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ChessCafe.com is pleased to welcome Taylor Kingston as a regular contributor. Taylor is a senior systems engineer by vocation, an avid chess historian by avocation. A national correspondence chess master, he lives with his family in the northeastern United States in Shelburne, Vermont.

The Keres-Botvinnik Case: A Survey of the Evidence Part I

Taylor Kingston

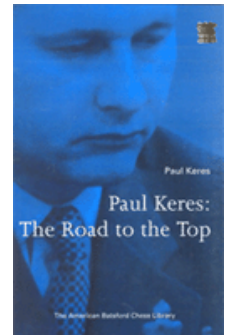
The case of Paul Keres and Mikhail Botvinnik is a chess equivalent of the John F. Kennedy assassination: an unsolved historical mystery full of dark implications, about which conflicting opinions and theories abound. Debate about the case has variously simmered or boiled for decades, and interest in it has recently increased.

Background of the Case

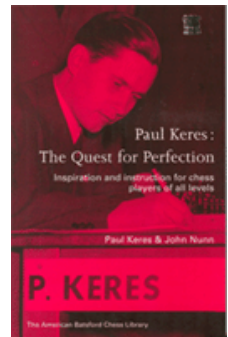
For those not familiar with the case, some background. In the 1930s Paul Keres (1916-1975) of Estonia emerged as one of the top chessplayers in the world. Based on his victory at AVRO, 1938 (then the strongest tournament ever held), he challenged world champion Alexander Alekhine. Title match negotiations were under way in 1939, but were disrupted by World War II. During the war Estonia was seized first by the USSR, then by Germany, then the USSR again.

As a Soviet citizen, Keres’ results dimmed somewhat, as he was continually eclipsed by Botvinnik (1917-1993), strongest of the Russian players. After the war Keres faced the threat of arrest, for the crime (by Soviet standards) of having played in Nazi-organized tournaments during the German occupation of Estonia. He was under virtual quarantine during the investigation. Eventually he was cleared, but he got no match with Alekhine, and was absent from some major post-war tournaments.

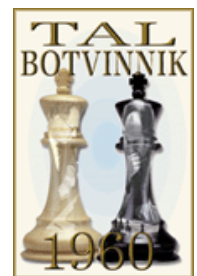
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Mikhail Botvinnik

Alekhine died in 1946, and the Hague-Moscow tournament of 1948 was held to fill the vacant title. Botvinnik (14-6) dominated, ahead of Smyslov (11-9), Keres and Reshevsky (10½-9½), and Euwe (4-16), scoring 4-1 against Keres. In the following years Keres never got a title match, though he came very close, finishing second four times in Candidates tournaments (an unequalled record).

Keres' failure in 1948 gave rise to speculation that he was forced by Soviet authorities to throw games to Botvinnik, who as a native Russian and loyal Communist, was a more desirable world champion by Party standards than the non-Russian, politically tainted Keres. Keres remained virtually mum on the subject, and Botvinnik denied any chicanery in what little he said, but the controversy has never died. Some insist the KGB (Soviet secret police) held a gun to Keres' head, others dismiss this as anti-Communist paranoia, saying Botvinnik was simply the better player.

Seeking Smoking Guns and Sifting through Mountains

Recent articles in major periodicals, discussing newly uncovered evidence, have again raised interest in the Keres-Botvinnik case to a high level. Debate centers on two major questions: one, was Keres indeed coerced to lose to Botvinnik, in 1948 or any other time? Two, if he was, what was Botvinnik's degree of complicity? A suitably dramatic solution would be discovery of a "smoking gun": an incriminating document or a confession from someone privy to the conspiracy. However, none has appeared. Were I a well-funded Russian-speaking investigative reporter, I would be searching for one.

In lieu of that, I have, for over a year, been analyzing every relevant source I could find: books, websites, magazines as far back as 1948, correspondence with international players and journalists. This has meant sifting through mountains of opinion and conjecture to glean a few nuggets of fact, and sometimes finding maddening paradox and contradiction. Yet it has yielded some very interesting results.

Principles and Prejudices

In this, I've tried to adhere to the principle of "innocent until proven guilty." As an American raised during the Cold War era, it would be very easy to let anti-Communist prejudice steer my thinking along stereotyped lines of nice guy Keres versus cold fish Botvinnik, Stalinist avatar of the Evil Empire. Evidence must lead one to conclusions, not vice versa, and Botvinnik must be given the presumption of innocence. We are, after all, discussing allegations which could indelibly taint him with shame and scandal. One should not jump to such conclusions lightly.



