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## The Boris Book

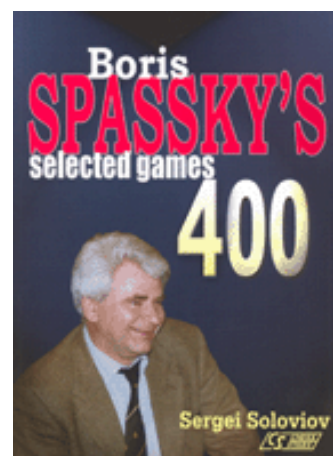
Stephen Ham

*Boris Spassky's 400 Selected Games*, by IM Sergei Soloviov, 2003 Chess Stars, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Soft cover, 493pp., \$29.95

It was Christmas, 1968. I was 14 and on a holiday trip across the country with my parents. Knowing I would spend long hour after hour and day after day in the car, I brought along books about my latest passion...Chess! I checked books out of the local library; game collections of the greatest chess players. I'd read that the current World

Champion was Tigran Petrosian, so I focused on his games, trying to absorb the essence of his craft. Naturally, given his unique style and my lack of skills, I comprehended nothing. But in my pathetic hero worship, the very fact that I comprehended nothing from his games only confirmed his superiority over all others, especially me. Naturally it came as a great shock to learn a few months later that somebody named Boris Spassky had dethroned the magnificent Petrosian. Since I'd already raised Petrosian to a near god-like status through hero worship, then Spassky must be perfection personified! Thus began my hero worship of Boris Vasilievich Spassky.

Several books have been written about Spassky's games. Unfortunately the great man himself has authored none of them. This book, the latest in English, is authored by IM





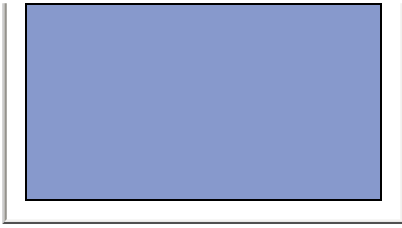
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Sergei Soloviov. It is part of the Chess Stars series that has already published books on Tal, Capablanca, Lasker, Chigorin, Botvinnik, and Alekhine. I am relatively unfamiliar with this publisher. The book doesn't provide any information either, other than to note that it is printed in Bulgaria. Nonetheless, the book is an expanded version of the ill-named *Boris Spassky's 300 Wins* (implying that he only had 300-wins, when he's won far more), by the same author and publisher in 1998. Other than 100-games being added to the first edition, I don't have access to the earlier book and thus can't judge whether anything has been modified in the text covering the first 300-games. However, both books share the identical picture of Spassky on the cover.

The book begins with an Introduction, followed by dividing Spassky's chess career into eight periods. Each of these periods has its own introduction, complete with crosstables, followed by annotated games from that period. The first period, Events of 1948-1957, includes 8-pages of glossy black and white photos (16-photographs). As such, there are no conventional chapters, "per se." Instead, there are sections entitled "Events of..." followed games for that period and then a subsequent "Events of..." and so forth. This book covers Spassky's games up through Santo Roman-Spassky, French Team Cup, Paris, 2002. The book ends with a section entitled, "Some Results of Spassky", followed by an Index of Opponents, an Index of Openings (in *Chess Informant* format, e.g., B78), and a bibliography entitled "Sources." While the 400-games in this book are presented in Chess Informant style (figurine short algebraic notation), only Russian/Estonian sources were consulted for this book. The sole exception was Cafferty's, *Boris Spassky: Master of Tactics*. I suspect, however, that this bibliography is incomplete and simply refused to credit Western sources. For example, the analysis of the Fischer-Spassky games from their 1972 World Championship consists largely of Timman's notes to the games.



