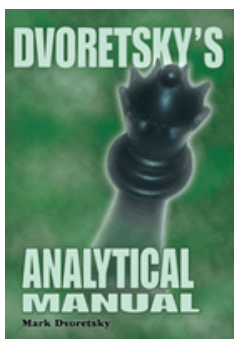




## BOOK REVIEWS

### From the Archives

Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



**CHESSTHEATRE**

Play through and download  
the games from  
[ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) in the  
[DGT Game Viewer](#).

[The Complete  
DGT Product Line](#)

## From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

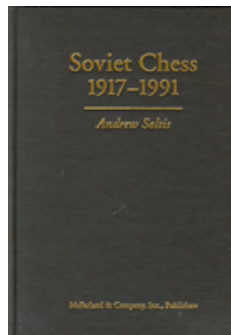
Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

## Recounting the Course of Empire

by Taylor Kingston

*Soviet Chess 1917-1991*, by Andrew Soltis, 2000 McFarland & Company, English Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 450pp., \$65.00

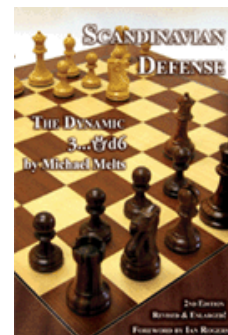
When discussing chess at the national and international level, rather than in terms of individuals, the most important episode in the game's history was, almost unarguably, the rise and fall of the Soviet chess empire. From meager beginnings after the Communist Revolution of 1917, state-organized chess in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) made rapid progress in the 1920s and '30s, leading to decades of world dominance by its players after World War II. While “Soviet chess” per se ended with the political dissolution of the USSR in 1991, its impact continues today and likely will for years.



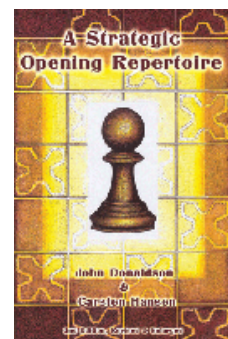
American grandmaster Andrew Soltis is a prolific but somewhat uneven writer. His works on openings have ranged from forgettable small pamphlets to respectable full-length treatises. He writes a popular monthly column in *Chess Life* magazine, and has produced a wide variety of instructional books. While his column (“Chess to Enjoy”) and some of his books (e.g., *Karl Marx Plays Chess*) tend to the lighter side, on occasion Soltis becomes more ambitious, as with his [Frank Marshall: United States Chess Champion](#) (1993), a lengthy, serious historical work.

*Soviet Chess* is perhaps his most ambitious work to date. It attempts nothing less than a detailed account of chess over the entire 75-year history of the Soviet Union: the players, organizers, administrators, theoreticians and composers, and the major social, economic, political and military events that affected them. In the introduction Soltis states his theme: “What Made Soviet Chess?”. He asks how did a nation with

Check out these  
bestselling titles from  
[ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com):



[Scandinavian Defense:  
The Dynamic 3...Qd6](#)  
by Michael Melts



[A Strategic  
Opening Repertoire](#)  
by John Donaldson  
& Carsten Hansen



[Tal-Botvinnik 1960](#)  
by Mikhail Tal

relatively low levels of literacy and education, schools that “stressed memory and conformity,” and an economic system that “discouraged enterprise and ... could not make a decent pair of shoes,” a nation horrendously ravaged by two world wars and its own internal political upheavals, manage to produce “the most successful sports machine the world has seen.”

Not a small question, and to Soltis’ credit, his ability is on the whole a match for his ambition. He handles a potentially overwhelming subject with skill and reasonable depth, turning what could easily have been a sprawling, jumbled mass or a superficial sketch into a well-researched, coherent narrative that tells its story in a very informative and interesting manner. It is a sort of scaled-down chess equivalent of Shirer’s *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, i.e., erudite enough to qualify as serious history, but still accessible to a wide readership. Though it is not without flaws, it is a fine and significant piece of work.