Paul Keres

Another caveat. Certainly the totalitarian Stalin regime under which Keres and Botvinnik lived was oppressive and brutal, with overt and covert coercion being standard procedure. Chess was highly politicized and regimented. However, the prevalence of coercion does not prove its role in any particular case. To assert it only on grounds of probability, without evidence, is sloppy and irresponsible, and such arguments would be thrown out of any decent court. The burden of proof is on the prosecution.

The Extremist Viewpoint: Schroeder

Such principles apparently are alien to James Schroeder, who in the 4/96 issue of the British monthly *CHESS* espoused the most extreme view I have found on the Keres-Botvinnik case. Schroeder, an American from Ohio, accuses Botvinnik of doing “everything in his power to destroy Keres.”

His allegations include: that Keres was barred by Botvinnik personally from postwar tournaments such as Groningen 1946; that Botvinnik was “the only reason why the KGB arrested Keres”; and that the KGB forced Keres to lose not only in 1948, but also in the 1941 Soviet Absolute Championship and in all his later FIDE Candidates competitions (the last of which was in 1965).

This is at best speculation and at worst rubbish. Schroeder’s forays into chess history often exhibit strong prejudice, and are rife with fallacies. To detail just a few from his *CHESS* article:

1) It is well established that Keres agreed to, or had imposed on him, a condition not to interfere with Botvinnik’s attempt at the world title. However, as stated clearly by Hooper and Whyld in *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, this applied only to a match with Alekhine. In 1946 Keres was, by virtue of AVRO 1938, still an official FIDE challenger. He ceded this to Botvinnik, a right which became moot when Alekhine died. Schroeder, however, goes far beyond this, asserting that “The KGB ... told [Keres] he could NEVER become World Champion [nor] win the Candidates Tournament”, for which he cites no support whatever. Nor, as we will see, has the most diligent firsthand research found any.

2) The idea that the KGB “arrested Keres” only at Botvinnik’s instigation is almost certainly nonsense. Firstly, as will be seen, there is doubt that Keres was ever actually arrested. Secondly, his offenses: playing chess for the Germans, and naively making mildly anti-Soviet remarks which appeared in the Nazi press, seem small or excusable in Western eyes, but were serious by the harsh standards of Stalinist Russia, where a hint of disloyalty could mean death. Keres was also suspected of aiding Estonian patriots. During 1945-49 the Soviets “deported” at least 60,000 Estonians, and they were not all rivals of Botvinnik. The KGB needed no prompting

from him to investigate Keres, and again Schroeder cites no support.

3) His assertion that Botvinnik personally kept Keres out of several postwar international tournaments is equally baseless. These were during Keres' political quarantine, and authorities would have routinely denied him permission to travel abroad. In 1945 Keres was not even allowed to go to Moscow for the USSR Championship.

4) The only authoritative source Schroeder cites is a 1995 *New In Chess* article by Valter Heuer (more about which later). Schroeder writes: "Heuer states that Leonard Barden and other masters euphemistically state '... the price for Keres' reprieve from execution was an agreement with Soviet officials not to hinder Botvinnik's ambitions to be World Champion and remain World Champion.'" In fact no such passage exists in the article. Its only similar quote from Barden says "Yet apparently the price for Keres' return was just a vague promise with Soviet officials not to hinder Botvinnik's campaign", which has a very different sense. Note especially his replacing "return" by "reprieve from execution" and his exaggeration of the meaning of "Botvinnik's campaign" (see point #1).

Fabrication? At best, flagrant inaccuracy. Schroeder's article is based more on opinion, perhaps even imagination, than fact. Unless authoritative support surfaces, his views must be regarded as more akin to tabloid headlines like "Elvis was a UFO Alien." Even *CHESS* now disowns him. In response to detailed critique I sent to London, a senior *CHESS* editor admitted that in places "Schroeder is just speculating ... [or] is just wrong," and that publishing the article "was a clear error of judgement."

Somewhat Less Extreme: Evans

The interest of many *Chess Life* readers was rekindled by GM Larry Evans' article "The Tragedy of Paul Keres" in the October 1996 issue. While Evans (mostly) avoids Schroeder's extremes, he finds "little doubt that [Keres] was forced to take a dive." At first I found Evans' case persuasive (explaining two highly laudatory letters of mine written in late 1996 but not published in *CL* until 8/97 and 10/97). Since then my research has raised doubts. Among his supports Evans cites: (1) "Newly opened KGB files"; (2) Schroeder's article; (3) an article by Soviet master Feodor Bohatirchuk; and (4) analysis of Keres' 1948 games against Botvinnik. Let's examine these.

