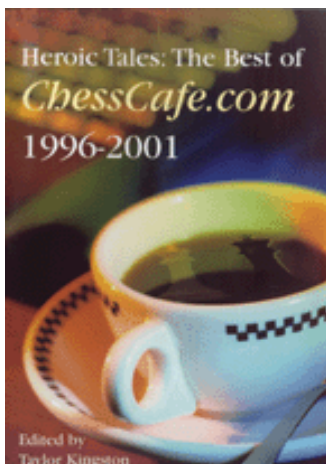




BOOK REVIEWS



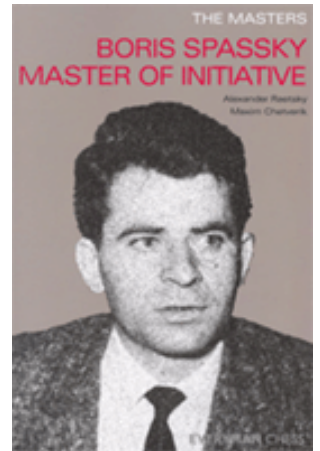
Sterner Stuff

David Kaufmann

Boris Spassky: Master of Initiative, by Alexander Raetsky & Maxim Chetverik, 2006 Everyman Chess, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 160pp. \$21.95

I want to begin this review with a caution, a caveat: any book that focuses attention on Boris Spassky deserves commendation. While it might be difficult to argue that Spassky does not get the recognition he deserves, given his linkage to Fischer, many chessplayers don't appreciate what Spassky himself achieved. Wedged between Tal and Fischer, lacking their flamboyant style and personalities, Spassky is easy to overlook.

But for that very reason, because Spassky achieved so much, and frustratingly (in some ways like this book) might have achieved more, any book that focuses attention on him should be as careful with the details as, well, as Spassky was in calculating variations. And while authors are responsible for what they write, editors must provide oversight, be accountable for the inaccuracies.



Boris Spassky: Master of Initiative is part of a series on The Masters from Everyman Chess. Having [reviewed](#) the book on Rudolph Spielmann in this series, I was expecting something similar: a book that gave me a sense of Spassky's style, arranged in an educational format. This book does something quite different. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But when books are marketed as part of a series and packaged the same way – identical layout of the covers, for instance – one expects, rightfully, that the contents be somewhat similar, even if the authors are different. Otherwise, why set up a series, as opposed to individual biographies or game collections?

Physically the book is appealing – Everyman Chess has evidently paid attention to production details. So you might think that complaining about the disparity in content is only a quibble. Well, no. A series ought to be consistent; if Everyman Chess is doing a series on The Masters, then we should be able to go from one biography to another and learn as much about the style and personality of one master (Spassky) as another (Spielmann). In other words, there should be a guiding hand, an editor at work who defines the framework within which the authors write.

It seems to me Everyman Chess does this with its Starting Out series on the openings. So why not do it with their The Masters series on the great players? One might argue that the quality of the Starting Out series varies, depending on the skill of the author. True, but the format and goal remains consistent throughout.

The issue that I'm raising, while not the fault of the authors – at least, not their fault alone – does affect the quality of the book itself. For a work on Spassky in the same series as a work on Spielmann ought to reach the same standards. But where they are comparable, it doesn't.

Both books present a brief biography. Again, as with the Spielmann book, I wish the authors or editors would include a record of Spassky's tournament and match play. It doesn't take much

research to produce one. These – often including crosstables – used to be required and expected of any game collection or grandmaster biography. It's like saying that such-and-such a team won a world championship without naming its opponents or giving the game scores for the season. In a way, it's cheating the readers not to give them a record of what the player accomplished.

That said, the book on Spassky suffers because English is not the native language of its authors. Even the title betrays this, and argues forcefully that someone at Everyman Chess should have taken editorial responsibility for the language. In English, the word "initiative" requires an article (*a, the*) or preposition before it. (If anyone really wants a grammar lesson, I'll gladly explain why.) So even the title grates. I know it's supposed to parallel other titles in the series ([Alexander Alekhine: Master of Attack](#); [Rudolf Spielmann: Master of Invention](#)), but it doesn't work. And since the same authors have a book in the series that breaks the pattern – [Mikhail Tal: Tactical Genius](#) – I don't see why the title couldn't have been Boris Spassky: Master of the Initiative – or something else entirely.