Having read books authored and published in the former Soviet bloc, I feared for the worst with regard to the English text. I opened the book at random and read some strange sentences written with poor grammar. So I consulted the credits to find that the book actually had a translator, Christo Iovev. While it's to our benefit that Chess Stars employed a translator, it's a shame that they didn't get a better one. In addition to misspelled words, poor grammar and awkward sentence structure, we find statements so clearly untrue that I can't imagine a FIDE IM author writing those words in any language. For example, the book begins with these two sentences; "Boris Spassky learned chess at the age of five - like Capablanca. Two years later the young chess player began a professional chess career." Did the author truly write that or is this a faulty translation? I'll speculate that, 1) the translator failed to translate correctly, and 2) the translator knew nothing about Boris Spassky. On the following page (page 8), we read, "A prodigy is not a genius, but only a candidate-genius. A genius becomes he, who, on one hand, is aware of his exceptional nature, and, on the other, who has unconditionally surrendered to his own self." Given such declarations, the author is to be faulted for this. Is this a games collection or a book on pseudo philosophy of questionable merit? At other times, we get hyperbole, such as that found on page 74, "Under the leadership of his clever and tough trainer - Bondarevsky - Spassky overcame his former uneven temper and started refuting Black's impudent actions right at the board. This fighter game ended in a draw." So awkward English aside, the result of refuting Black's impudent play was only a draw? This illogic doesn't seem to trouble the author/publisher/translator team. Such examples are not uncommon. Still, the English is not as bad as some books I've seen translated into English. In all honesty, although the writing style suffers from awkwardness unique to Slavic writers writing in English, the book is still comprehensible. While clearly something is lost in the translation, one can still focus on the Spassky story

without too much effort.

But, where is the Spassky story? We are given a minimalist biography. More correctly, there is virtually no biography at all. Instead, the 4-page Introduction, written by Alexander Shashin, is the best biographical source in the entire book. A section entitled, "Events 1948-1957", immediately follows this Introduction. There we read that Spassky was born in Leningrad on January 30, 1937. We are given the date when he first visited the Leningrad Pioneers' Palace, and told that his first trainer was Zak. Then follows a brief narrative of each chess tournament that he played in during the period. But what was missing was the human element. Spassky, more than just about any other world champion, is an interesting human being. I know from other sources that he was a fine athlete and proud of the fact that he could high-jump over his own height. The Introduction stated several times that Spassky was very handsome. "A tall blond man, Spassky is rather attractive to women. He loves life and has helped himself to its joys to the full." That declaration has the potential to develop into a juicy character development and drama, but nothing develops at all. While there's no doubt that Spassky is indeed handsome, he's neither tall nor blond. Even the pictures in the book show him to have medium dark hair when young and to be no taller than average. So what credibility has the author from now on when his own book disproves his statements?

Section after section continues along with dull narratives of each subsequent tournament, putting into writing much that can be gleaned by perusing the tournament crosstables. We are told little of the difficulties Spassky had with his trainers. Yermolinsky and Sosonko have written about their experiences with the (in)famous trainer Zak. From other sources, I've read that Zak was the one who taught Spassky to play the Leningrad System against the Nimzo-Indian Defense, a line with which Boris scored many beautiful victories. Alas, there's no detail regarding that here.

From other sources I've read that the Spassky's relationship with his next trainer, Tolush, was an unhappy one. While Spassky did learn how to improve his attacking skills under Tolush, their personalities clashed. Tolush was abrasive and insulting. From other sources, we know that Spassky married at least twice and has at least one son. Of his first wife, he claimed that they "were like Bishops of opposite colors." Again, no details are mentioned here. In short, Spassky as a person never emerges from this book.

I'd like to know the inside scoop regarding why Spassky lost so much of his strength so rapidly after he lost his title to Fischer. Although his talent was enormous, other books stated that he often claimed to be lazy and lacked motivation. Was that the explanation here? The book provides no clues. Spassky exhibited great sportsmanship throughout his career and demonstrated political courage at his own expense (he refused to sign the letter of condemnation against Korchnoi's defection), so he's a man whose biography should be written. Instead, this book offers just droll statements, such as: in the 9th round Spassky defeated Taimanov by exploiting his advanced IQP, and so on. To be fair, this book never claimed to be a biography, so I shouldn't be too critical of the fact that it's not something it was never designed to be. In this respect it is dissimilar to Soltis and Cafferty's books on Spassky, also game collections, but where there's at least a sense of the human element and biographical material. However, *Boris Spassky's 400 Selected Games* includes 111 pages of text (nearly 1/4 of the book) devoted only to a repetitive narration of Spassky's tournament results. Surely this space is largely wasted and valueless. Instead, would it have been too difficult to tell us something about our protagonist, Boris Spassky?

So if biographical details are lacking, what of the chess characteristics of our protagonist? Spassky had a "universal style." He was indeed a master of tactics, as

Cafferty's title claimed. Yet he could also score positional wins from Petrosian and Karpov and outplay others in the endgame. Ideally, a book dedicated to 400 Spassky games should devote some attention to his style of play. How did he develop his ability? How did he prepare for competition? Spassky was known for his skills in IQP positions. How did these skills develop? Spassky, while never an opening theoretician, had a fairly broad opening repertoire. Many books that focus upon specific players also discuss their theoretical contributions and opening preferences. This book is silent on all of the above topics.

