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Alekhine’s Odessa Secrets: Chess, War and Revolution
Sergei Tkachenko

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# TIMELINE OF POWER IN ODESSA AND ALEKHINE’S VISITS

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION: DISCOVERING CHESS SECRETS!

Dear Reader, you have in your hands a new book by the wonderful chess composer and historian Sergei Tkachenko, an Odessa native. It contains an account of the part of fourth world champion Alexander Alekhine’s life that was connected to Odessa and Odessites.

Each sentence in Sergei’s book reflects his great love for his hometown. The author is driven by his immense desire to establish the historical truth of those events where the great Russian chess player took center stage.

I found this book so fascinating that I read it virtually non-stop! Not only did I learn about previously unknown episodes of Alekhine’s life, but I was also introduced to long-forgotten Odessa chess players who were colleagues of the future chess king. They helped to found the famous Odessa chess school that would provide the world with a slew of outstanding grandmasters, including Efim Geller, Vladimir Tukmakov, Lev Alburt, and Konstantin Lerner.

Yet Sergei’s book is not limited to historical sketches. It also analyzes little-known games played by Alekhine from the time he spent in Odessa. Several of them struck me with the beauty of the combinations so typical of the world champion.

I am sure that you, dear Reader, will feel as much pleasure reading *Alekhine’s Odessa Secrets: Chess, War and Revolution* as I did!

Boris Gelfand

*Rishon LeZion, December 2017*
FOREWORD TO THE RUSSIAN EDITION: A NEW CHESS HISTORIAN!

Do not be misled by the title of this book – Alekhine’s Odessa Secrets: Chess, War and Revolution. It’s absolutely true that the events center on Odessa (what else could you expect from an Odessite in love with his home city?). Yet this book’s subject is much broader than that. In a nutshell, you are holding a repository of well-known, barely known and completely unknown facts about the life of the first Russian world chess champion, which we put together to answer questions that had troubled generations of Alekhine biographers.

Sergei Tkachenko has spent years digging deep into this rewarding subject, painstakingly piecing together evidence found in Odessa archives (some of which are not usually open to the general public), studying old newspapers and magazines, and talking with historians, including experts on Odessa. I remember his excitement as he led me on a tour of the “Alekhine” places in the city. His eyes sparkled, his hair waved in the autumn wind, and his voice, filled with strong emotion, seemed to bounce off the cobblestone streets! It was a pity that I was the only one taking part in the tour, and not thousands of Alekhine fans. I was more than enthusiastic about Sergei’s idea of making a film where he would act as the guide and take viewers along the same route that he had once shown me.

The book you are holding in your hands is also a historical film of sorts. Only it is written, rather than shot, and just like any decent film, it contains the key effect of presence. In fact, you can sense the author’s training as a stage director: he knows how to build intricate stage settings, create a unique atmosphere, not to “overload” (his word!) the act, and, what is extremely important in historical research, to preserve the intrigue and keep the momentum going. He knows that a book should never be boring – otherwise all of the writer’s efforts at research, discoveries and creativity will be in vain.

It’s not for nothing that I mention historical research. Over the eight years that I have known Sergei Tkachenko (we started by corresponding with each other), he has grown from an enthusiastic novice historian into a fine pro. And all this without forgetting his main pursuit in life – composing chess problems and studies, in which he is a world champion. I very much hope that his achievements as a chess historian will reach similar heights. Indeed, Sergei has all the tools needed to succeed: the doggedness of an ore miner and the ability to dig deep, unearth and then process an incredible volume of information. I am particularly enamored by his desire to get to the truth and find original sources, which, to my mind, differentiates between a pro and an amateur. I can even guess where Sergei got his passion. It’s closely related to a chess composer’s desire for perfection!

This is certainly not the first time that I have edited Sergei’s books. I’ve seen firsthand how he improves with every book, and not only his literary skills. After all, it’s not enough to find an unknown fact. You need to think it through and add it to the historical narrative. Yet few people are capable of doing this. So lots of people collect facts but only few can effectively interpret them... It’s just so wonderful that we have a new chess historian!

Sergei Voronkov
Moscow, May 2016
CHAPTER 1
THE TRIP THAT NEVER HAPPENED

LOCKED UP FOR THE FIRST TIME

It’s known that Alexander Alekhine took three chess tours to Odessa, the first of which began in spring 1916. In fact, though, another visit was planned, but it never took place...

In summer 1914, Alekhine played in an elite tournament in Mannheim, Germany. With six rounds to go he was the clear leader with 9.5 out of 11. But then World War I (as it subsequently became known) broke out and the tournament was called off. The organizers declared Alekhine the winner and awarded him the first prize of 1,100 DM.

History has preserved the group photo of the players and organizers from that tournament. This rare photo also portrays a person with whom fate would reunite Alekhine at the end of 1918, in Odessa. Indeed, the most intriguing story of the world champion’s entire Odessa period involves this man. Who is he? I’ll keep it a secret for now!...


The tournament winner was unable to return to his native land, since Alekhine and ten other Russian chess players were arrested and interned as citizens of an enemy state.

Soon after their arrest, an order was issued to release all of those prisoners deemed unfit for military service. The chess playing prisoners all took a medical. Alekhine was one of the lucky ones. He managed to convince the German doctors that he was indeed unfit to serve and got released. Just two others shared his good fortune: Petr Saburov, the Chairman of the Russian Chess Union, and Fedor Bogatyrchuk, who was playing in a side tournament.
Here, though, I will digress slightly, to tell the reader what chess life looked like in Odessa at the time. Otherwise you will find it difficult to understand why Alekhine took to visiting Southern Palmyra so frequently.

Well, let’s start from the beginning! Chess was popular amongst Odessa’s founding fathers. This is eloquently described by the local historian Alexander Mikhailovich de Ribas in his article “Chess Life in Old Odessa” published in the magazine *Southern Light (Yuzhny ogonek)* in 1918:

*The French were the first people to play chess in Odessa. The Duke of Richelieu’s entourage included a number of people who would visit the Café de la Régence in Paris (a famous café which in the 18th and 19th centuries was the center of chess in Europe – S.T.) and who had watched the great Philidor play there.*

Local chess players in Odessa would meet up in a building which Baron Reno had constructed specially for popular entertainment, and they would often play in tournaments there (the building housing the Rossia insurance company is now at the same address). Richelieu’s friend Sicard would play there, as would the deaf friar Labdan and both Rochechouart brothers. Their partners included the Austrian consul Tom, my grandfather Felix de Ribas, Richelieu’s aide Stempkovsky and many others. When Princess Maria Antonovna Naryshkina visited Odessa in 1811, the Duke of Richelieu treated her like royalty, which a close friend of Emperor Alexander deserved. The younger members of high society, led by the Rochechouart brothers, made a huge effort to entertain the Princess, her ladies in waiting, and her young daughter Sofia. They arranged parties, picnics in the countryside, cavalcades, balls, and musical soirées.

