



BOOK REVIEWS



Parallel Problems, Different Fates

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Vladimirs Petrovs: A Chessplayer's Story from Greatness to the Gulags by Andris Fride, 2004 Caissa Editions, Yorklyn, Delaware, USA, paperback, 190 pages, English algebraic notation, \$25.00.

Bogoljubow: The Fate of a Chess Player, by Sergei Soloviov, 2004 Chess Stars Ltd., Sofia, Bulgaria, paperback, 280 pages, figurine algebraic notation, \$29.95.

We look here at two biographies and game collections, about two roughly contemporary masters whose lives had both some interesting parallels and a striking difference. One, Ukrainian-German Efim Bogoljubow (1889-1952) is well known to most students of chess history: one of the world's top five or six players in the 1920s, winner of major tournaments and twice challenger for the World Championship, against Alekhine in 1929 and 1934. The other, Vladimirs Petrovs (1907-1943), a rising star in the 1930s, has been little known outside his native Latvia, but with this book he may get some overdue recognition in the English-speaking world. We'll deal with the Bogoljubow book first. After decades of relative neglect, Efim Dimitrievich seems to have become recently more popular: this is the second monograph on him to appear in the past few years, the other being the CD *Grandmaster Efim Bogoljubow* (Pickard & Son, 2000). Having already sketched Bogoljubow's life in our review of that work, we won't repeat ourselves here; interested readers are referred to the

ChessCafe archives.

Bogoljubow: The Fate of a Chess Player is another typical product of the Russian IM Sergei Soloviov and his Bulgarian publisher Chess Stars, much like their books on Tal, Capablanca, Lasker, Spassky and others. So similar, in fact, that we could almost rerun our review of *Boris Spassky's 300 Wins*, just changing names and dates here and there, the strengths and weaknesses are so alike.



The book contains 211 games, dating from 1909 to 1952. Virtually all are annotated, though only in the symbolic *Informant* style. There is some biographical narrative, about 50 or 60 pages, and many crosstables. The game choices are reasonable and representative, concentrating on major events (Pistyán 1922, New York 1924, USSR Championship 1924, Moscow 1925, Kissingen 1928, matches with Euwe and Alekhine, etc.). Still, this is only about one-sixth the games of the aforementioned Pickard CD, which has 1,247.

The other shortcoming is the biographical narrative. While it seems to have most of the facts about Bogoljubow's life straight, it is unscholarly, poorly written, poorly translated and poorly proofread. Bad spelling is rampant, and there is utter confusion in the use of quotation marks. They appear seemingly at random, often when nothing is being quoted, sometimes redundantly around italics. Elsewhere they are missing, for example page 35 cites a full paragraph from Edward Winter's *Capablanca*, but the punctuation gives no clue that the words are not Soloviov's.

The book's level of erudition is exemplified by this learned citation on page 29:

“An idyllic picture has been described about those days in somebody's memoirs.”

And the translation abounds in unfluent phrases, some unintentionally hilarious:

“...it was with more details, but it was in fact almost analogous in content.” (p. 116)

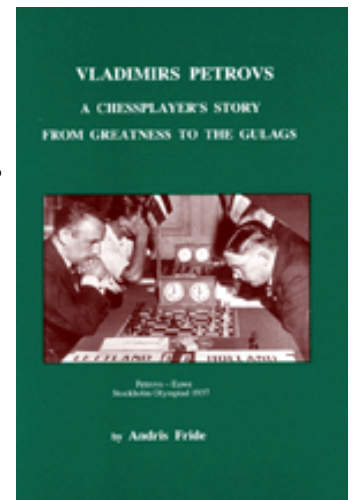
“... against Capablanca he has lost five tight off.” (p. 132)

“Bogoljubow probably thinks that sometimes it is enough for him to only sit on the board in order to win the game.” (p. 35)

As we have repeatedly stressed in review after review, a book’s translator should be a native speaker of the language being translated to, but Chess Stars continues to ignore this, employing in this case a GM named Evgeny Ermenkov, whose English gets an Elo rating of maybe 1400. The use of a Canadian “translation assistant” seems not to have helped much; this book is not notably better than the Spassky book, which had no Westerners involved. At least in this respect it is no worse off than the Pickard CD, which had the inimitable prose stylings of Victor Charushin (see the archives for examples).

A theme running through both books is the problem an individual faces in coping with an oppressive totalitarian state. Bogoljubow faced this first with the Russian Communists in the 1920s, then the German Nazis in the 1930s and ’40s. However, he went relatively unscathed. Detained in Germany at the outbreak of World War I, Bogoljubow established a home and family there, which kept him out of the chaos of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and made it relatively easy to break with the USSR in 1926, a break made not as a political protest, but to stop their meddling in his chess career. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Bogoljubow took the path of least resistance, becoming, along with Alekhine, one of the most prominent “chess collaborators,” even joining the Nazi Party eventually (though again not out of political conviction, but more as a matter of convenience or self-preservation). After the war this brought on him ostracism and disgrace for a while, but at least he survived.