I sensed political remnants of the pro-Soviet writing that we saw when the USSR existed. For example, page 142 discusses the conditions for the Amsterdam Interzonal of 1964. "There were two more subtleties at the tournament: no draws shorter than 30 moves were allowed and second, the pairing was biased, so that the representatives of one country played among themselves in the first rounds." This is intentionally misleading. Soloviov ignores the fact that there was a logical reason for this policy. It was because Soviet players played unfairly as a team (or "cheat", to quote Bobby Fischer). They had a habit of playing short draws with each other to conserve energy in long tournaments. At other times, when a Soviet player was fighting with a Western player for victory in a tournament, other Soviet players would deliberately lose games to their leading player in order to give him easy points. So by forcing the Soviets to play each other immediately, they had no ability to see who would ultimately have a good tournament and who would have a poor one. Also, playing at least 30 moves reduced the chances of pre-arranged draws. In short, the Soviets would have to put forth as much effort as the non-Soviet players.

Again the credibility issue is raised. Why didn't Soloviov mention this? Does this author have a political agenda? One of the most important moments in Spassky's life was his defection from the Soviet Union to France. Yet there's

no mention of it in this book. Instead, page 409, which discusses the Olympiad of 1984, now only mentioned that Spassky played first board for France and led them to their best result to date.

So far, the book appears to be a huge failure. But since it is primarily a games collection, let's turn our focus there. After all, one really buys a game collection for the games, and we are offered 400 "selected" examples. Surely all of us have a favorite Spassky game, such as Larsen-Spassky, USSR versus the Rest of the World, 1970, or Spassky-Evans, Varna Ol. 1962, or Spassky-Bronstein, 27th USSR Ch., Leningrad 1960, or Spassky-Petrosian, (g/19) World Championship 1969, or any of Spassky's fine wins over Fischer. While this book offers us 400 Spassky games, not all are victories, since included in this number are some draws.

Each game is annotated in the languageless Chess Informant style. I find this an odd juxtaposition, since this book includes 111-pages of English language text. Therefore some game commentary in English would have been desirable. But unlike the Informants, there's few helpful symbols used, other than the standard diacritical marks, such as "!" and "?" and the symbols for White is better, and so on. Unfortunately, some analytical lines lead to forced checkmate, such as mate in 3, but those lines merely end with no assessment. The game Spassky-Levy, XXI Olympiad, Nice 1974 was one example from many of this problem. What was the publisher thinking?

Here's an example of a shorter game from the book,  
**Larsen-Spassky, Leiden 1970. 1 d4 d5 2 c4 dxc4 3 Nf3 Nf6 4 e3 e6 5 Bxc4 c5 6 O-O a6 7 a4 Nc6 [7...cxd4 - game 111] 8 Qe2 cxd4 9 Rd1 Be7 10 exd4 O-O 11 Nc3 Nd5 12 Ne5 [12 Qe4 Ncb4 13 Ne5 Qd6=; 12 Bd3!?] 12...Nxc3 13 bxc3 Nxe5 14 Qxe5 [14 dxe5 Qc7 15 Rd4 (15 Qe4 Rd8 16 Rxd8+ Bxd8 17 Bd3 g6 unclear) Rd8 16 Rg4 Bd7 17 Bh6 g6 unclear) 14...Bd6 15 Qh5 [15 Qe2!?] 15...Qc7**



**16 Rd3?** [16 Bd3 g6 17 Qh4 Qxc3 18 Bg5 Qc7 19 Bf6 Re8 20 Rac1 Qd7 21 Rc5!? Bf8 (21...Bxc5 22 dxc5 h5 23 Qg5+-) 22 Rdc1 (22 Rh5 Be7!) Bg7 23 Rc7 Qd6 24 Bxg7 Kxg7 25 Rxf7+ Kxf7 26 Qxh7+ Kf8 27 Bxg6+-; 18...Re8 19 Bf6 Bf8 (19...Qa5 20 Re1 Bd7 21 Re3 with an attack) 20 Rac1 Qa5 21 Qf4!? (21 d5?! exd5 22 Bc3 Qd8 23 Qd4 f6) 21...Bg7 22 Bxg7 Kxg7 23 Rc7 with compensation.) **16...Qxc4 17 Rh3 f6!** [17...h6? 18 Bxh6 Qd5 19 Qg4 g6 20 Qh4 +-] **18 Qxh7+ Kf7 19 Qh5+ Ke7 20 Qh7 Rf7 21 Ba3 Bxa3 22 Rxa3 Bd7 23 Rg3 g5 24 Qb1 Bc6 0-1**