*The peak of their inventiveness was when they arranged a grandiose chess ball in Reno’s house. Odessa’s entire high society took part in this festival, separated into two camps: black and white. Each had a special costume tailored, either in black or white. Some dressed as kings or jesters (reflecting the French word for “bishop” – S.T.), others as rooks or queens. Children were dressed as pawns by their mothers. The floor in the grand hall was decorated in squares to resemble a chess board. The elder Rochechouart, Louis, was the master of ceremonies. Once all the chandeliers and oil lamps were lit and the guests assembled, Louis waved his baton, two opposite doors opened, and sixteen live chess pieces entered the hall from each side. Naryshkina was the white queen, while the beautiful Sofia Potocka was the black queen. The kings were Richelieu and Duke Potocki-Szczesny. The costumes were opulent. The operatic orchestra played amusing marches and the chess pieces stepped in tune, following the instructions of two people dressed up as court musicians on stilts.*

After all these animated movements, in which the children dressed as pawns were particularly active, the game ended quite unexpectedly – both sides won! The black queen took the white king prisoner, while the black king, Richelieu, surrendered to the white queen, Naryshkina.

*Chess was mostly played at the Commercial Casino (where the Ashkenazi banking house now stands). Later, they played at the house of a Frenchman called Othon. Pushkin and Tumansky, and later Mitskevich and Gogol, all visited his restaurant. Whether or not they were familiar with our game I don’t know. (Yes, they were! – S.T.). They then moved on to Novak’s restaurant, where Odessites also played chess. And later still – this was now in my time – they played at Lassan’s patisserie on Richelieu Street and at Zambrini’s place in the Palais-Royal.*

Actually, the chess ball described here was not the first in the city. One had already been held there in 1808 – a chess-themed masquerade ball. Here is the description of this event by another of Richelieu’s aides – his nephew Duke Leon Rochechouart:

*Upon the agreed signal two magicians entered the ballroom from opposite doors, thrashing around on stilts. Six pages dressed in white and another six decked out in black unraveled a huge rug in the form of a chess board. The fanfare sounded, and the doors swung open wide, from one of which the black king emerged hand in hand with the black queen. They were followed by two officers (reflecting the word for “bishop” in some languages, including in Russian chess slang – S.T.), two cavalrymen, two rooks and eight pawns, or soldiers, all dressed in black. Each “piece” took its starting position on the chess board as the rival army, dressed in white, entered the room from the opposite door and took up its places vis-à-vis the black pieces. The two magicians played the game with the live pieces. They would touch the pieces with their magic wands and the pieces would then make their move, abiding by the rules of chess. Development was followed by attacks, defense and the capture of one of the kings, with check and*
mate declared. This performance was highly praised, which it deserved due to its originality and perfect execution.

Actually, it wasn’t only for its “live” chess that Southern Palmyra was famous in its early years! One of the first poems about chess to appear in Russia was Gakrab (“The Battle”), written in Hebrew by the poet and teacher Yakov (or Jacob) Moiseevich Eichenbaum, who spent some time living in Odessa. The poem described chess rules and theory and relates a sharp game with an elegant finale. Gakrab was first published in London in 1839. Eight years later it was translated into Russian and published in Odessa. It was very popular among chess fans – five print runs were issued of the Russian-language edition alone!

Mikhail Stepanovich Bezkrovny, a well-known chess organizer and sponsor in the Russian Empire and friend of Mikhail Chigorin, was born in Odessa in 1840. He began studying at St. Petersburg University in 1857 but then left for Paris for health reasons, where he completed his education at the Mining Institute. Bezkrovny played a lot of chess in Paris, winning several tournaments at the Café de la Régence. After returning to Russia, Bezkrovny threw himself into organizing chess. He was one of the founders of the Society of Chess Lovers in St. Petersburg in 1869.

The establishment of the Odessa Chess Society in 1900 was a landmark event. At this Society’s invitation, one of the strongest masters of the time, David Yanovsky, visited Odessa that November. He gave a series of simultaneous exhibitions over the course of a week in the city council building. Odessites beat him in seven of the 44 games and drew another three. At the closing banquet, Yanovsky praised the strong level of local chess players.

It’s also worth noting that Mikhail Bezkrovny’s younger brother – Vladimir Stepanovich – became chairman of the Odessa Chess Society in 1901. That same year, the Society invited Chigorin to give a number of simultaneous exhibitions in Odessa. However, Chigorin was unable to visit our city due to his tight tournament schedule.

Local newspapers also had chess sections. The most serious column was probably in Odessa News. Its publisher and chief editor, Alexander Solomonovich Ermans, added a chess and checkers section in June 1900, which was written by the experienced Moscow-based journalist and chess organizer Pavel Pavlovich Bobrov. Six months later, the latter handed it over to a talented Odessa-based journalist and strong player called Leonid Eisenberg. The column’s popularity rocketed! Bobrov later wrote: “During my short time in charge of the chess column (June to November 1900) I had around 120 constant correspondents from various towns in southern Russia (as well as in Romania) sending me solutions to puzzles, suggesting many aspects of theory to explore, sending chess compositions, and so on. No other newspaper where I was in charge of the chess column enjoyed such a wide and dedicated audience.”

The first Odessa Chess Championship was held at the beginning of 1901 on the premises of the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Co. 22 players competed. Three players were first-equal with 18.5 points: Eisenberg, Vladimirov and Zheludkov. No tie-break was arranged, and each winner was awarded a gold coin with the inscription ‘first prize’.

1902 saw the international debut of a local hero. Leonid Eisenberg represented Odessa at a tournament in Monte-Carlo in the dual capacity of player and journalist. He diligently kept Odessa News’s readers up to date regarding the ongoing battles. His result wasn’t fantastic, just 18th place out of 20. That said, his win against the mighty Harry Pillsbury kept the American from claiming first prize. Leonid was awarded 100 francs by Baron Edmond de Rothschild, a big chess fan, for his great victory.

The first major chess tournament held in Odessa was the Southern Russian Tournament of 1909-1910. I will come back to this tournament and its winner, Boris Verlinsky, later in this book.

Apart from Verlinsky, several strong chess players lived in Odessa before the start of World War I: Vasily Vladimirov, Pavel List, Nikolai Laurent, and Yakov Vilner. Portraits of each of them are in this book.

Actually, there were other reasons related to chess that explained why Alekhine was so keen on being in Odessa. I’ll elaborate on them later in this book. For now, however, it’s high time I returned to the main plot!

