's 52nd move:* "Incidentally, after this move I could not restrain myself, and, going up to our team captain Lev Abramov, I said to him one word: 'Draw'. Great was the general astonishment later when later we learned that at this point Fischer had protested to the deputy arbiter that 'Botvinnik was being prompted during the game'!" — *After White's 68th move (the game's last):* "Only here, with his face white as a sheet, did Fischer shake my hand, and with tears in his eyes he left the hall."

That's it? We are to believe that Fischer's character was "always inadequate" because: (1) he grew

impatient with Botvinnik's prolonged resistance, (2) he wanted to show people he could play well, (3) he objected to possible consultations during play, and (4) he was white-faced and close to tears?

Let us offer some alternate interpretations: that #3 was entirely logical and permissible under the circumstances, and that 1, 2, and 4 may reflect not so much "inadequate character" as an immaturity not unusual for a boy of 19 (which Fischer then was). Had Fischer behaved like this in many games, Botvinnik would have a case, but Fischer did not, and in fact his character proved sufficiently strong for him to beat everyone in the world within the next 10 years. (*Photograph: Mikhail Botvinnik*)



This sort of petty *ad hominem* slight occurs with unfortunate frequency in Botvinnik's writings, usually in a more subtle form than this instance. It is one thing to make objectively valid critiques of opponents' chess styles (something at which Botvinnik excelled), but quite another to extrapolate from that to evaluation of character. This tendency is especially evident when Botvinnik discusses players with more natural talent than he (e.g. Fischer, Tal, Keres); he thus appears to be trying to enhance his own image at their expense, from motives of spite and envy. And Botvinnik's definition of "character" is somewhat peculiar: for

him it generally seems to mean not honesty or moral rectitude, but absolute determination to win.

Furthermore, and in unfortunate contrast to the objectivity and thoroughness of his annotations, Botvinnik is quite selective in his reporting of events. One might build a plausible case against his own character based on what he omits. We won't go that far, and we don't consider this reason enough to condemn the book, but at the very least, readers are advised not to take Botvinnik's historical accounts at face value, and to compare them with other sources before reaching conclusions.

Botvinnik retired from serious chess at age 59, unlike Lasker, Reshevsky, Smyslov, Korchnoi and other masters who continued to play well into their later years. Though he was then past his prime he was by no means washed up, as the quality of his later play attests. Only in his last two tournaments were his results unimpressive (7th of 16 at Belgrade 1969, =3rd of 4 at Leiden 1970), and this was partly due to the fact that he had already decided to retire. His last years were devoted to chess teaching (among his pupils were Karpov and Kasparov), electrical engineering, and the development of a chess-playing computer. Botvinnik had high hopes of designing the first program to play at world championship level, and that this would be the crowning achievement of his chess legacy.



Botvinnik's famous chess school, 1963. On the right is the young Anatoly Karpov.

However, he failed. The approach he chose, a sort of chess artificial intelligence imitating human positional judgment, has so far proven less effective than the brute-force calculating speed of Deep Blue. In his concluding remarks, Botvinnik does not mention computer research as his major contribution to chess. Instead he concludes “The art of preparing for competitions became so refined, that a master, in the quiet of his study, unrestricted by time (not like during a game!), was able to find more complete evaluations of a variety of chess positions. This also developed positional understanding and simultaneously led to good practical results. It is this, evidently, that constitutes my contribution to chess.”

In this, unlike some of his historical accounts, Botvinnik is totally objective and correct. Those who study this collection with any diligence will undoubtedly benefit from the work of a great player and analyst.

Order *Botvinnik's Best Games*
Volume 3: 1957-1970
by Mikhail Botvinnik



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