I will try to summarize Soltis’ account and convey its flavor. The story begins actually in late 1918, when Russian “cultural life had nearly been extinguished” by war and revolution. With a civil war still going on, organized chess is brought back to life by the efforts of Alexander Ilyin-Genevsky, then further advanced by the politically powerful and ruthless Nikolai Krylenko, who secures government and Communist Party support for chess, and pursues the twin goals of mass popularization (“Take Chess to the Workers!”) and “big chess,” i.e., grandmaster-level international competition. By the mid-1930s probably half the chessplayers in the world are Soviet citizens, and from this huge pool top-level talent appears. Contact with Western chess circles is re-established with the Moscow tournaments of 1925, 1935 and 1936, but except for a few such as Botvinnik, Soviet masters remain little known in the West. They, like the rest of the population, suffer greatly during World War II, but immediately afterward the hitherto unknown Soviet chess machine bursts onto the world stage, winning everything in sight, from junior Olympiads to men’s and women’s world championships. This dominance continues for decades. It is briefly broken by Fischer, then reasserts itself, but gradually declines, though a concentration of resources behind world champions Karpov and Kasparov somewhat hides the erosion. The once smoothly-running machine starts to break down with increasing political instability and increasing resentment. Under Gorbachev’s *glasnost* Soviet grandmasters realize that the political machine that has supported them has also limited and exploited them, and they see that they may have more in common with their Western counterparts than with it. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 the centralized institution called “Soviet chess” ceases to exist, but its effects continue today.

In describing all this, Soltis skillfully shifts his focus between the big and the small, the broad and the narrow, alternating discussion of social, economic, political and military trends with individual biography and details of human interest, adding annotated games at appropriate points. Some examples of the big picture:

“As [Krylenko] put it later during the government’s titanic drive towards industrialization: ‘We must organize shock brigades of chessplayers and begin immediately a five-year plan for chess.’ It was Krylenko’s plan to sell chess to the government as an ideologically safe form of relaxation ... for the Soviets ‘chess was a dialectical game illustrating ... Marxist modes of thought.’” (p. 25)

“The trade unions reinforced mass-chess. By the 1930s every *profsoyuz* had a team with 28 registered players ... Matches on 100 boards pitted major universities with scientific institutes ... Moscow’s massive Likachov Motor Works eventually had 26 different sports clubs, but the chess club ... was the largest.” (p. 58)

“But none pointed out what Averbakh has said was the real reason for the Soviet decline in the late 1950s and early 1960s: World War II. Players

born after Spassky (1937) and before Karpov (1951) grew up deeply affected by the war ... What the *vlasti* were panicking over was a 'missing generation' that would have reached its prime in the 1960s" (p. 247).

Soltis familiarizes the reader with some important Russian terms, such as *profsoyuz* (trade association or labor union), *vlasti* (political authorities), *sviazi* (connections), and *blat* (the art of quid pro quo). The more successful players use *blat* and their *sviazi* with the *vlasti* to advance their careers. Throughout the book Soltis pays close attention to the connection between chess and politics in the USSR, both at the general level, such as the strange persecution of problem composers during the terror of the late 1930s, and the personal, e.g., "Before Botvinnik went to Holland he exercised his *telefonnoye pravo* (telephone right), the ability to call up a high-ranking official to ask a favor. Knowing the right people – or just knowing their telephone number – was an enormous power in a nation where public telephone directories were virtually unknown." (p. 121).

We learn much about the complications of "navigating through the byzantine Soviet hierarchy," and about corruption in the system, both major and petty, such as players who received free airline tickets being forced to trade them for cheaper fares so that bureaucrats could pocket the difference. We also learn of the grudges and rivalries (e.g., Botvinnik vs. Veinstein, Korchnoi vs. Petrosian and wife), and constant infighting behind what Soviet propaganda tried to portray as a monolithic structure.

The high-level views are balanced with personal detail and vignettes of human interest:

"A chief complaint [at the first Soviet Championship in 1920] was the food. Alexander Sergeev recalled them as 'scanty Red Army rations.' The first course was usually herring head soup. The second, herring tails. 'Where the middle of the herring went we never succeeded in establishing,' Levenfish wrote in his memoirs." (p. 13)

"Besides chess, beer, and bridge, [Bogolyubov] had no interests, and Panov said he lived the comfortable life of a well-fed hamster." (p. 28)

"Holding rounds in halls adorned by Rubens and Rembrandts would add a unique flavor to [the 1935 Moscow international] tournament. But the museum director was appalled by 'such a "profanation" of the cathedral of art' ... [he] declared the chessplayers would get inside ... 'only over his dead body.' That was a condition Krylenko could easily have satisfied." (p. 83-84)

Soltis relates many anecdotes, some deeply tragic: "During the terrible winter of 1941-42, starvation and exhaustion haunted the streets of Leningrad ... When a rescue party ... reached the [Pyotr Romanovsky] house there was almost nothing in it but books and notepaper. The furniture had been used for firewood. The only person alive was the 49-year-old Romanovsky, half-conscious ... Every so often he had gotten up to check on the verandah where the frozen bodies of his daughters and housekeeper lay." (p. 142). Though harrowing, this particular tale does have an uplifting sequel: "While recovering at the Ivanovo sanatorium [Romanovsky] met the woman who became his second wife and the mother of his second family of children. She helped give him the strength to live another twenty years." (p. 151). Other anecdotes are more amusing, such as the time Tal and Korchnoi went out for drinks at a Havana nightclub. Tal paid a bit too much attention to a Cuban woman and got knocked cold by her jealous boyfriend.

