



COLUMNISTS

## *Hoisting the Hippopotamus*

Lev Alburt & Al  
Lawrence



## The Books that Came in from the Cold

It's a cold-war spy story complete with smuggled documents detailing closely guarded state secrets. But neither British-intelligence trained agents nor CIA operatives were at the vortex of this international espionage, nor was nuclear armament the subject of the purloined documents. In 1977 a Soviet chess master brought to the West the official, secret plans that were key to what is arguably the Soviet Union's one true success story—its methodically constructed and undisputed supremacy at the chess board.

### **Power to the pawns**

The secrets go back to the Bolshevik beginnings, soon after the fall of Czar Nicholas in 1917. Nowadays we think of Russia as having been the pre-eminent chess power forever. Before the Soviet regime and its brutal efficiency in implementing its goals, however, Czarist Russia was just one of several nations that nurtured chess culture. Certainly, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Poland, France, England, as well as the United States, and Cuba all had claim to chess glory. In fact, the participants of the great St. Petersburg invitational tournament of 1914, declared by Nicholas himself as the world's "grandmasters," included just two "Russians," Moscovite Alexander Alekhine, and Latvian Aaron Nimzovich.

### **Chess mastery by edict**

Soviet chess hegemony began as a top-level directive, launched soon after the Communist revolution of 1917 and the consolidation of Bolshevik power in 1921, to spotlight the new Soviet culture. Lenin played chess, partly as a sign of his intellectualism. Even the semi-educated Stalin let it be known that he played. Nikolai Krylenko, a trusted Lenin operative even before World War I who was promoted to Supreme Commander of the Soviet army, as well as Ilyin-Genevsky, Krylenko's fellow Military Revolutionary Committee member in the days right after the fall of the czar, both played chess. (Krylenko was to become one of the most important early promoters of chess in the Soviet Union—until he perished, a victim of Stalin's continuing purges.)

### **The ideal Soviet diversion**

Chess was cheap; it would occupy and pacify many of the top minds that might otherwise come into conflict with the party thought. Chess supremacy was formally declared an official cultural goal and was achieved through a dictatorially efficient program that, as always, contained the brutal threat of prison or worse for "dissidents." But as we'll see, the "motivation" included carrots as well as sticks, awarding chess masters a very favorable status and salary. And the more successful the player, the more his or her life improved.

The Soviet schools began to offer chess, as they did a number of other activities—such as basketball, soccer, and gymnastics—as an elective activity, attracting both boys and girls. Only recently have private US nonprofits like New York City's "Chess In Schools" (CIS) program, from its headquarters building at 353 West 46<sup>th</sup> Street, had similar success. CIS touts a long list of reports and double-blind studies indicating chess is good for our young—improving study habits, reasoning abilities, and boosting confidence and self-reliance—in order to gain entrée to schools. The Soviet leadership used a shortcut. They assumed these benefits and simply decreed chess schoolworthy.

Away-from-school chess centers sprang up as well. Aspiring young chess players could enroll in local clubs for free group lessons. The Soviet Sports Ministry underwrote the

salaries for the chess teachers. Paid-for private lessons were technically illegal in the early days after the revolution, since free enterprise was forbidden.

Later, in the 1930s and 40s, lessons of all kinds were broadcast over the radio. During the lunch break at work, factory workers might follow radio instructions to do five minutes of gymnastics. Those at home in apartment buildings had access to radio because one master station was piped into speakers in their dwellings, giving them the opportunity to learn gymnastics, music, chess, or other activities that promoted the Soviet slogan "a healthy mind in a healthy body." On the other hand, golf and tennis were discouraged, seen as pastimes of the bourgeois businessmen of former times.

### **Chess players improve their positions**

By the 1960s, chess masters had an enviable life by the standards of the place and time. It's difficult for an American to understand these Russian basics. Ask Grandmaster Lev Alburt how the housing for the average worker was determined, and he answers, "You lived where you were from." Property rights were reduced to squatters' rights in a feudal system grafted onto dialectical materialism. You were born in an apartment in Moscow, for example, and you lived there with other members of your family as they were born or passed away in what we would call a low-level studio apartment. To determine the number of people sharing a space, the formula of eight square meters per person was frequently used. Several families, or one family if it were well connected, might share a one- or two-room space. Visitors used doorbell codes to summon the right family. Even into the 1970s, telephones were still a rarity, just making their way into apartments. On the other hand, rent was nominal, perhaps five rubles per month.

Salaries were low, and the basics of life were all one could hope for. In the 1970s, a typical factory worker made about 120 rubles per month, while a factory manager or university professor made in the neighborhood of 300. But these professionals had stringent rules to follow and were subject to strict discipline. Additionally, most lucrative positions required party membership. Being a party member required the payment of dues and the obligation to attend meetings. In itself, it was hardly a passport to power. Rather, it was a necessary inconvenience for those in scrutinized positions.