THE UNUSED FERRY TICKET TO ODESSA
The Foreign Ministry of the Russian Empire watched out for the country’s citizens abroad and started to publish a regular List of Russian Subjects Abroad When the War Began. The second edition of the list contained a report that, as of 3 September 1914, Alexander Alekhine lived in the spa town of Baden-Baden. Indeed, this is where the interned Russian chess players were sent.

After he was freed, Alekhine made his way to Genoa, which was the agreed meeting point for Russian subjects. A ferry ticket to Odessa was then booked for him – but his sea voyage never took place. Due to the threats of naval action in the Black Sea, marine travel was suspended, and the grandmaster, who had sufficient cash on him, set off for the motherland via the more expensive but safer northern route – via France, England and Sweden. Saburov did likewise. Whereas Kiev master Bogatyrchuk, with whom Alekhine whiled away the time in Genoa, decided to wait for the ferry and managed to return to Russia via Odessa.

In fact, it was a miracle that Bogatyrchuk returned via the southern route! “Fate was kind to me, and I made it at the very last minute,” he wrote in his memoirs. “Having got the message that the Dardanelles had been closed, the captain spoke with his superiors and then set off for Thessaloniki. We were told that we had to travel over land through Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria to reach the Bulgarian port of Varna, from where we would sail to Odessa. I have only a dim recollection of that part of the journey. Before embarking at Varna, we had to put on life jackets. Except that this time, the danger was much more prevalent than when we were on the Mediterranean Sea. Fortunately, nothing untoward happened, and we made it to Odessa fairly quickly.”

Indeed, the situation on the Black Sea was mostly quiet at the start of the war, and it was still possible to reach Odessa by ferry. Soon after, however, the neutral Ottoman Empire closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles maritime routes. Both Russian and foreign boats piled up in Odessa, cut off from the rest of the world. Don’t forget that most of the state’s imports and exports were delivered via our city!

The Ottoman Empire’s neutrality was obviously not to Germany’s liking. Everything was done to draw its wavering allies into open warfare. Two German ships arrived in Constantinople in August 1914 – the battlecruiser SMS Goeben and the light cruiser SMS Breslau. By the 16th of that month, both cruisers had been sold to the Turks. SMS Goeben was renamed Yavuz Sultan Selim, and SMS Breslau became Midilli. The sailors remained German, though. The commander of the German Mediterranean squadron Admiral Wilhelm Souchon was suddenly reborn as Pasha Souchon!

In October, the newly-baked Pasha persuaded the Turkish government to attack the key Russian ports of Sevastopol, Novorossiysk and Odessa. It was no surprise that the tense situation on the Black Sea was resolved by military action.

In the dead of night on 29 October, two Turkish destroyers reached the port of Odessa. This daring attack resulted in the sinking of the Donetsk, a gunboat. The Turkish invaders were discovered by a second gunboat, the Kubanets, which launched quick fire against them. Nevertheless, the destroyers didn’t suffer
much damage and, having first cut out their lights, sailed deep into the port. Their aim was to destroy the Beshtau military transport ship and several barges which were fully loaded with mines and mortars. Had the torpedoes hit them, it’s hard to imagine what would have become of Odessa. And whether Alekhine would have ever toured our city.

Later on, Odessa was saved by chance. The port cutter was dispatched after shouts for help from the sinking Donetsk were heard, and in the darkness it crashed into one of the destroyers. The Turks took this to be an attempt to board their vessel, threw grenades at the cutter, and then hurriedly left the port. Once out of the port, they shelled it and the city itself. They managed to damage several haulage vessels, the sugar factory in the Peresyp neighborhood of the city (which, incidentally, belonged to the father of Boris Vainshtein, the head of Soviet chess during World War II), an oil reservoir, and a tram stop on Primorskaya Street. Once again, fate had looked out for Odessa! Several mortars exploded next to the Beshtau without causing any damage. Another hit a coal barge next to it.

And so, although Odessa was meant to be far from the military action, it got a nasty taste of the war.
CHAPTER 2

ALEKHINE’S FIRST ODESSA TRIP

NO GAMES SURVIVED BUT WE HAVE A PICTURE!

In spring of 1916, Alexander Alekhine finally visited Odessa! The grandmaster spent 18 whole days in our city, from 8 to 26 April.

The first chess event in which he was involved didn’t take place, however, until 13 April. Alekhine played a 20-game simul in the Writers and Artists Club to raise money to help Russian chess players interned by the Germans. He scored 17 wins, two draws and one loss.

Unfortunately, nobody saved their scoresheets. But the good news is that a drawing of historical significance has been preserved!

A BLIND SIMUL AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

The next event was held on the evening of 15 April in the same club. Alekhine played a blind simul (or à l’aveugle as it was called then, using the French name). By four-thirty in the morning the grandmaster had won seven games and lost only one. The Odessa Sheet (Odesskii listok) newspaper was quick to report on this unique show:
Yesterday, chess fans had the chance to watch something never before seen in Odessa: 8 simultaneous games played without sight of the board. A row of eight tables with chess boards was arranged in the main hall of the Writers and Artists Club, while Alekhine sat at his own table in the next room, from where he dictated his moves, with nothing more than a cup of tea.

The public packed the hall and observed, utterly amazed, a phenomenon unfathomable to ordinary players, animatedly exchanging views with one another. Ardent discussions were held at almost every table, which ensured that none of the players blundered.

Alekhine preserved four complete games from this exhibition, providing short commentary. They were first published in the magazine Chess Messenger (Shakhmatny vestnik) issues 11-12, 1916. The first game in the collection was against one of the best players in Odessa, Iosif Greenberg. This is what Southern Light wrote about him later in an article (Issue 8, 1918) on participants in the Odessa championship: “I.M. Greenberg. An old Odessite player. He hasn’t played in top-level competitions for many years. It will be interesting to see whether his game has suffered after such a long absence.” The Odessa address book for 1914 states that Iosif Markovich Greenberg owned a well-known photo studio on 13-15 Panteleimonovskaya Street. This was very close to the railway station. I suspect that a historical photo of Alekhine, which is discussed later in this book, was created with the help of the same photo studio.

Let’s now turn to the Greenberg game itself. Alekhine properly commented on the game twice (ignoring two scanty notes in a magazine) – for the Petrograd newspaper New Time (Novoe vremya) on 9 June 1916 and for the Yugoslav Chess Almanac 1939. But the funny thing is that in the Almanac report he changed the ending! His commentary was also quite different. I think that the reader will find it interesting to see how the victor changed his commentator’s “temperature” over time. The post-mortem from New Time is used as the basis of our analysis, while comments taken from the Yugoslav Almanac are labeled “CA”. Comments by the author and Russian editor of this book are in italics – note this explains why, at times, the text in italics in game No 1 contains an evaluation of the position that is totally opposite to that in the non-italicized text.

