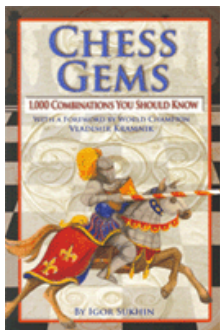




BOOK REVIEWS

From the Archives

Hosted by Mark Donlan



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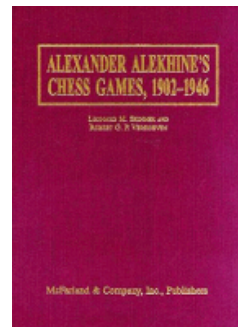
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Portrait of a Colossus

by Taylor Kingston

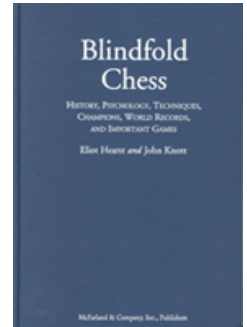
Alexander Alekhine's Chess Games, 1902-1946 by Leonard M. Skinner and Robert G. P. Verhoeven, McFarland & Co., 1998, Hardcover, Algebraic Notation, 807pp. \$125.00.

Over fifty years after his death, Alexander Alexandrovitch Alekhine (1892-1946), world champion 1927-35 and 1937-46, continues to fascinate the chess world. It is a measure of that fascination that a book such as this should appear.

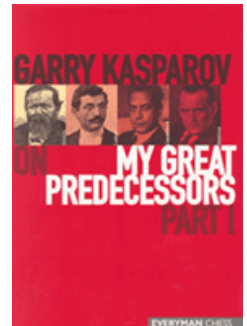


A massive work, comparable in size and weight to a large Encyclopaedia Britannica volume, *Alexander Alekhine's Chess Games* is the product of years of research into a vast array of sources, ranging from books by and about Alekhine, to innumerable library, newspaper, and magazine archives; from notebooks used for correspondence chess by Alekhine as a child, to the memories of aged Russian émigrés in Detroit and shogi players in Japan. There are 2,543 games, of extreme variety: grandmaster tournaments and world championship matches, training games, thematic experimental games designed to test specific openings, local club games, postal games, consultation games, simultaneous exhibitions, alternating simuls (where Alekhine made every other move, switching with a non-consulting partner), blindfold exhibitions, alternating blindfold simuls, clock simuls, blitz games, odds games, even a frivolous offhand game where each side made two moves in a row. These are organized chronologically, and divided into chapters representing important phases of Alekhine's career. Each set of games is accompanied by a narrative, usually brief, some more lengthy as appropriate, explaining the circumstances, historical setting, and significance, along with the occasional colorful or noteworthy detail.

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Alexander Alekhine

The result is one of the most extensive, perhaps the most extensive portrait ever of a chess master's life work – in some cases practically a day-to-day record of his existence as it related to chess (and Alekhine's existence related to little else). The emphasis is decidedly on games: the ratio of pages devoted to games and annotation, to pages of narrative, is about eight or ten to one. The narrative assumes a broad scope when discussing the most important episodes, such as major tournaments or world title matches, but otherwise it is closely focused on recorded fact as it relates to specific events. It presents many little-known items of interest to historians and chess players in general. A few examples include the following:

Alekhine had a brother, Aleksei Alexandrovitch, a good but not great player. Thus there were two chess-playing A. A. Alekhines in Russia at the same time, leading to some confusion for historians. Unlike Alexander, Aleksei remained in Soviet Russia, and later lent his name to Communist Party denunciations of his brother.

In 1908 Alekhine, age fifteen, played a match against Curt von Bardeleben, famous for an incident at Hastings 1895, when he walked out and forfeited to Steinitz rather than allow him to finish playing a brilliant combination. Alekhine drubbed von Bardeleben +4 =1 -0. In 1913, Alekhine won, by +7 -3, a match against S. M. Levitsky (apparently the same Levitsky who lost to Marshall in the famous "Gold Pieces Game"). There were two odd features to this match: one, it was required that games begin 1.e4 e5, but the Spanish Opening and the Four Knights were not permitted; and two, it may be the first example of Alekhine falsifying a game score. From the diagrammed position, Alekhine, Levitsky, Match, 3/12/1913



Alekhine in his book *My Best Games 1908-1923* shows himself concluding brilliantly with 26.Re1 Qh8 27.Qe3 Rd8 28.Nxe5 Kf6 29.Nxg4+! Bxg4 30.Qe5+ 1-0. However, the actual continuation was **26.Qg5+ Ke6 27.Qe3 Qh8 28.Re1 Rd8 29.Nxe5 Kf6**, reaching a position identical to that just before 29.Nxg4+ in the first line, but here contemporary sources show that he in fact played the more prosaic **30.Nf7 Qf8 31.Nxd8**, winning the exchange and eventually the game in fifty moves. This retroactive

falsification to show himself in a better light was to occur several times in

Alekhine's annotations, perhaps most dramatically in the famous and apocryphal "Five Queens" game. Interestingly, *AACG* shows a game of verified authenticity, against Edward Lasker in London, 1913, involving four queens.

