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Strategies of the Soviet School

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The Secret Weapons of the Champions, by Adrian Mikhalchishin, DVD, ChessBase 2007, Running Time: 4 hrs, \$34.95

A number of the ChessBase *Fritztrainer* DVDs discuss very specific topics, i.e. [The French Defense](#) or Daniel King's [PowerPlay3: Pawn Storm](#), which covers f-pawn and h-pawn advances.

This DVD, however, covers a more nebulous topic – middlegame strategy. In the introductory video, GM Adrian Mikhalchishin identifies two primary approaches a player should use to improve his or her chess:

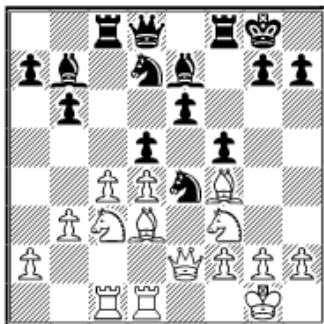
- Carefully analyze one's own games to identify faulty play so that it can be systematically eliminated. If you make fewer mistakes, you will lose fewer games.
- Review classical players from the past in order to learn how to handle typical plans and structures.



In this four-hour DVD, Mikhalchishin demonstrates the second approach, that of observing patterns of great players from the past. Following the introduction, there are four video segments covering Mikhail Botvinnik, two videos discussing the little-known Soviet GM Vladimir Makogonov, five video chapters about Mikhail Tal, and four video lectures concerning Tigran Petrosian.

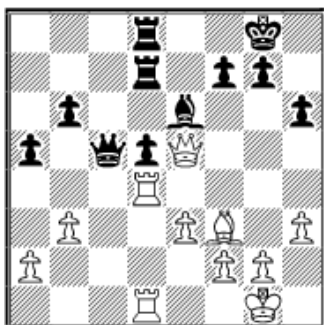
Botvinnik, Tal and Petrosian were all great world champions, but I was not familiar with Makogonov. We'll discuss why he was included in this DVD shortly.

The chapters on Botvinnik cover a variety of positional motifs. First Mikhalchishin presents several games demonstrating how Botvinnik controlled the center with the use of flank moves. For example, the position below occurred in the game Bogoljubow-Botvinnik 1936:



The game proceeded 14...g5 15.Be5 g4 16.Ne1 Nxe5 17.Bxe4 dxe4 18.dxe5, resulting in a strong black pawn at e4 and a weak white pawn at e5.

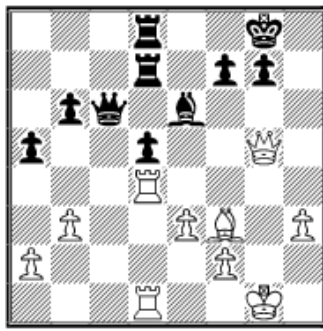
Another important middlegame strategy is the creation of a "second weakness" in the enemy camp, since a single weakness may be able to be defended sufficiently. This is demonstrated in the position below, from Botvinnik-Zagoriansky 1943:



Black has a weak pawn at d5, although it is sufficiently defended at the moment. Mikhalchishin notes that a typical strategy in such positions (isolated pawn attacked and defended by heavy pieces) might be 1.Bg4 Bxg4 2.hxg4 (now threatening 3.e4, exploiting the now-pinned pawn at d5) 2...Qc6 3.e4 dxe4 4.Rxd7 Rxd7 5.Qe8+, winning the rook at d7. However, in response to 1.Bg4, Black can play 1...Qc6, so that if 2.Bxe6, Black retakes with 2...fxe6, protecting the pawn at d5.

Therefore, Botvinnik came up with another plan, that of producing a second weakness. He played 1.g4,

followed by 1...Qc6 2.g5 hxg5 3.Qxg5, producing the following position:



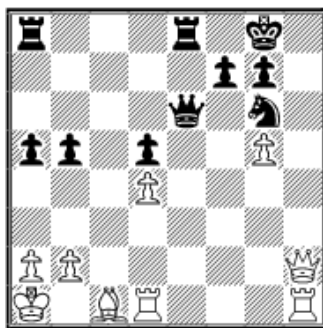
Now Black has a second weakness on the kingside. The g7-pawn has become a target (i.e. with Kh2 and Rg1), and White also threatens Rh4, followed by Qh5, attacking along the h-file. Black was able to defend for awhile, but Botvinnik's flank attack produced yet another weakness in Black's position. At some point, it becomes too difficult to defend multiple weak points. Black resigned a few moves later.

Mikhalchishin notes that Botvinnik's influence was critical in the development of the powerful "Soviet School" of chess. He was a major influence for such players as Karpov, Beliavsky, Kasparov, Kramnik, Shirov and others.



The next two video segments revolve around Makogonov, who was close with Botvinnik and Vassily Smyslov, and was one of the top Soviet trainers prior to World War II. He's not well known in the West, but at one point Mikhail Botvinnik asked him to help a young player by the name of Garry Kasparov. Botvinnik described Kasparov to Makogonov as a tactical genius, but with major difficulties as a positional player. Makogonov agreed and began working with Kasparov.