I spend this much time on the title because it's symptomatic of the poorly written biographical section. Here are some random sentences from the nine page biography: "Spassky's authority stems from the high quality of his champion's title – not the transient title of recent history, but a dazzling gold crown from classical chess history." (After two weeks in class, my college freshmen know better than to write like that.) Even when the sentences make sense, they have a junior high school quality to them: "Boris's childhood years were difficult. When he was four years old, the war began. From besieged Leningrad he had to be evacuated; it was during this evacuation that the boy learned to play chess."

And it gets worse: "Boris happily went in for sacrifices, although he made a few incorrect sacrifices. As a player he was in general more intuitive than calculating, classical rather than irrational, and practical rather than analytical." I doubt many grandmasters would characterize themselves as "irrational." Or again: "Combining fashionable and little-known schemes, Spassky acquired the habit of playing numerous typical positions." Well, duh. Doesn't every grandmaster? Every club player?

Regarding Spassky's second match with Petrosian, the authors claim, "Thanks to the efforts of these [Spassky's] trainers, for the first time in the history of such events [the World Championship] the match abounded in theoretical duels." This is just wrong. Capablanca-Alekhine 1927 was a theoretical duel over the (Orthodox) Queen's Gambit. Several of Tal's remarks in his book on the 1960 match state clearly that he as well as Botvinnik prepared for a "theoretical duel."

There's no need to belabor this point. The reader can skip the biography and go right to the chess problems, the heart of the book.

Here, I want to return briefly – and one last time – to the comparison with McDonald's book on Spielmann. McDonald states: "After a biography that includes Spielmann's best games and a discussion of his style, the remaining chapters have been organized according to themes, such as an examination of Spielmann's handling of a certain piece or a specific attacking method. A lot of complete games as well as extracts have been included so that you can get the 'big picture'."

Raetsky and Chetverik have a different aim: "In this book we have selected Spassky's best tactical finishes to give the readers a chance to improve their tactics. Studying the creativity of a great world champion by this method is, we believe, the best way to achieve improvement."

Thus the goals of the books differ: one gives us insight into the style, the uniqueness, of the player while also teaching concepts. The other is a puzzle book. Certainly the authors are right that studying the play, not just the tactics, of the great masters, particularly the world champions, will or ought to improve one's own play. But studying tactical puzzles doesn't necessarily give us insight into the style, the uniqueness of the player.

And after going through these puzzles, I didn't feel I knew Spassky any better than before. I

didn't sense that in this position Spassky would play differently than Tal or Botvinnik.

But what of the puzzles themselves? Is the book more than just a "White to move and win" collection?

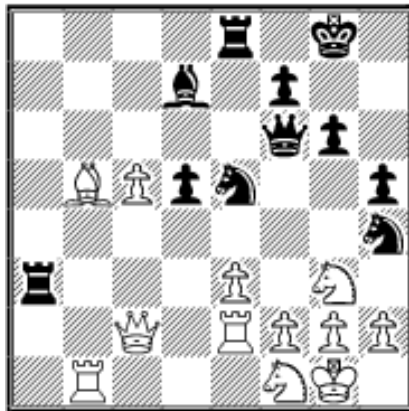
Yes and no. To understand why, we have to look at five factors: the chapter organization, the comments to the puzzles, the hints, the "games collection" at the end and, of course, the puzzles themselves.

The chapters are as follows:

- Introduction
- 1 Boris Spassky: A Short Biography
- 2 Warming Up
- 3 A Greater Depth
- 4 It's Time to Calculate
- 5 Up Another Level
- 6 The Very Best of Spassky
- 7 Endgame Legacy
- 8 Retaliation
- 9 Missed Opportunities
- 10 Tips
- 11 Solutions to Puzzles