Alekhine nearly missed the important St. Petersburg tournament of 1914, the event that first brought him to major international attention. In a preliminary qualifying tournament, Alekhine trailed in the last round but caught a break when the leader lost to an also-ran. Had this not occurred, World War I might well have delayed Alekhine's emergence for at least five years, perhaps forever.

In the famous game "Alekhine-Feldt," one of five in a blindfold display at a Russian military hospital at Tarnopol in 1916, Alekhine's opponent was actually not "Feldt" but a Dr. Martin Fisher, according to one Leon Stolcenburg of Detroit, who grew up in Tarnopol and who was present at the display. For those not familiar with this game, from the diagram



White won with the surprising **15.Nf7!! Kxf7 16.Qxe6+! Kg6 17.g4! Be4 18. Nh4 mate.**

In the immediate aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, chess was officially discouraged in Russia as a "decadent bourgeois pastime." This policy obviously was later revised.

A "candidates match" between Alekhine and Rubinstein almost occurred in March 1922. The winner was to be recognized by world champion Capablanca as the number-one challenger. For unclear reasons the match never took place.

The antipathy between Alekhine and Capablanca was fueled in part by a sophisticatedly catty, sour grape-laden 1927 article, wherein the Cuban made involved excuses for his loss in the world championship match and subtly denigrated Alekhine's talent. Capablanca continued this high-handed attitude in later negotiations for a rematch, still referring to the world championship as "my title." Whatever the full story may be concerning their soured relationship and the lack of a title rematch, it is clear Capablanca is not without blame.

During a 1934 world tour, at simulms in Morocco, Alekhine consented to play by Arab rules, in which castling and pawn promotion were different, and the board was set with kings facing queens and a black square at the lower right corner. No games or total scores are given, but it is said he did very well under the unusual rules.

While Alekhine is considered by some a collaborationist for playing in Nazi-organized tournaments, any pro-Nazi sentiment he may have felt was much dampened when they "scientifically looted" his chateau while overrunning France.

The narratives are not all equally interesting. The chief money-maker for masters in those days was the simultaneous exhibition. Alekhine played a great many, perhaps over 1,000, and all that are known are dutifully mentioned in *AACG*. The brief descriptions of these quickly become rather repetitive. There is not much variation one can work into the formula of

"Alekhine sailed for [country] on the S. S. [ship], arriving on [date] at [city]. There, as the guest of [local chess official] he stayed [n1] days, playing [n2] simultaneous exhibitions. In the first of these, held at [venue], he played in front of [n3] spectators on [n4] boards, including [n5] blindfold, scoring [n6] wins, [n7] draws, and [n8] losses, an average of [n9] %." Given the subject matter and the book's intent as a serious and comprehensive reference work this repetitiveness is virtually unavoidable.

By the way, there is no mention of an oft-retold story that Alekhine once smashed his hotel room furniture after a loss that cost him first place in a tournament. This pot-boiler nonsense is still making the rounds (I saw a recent on-line newsgroup posting that alleged he did it after every loss!). It should be laid to rest. Another myth, still believed in some quarters, that Alekhine never or only once played Alekhine's Defense (1.e4 Nf6), is thoroughly refuted: dozens of games where he played the line are shown.

While the narratives provided are very good, I feel in some cases they should have been expanded. Some historical controversies are left unsettled, in particular the matter of the anti-Semitic articles appearing under Alekhine's name in the 1941 *Pariser Zeitung*. These are briefly mentioned, but not elaborated on, let alone discussed thoroughly. Priorities seem a bit askew when much more space is devoted to the Feldt blindfold game than to this serious historical issue.