Soltis' biographical notes put a human face on many players known to western readers mainly as names of opening variations, e.g., "Rauzer was, in a word, strange ... so pale 'he was almost an albino' ... [he] seemed unable to deal with many problems of everyday life. He was absent-minded and careless but monomaniacal about chess ... [he was] determined to refute the Sicilian Defense and prove that the French was

not quite sound.” Or “Ragozin’s long ears, long face and ‘coarse facial features’ struck him. It was ‘as if Mother Nature began to shape his physiognomy but was interrupted ...’ Botvinnik wrote.” This aspect of the book is enhanced by sixteen pages of photographs, including one of Ragozin’s interrupted physiognomy.

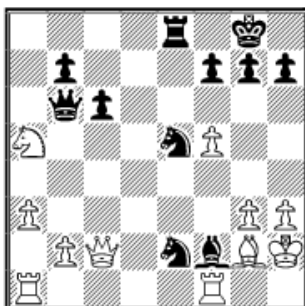
Soltis is careful to create a sense of continuity, relating the players of one era to later generations; for example, “But to his students Romanovsky was a deity and his influence was measured in decades ... It was Tolush (born 1910) who eventually adopted Romanovsky’s love of combinations and tactics and passed it on to *his* students, principally Boris Spassky.” (p. 30)

Aptly placed throughout are over 230 lightly annotated games, illustrating a given player’s style, a development in theory, or a key point in a match or tournament. Soltis claims that “perhaps fewer than half of the games ... in the first 10 chapters have been published outside the Soviet Union.” This may not be accurate; randomly checking about twenty games with a database I found a match more often than not. However the games are generally not well known to non-Russian readers, and are for the most part highly interesting; for example, *Popov-Riumin*, Moscow Championship, 1930: **1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 Qb3 c5 5 Nf3** “The Nimzo-Indian was very young in 1930 and the defects of trying to maintain the center were not clear. Here 5...Ne4 equalizes quickly.” **5... Nc6 6 e3 0-0 7 Be2 b6 8 0-0 Bb7 9 Nb5 d5! 10 a3 Ba5 11 Rd1 a6 12 cxd5 exd5 13 Nc3 c4 14 Qc2 b5 15 b4 Bc7 16 e4** “White has drifted into a bad position and faced a strong attack after ...Re8 and ...Ne4.” **16...dxe4 17 Nxe4 Nxe4 18 Qxe4 Re8 19 Qc2 Qd6 20 g3 Qd5 21 Be3 h6 22 Qd2 Re6 23 Re1 Rf6! 24 Kg2 Kh7 25 Qc2+ g6 26 Qd2?**



“Once he obtained the initiative, Riumin was deadly. ‘Attack was his poetry,’ Udovich wrote.” **26...Rxf3!! 27 Bxf3 Qxf3+! 28 Kxf3 Nxd4+ 29 Kg4 Bc8+ 30 Kh4 Nf3 mate.** Riumin, another of the many lesser-known Soviet masters discussed, was considered a potential rival to Botvinnik, but he died at age thirty-four.

Here is another example, from a then young, aspiring would-be master, who decades later would become president of the Soviet chess federation: *Mikenas-Averbakh*, Moscow Championship, 1943



**27...Ng4+! 28 hxg4 Qe3 29 Rxf2 Qxg3+ 30 Kh1 Qh4+! 31 Bh3 Qxf2 0-1**

Soltis strikes a good balance, naturally emphasizing major figures such as Krylenko, Botvinnik, Kotov, Keres, Bronstein, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Karpov, Korchnoi, and Kasparov, but not neglecting innumerable important lesser figures: Model, Zubarev, Rokhlin, Blumenfeld, Romanovsky, Verlinsky, Bohatyrychuk, Tolush, Kholmov, to name only a few. He also takes a balanced view in assessing the overall impact of the Soviets on world chess. He notes their many contributions to all phases of the game, particularly opening theory, but he also examines the negatives: the many cases (known and alleged) of collusion and other forms of cheating, the depression of financial rewards for non-Soviet players created by Soviet policies, the hidden political machinations, etc. Questions of major scandals often raised in Western circles (for example, possible coercion on Keres and Bronstein, collusion at Curaçao 1962, etc.) are well examined, though usually without definite conclusions (except for Curaçao guilty as charged).