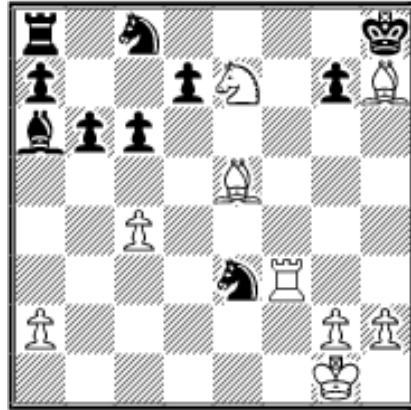
It seems impolite (to be euphemistic) to conclude a book meant to celebrate Spassky's achievements with two chapters that emphasize Spassky's defeats (Retaliation) and his opponents' oversights (Missed Opportunities). These can be included, but why not place them before chapter 6 or chapter 7? Also, if the authors want the reader to progress tactically, to go from the easier problems of chapter 2 (Warming Up) to the legend defining positions of chapter 6 (The Very Best of Spassky), these just don't seem to fit the pattern.

Further, I don't think the chapter always indicates the difficulty of the puzzle. For example, in this position from Chapter 4, It's Time to Calculate:



Puzzle 57 Andruet-Spassky, Bundesliga 1988, Spassky played 28...Qf3, which forces mate (29 gxf3 Nxf3+ 30 Kh1 Bh3 and White cannot defend against ...Bg2 mate).

But is that more difficult to find than the winning move in this position from Chapter 3, A Greater Depth?:



Puzzle 37 Spassky-Hübner Munich 1979 Spassky played 28 Bg6. After 28...Nxe7, 29 Bf7 leads to 30 Rh3 mate.

I'm not sure. I don't think it matters too much, because the authors really aren't giving you a way to measure your progress. (For example, Igor Khmel'nitsky's [Chess Exam and Training Guide](#), among other works, does give you a way to assess your strengths, weaknesses and progress.) The book is a collection of "Find the Winning Move" positions, tactical puzzles like the ones you find in Andy Soltis's column in *Chess Life* or in an

old Al Horowitz book *Winning Chess Tactics Illustrated* (or Laszlo Polgar's massive [tome](#)). There are, of course, many such books, and now computer programs, on the market. This one just happens to use only Spassky's games. More on this at the end.

Raetsky and Chetverik do offer comments on each position, something that many authors of tactics puzzle books don't. The quality and usefulness of the comments vary, though, from the insightful to the obvious to the banal. Here's a sampling:

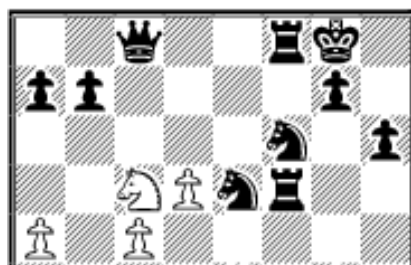
- Puzzle 7: The e4-bishop dominates. How can Black immediately exploit this factor?
- Puzzle 16: Though his position is pleasant, White still needs to prove his advantage. How did he do so?
- Puzzle 22: Can you spot Spassky's killer blow?
- Puzzle 31: White is better and now forced a king hunt after some inaccurate defence. How did that attack begin?
- Puzzle 43: Does Black have time to defend c4 before capturing on d6?
- Puzzle 55: Spassky has organized his pieces in a manner that paves the way for an attack. What did he do next?
- Puzzle 66: The side with an IQP must usually attack. How did Spassky do so?

These last two illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. If one looks at the position in puzzle 55, it's obvious Spassky is attacking. But the comment to puzzle 66 points out an important feature – the IQP – that the reader might overlook. (Of course, this assumes the reader knows what an IQP – Isolated Queen Pawn – is.)

I found that the authors' need to end every comment with a question soon became tedious and irritating. I also would have preferred some consistency: either the comments should provide the historical context of the game or they should point to the salient features of the position (or both). In fact, doing the latter might have been a way to increase the difficulty as one went along: begin with some clear directions of what to look for in the early chapters, reduce the guidance in the middle chapters, and then present the puzzles without comment (or only historical background) in the final chapters.

The same problem plagues the "Tips" – hints provided in case you get stuck. Now, before giving some examples, let me acknowledge that providing tips that nudge the reader but don't give away the answer can be quite difficult. Here are a few positions and their "Tips":

Puzzle 35 Hodgson-Spassky, Brussels 1985



Black to play.