Since the book is not intended as a biography *per se* (the foreword, by Alekhine's son, states "The private life of Alekhine will not be found in this book"), there is little discussion of the controversial aspects of Alekhine's psychological makeup and character. Nonetheless, a good many glimpses come through (some of which we have already seen, with the game score falsification). Others are often contradictory. For example, Francisco Lupi depicts a paragon: "Alekhine [in 1940] delighted the Portuguese chess enthusiasts with his brilliance, his kindness, his constant readiness to help young players, and his work for charity." Yet at a 1929 simul in Barcelona, a "rude and overbearing" Alekhine, "bordering on megalomania," is said to have bullied opponents playing well against him. At a 1929 simul in St. Louis, Alekhine, agreeing to play on a motley collection of non-standard sets, is praised for his "patience and forbearance," yet a 1939 simul in Argentina is "marred by a number of unpleasant incidents" including Alekhine's refusal to face more than twenty-five boards, which forced some disappointed customers to retire without playing. Rather than any factual errors by *AACG*'s authors, or in the original reports, these seemingly contradictory incidents almost certainly reflect the inconsistencies of Alekhine himself, a complex man.

The one overriding constant in Alekhine's life is, however, made totally clear. In the film *All About Eve* actor George Sanders, playing a drama critic, says the memorable line "I live in the theater as a Trappist monk in his faith; I have no other life." For Alekhine, substitute "chess" for "the theater," and intensify the metaphor by several orders of magnitude. Personally, I found just reading the book, and playing over a small sample of its games, to be no small amount of work. To realize that Alekhine actually *did* everything I read about left a deep impression. He lived in and for chess like no one before him, nor any since until Fischer.

The record given in *AACG* makes clear he labored at the game like a worker ant, almost ceaselessly. Picking a year at random one will usually find the texts of about 100-200 games, but these are only the known games. For many of his exhibitions no game scores exist. The accounts of his simuls, compared to the games actually shown, indicate a conservative guess at the ratio of unknown to known is at least ten, perhaps even twenty, to one. This means that at his peak Alekhine was playing at least 1,000 – perhaps over 2,000 – games per year. (This fits with Alekhine's own figure – at age forty-eight he estimated that he had played at least 50,000 games in his life to that point.) Add to this his writing and annotation, his tournament and match preparations, his study of openings and opponents' games, and his self-critical analysis of his own games, and it's clear the amount of work must have been absolutely Herculean. It is one thing to know Alekhine played a lot of chess, it is quite another actually to see this massive pile of games, and know it is only

a small fraction of his total. Since the book is primarily a games collection, some examples should be provided. Finding good ones is not at all hard; Alekhine played many brilliant and famous games. *AACG* gives many that are almost unknown or forgotten but nonetheless also highly brilliant; it is from those I have tried to choose.

As C. H. O'D. Alexander said, "... in playing through an Alekhine game one suddenly meets a move which simply takes one's breath away." A fine example is **Alekhine-R. O'Malley**, blindfold simul, St. Louis, 1924: **1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Bb4 3.Bc4 d6 4.f4 Nc6 5.Nf3 Bg4 6.0-0 Nf6 7.d3 0-0 8.h3 Bxf3 9.Qxf3 Nd4 10.Qd1 Bc5 11.Kh1 ef4 12.Bxf4 Qd7 13.Bg5 Ne8 14.Nd5 Nc6 15.Qh5 Kh8**



**16.Rf6!** The breath-taker. And without sight of the board! **16...Bd4 17.Raf1 Bxf6 18.Rxf6 Ne5 19.Rh6 gh6 20.Bf6+ Nxf6 21.Nxf6 Qe7 22.Qxh6 Qxf6 23.Qxf6+ Kg8 24.Bb3 Rae8 25.h4 Nd7 26.Qf5 Nc5 27.h5 Nxb3 28.Qg5+ Kh8 29.Qf6+ Kg8 30.h6 1-0.** Alekhine was the greatest blindfold player of his time, perhaps of any time.

*AACG*'s comprehensive historical sweep allows one to track Alekhine's development. We see his unimpressive early efforts: **N. Aleksandrov - Alekhine** (age ten), correspondence, 1903: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.d4 d5 6.Bd3 Nc6 7.0-0 Be7 8.Re1 Nf6 9.c4 0-0 10.Nc3 Bg4 11.cd5 Nxd5 12.Be3 Bb4 13.Rc1 Bxf3 14.Qxf3 Nxe3 15.fe3 Rb8 16.Red1 Qg5 17.Bb1 Rfe8 18.Ne4**



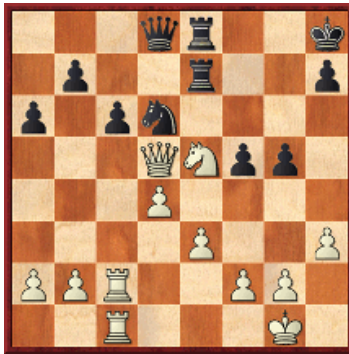
**18...Nxd4?? 19.Rxd4 1-0.** It's hard to say what Alekhine thought he was doing with that eighteenth move.