No. 1. King’s Gambit Declined

ALEKHINE – I. GREENBERG
Blind simultaneous game
Odessa, April 1916
Commentary by Alekhine

1.e4 e5 2.f4 Be5 3.Nf3 d6 4.Bc4 Nc6 5.Nc3. Alekhine would also play 5.b4, explaining this move as follows: “It has the advantage over the same maneuver usually played on the fourth move (as von Bardeleben once played in a match against me), as after 5...Bb6 (accepting the gambit is certainly not to be recommended, in my view) 6.a4 a5 white can play b4-b5 with tempo” (S. Voronkov).
5...\textit{Nf6 6.d3 Na5}. CA: 6...\textit{Bg4} or 6...\textit{Be6} are better and more typical moves here. After the move played and the subsequent exchange, white gains an advantage in the center.

7.Qe2 \textit{Nxc4 8.dxc4 Qe7 9.f5 Bb4}. CA: From this square, the bishop can no longer keep white from developing comfortably, as the move \textit{Be3} is always possible in the future, whereas the knight on \textit{c3} constantly threatens \textit{d5}.

10.Bd2 Bd7 11.0-0-0 a6. CA: My opponent – who, as the game’s subsequent moves indicated, could hardly be called a weak amateur – loses one or two tempos here that he could have better used to complete his piece development. However, his slowness fully reflected the spirit of the times – when I played this game, the importance of tempo in chess was poorly understood.

12.Rhe1 h6 13.h3 Bc6 14.Qd3 Bxc3. After exchanging on \textit{c4}, black has been unable to exploit his opponent’s doubled pawns. White now drums up play using the open d-file.

CA: This is the lesser of two evils – exchanging or allowing the knight to invade on \textit{d5}.

15.Bxc3 0-0-0 16.g4 Kb8 17.b4. CA: A direct attack to try and mate the opponent is an understandable and perfectly acceptable approach in a blind simul. In a tournament game, however, white would probably attempt to gain the initiative on the part of the board where he has an advantage in development, i.e. on the kingside.

17...\textit{Nd7 18.Qe2 b5 19.a4!} With this move, white launches some neat combination play.

CA: Otherwise, black would have played 19...\textit{Nb6} and taken control of \textit{a4} and \textit{c4}.

\textit{The computer doesn’t approve of white’s pawn charge. It prefers an exchange with 19.cxb5, which leads to an approximately equal position.}

19...\textit{bxa4}. 
20.Rd5! A very interesting positional exchange sacrifice, the consequences of which are not easy to work out over the board.

CA: I have noticed on numerous occasions that one’s thought process during blind simultaneous games follows its own, still poorly understood laws. For example, in this game, the idea of sacrificing a pawn with the aim of transferring the rook to the a-file or, if the exchange sac is accepted, sending the knight off to attack the black king, would have required long and careful calculation of numerous variations. Yet I went for this sacrifice almost instantly, intuitively sensing that I would gain plenty of compensation for the exchange.

The computer evaluates this position as winning for black after he gains the exchange (S. Voronkov).

20...Bxd5 (as 21.Ra5 was threatened) 21.exd5. CA: Threatening 22.c5.

21...Kb7 22.Kb2. CA: Not 22.Nd4 due to 22...Qg5+. If now 22...Qf6 to prevent the white knight from invading, then Nf3-d2-e4 etc.

22...Rb8. A poor and pointless move. It would have been more logical to play 22...Nb8 (threatening c7-c5) or 22...Ra8.

23.Nd4! Qh4. CA: This unexpected attack creates reasonable counter-chances; were black to play passively, the white knight would occupy a dominating position on c6, which would soon prove decisive.

24.Nc6 Qxh3. Worried about white attacking with 25.Ra1, Rxa4, c4-c5 and so on, so black decides to return the exchange.

CA: There is obviously no time to save the exchange. Moreover, black now threatens an unpleasant check (25...a3+).

25.Ra1 Nf6 26.Rxa4 Qxg4. CA: Black has not only picked up two pawns but has brought his queen into play.

27.Qf1 (threatening 28.Rxa6 Kxa6 29.Qa1+) 27...Ra8. CA: Thwarting the pawn charge with 28.c5.

28.b5! CA: Tactically speaking, this is the most difficult move in the game. Not because of the actual continuation played, which was not too difficult to calculate, but because of the possible reply 28...Nxd5. The main line that I had prepared was the following: 29.Rxa6! Rxa6 30.bxa6+ Kxc6 31.exd5+ Kxd5 32.Qb5+ Ke4 33.Qd3+ Kf4 34.Bd2#. However, black had a stronger counter to 29.Rxa6 – 29...Nxc3, after which white had to choose between a draw via 30.Na5+ Kb8 31.Nc6+ and playing to win via 30.Qa1 (30...Nd1 + forces a draw). Indeed, this was not such a risky move. After the continuation chosen by black, however, play is forced.

In the main line, instead of the “hospitable” 31...Kxd5?, black could have won after 31...Kb6! However, white was not required to play 29.Rxa6? – the correct continuation was shown by... Alekhine himself in New Time! We can
only speculate as to why he didn’t include it in Almanac. Had he forgotten it? (S. Voronkov).

28...axb5. 28...Nxd5 would have been met by 29 Qh1! White gains the initiative after this: 29 e4 30 cxd5 axb5 31 Rb4 Qf3 32 Qg1 Rhb8 33 Nxb8 Rxb8 34 Qxg7 Qxf5 35 Qd4! with excellent winning chances.

29 Rb4! Kc8 30 c5. CA: Finally opening up a path for the queen to invade the enemy camp.

30 Qg3. In the Yugoslav Chess Almanac 1939 Alekhine changed the ending of the game, which was subsequently saved in Megabase: 30 Qg5 31 Qxb5 Nxd5 (there is nothing better) 32 Qb7+ Kd7 33 Nxe5+ dxe5 34 Qxd5+ Ke7 35 Qxe5+ (35 Bxe5! would have saved white) 35...Kf8 36 Qxc7 (black loses, unable to connect his rooks) 36...Qd8 (black would have won after 36...Kg8 37 f6 Qg1!) 37 Qg3 f6 38 Rb7 Rg8 39 c6, and black resigned.

31 Qxb5. Now black’s position is lost. The game ends with fireworks, which is particularly remarkable as it was played blind.

In reality, black is winning here! (S. Voronkov).