A careless reading might lead one to think that Evans possesses once-secret Soviet documents on Keres. If so, he is not forthcoming about it. The only one quoted, a letter from Keres to Foreign Minister Molotov, was unearthed and published by the aforementioned Valter Heuer. In it Keres begs not to be stigmatized for playing in Nazi-organized tournaments, and pleads for reinstatement as a Soviet grandmaster. Relevant, but not, as Evans implies, directly illustrative of a plot to make Keres throw games.

I asked Evans if he had a "smoking gun," stating clearly the KGB told Keres "lose or we kill you." He admitted (*CL*, 4/97, p. 28) "I doubt such a document will ever surface." He then cited the aforementioned *Oxford Companion* entry: "In return [for official forgiveness] Keres promised not to interfere with Botvinnik's challenge to Alekhine." That, printed in 1984, is nothing new. Its meaning is also clearly narrower than Evans' blanket statement "the price of [Keres'] reprieve was to abandon his quest for the crown." Evans is claiming more than it appears he can document.

Amazingly, Evans mentions Schroeder's *CHESS* claim that Botvinnik barred Keres from Groningen et al. As we have seen, this is like citing a comic book in the Warren Commission Report. I am frankly surprised that Evans would report this unsupported claim as fact without question or comment.

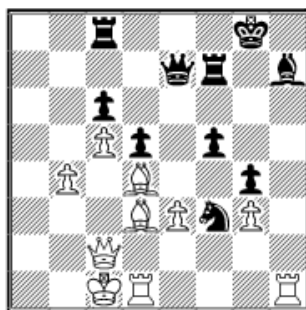


Keres vs. Botvinnik

The Ukrainian Bohatirchuk, writing in *Chess Review* in 1951, is an informed character reference but not an eye-witness. Six times a USSR championship participant from 1923 to 1934, and co-winner in 1927, he had first-hand acquaintance with Soviet chess politics, but he left the USSR during WW II and thus had no involvement in Keres' postwar situation. We will return to Bohatirchuk later, but for now suffice it to say that the Bohatirchuk excerpts Evans gives are not definite evidence; they are rather only an earlier statement of Evans' main thesis: that the low quality of Keres' games against Botvinnik in 1948 indicates a fix. The bulk of Evans' article is devoted to analysis of points in those games which strike him as suspicious. It appears valid, insofar as he finds inferior moves by Keres.

However, inference based on quality of play is highly problematic. Chess is a hard game, and even the greatest players have made horrendous mistakes. Take this position from the 1977 Korchnoi-Spassky Candidates match.

Korchnoi-Spassky
Candidates (13) 1977



Most D-players would see that 32. Bxf5?? Rxf5 33.Qxf5??? Bxf5 is dreadful, yet Korchnoi, a player arguably superior to Keres, did just that. Those seeing conspiracy in this game involving a Soviet defector should note that Korchnoi still won the match. Alekhine and Petrosian each once hung his queen. Nimzovitch and Reshevsky each allowed mate in two, which Rubinstein and Szabo, respectively,

overlooked, and such greats as Smyslov, Bronstein, Gligoric, Short and Yusupov have missed mate in one. Capablanca once hung a piece on move nine.

If coercion is not required to explain these blunders, why must it be invoked to explain Keres' more subtle errors? Coercion can cause bad play, but bad play does not prove coercion. Yet Evans insists that Keres "left a trail in his first four losses [in 1948] for those who are knowledgeable enough to follow it to an inescapable conclusion." Apparently British GM John Nunn, generally considered a stronger player than Evans, is not "knowledgeable enough."

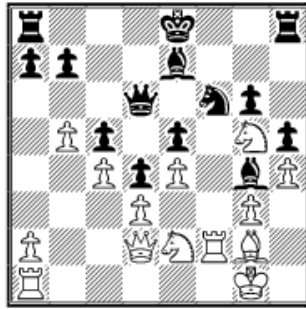
Seeming to reply to Evans in his foreword to [*Paul Keres: The Quest for Perfection*](#) (ICE, 1997), Nunn says "Attempts to analyze the games themselves for evidence of Keres' suicidal efforts ... appear to be misguided" and notes that Vishy Anand, in his 1995 title match with Kasparov, committed two "elementary errors far worse than any committed by Keres in ... 1948 ... and nobody seriously suggests that Anand deliberately lost." Evans said in the 10/97 CL, "Obviously a player of Keres' genius isn't going to make stupid mistakes that are easy to

detect.”

Yet ease of detection was his basis in 10/96 for suspecting Keres’ 21.Re1 in the diagrammed position.