However, he followed such early stumbling by rapid improvement to master level: **V. Kade - Alekhine**, Moscow, Spring 1908: **1.e4 e5 2.Ne2 Nf6 3.f4 Nxe4 4.d3 Nc5 5.fe5 d6 6.Bf4 de5 7.Bxe5 Nc6 8.Bg3 Na4!** A strikingly original way to refute White's grotesque opening. **9.Qc1 Bb4+ 10.c3**



**10...0-0! 11.cb4 Nxb4 12.Nf4 Re8+ 13.Kd2 Qd4! 14.Nc3 Qe3+ 15.Kd1 Nxc3+ 16.Qxc3 Bg4+ 17.Ne2 Rad8! 18.d4 Bxe2+ 19.Bxe2 Rxd4+ 0-1**

In the years 1927-31 we see the fully mature Alekhine, who did "bestride the narrow world like a colossus": **Alekhine-Rubinstein, San Remo, 1930**



**26.Nxc6! bc6 27.Rxc6 Ne4 28.Qxf5 Rf8 29.Rc8! Rxf5 30.Rxd8+ Kg7 31.f3 Nf6 32.e4 Ra5 33.a3 Rb5 34.b4 a5 35.Rc5! Reb7 36.ba5 Rxc5 37.dc5 Rc7 38.a6** and 1-0 in forty-six.

In the latter years, though, we see a sad decline. Alekhine's percentage in simul, formerly in the ninety-plus range, dropped to seventy or even sixty percent in the mid-1940s. In poor health and almost penniless, he left Nazi-occupied Europe to scratch out a living playing against Portuguese and Spanish masters of no international reputation, and often doing none too well. A terrific inconsistency is evident, flashes of old greatness mixed with debacles such as **Alekhine – F. Lopez Nuñez, Almeria 8/24/1945**



A pawn ahead, White should win, but play continued **25.Rd2?? Ba5 26.Red1 Bxd2 27.Rxd2 Rc8 28.Qa4 Qb4 29.Qxa7 Nc3 30.Qd4 Qxd4 31.Nxd4 Nxa2 32.Ba3 Rfd8 33.f3 Nc3 34.Kf2?? Nb1 35.Rd3 Nxa3 36.b6 Nc2 37.b7 Rb8 38.Nxc2 Rxd3 39.Nb4 Rb3 0-1** If one were given no information besides the moves of this game, one would hardly guess that the player of the white pieces was officially champion of the world.

Naturally, not all the games are of equal interest. For the sake of historical completeness, the authors have included many entries such as **S. Petrov - Alekhine**, correspondence 1903: "**1.a3 d5 2.d4 Nf6 3.Bf4 Bf5 4.e3 e5**, Alekhine withdrew from the tournament," or "Buenos Aires Olympiad, 7

September 1939: Alekhine was rested."

Overall, though, it is a stupendous and fascinating collection. It is exhaustively indexed, by opponent and opening (by ECO classification and descriptive name; i.e., both "D53" and "Queen's Gambit Declined"). Alekhine's complete tournament and match record is given, with full crosstables of all participants where available. Even his won-loss record at every simul is given, where known. This is a massive reference work. Yet it is of interest not only to historians. Playing over the games, many of them with annotations not easily found anywhere else, cannot be anything but instructive.

The book cannot have been anything but a labor of love for its authors: Skinner, a marine scientist from Wales, and Verhoeven, a former chess librarian for the Royal Dutch Library. Among those assisting them were noted chess historians Ken Whyld (*Oxford Companion to Chess*), Edward Winter (*Chess Notes*), and A. J. Gillam (among other things the editor of a delightful series of pamphlets dealing with "forgotten" chess tournaments and matches from *The Chess Player*). This reviewer's erudition is not sufficient to verify some the book's scholarship, but with authorities such as those involved, my confidence in it is high. These days, when anyone with a database and word-processor seems to think he can write a chess book, it is both gratifying and astonishing to see a work of such scope, depth, and quality. Also today, when the chess market is increasingly dominated by opening books, videos, and database software, one must applaud the courage of the publisher: McFarland & Company. I hope for their sake, and the sake of potential future books of similar quality, that AACG finds an appreciable readership. At \$125.00 the price is not small, but the value is there. This book is worth at least ten of today's typical \$20 or \$25 paperbacks, making it a bargain.

There is no master – none – whose games I enjoy more than Alekhine's. If I were to be sent to the proverbial desert island, and could take only one chess book, *Alexander Alekhine's Chess Games, 1902-1946* might well be it.

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**[Order Alexander Alekhine's Chess Games, 1902-1946](#)**

by Leonard M. Skinner and Robert G. P. Verhoeven

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