31...Nxd5 32 Qb7+ Kd7 33 Nxe5+ dxe5 34 Qxd5+ Ke7 35 Rb7 Rhb8. Black would have won after 35...Kf6! Now white can force a draw: 36 Qd6+! Ke8 37 Qxc7 Rxb7+ 38 Qxb7, and black should be grateful that he has the saving resource 38...Ra2+ etc. (S. Voronkov).

36 c6 Rxh7+. Committing suicide! As before, he could have won with 36...Kf6, for example: 37 Qd7 Qg1 38 Bb4 Qd4+ and exchanging queens (S. Voronkov).

37 exb7 Rb8.
38. f6+! Kxf6. 38... gxf6 would lose to 39. Bb4+ Ke8 40. Qc6+ Kd8 41. Be7+, and black is destroyed (S. Voronkov).

39. Qc6+ Kf5 40. Qxc7 Rxb7+ 41. Qxb7 f6 42. Qd7+ Ke4 43. Bd2 h5 44. c4.

44... Qd3. This only hastens the inevitable. White threatened 45. Qd5+ and then queening the c-pawn.

In this case, the ‘inevitable’ would have been a draw: 45. Qd5+ Kf5 46. c5 h3 47. c6 Qg2! 48. Qd7+ Kf6 49. c7 Qb7+ and h3-h2 (S. Voronkov).

45. Qxd3+ Kxd3 46. c5! According to New Time, the game ended here. However, in Chess Messenger the game continued for a few more moves:

46... h4 47. Be1! h3 48. Bg3 e4 49. c6. Black resigned.

As is clear from the commentary and series of publications, the grandmaster was proud of this game. Alas, his Odessa ‘favorite’ failed the computer challenge.

In the next battle from this simultaneous exhibition, Alekhine’s opponent took up the challenge and accepted the
No. 2. King’s Gambit Accepted

ALEKHINE – A. VELIKANOV

Blind simultaneous game

Odessa, April 1916

Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5
4.d4 d6 5.Bc4 g4 6.Bxf4 gxf3
7.Qxf3 Nf6 8.Bg5 Be7 9.0-0 Nbd7
10.Nc3. One of the sharper positions in the King’s Gambit. Alekhine’s choice of opening is understandable – he wants to confuse his uninitiated opponent with sharp lines.

10...c6. Black could have played the defense 10...h6! 11.e5 hxg5 12.exf6 Bxf6 13.Qd5! 0-0 14.Ne4 Kh8! 15.Nxf6 Nxf6 16.Qxg5 Nh7!, and there doesn’t appear to be any way for white to break down black’s defensive walls.

11.Rf2 Qa5?! 11...Qb6! was more precise, and white would then have to force a draw: 12.Bxf7+ Kxf7 13.Qh5+ Kg8 14.Bxf6 Nxf6 15.Qg5+ and so on.


16...Qb6? Black fails to take his chance to smother the charge by the ‘blind’ master: 16...Qa3! 17.Rf3 Qb2 18.Rd1 b5! 19.Bb3 Nd2! with an approximately equal position.

17.e3! Nd6. He cannot save himself after 17...Nxf2 18.Kxf2 a5 19.Qg7! Re8 20.Bc5!, where black’s queen is condemned.

18...Nxc4 19.Qxc4 Qb5 20.Qf7 Qd5 21.dxe5 Qxf7 22.Bd6+ Kd8!? It’s easier for black to defend after the king moves towards the center: 22...Kb6! 23.Rxf7 Re8 24.Re1 a5! 25.e6 axb4 26.cxb4 Rxa2, with equal chances.

23.Rxf7 Nb6 24.Rd1. 24.Raf1! was better.

24...Bd7? The decisive mistake, after which black cannot save the game. The only way to maintain equality was via 24...Nd5! 25.c4 Ne3 26.Rd3 Nf5 27.Bc5+ Ke8 28.Re7 Rg8 29.Rxh7 b6 30.Bd6 Be6 and so on.


The player who was black in this game was one of the heirs of the well-known merchant and philanthropist Alexander Semyonovich Velikanov, who built the Russian theater in Odessa in 1874. According to my research, the player was Alexander Alexandrovich Velikanov – the owner of the Central Hotel, where Alekhine would give
simultaneous exhibitions in 1918.

According to Megabase, Alekhine’s opponent in the next game was the future chairman of the Russian Chess Union Samuel Osipovich Vainshtein. Obviously, this is a mistake! During Alekhine’s trip Samuel Vainshtein was a prisoner of the Germans and could not possibly have been in Odessa.

However, Alekhine recorded the correct initials of his opponent: N.I. in Chess Messenger.

Among the large number of Odessite Vainshteins, I managed to find only one person with these initials. The state archive of the Odessa region contains collection No. 359 Odessa Town Council: Jewish Office (family lists of Jewish townsmen), 1893-1916. No. 617 in these lists is a certain family head Nuta Iosevich Vainshtein. It’s a fair assumption that he wasn’t a poor townsman. He owned a house in the German colony called Mannheim(!), which was 22 km from Odessa.

No. 3. Queen’s Pawn Opening

ALEKHINE – N. VAINSHTEIN

Blind simultaneous game

Odessa, April 1916

Commentary by S. Tkachenko


9...b5? Alekhine criticizes this move in Chess Messenger and places a question-mark against it. The best choice would have been to attack the outpost on c5: 9...b6 10.b4 a5 with counterplay on the queenside.

10.a3 Bb7 11.0-0 0-0 12.Bc2 Nh7?! (12...f5 was correct). The move played allows white to begin active play on the kingside.

13.Bxe7 Qxe7 14.e4 e5?! Once again, black gives white more fire to work with. 14...Ng5 15.Nxg5 Qxg5 16.f4 Qh4 17.e5 g6 18.Rf3 a5 etc. would have been much better, although here too, white retains a powerful initiative.

15.Re1. Following the chess maxim that the player who controls the center normally enjoys an advantage.
15...Rfe8? This is a serious mistake, allowing white to gain a pawn for nothing. Black desperately needed to reduce the tension in the center: 15...exd4 16.exd5 Qxc5 17.dxc6 Bxc6 18.Nxd4 Rad8, and black could continue to resist.

16.exd5 cxd5 17.Nxe5 Nxe5 18.Rxe5 Qd8 19.Qd3 Nf8 20.Rae1 Rxe5 21.Rxe5 Ra7? Alekhine’s question-mark. Obviously, black can put up better resistance with 21...Ng6 22.Re3 Bc6 23.Ne2 a5. However, after 24.Nf4!, white has a fine attack and is a pawn up.