The book does have some minor shortcomings. It is well proofread, but a few glitches crept in, such as the sentence “Smyslov was one of the tallest of grandmasters, with ... a slow-moving gate that exuded dignity and calm” (p. 215). One hopes the gate did not interfere with Smyslov’s gait. Page 148 correctly says Smyslov won the 1943 Moscow Championship, but the crosstable shows Botvinnik on top. Soltis never mentions the brief period, circa 1917-19, when the Communist Party discouraged or at least disdained chess; how Ilyin-Genevsky overcame this would have made an interesting story. The middle of the book, covering the late 1940s and the 1950s, deals well with individuals, but lacks some of the broader perspective attained in other chapters, and could have done more to examine Soviet political moves within FIDE. Some noteworthy figures, such as Jacob Yukhtman, a promising talent whose career was curtailed by official disfavor, get perhaps less mention than they deserve. The book itself, though handsomely cloth-bound in sober black with gold letters, might have been much more appropriately clad in flaming Bolshevik-martyr red with a hammer and sickle, and perhaps a dust-jacket with an illustration in the style of Socialist Realism.

Soltis has sometimes been criticized (by Edward Winter for one) for not naming his sources. However, Soviet Chess is well documented, its eight pages of notes and bibliography detailing hundreds of sources, mostly Russian, ranging from old issues of *Shakmaty v SSSR* and *64*, and memoirs of early figures such as Ilyin-Genevsky and Bohatyrychuk, to newly unearthed KGB files and recent books by Kasparov and Karpov. The writings of Vasily Panov and Sergei Grodzensky are particularly prominent. However, there is one curious omission: Mikhail Kogan, an important historian of Russian and Soviet chess. He is mentioned once in passing, but none of his works (e.g. *The History of the Game of Chess in Russia* (1927), *Short Notes on the History of Chess* (1931), *Notes on the History of Chess in Russia* (1937)) are in the bibliography.

Another source is perhaps under-used or under-acknowledged: British historian David J. Richards’ *Soviet Chess: Chess and Communism in the U.S.S.R.* (Oxford University Press, 1965). This hard-to-find book is a more formal, academic-style work than Soltis’, rather like a doctoral dissertation, strictly historical, containing no games. Yet re-reading it I find enough similarities that it is hard not to see it as a spiritual precursor, much as the novel *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin was a forerunner of George Orwell’s *1984*. While Soltis does list Richards’ book in his bibliography, he makes only two minor references to it. He would have benefited by having a few more, as Richards’ book is strong in the few areas where Soltis’ is weak.

This is most apparent with Soltis’ main thematic question, “what made Soviet chess?”. In the preface he says they “somehow had discovered methods of thinking about chess that seemed to exist nowhere else,” leading the reader to expect an eventual explanation of what those methods were. Did the Soviets dominate, as Karpov claimed, “simply because we have such a lot of people playing chess,” or was it something

else? Was the game's great secret somehow discovered as a corollary of Marx-Leninism? Is it simply that if a society esteems and supports chess, talent will develop? Was the discipline and regimentation imposed by the Soviet system a requisite spur, or did Soviet chess thrive because this was one area where freedom of thought was permitted? While Soltis gives us a great deal of relevant material and some partial answers, he states no definite conclusion, which leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied, especially since Soltis posed the question in the first place. Richards, however, did conclude that there were characteristic Soviet 'methods of chess thinking' and discussed them at length. It seems odd that Richards, not a player of any great note, would attempt this, while Soltis the grandmaster does not. Perhaps Soltis considered and rejected Richards' arguments, but in that case the book would have been enriched by a discussion of his reasons.

However, I do not wish to stress this point overly much; if the dessert Soltis serves is not quite sweet enough, he still gives the reader a gourmet meal. *Soviet Chess 1917-1991* is an important and excellent work, strongly researched, well organized, and intelligently, insightfully and engagingly written. It covers a major chess era in a way that will entertain the casual reader, reward those seeking interesting games, and deeply engross the serious student of chess history. I consider it well worth the price and recommend it highly.

---

[Order](#) *Soviet Chess 1917-1991*

by Andrew Soltis

---

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE  
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)  
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)  
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

© 2009 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.  
"ChessCafe.com®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.