Petrovs was not so lucky. Latvia, a small Baltic country long part of the Tsarist Russian empire, declared independence in 1918. This ended in 1940, when it was forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union. Up to that time, as *Vladimirs Petrovs: A Chessplayer's Story from Greatness to the Gulags* ably describes, Petrovs was Latvia's most promising young master.



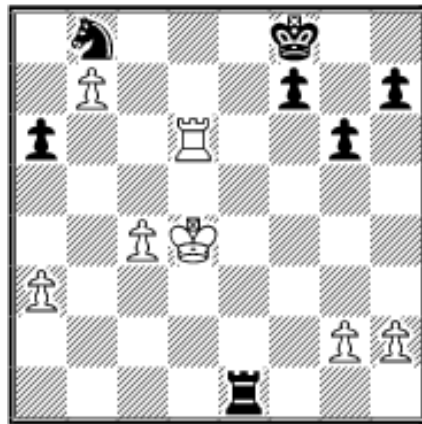
Learning the game relatively late, at age 13, Petrovs made rapid progress. By 1926, at age 19, he had improved enough to win the Riga Championship and finish 3rd in the national championship. Other highlights of his career:

- **1928:** Plays 3rd board on Latvia's first Olympic team, scoring +5 -4 =7, Latvia placing 14th of 17 teams.
- **1930:** Board 2 for Latvia, Hamburg Olympiad, scoring +8 -3 =6, defeating Tartakower among others. Latvia 10th of 18.
- **1931:** Wins a match with Feigins +4 -1 =3; places =2nd-5th (+3 -2 =2) in the first Baltic Championship, tied with Gordons, Leonhardt and Mikenas, ½-point behind Vistaneckis. Scores +9 -2 =5 on 3rd board at Prague Olympiad; Latvia 6th of 19.
- **1932:** Wins Riga Championship +11 -1 =3 ahead of Bergs, Apsenieks, Endzelins, Feigins and Hazenfuss.
- **1933:** Board 2 at Folkstone Olympiad, +6 -5 =3; Latvia 9th of 15. Plays in his first major individual international tournament, at Mährisch-Ostrau, placing =8-9th of 12, 2½ points behind winner Grünfeld.
- **1934:** Narrowly loses match to the veteran Spielmann +1 -2 =5. Co-wins Latvian Championship with Apsenieks, scoring +11 -0 =4.
- **1936:** 1st at Helsinki, scoring 7-2 ahead of Stoltz and Böök.
- **1937:** Co-winner at Kemeru, tying at 12-5 (+9 -2 =6) with Flohr and Reshevsky, ahead of Alekhine, Keres,

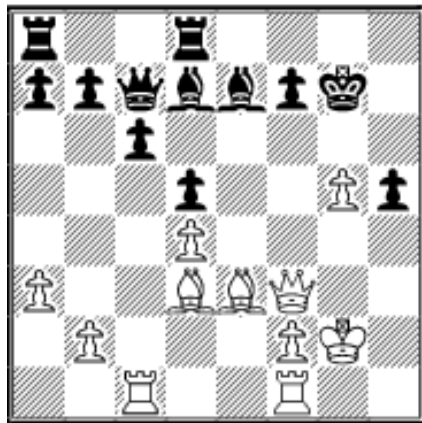
Tartakower, Fine and Ståhlberg in a field of 18. This was Petrovs' finest tournament achievement.

- **1938:** =3rd-5th of 16 at Lodz, tied at 9½-5½ with Ståhlberg and Eliskases behind Pirc and Tartakower. 3rd of 10 at Margate, behind Alekhine and Spielmann, but beats Alekhine in their individual game.

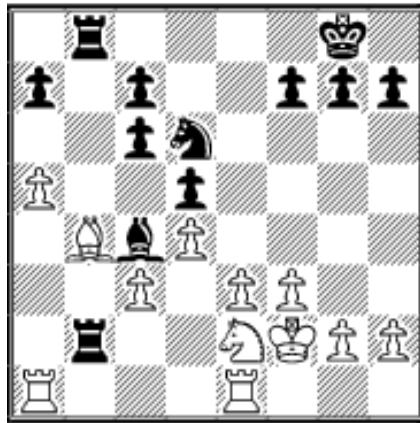
Petrovs was a rather variable player and the above list omits some of his poorer results, but the overall pattern of improvement in his play was unmistakable. A few highlights from his games:



Petrovs-Fine, Kemer 1937: 36.Rd8+ Re8 37.Rc8! Ke7 38. Kd5 Rd8+ 39.Rxd8 Kxd8 40.Kd6 1-0.