22.Qf3 Ne6 23.Qe3 Nc7 24.Qd3 g6 25.Qe3 Qf8 26.f4! (or 26.Re7!) 26...Ra8 27.f5 g5 28.f6 Kh8 29.Rxg5. Ready to meet 29...hxg5 with 30.Qh3+ and a mating attack.

29...Qe8.

30.Rg8+! Forcing the rook down black’s throat! It’s mate in two, so black resigned.

Alekhine’s fourth opponent during this simul “hid” behind the initials NN. It proved impossible to identify him.

No. 4. Scotch Game


\[Diagram\]

14...Qf6. He could have reduced the tension with 14...Be6! 15.c4 c6 16.Nh4 Qg4 17.Nxf5 Qxe2 18.Rxe2 Nxf5 19.Bxf5 Kd7 and an equal position.

15.Rab1 b6 16.d5 Rg8 17.Nd4 Kf8 18.Qf3!? The computer prefers 18.g3 Bb7 19.c4 Nxd5 20.cxd5 Qxd4 21.Bxf5 Qf6 22.Be4 Re8 23.Qd3. However, after 23...h6 it’s not easy for white to demonstrate the soundness of the pawn sacrifice.
18...Bb7! Black grabs the initiative.

19.Bc4 a6. More accurate was the immediate 19...Ng6! 20.Qe3 Ne5 21.Bb3 f4 22.Qe4 Qg5, and white has to mount a difficult defense.


24...Kd8?! Black misses another chance to cause his illustrious opponent big problems: 24...Rg4! 25.f4 Bc8! 26.fxe5 Qxf5 27.Qxf5 Bxf5 28.Rf1 Rxc4 29.Rxf5 Rxa4 30.exd6 cxd6 31.Rh5 Rc4 32.Rxh7 Rxc3 and so on.

25.Bf1 Bxd5 26.Qxd5 Qxf5 27.Qa8+ Ke7!? An ugly move. Black’s defense is easier with 27...Kd7! 28.Qxg8 Qxb1 29.f4 Qg6! 30.Qf8 Nd3 31.Bxd3 Qxd3 32.Qxf7+ Kc8 33.Qe6+ Kb7 34.f5 Qd1+ and perpetual check.

28.Qxg8 Qxb1 29.Qe8!

29...c5!? It was much safer to play 29...Nd7 30.Qxc7 a5 31.Qb7 Qc2 32.Qc6 Ne5, and there’s no obvious way for white to break through his opponent’s defense.

30.Qxa6 Qb3?? A real blunder! Having played a decent game so far, black fails to cope with the tension and falls apart one move before he could reach safety. He could have held his position with 30...Nd7!
31. Qb7+! Kf6 32. a5! Black resigned. The white pawn cannot be stopped.

Unfortunately, the game in which Alekhine tasted defeat has not been preserved. Yet it’s clear from the games analyzed above that the blind simul was no walk in the park for the grandmaster.

Let me say a few words about the Writers and Artists Club, where Alekhine fought a number of chess battles. It was located at 48 Grecheskaya St., very close to the famous Deribasovskaya St. This building was considered the headquarters of the Odessa Writers and Artists Society, founded at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its
The chairman was the now familiar Alexander Mikhailovich de Ribas.

The club officially opened its doors in mid-March 1916 – several weeks before Alekhine’s tour. A performance by the well-known local poet Eduard Bagritsky was the first event organized there, and Alekhine’s simul was the second!

A curious fact is that Alekhine’s future father-in-law Semyon Osipovich Fabritsky lived for some time at the same address at the turn of the 20th century.

In communist times, the building housed the Red (Soviet) Army Theater and the Kievan Military District Theater. The Theater of Musical Comedy was transferred from Lvov to Odessa in 1953 with the Soviet Army Theater moving in the opposite direction. Later, the Theater of the Young Viewer took up residence in the building, where it continues to perform to this day. Its official address today is 48a Grecheskaya St.

**THE BUSINESSMEN’S GUEST**

On 19 April, Alekhine played a consultation game in the building of the Commercial Assembly (4 Gavannaya St.), where the Odessa Chess Society also met, against the two strongest players in the city – Nikolai Laurent and Vasily Vladimirov.

*Odessa News,* which reported on Alekhine’s tour in detail, wrote “a photo was taken with the players.” The original of this unique photo is now kept by the family of the well-known Ukrainian music and art historian Sergei Alexeevich Borodavkin – Vasily Vladimirov’s grandson.

The Commercial Assembly was run by a Council of Elders and was considered the most elite club in Odessa. Since 1907, it had rented a luxury mansion from the city government on Gavannaya St. built in 1876 by the architect Felix Gonsiorovsky for the famous rope factory owner Alexander Novikov.

Many exciting chess events were held in this building, including the Odessa championship. The Odessa Museum of Regional History is now located in it.

As was typical for Odessa, apart from chess, cards were often played in the club! While studying the history of the Commercial Assembly I found some interesting information about how it functioned in the *Russian Word (Russkoe slovo)* newspaper (1910): “The City Leader Tolmachev summoned the elders of the Commercial Assembly and told them in no uncertain terms to expel all cheaters from the club whose names he knew. The elders claimed that they could not fulfil this wish as they were unaware of any cheaters. Following these discussions, the entire Council of Elders resigned.”
Tolmachev was also suspicious of chess sessions. He saw a “Jewish plot” everywhere. He therefore believed it his duty to intervene in all of the city’s events, even chess. Not surprisingly, Tolmachev’s attempt to establish total control over the artistic community of Southern Palmyra and his obsessive mistrust led to his eventual sacking.

Well, let’s look on the bright side. The score of the consultation game has been preserved. Alekhine commented on it in *New Time*.

**No. 5. Scotch Game**

**N. LAURENT and V. VLADIMIROV – ALEKHINE**

Consultation game

Odessa, April 1916

Commentary by Alekhine


6.Nc3 Nge7 7.Bc4 0-0 8.f4. The immediate 8.0-0 was better. Delaying castling together with the weakening of e3 gives black chances to attack along the e-file.

8...Na5!

White didn’t have to retreat the bishop. The correct move was 9.Qd3!, and white would meet 9...c5?! with 10.Ndb5 and a better position.

9...d5! 10.exd5. 10.Nxd5 Nxd5 11.exd5 Re8 etc. is even worse.


White would actually still be far from equality in this line. After 13...Qe7!, white cannot castle queenside: 14.0-0-0? c5! 15.Ne2 c4 and white loses a piece. Instead, white has to abandon thoughts of castling with 14.Kf2 and faces a hard time on the defense.

11.0-0. If 11.b4, then 11...Nc4 12.Bxc4 Nf5 13.Nxf5 Bxf5 and so on.