Keres-Botvinnik

World Championship (5) 1948



“Incomprehensible ... 9 out of 10 grandmasters would double rooks by 21. Ra1 without thinking twice.” Evans wants it both ways: obvious errors show Keres taking a dive, subtle mistakes show him using his genius to cover the tracks. In this kind of logic, any and all evidence is interpreted to support an a priori conclusion. I do not agree with recent anti-Evans comments by Chess Life readers, calling his article “wild

charges”, “crackpot theory” and “a fire sale on paranoia.” Evans is raising important issues.

However, by citing Schroeder he uncritically accepts dubious support. In the 4/97 *CL* he disturbingly misrepresents Hooper & Whyld, and later (10/97) Heuer, implying the Estonian supports his conclusion, when as we will see, the opposite is true. His analyses are perhaps necessary to establish his case, but are not sufficient. He admits he has no direct evidence. His conclusion is far from “inescapable.”

Alternate Explanations and Occam’s Razor

Still, Evans is correct that “To put it mildly, Keres didn’t play his best against Botvinnik in 1948,” and one wonders, if not because of coercion, then why? Research suggests some alternatives. One explanation may lie in military history.

Chess masters, like most of us, do best in peace and prosperity. Estonia for decades had little of either. Its recent history runs: 1920-39, independent; mid-1940 to mid-1941, Russian occupation; mid-1941 to September 1944, German occupation; then Soviet occupation until recent years. During these turbulent times, Keres’ chief rivals were Alekhine, then Botvinnik.

A correlation of their games with historical periods is revealing.

Keres vs. Alekhine

1935-39 +1 –2 =5

1942-43 +0 –3 =3

Keres vs. Botvinnik

1938 +0 –0 =2

1940-41 +0 –1 =4

1947-48 +1 –5 =0

1951-56 +2 –1 =2

During Estonian independence Keres’ results against Botvinnik are equal, and nearly so against Alekhine. However, his score dips during foreign occupations, against Alekhine under the Germans, then twice vs. Botvinnik under Russia, finally recovering years later. There are precedents for this.

A reason for Keres’ poor showing against Capablanca in 1921 was his suffering in the aftermath of Germany’s defeat in WW I. Flohr’s decline after 1938 was due to the travails of his homeland Czechoslovakia. That during occupation, a distracted Keres would do poorly against the favorite of the occupying power, is not hard to grasp. If only Communist coercion

explains his decline against Botvinnik, logic requires that Nazi coercion be invoked to explain his dip against Alekhine, but no one has suggested that.

During WW II, Keres and Botvinnik faced different levels of competition. From late 1941 to late 1945 the only top player Keres met was Alekhine; the rest were decidedly lesser masters and a washed-up Bogolyubov. Botvinnik meanwhile stayed keen against fellow Soviet GMs such as Smyslov, Kotov, Boleslavsky, Bronstein, and Flohr. Thus, like Muhammad Ali in 1971, Keres returned to competition out of shape, and his post-war quarantine limited his chances to play back into form.

Botvinnik may simply have had Keres “psyched.” Botvinnik states in “Achieving the Aim”: “Keres had failings which were well known to me ... when his mood was spoiled he played below his capabilities.” When their rivalry resumed in 1947, Botvinnik “resolved with the help of this game [against Keres in the Chigorin Memorial] to rob my main rival ... of his confidence.” (p. 110).

Botvinnik did indeed win, and may have succeeded in “spoiling Keres’ mood” for some time. This again is not uncommon: Lasker had Capablanca psyched at St. Petersburg 1914; Capablanca had Alekhine’s number before 1927; Tal had Fischer’s in 1959. Heuer says “There is no doubt that ... Keres suffered a certain ‘Botvinnik complex’.” Botvinnik also observed that Keres had “a tendency to fade somewhat at decisive moments in the struggle,” or in common parlance he wasn’t a “clutch player.”

Sports history is rife with talented teams and players who can’t or don’t “win the big one”: the Brooklyn Dodgers of the 1950s, the Los Angeles Lakers and the Dallas Cowboys in the 1960s for example. I don’t recall that cries of “Fix!” were raised when they consistently lost to the Yankees, Celtics and Packers, respectively.

Keres was highly variable. Immediately after sharing first with Alekhine at Bad Nauheim 1936, he placed 8-9th at Dresden. After beating the world’s best at AVRO 1938, he next placed only 12-13th against a much lesser field. Hague-Moscow may have been a similar downswing. Finally, as Keres himself said, “Anyone can lose to Botvinnik, he is a very strong player.”

Consider his triumph at Groningen, 1946, ahead of most of the world’s best including many un-coercible non-Russians. To insist that Botvinnik could not succeed without a fix is a very shaky stance. I do not claim these facts disprove coercion, but they do show that many simpler, mundane, non-conspiracy explanations are plausible. Occam’s Razor requires that more complex hypotheses have supporting evidence.

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