Professional chess players, however, enjoyed an almost unique stature and relative freedom. Even an "ordinary" master with teaching skills could do better than an engineer or physician. Not only were the international-strength players provided coveted private dwellings and paid stipends by the Ministry of Sport, but they also had the rare freedom to travel to foreign competitions, where, if they won a cash, they were allowed to keep half. (The rest was turned over to the Ministry.) Since the prizes were significant by Soviet standards, they had further motivation to excel. And with travel came other important money-making opportunities. In the 1970s, Lev recalls buying a pair of blue jeans in a Woolworth's in Cyprus, paying five dollars (his per diem while on a "cultural visit") and bringing the ubiquitous Western uniform back to the USSR. Although he used them for a gift, they could have been sold for about the monthly wage of a factory worker.

So in the USSR the life of a chess master, especially an internationally competitive one, was enviable, offering a good income, a nicer-than-average home, travel—and comparative freedom not to be under the continual scrutiny of supervisors. A Soviet chess master had the freedom of an artist, with salary and perks greater than the manager of an important factory—without all the headaches and uniquely "red" tape.

### **The first Soviet superman—and his phosphorous**

Even while other Soviet goals of the 1920s failed miserably, the plan to dominate world chess got gratifying results. By the early 30s, the system produced its first truly Soviet chess superstar, as opposed to "Imperial" Russian-hold-over masters. His name was Mikhail Moiseyevich Botvinnik and he won the world chess championship three separate times, a record. He was destined to be the prototype of the chess Soviet

superman for the USSR's fifty-year world domination of the sport.

He was born near St. Petersburg in 1911, so his school experiences were totally Soviet. When it came time for him to enroll in college, his Jewish ancestry was no handicap, but his father's profession was. The rules for college admission were simple and strict. If you were the son of a "worker," a laborer at a factory, for example, you had the wide path to college; there were many spots available at the university. On the other hand, if your parents were *intelligentsia*, perhaps teachers or doctors, the spots available to your societal "class" were strictly and sparingly rationed. Finally, if you were the offspring of *bourgeoisie*, merchants for example, your chances were negligible. Botvinnik did well on his entrance exams to enroll as an engineering student at Leningrad Polytechnic, and he was already seen as a chess luminary, which gave him prestige. His father, however, was a physician.

A prurient and paradoxical aside—years later, decorated scientist and doctor's-son Botvinnik would adopt a theory of "phosphorus preservation" before important chess encounters. He once explained to *Hoist* co-author Lev Alburt that players should refrain from sex before a game, because the act robbed the body of phosphorus, an element crucial to brain processes. (Movie fans may be somewhat reminded of a character on the Western side of the cold war from Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb*. Strategic Air Command General Jack D. Ripper, chomping on his cigar and fondling his pearl-handled revolvers, also worried about the need to preserve his "bodily fluids." We should note that Mad Jack seemed to share no other personality traits with the distinguished World Chess Champion.) *Photo: Preserving his phosphorous—Mikhail Botvinnik at his first game in the US, Tom's River, New Jersey, October 1993.* (Photo courtesy USCF. Photo by E. Steven Doyle.)



Botvinnik did believe in vigorous exercise of *other* kinds before a game, however, such as walking briskly for a half-hour. When Alburt, a young and popular bachelor, explained to his great mentor that it was difficult to resist women and that walking so far before a game made him tired, the Soviet Superman looked at Lev with the pity of the mighty for the weak, the prophet for the proselyte. "Well," he said ruefully, "then try to refrain as much as you can from losing your phosphorous right before a game. And try to walk at least a few blocks."

### **Madison Avenue on the Neva**

Back to serious Communistic matters. When the young Botvinnik was experiencing trouble getting into college due to his father's occupation, Mikhail was fortunate to have the assistance of Jacob Rokhlin. Rokhlin, born in St. Petersburg in 1905, was a young chess master himself, although a bit older than Botvinnik and certainly no future world champion. But he was a grandmaster of the brash, imaginative and compelling style that his American counterparts were contemporaneously using to sell lakes full of Coca-Cola and warehouses full of Lucky Strikes. Rokhlin's "product" was chess. He wanted to sell Botvinnik to the University.

Rokhlin met personally with the chancellor, extolling young Botvinnik's virtues and arguing that he would be a catch for any college, that in future years such an alumnus would be a trophy. The chancellor wanted to admit Botvinnik, but pointed out that he was helpless in this matter. The rules were clear. There were only a few spots for applicants from offspring of the *intelligentsia*. If Botvinnik were a worker's son, there would be no problem, he said. But he's a doctor's son. Rokhlin listened, and then expansively explained away the problem as if it were all a byproduct of the chancellor's

misunderstanding of the big picture. Then it's solved, Rokhlin replied—because Botvinnik's father is really a "doctor-worker"! He ministers to the workers!

One can picture the chancellor behind his desk, trying to cope with the flimflam of this misplaced, one-man Madison Avenue. Finally, the university official folded, nodding and making a note in his admissions book: "Botvinnik—doctor-worker." Botvinnik was admitted and earned both university and later professional honors—for his work with chess and computers.