Relevant to this DVD is the Makogonov method known as "The Principle of the Worst Piece." This rule states that in a position in which there are no direct threats (from either side), it is necessary to spot the worst-placed piece, and try to improve it or exchange it. As an example, Mikhalchishin presents the following position from Galliamova-Prokopcuk 1999:

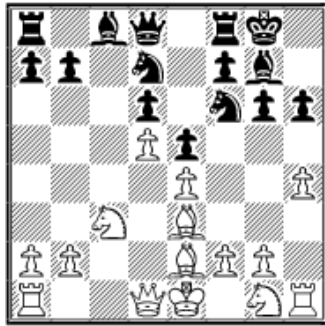


It is White to move, and Black has no immediate threats on the board. Applying the Makogonov Rule, White identifies the bishop at c1 as her worst-placed piece and decides that it would be better at d6, via f4, threatening Qh7#.

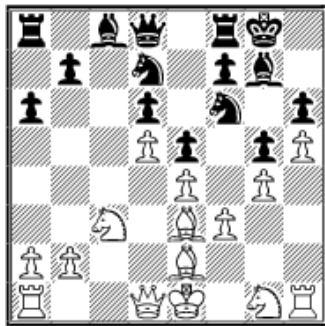
Therefore, White played 1.Bf4, and Black responded 1...Ra6 to prevent the bishop from going to d6. Play then proceeded 2.Be5 Kf8, at which point the Makogonov Rule can be applied a second time. The white rook at d1 is not contributing much, and could be much more effective at e1. White actually played 3. Qh7 and eventually won, but 3.Rde1, inspired by the Makogonov Rule, would have won immediately.

Following the two Makogonov video segments come five chapters devoted to the play of Mikhail Tal. One of his strengths was to create complications by producing unbalanced positions (i.e. exchanging a rook and pawn for two pieces). Multiple game segments are reviewed to demonstrate when such a strategy may be advantageous. One small error I noticed occurred when Mikhalchishin was presenting the game Ribli-Tal, from round nine of the 1985 Candidate's Tournament. The problem was that Mikhalchishin kept mentioning "Tal," but the score sheet displayed Botvinnik as the black player in this game. It doesn't detract from the message imparted in the video, but I was distracted enough to stop the DVD and check my databases to verify that the game actually was between Ribli and Tal. Oddly enough, the forty-game database contained within the DVD does identify the game correctly as Ribli-Tal, even though Botvinnik's name is displayed in the relevant video segment.

The final part of this DVD contains four chapters devoted to Tigran Petrosian's "white square strategy." This involves strengthening one's own white squares, while exploiting the weaknesses of the opponent's white squares. Mikhailchishin notes that Bronstein explained that this ultimately means attacking the opponent's pieces on the black squares, where they are typically located when his white squares are weak. To apply Petrosian's white square strategy, commonly one places both pieces and pawns predominantly on the white squares. An example will help to clarify:



This position comes from the game Petrosian-Schweber 1962, after the first ten moves. With his two central pawns already on white squares, Petrosian applied his white square strategy and play continued 11.h5 g5 (resulting in a weakness at f5 for Black) 12.f3 a6 13.g4, when we reach the following position:



White is completely dominant on the central and kingside white squares.

13...b5 Black is trying a bit of white square strategy of his own on the queenside. 14.a4 b4 15.Nb1 a5 16.Nd2 Nc5.



An important moment, according to Mikhailchishin. He notes that Petrosian was not afraid to trade a bishop for a knight, so play proceeded 17.Bxc5 dxc5 18.Bb5. Petrosian now has a passed pawn at d5 and expects Black to try to blockade it with ...Ne8, followed by ...Nd6. This is why Petrosian played 18.Bb5, in order to capture the knight at e8, even at the cost of removing a second bishop.

Play continued 18...Bb7 19.Ne2 Ne8 20.Bxe8 (there goes the knight!) 20...Rxe8 21.Nc4 Ba6 22.Qb3



Notice how many white squares are now occupied or controlled by white pawns and pieces. Petrosian began an attack on the c5-pawn, went on to win two pawns and ultimately the game.

In summary, the DVD teaches:

- Botvinnik's strategy of central control via flank moves and the importance of creating a second weakness.
- The Makogonov Rule of the "Principle of the Worst Piece."
- Tal's strategy of creating complications by producing unbalanced positions.
- Petrosian's white square strategy.

Teaching effective middlegame technique can be notoriously difficult once basic tactics exercises have been exhausted, but Mikhailchishin has done a nice job of providing practical positional advice, particularly Makogonov's "Principle of the Worst Piece" and the well-known idea of creating a second weakness. Although Mikhailchishin speaks with a heavy Russian accent, his English is quite good. There were moments in which moves were shown so quickly

that it was difficult to properly assimilate the action, but, of course, the beauty of DVD learning is that it is easy to replay those sections that need reviewing.

I recommend *The Secret Weapons of the Champions* as a good buy for most class players.

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by Adrian Mikhalchishin

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