16. **Qc2. A stronger continuation would have been 16.** Qb3! c5 (16...Nd3 17.**Qb5! Rd8 18.**Qxd3 c5 19.**Rad1 cxd4 20.**Bxd4) 17.**Rae1 Bd7 18.**Qxb2 cxd4 19.**Bxd4 Bxd4+ 20.**cxd4, and white is no worse.

16...**Nc4 17.**Qa4 Be6.

18. **Bxb7. Having given up a pawn and then regained it, white has somewhat managed to wriggle out of a cramped position. However, this maneuver once again weakens white. A better continuation would have been 18.**Nxe6 Bxf2+ (if 18...Qxe6, then 19.f5) 19.**Rx f2 Nb6 20.**Qa5 Rx e6 21.**Bxb7 Rae8 and so on. (22.**Qxa7? **Qe5).

18... **Rab8 19.**Be6. 19.**Nxe6 is somewhat better here too.

19... **Bxd4! The computer doesn’t approve of this move and advises maintaining tension via a different line: 19...**Nb2! 20.**Qc2 Bd7!
20.Bxd4. If 20.cxd4, then 20...Rb4; if, however, 20.Bxe8, then 20...Bxf2+ 21.Rxf2 Nb6! 22.Qc6 Qe7 and black wins.

It would have been interesting to see how the game continued were white to have risked the following line:
20.cxd4 Rb4 21.Qxb4! Qxb4 22.Bxe8, where Alekhine would have ended up with a queen and two minor pieces for white’s two rooks and bishop pair. There is no obvious way for black to win.


29...g5! White resigned. After protecting the knight on f4, black threatens mate via 30...Re2+.

Unfortunately, the names of Alekhine’s opponents in this game are totally unknown to today’s reader. Yet, in their day, these players were the driving force behind the popularization of chess in the south of the Russian Empire.

Actually, not only in the south! These great people, without doubt, laid the foundation of the famous Odessa chess school and deserve to be researched separately.

Nikolai Evgenevich Laurent (1885 – not before May 1919)

Nikolai Laurent was born on 1 August 1885 in a small town called Kagul in the Izmailovsky district, in a family of a hereditary nobleman and local customs official.

Laurent’s ancestors moved to Odessa from Lausanne in the early nineteenth century. The chess player’s great grandfather Jean (Ivan) Laurent was a teacher of natural sciences at Lycée Richelieu in Odessa (the precursor to Novorossiysk University). The chess player’s grandfather Nicole (Nikolai) Laurent was another well-known personality. In the 1840s, he served in the office of the Caucasus military commander and governor, Prince Mikhail Semyonovich Vorontsov. This grandfather was the author of the Caucasus Calendar (Tbilisi 1846) – the first book in the Caucasus to be published in Russian. Vorontsov awarded him a diamond ring for his work. His grandfather was appointed head of the office of the Governor-General of Novorossiysk and Bessarabia in early
1854. After Vorontsov’s death, he served as the director of the Bessarabian Chamber of State Property. He wrote several works on the migration of Bulgars to Russia. From 1870 right up until his death in 1892, the grandfather served as the head of the Kharkov and Poltava gubernias.

Nicole’s grandson, Nikolai Laurent the younger, inherited his talent as a writer. After graduating from the law faculty of Novorossiysk University, he combined working as an assistant attorney with journalism. Publications in the Russian capital frequently reprinted materials from his columns in Odessa News. He founded and became the editor of a unique magazine called Chess (Shakhmaty) in 1911 – the first printed publication on the theory and practice of the ancient game in the south of the Russian Empire. Unfortunately, the magazine printed only two issues due to financial problems.

Laurent was one of the strongest chess players in Odessa. He won the city championship in 1906. He possessed a unique drive as a chess promoter! Together with the editors of the chess columns in the Speech (Rech) and Modern Word (Sovremenoe slovo) newspapers, he organized and ran a unique correspondence match in 1911 between the north and the south over one hundred boards. Many well-known chess players took part in this impressively large event. The match participants were divided into pairs and played each other twice, black and white. Even Alekhine played for the northerners, drawing both games with Stefan Izbinsky from Kiev. The northern team won the match 101:99.

The last information on the life of Nikolai Laurent is dated April 1919, when Odessa was captured by soldiers under the command of red ataman Nikifor Grigoriev. Where and how this scion of a great French family met his death is unknown. There are no known mentions of Laurent in any newspaper or magazine after 1919. He should not be confused with his younger brother Grégoire (Grigory) Laurent, who lived in Odessa after the Civil War and participated in chess tournaments.

Vasily Vladimirov was born on 27 February 1867 in Volyn in the family of army medic and Titular Counselor Modest Vladimirovich Vladimirov. The title Titular Counselor was the equivalent of an infantry captain and endowed its owner with personal nobility (i.e. nobility that could not be inherited).

Modest Vladimirov took part in all the military campaigns of the period. He was awarded St. Stanislav III class and St. Anna III class medals. King Carol I of Romania awarded him an Iron Cross “for
special achievements in treating the wounded during the Russo-Turkish War.”

Vasily Vladimirov did not follow in his father’s footsteps. Having completed his schooling at the Odessa Realschule he left for St. Petersburg, where he graduated from the Chemistry Faculty of the Emperor Nikolai I Technological Institute in 1897. After returning to Odessa, he taught chemistry and technical disciplines (including theoretical mechanics and materials strength) at several colleges in the city. He worked as the inspector of a school for managers that belonged to the Odessa branch of the Imperial Russian Technical Society. He was a governor of several technical colleges and head of the Odessa rail cargo technical college. Like his father, he was awarded the St. Stanislav III class and St. Anna III class medals. By 1909, he had served long enough to earn the title of State Counselor. He was nominated for the rank of Actual State Counselor at the end of 1916, a hereditary title that would have allowed him to be addressed as “Your Excellency”. However, because of the revolution, Vasily Vladimirov was never actually awarded this rank.

He was the key initiator behind the establishment of the Odessa Chess Society in 1900 and its first treasurer. Later, he was elected its Chairman. He was one of the strongest players in Southern Palmyra, including winning the city’s first championship held in 1901, jointly with Eisenberg and Zheludkov. For some time, he ran a chess column in the Southern Thought (Yuzhnaya mysl) newspaper.

He taught technical disciples at the Odessa millers college during the last years of his life. He died in Odessa during its occupation by Romanian forces in 1942.

THE ALTERNATING-MOVE SIMULTANEOUS EXHIBITION

Odessa chess fans enjoyed one more pleasant surprise from Alekhine – an alternating-move simul held on 22 April. Together with Odessa master Pavel List, he gave a simultaneous display at the Writers and Artists Club on 15 boards. Playing moves alternately, Alekhine and List won 11 games, with one loss and three draws. Following the exhibition, the tour organizers put on a plush banquet in honor of the illustrious guest.