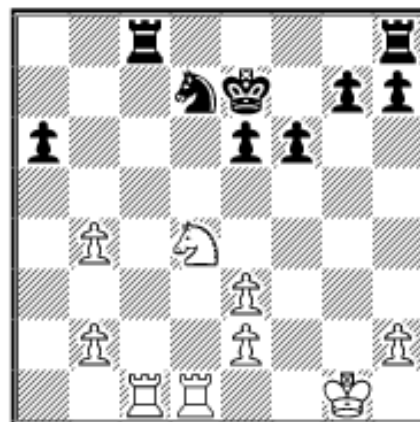
Petrovs-Eliskases, Semmering 1937: 23.Bf4! Bd6 (otherwise 24.Qxh5 is ruinous) **24.Bg3!** — A quietly decisive maneuver. Now Qf6+ looms. **24...Bg4 25.Qf6+ Kg8 26.Qh6! f5 27.gxf6 Qf7 28.Be5 Bxe5 29.dxe5 Rd7 30.f3 Qe6 31.Qg5+ 1-0.**



Ståhlberg-Petrovs, Lodz 1938: 20...f5! 21.f4 Ne4+ 22.Kf3 h6 23.h3 g5 24.fxg5 hxg5

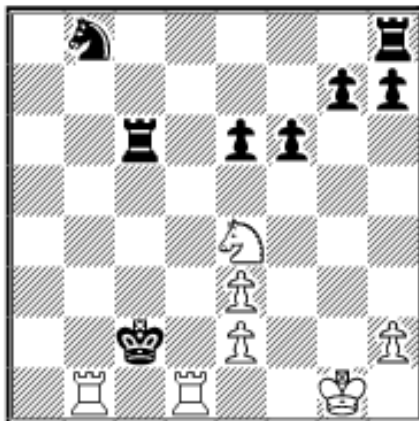


25.h4 — Or 25.g4 fxg4+ 26.hxg4 Kg7 27.Ba3 Rh8! 28.Bxb2 Rh2 and mates. **25...Bxe2+ 26.Rxe2 g4+ 0-1**. “This game shines like a jewel,” said Tartakower and Du Mont in *500 Master Games of Chess*.



Petrovs-Alekhine, Margate 1938: 26.Ra1! Nb8 (26...Ra8 27.Nc6+ Ke8 28.b5 etc.) **27.b5! axb5 28.Ra7+ Kd6 29.Nxb5+ Kc5 30. Nd6 Rc6??** — Better 30...Rcd8, though

White should still win after 31.b4+ Kb6 32.Rb7+ Kc6 33.b5+ Kc5 34.Rc7+ Kb6 35.Re7. **31.b4+! Kxb4 32.Rb7+ Kc3 33.Ne4+ Kc2 34.Rbb1**



1-0. The World Champion resigns one move before mate. Very unusual for him in those days; more often the situation was reversed.

There are 265 games total, comprising all known surviving Petrovs efforts, more than twice the 127 on the *Chess Assistant* database. About 30-40% are annotated (in English, not *Informantese*), mostly by Petrovs himself, a few others by Flohr, Euwe, Betins, Kmoch, even one by Fred Reinfeld. The one complaint we have about the games is that they are arranged in a very odd order: alphabetically by the name of Petrovs' opponent. Thus they start with Ahues and end with Zinner, rather than proceeding in the normal and more sensible chronological fashion.

Petrovs' success contributed to a flowering of Latvian chess. This changed in 1939. Having made an excellent score (+8 –0 =11) on board one at the Buenos Aires Olympiad, he returned to a Europe at war, then in 1940 watched his country become a Soviet Socialist "Republic." For a while he continued to play under the new regime, placing 10th of 20 in the 1940 USSR Championship, and 2nd in several strong tournaments: Moscow 1941 (behind Mazel but ahead of Panov and Alatortsev), Moscow 1942 (½-point behind Boleslavsky but ahead of Alatortsev, Mikenas, Panov and Yudovich), and Sverdlovsk 1942 (behind Ragozin but ahead of Sokolsky,

Boleslavsky and seven others).

However, while he tried to pay lip service to the Soviet system, apparently Petrovs lacked Bogoljubow's knack for easy accommodation. The exact circumstances of his arrest are not known, but it seems he was a bit too outspoken and critical, which in 1942 led to his imprisonment in Moscow. He immediately became an unperson, whom Soviet officialdom tried to expunge from memory. It was not until 1989 that his wife finally learned that he had been sent to a Siberian labor camp, where he died of disease and malnutrition in August 1943.

Vladimirs Petrovs tells this story in a well-written style, supplemented by interviews, photographs, crosstables and drawings. Without becoming maudlin, polemical or hagiographic, it treats its subject with sympathy and insight. The author, Andris Fride, is the son of Janis Fride, a friend of Petrovs and a chess journalist who (probably at considerable risk) kept an extensive file about him. This gives the book an emotional impact and authenticity lacking in the Bogoljubow book. Fride has written not just to churn out another standardized product, but out of a strong passion and sense of duty.

That is what lifts *Petrovs* above the ordinary, and prompts us to recommend it over the otherwise similar *Bogoljubow*. Admittedly, Bogoljubow was the more important player, but readers who want a work about him are probably better advised to try the Pickard CD, which is roughly comparable but has many more games.

Vladimirs Petrovs, in contrast, while not a major biography, is something special. Its resurrection of a fine player, whose career was cut short and then almost erased, is a service to both chess and history. Readers interested in either will find it worthwhile.

[Order](#) *Vladimirs Petrovs:*
A Chessplayer's Story from Greatness to the Gulags
by Andris Fride

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