### **The well-Red Lenin**

Earlier, it was Rokhlin who used his promotional talents to further support chess as a cultural goal. He dreamed up the now famous slogan, recently imported even to the US as a chess promotion, "Chess is the gymnastics of the mind," in keeping with the Soviet ideal of sound minds in sound bodies. But without billboards, radio commercials or sound bytes, the phrase couldn't do much good as a mere saying of Rokhlin. So he decided that Lenin said it. After all, Lenin liked chess; it sounded believable. What *Lenin* said would be quoted in the newspapers at no charge. But Rokhlin knew that the truly important newspapers would need corroboration of such an utterance by the great man. So Rokhlin went to the editor of a small, local newspaper and planted the story. He clipped the article and took it to a meeting with the editor of a regional paper. Then he took that clipping to a meeting with a Pravda reporter. Pravda disclosed that Lenin had stated the great truth. The sentence became legend.

### **A rising tide raises all Potemkins**

During the years following the Bolshevik revolution up to the fall of the Soviet Union, chess remained a point of pride and a high priority. Chess coaches throughout the vast country would continuously develop new pedagogical techniques. Local ministries would conduct seminars, where the most successful trainers were invited to present their ideas. Regional ministries would do likewise. Ultimately, the papers and recommendations would be sent to the Chess Division of the powerful Soviet Ministry of Sports, in our terms a cabinet-level authority. Here the materials would be examined, and the official curriculum would eventually go out to all corners.

Year after year, the lessons were refined, and their results more and more successful. The USSR boasted a million registered tournament players and the longest list of grandmasters from one country anyone had ever seen. Such success produced more and more expertise and motivation, and thus bred even greater success. (A rising tide raises all Potemkins.) There was no question that the state had reached its goal. In fact, the Soviet chess juggernaut was so overwhelming that a special match was arranged in 1970. It's still known by the official, descriptive name the organizers gave it: USSR versus the Rest of the World. This was no false bravado. The best players from the West scrambled to get on the "Western All Star" side of the tables. Even Bobby Fischer wanted to play so badly that he ceded first board to Denmark's Bent Larsen, whose long record was the best of any non-Soviet, and whose recent victories led some to see him as the great West hope. The Soviets, with a team of five world champions, won with a score of 20.5 to 19.5.

### **US Congress plays a key role in smuggling out the documents**

The curriculum of the Soviet chess course was an important state document, the underpinning of an arduously developed and fantastically successful program. To anyone forced to grow up under the ominous shadow of Stalin's cruel paranoia, the consequences of being caught attempting to spirit these precious course materials out of the country would be terrifying. In 1977 Master Roman Pelts, a prominent chess coach, had applied to immigrate to Israel. Doing so had been the only successful path to freedom for some Jewish citizens of the USSR with relatives, real or fictitious, in Israel. This breakthrough program during the Nixon administration was the result of prominent pressure from the US in the form of the Jackson-Vannick amendment that required the Soviets to loosen their emigration rules in exchange for being awarded Most Favored

## Nation Status.

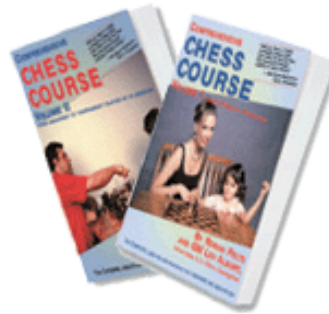
Characteristically, the Soviet bureaucracy purposely refrained from providing clear guidelines for successful application for such emigration. Simply applying for emigration had severe consequences. The applicant would lose his job immediately and become a cultural pariah. Pelts lost his opportunity to earn a living for his family. If his application were not granted, he would join the ranks of the other "refusniks" who languished in limbo and even in prison.

As it turned out, Pelts' got permission to leave. As he boarded his plane to the West, in his luggage was all he would take from the Soviet Union. Hidden among his clothes and treasured photographs was the condensation of 50 years of Soviet chess training secrets.

Pelts eventually settled in Canada, where he took up residence first in Montreal and then in Toronto. In 1979 he entered the US Open in Chicago. At that tournament was Pelts' former pupil and former USSR chess grandmaster Lev Alburt. Alburt had recently defected while playing in a tournament in Germany. Pelts told Lev about the materials the teacher had safely tucked away in Montreal, and the two men began to plan the logical, last step in the journey of the secret documents, their publication in English.

The material became the foundation for Lev Alburt's now famous *Comprehensive Chess Course*, whose first volume was published in 1986 and whose seventh and final volume was published earlier this year. The *Course*, now read all over the world, has been translated into languages as unlikely as Thai, and, perhaps just as improbably, has infiltrated nearly all mainstream bookstores, selling more than 100,000 copies to date.

Soviet chess intelligence has come in from the cold to a warm Western welcome.



The chess instruction distilled during nearly the entire period of Soviet cultural development, from the Revolution to 1977, served as the foundation for Lev Alburt's *Comprehensive Chess Course*. Material in volumes I and II were first published in 1986.

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All seven volumes of Lev Alburt's *Comprehensive Chess Course* are available in [The Chess Cafe Online Store](#).

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