Spassky had played incorrectly, but the young Englishman did not find the correct defence. Suddenly there was a tactical chance for Spassky, but where?

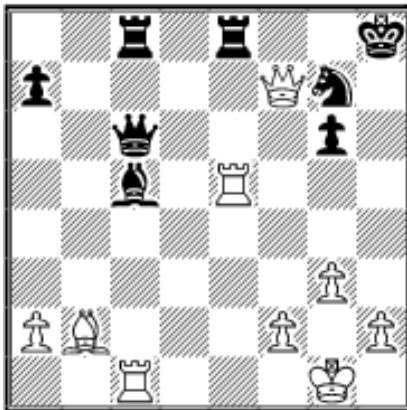


Tip: Black has a sudden strike.

No kidding?! Isn't that what a "tactical chance" is?

But then there's this:

Puzzle 68 Portisch-Spassky, Santa Monica 1966



Black to play.

It appears that Black is in dire straights, but he saved the day with a tactic. Can you also avoid defeat here?

Tip: Black desperately needs to remove the b2-bishop.

An average player should, from the tip, be able to find Black's moves: 29...Bxf2+ 30 Qxf2 (30 Kxf2 Qb6+) 30...Qxc1+ 31 Bxc1 Rxe5 32 Bc2 draw.

One bad tip, one good one.

Here's a few more. Even without the diagrams, you can judge their usefulness:

- Puzzle 16: It is useful to have a solid grip on the only open file.
- Puzzle 45: Try to look deeper than White has.
- Puzzle 58: Don't get too focused on the b-file?
- Puzzle 69: Simple will do!
- Puzzle 70: There's nothing wrong with reaching a winning endgame.
- Puzzle 95: Spassky never liked to retreat!
- Puzzle 96: It's all happening on the dark squares.
- Puzzle 110: There's a neat way to finish.

You get the idea.

Chapter 11 Solutions to Puzzles contains not only the solutions but the complete game scores because, the authors state, "we know that a lot of readers like to see how certain positions have arisen." The annotations are very sparse, almost non-existent before the critical, puzzle position is reached. Even afterwards, the authors say no more than they deem necessary to get us to the end of the game.

Since the book does not purport to be an analysis, in-depth or otherwise, of Spassky's games or style, the authors can hardly be faulted for being minimalist here.

So we arrive at the puzzles themselves and the justification for the book. The authors intend the reader to improve his or her tactics by studying "the creativity of a great world champion." About the puzzles, "some will be fairly easy to solve, others rather hard, but all should help to improve your tactical vision and calculating ability."

Yes, of course. But is this the most efficient way to do so? Is making your way through 150 positions from Spassky's games better or equal to using a computer program to test one's knowledge of certain motifs? Is it better than other puzzle books, ones that don't just present puzzles but help the reader see and learn those "typical patterns" Spassky mastered?

In other words, who is the audience for this book? If you want a good biography of Spassky – well, at least here you'll find some facts you won't find elsewhere. If you just want a collection

of Spassky's games, you can find them on the Internet. If you want tactics exercises, you can get an interactive computer program or books designed to be part of a training program.

And yet, this book, like Spassky himself, has a beguiling charm. The language irritations, for instance, bespeak an earnestness and an investment on the part of the authors. Spassky knew what becoming world champion involved; he knew what playing Fischer meant. Similarly, it seems to me that Raetsky and Chetverik understand the significance of Spassky.

The book is reasonably priced and easy to carry around. (The case for my MacBook has a front pocket for a mouse and power cord and a back pocket for a small folder. It fits in there neatly.) I can see taking it with me when I travel, for instance. I can test myself according to my mood, how hard I want to work on a chess problem. If I don't feel like reworking one of the problems, I can play over the games of one of the greats.

In a lot of ways, the book reminds me of its subject. Spassky was simultaneously a master of the initiative and lazy, a complex man full of contradictions: a fierce competitor yet a gentleman, ambitious yet ambivalent, innovative yet retreating to the routine.

As I said at the outset, any book that helps us appreciate Spassky deserves our thanks – and consideration.

[Order](#) *Boris Spassky: Master of Initiative*
by Alexander Raetsky & Maxim Chetverik

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