I find the game annotations to be generally analytically correct, but a little sloppy. For example, in the above game, I believe that Larsen's 12th move was best. Soloviov wrote 12 Qe4 Ncb4 13 Ne5 Qd6=, but I prefer White after 14 Bd2 (*NCO*, p. 387, note #22, favors White after 14 Qg4 f5 15 Qe2) b6 15 Nxd5 Nxd5 16 Bd3 f5 17 Qe2 Bf6 18 Re1 Re8 19 Qh5 Rf8 20 Rac1 Bb7 21 Bc4. Therefore Black should play the superior 12...Nf6, with drawish possibilities. Also, in the analysis after 14 dxe5 (the game continued 14 Qxe5) Qc7, Soloviov considered only 15 Rd4 and 15 Qe4. However, White has a pawn sac available that exploits the position of Black's Queen, allowing White to develop with gain of time. Such a line is 15 Bd3! Qxc3 16 Bd2 Qc6 (16...Qc5 17 Rac1 leads to the same thing) 17 Be4 Qc5 18 Rac1 when White must be clearly better. He also threatens a Bishop sac on h7. Therefore Black probably must decline the pawn and try catch up in development with 15...Bd7 (planning 16...Bc6). However, I still prefer White after another pawn offer, 16 Be3 Bc6 (16...Qxe5? is met by 17 Bxh7+ Kxh7 18 Rxd7) 17 Bd4 gives White an edge. If correct, then Black's 11...Nd5?1 should have been criticized in

favor of 11...Nb4, as recommended by *NCO*, when Black has equality.

Also, in the game analysis after 16 Bd3 (the game continued 16 Rd3?) g6 17 Qh4 Qxc3 18 Bg5 Re8 19 Bf6 Bf8 20 Rac1 Qa5 21 Qf4, I'm curious why Soloviov didn't provide analysis of what happens after Black simply grabs a pawn with 21...Qxa4. Then, with White's attack stalled and Black owning a 2:0 Queenside pawn advantage, I think Black must be better. So Larsen should have played 20 Be4 (unmentioned by Soloviov), when I think White may have an edge due to more active pieces.

So what should one make of that game? Clearly this wasn't a Spassky victory as much as it was a horrible Larsen loss, caused by a huge oversight on the 16th move. One wonders at what stage Larsen realized that he had blundered. This game though is typical of many in this book, which is why I selected it. It illustrates that the author favors quantity far more than quality. Spassky has played some of the most beautiful chess I've ever seen, and scored those wins against the strongest players in the world. But the beauty of his games is tarnished by inclusion in this book of games that are not beautiful, but merely successful opportunism when his opponent blunders. My choice would have been for far fewer games - just the beautiful ones - all analyzed in greater detail and with eclectic notes compiled from various sources. I'm not the author of this book, so I can't dictate what should be included. Nonetheless, what's the point of compiling large numbers of opportunistic games? The title says that these were selected games, but the book fails to tell us what criteria were used in the selection process. Instead, as a book buyer, I'll happily reject 400-games selected in an unknown manner, in favor a book covering 100-beautiful games or 64-remarkable games, and the like.

With regard to publication quality, this book is printed on fine quality paper and the print size is standard. Given the mass that 493-pages creates, the spine on the soft cover

review edition allowed the book to lay flat for easy reading without any apparent stress upon its spine. Every game is allowed at least one diagram and they were placed in appropriate places.

Those who yearn for a definitive biography of the 10th World Champion will be bitterly disappointed. This book doesn't qualify – there's no biography to be found here. Instead, this book is attractive only for being a collection of 400 "selected" games of Boris Spassky. The games are acceptably annotated, although some sloppiness is noted. So this clearly is not a hasty database dump. Nonetheless there's insufficient value-added to Spassky's games by the author. Yes, I enjoyed having access to these games and playing through many of them, but I can't endorse this book. The English text was poor because the translation and writing were substandard. There was virtually no biography, virtually no historical context, and no discussion of Boris Spassky as a man or chess player. Instead, there was just a dull commentary upon his results in various rounds of various tournaments, all consuming a great deal of space. And since the book emphasized game quantity over quality, I think it could only appeal to devout Spassky fans. Meanwhile I continue to dream of the day when Boris writes his own story and selects his favorite games, complete with analysis and anecdotes. I'd recommend saving your money for that book, or at least a better one than this.

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**Order** *Boris Spassky's 400 Selected Games*  
by IM Sergei Soloviov

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