Unfortunately, the scoresheets of this double exhibition are lost, and there is, hence, nothing about the games to report. Instead, I will tell the reader about Alekhine’s partner, who did so much for chess!

Pavel (Paul) Mikhailovich List (1887–1954)

Pavel List was born into a Jewish family on 9 September 1887 in the ancient city of Klaipeda – the third-largest city of Lithuania. After studying in a business college in Vilnius, he decided to continue his education at Novorossiysk University, where chess was especially popular.
In his new city, he changed his surname. The reason? The student’s surname at birth was “Odes”! As Grandmaster Levenfish, who knew List well, later recounted, “there was some confusion with letters addressed to Odes in Odessa.”

The still relatively unknown student took first prize in the 1909 Southern Palmyra Championship. “How is that possible?” The local chess bigwigs asked nonplussed, and they assumed that he just got lucky. Several strong local players immediately challenged List to a match: Nikolai Laurent, Vasily Vladimirov, Boris Verlinsky, G. Inge and V. Lichman. However, before negotiations were complete the academic year ended at his university, and he went home to Vilnius. After returning to Odessa, he first played a match against the 1906 Odessa champion, Laurent. The first player to gain five points would be declared the winner. After a fierce battle, Laurent edged the match 5:4 (+3–2=4). The next match “for supremacy in Odessa” (that was the match’s official title) was between List and the oldest strong player in Odessa — the bronze medalist from the first city championship V.I. Lichman. Youth was victorious! Pavel List won all five games, and the matter of the “lucky winner” was buried.

List also proved to be a talented organizer. He convinced the Commercial Assembly elders that holding a strong chess tournament in the city would be a great way to advertise for business there. As a result, the South Russian tournament was held at the Assembly in 1909, to which the businessmen allocated 500 rubles (the average monthly salary in the Russian Empire at the time being a little below 36 rubles) and for which the businessmen had established an additional best game prize. The players coming first and second were additionally rewarded with gold tokens.

The local players were Verlinsky, List, Vladimirov, Laurent, and S. Kiryakov. Kiev was represented by E. Bogoljubov and S. Izbinsky. I. Selivanov from Kharkov and B. Yankovich from Rostov on Don also participated. The tournament ended in January 1910. Verlinsky won the first prize of 160 rubles, with Bogoljubov second and List and Izbinsky third equal.

That same year, in 1910, List spent his summer holidays at home in Vilnius. While there, he played a match against one of the strongest players in Russia, Grigory Levenfish. The match ended drawn: 4.5:4.5 (+4–4=1). Then, in 1912, List finished fourth equal with Ilya Rabinovich in the Russian Amateurs Tournament (20 participants), also held in Vilnius. The Russian Tournament of Masters, with ten players, was held in the same city. Alekhine and Levenfish shared sixth place. It may well be the case that Alekhine and List first met at that tournament.

In 1920, once the Civil War had ended in Odessa, List emigrated to Berlin. He went on to open a strong chess club in the German capital, which hosted chess problem solving competitions, lectures, chess tournaments, and simul. List was a friend of the second world champion Emanuel Lasker, and as a team they held alternative-move simultaneous exhibitions, similar to that held in Odessa with Alekhine.

List had a decent record at international tournaments: Magdeburg (1926, third prize), the XXV German Congress (1927, 3-4), and Frankfurt (1932, third).

Hitler taking power put an end to many of his chess plans. List emigrated to England in 1938, where he continued his chess career. That year, he took third prize at Plymouth, followed by second at Birmingham in 1939. He was then first equal in London in 1940.
He played for the British team in a radio match against the Soviet Union in 1946. He lost 0:2 on board six against the future grandmaster Alexander Kotov. Despite being seriously ill, he won the British Lightning Chess Championship in 1953.

The champion of Odessa and Great Britain, now known as Paul List, died in London on his birthday, 9 September, in 1954.

ALEKHINE’S HANDICAPPED GAMES

Odessites were treated to another big event on 25 April – Alekhine took on another one of the city’s elite players, Boris Verlinsky. To even up the chances, the guest, playing black, removed his f7-pawn.


14.b3. 14.Rd1! Ng6 15.Nd5 Qc6 16.b4! and so on was stronger.


30.Nc5! Alekhine assigned an exclamation mark to this move. However, there was actually a better way to return the pawn: 30.Rd4! Rfe7 31.Nc5 Bxa2 32.Ra4!, where white has an excellent position and remains a pawn up.

30...Bxa2 31.Rc1 Be4 32.Qd4 Qf6! 33.c3 Qxd4 34.cxd4 Nh5! 35.Rf7. If 35.Nf5, then 35...Ng3+ and so on.

35...Nxg3+ 36.Kh2 Kxf7 37.Kxg3 Kg7.
38. Ra3. White could have immediately forced a draw: 38.Nxa6! Ra8 39.Rc1 Bxa6 40.Rxc7+ Kf6 41.Rc6+ Kg7 42.Rc7+ Kg8 43.Rc6 and so on.

38... Rd8 39.d5 Rb8 40.Kf3 Kd6.

41. Nxa6! Clearly white’s best chance. Were white to retreat his knight, black would win easily after forcing the exchange of rooks.

41... Ra8 42.Rc3 Bxa6 43.Rc6+ Ke5 44.Rxc7 Bc8 45.Re7+ Kf6.
46.d6? This move loses. White should have played 46.Rc7 with good drawing chances.

Alekhine is right. After: 46.Rc7! Ra3+ 47.Kf2 Ba6 48.Rc6+ Ke5 49.Re6+ Kd4 50.d6 it’s unclear how black can save his pawn.

46...Be6! 47.Rh7 (other moves won’t help, as the d6 pawn is already doomed) 47...Bf7 48.e5+ Kg6 49.e6 Kxh7 50.e7 Be8. White resigned.

Now let me continue introducing Alekhine’s opponents. All the more so, as the reader is now made privy to previously unknown information about this remarkable chess player.

Boris Markovich Verlinsky (1888–1950)

Boris Verlinsky was born on 8 January 1888 in the town of Bakhmut of the Ekaterinoslavskaya gubernia (later known as the Donetsk Region).

We are told in Soviet-era chess literature that he came from an underprivileged background and his parents moved to Odessa at the end of the nineteenth century in search of a better life. The lad learnt the rules of chess in his new home city and soon became one of the strongest players in southern Russia. Verlinsky mentioned this frequently in his own writings.

Yet this information isn’t exactly true! Alexei Radchenko – one of the authors of the book From Verlinsky to Father Zui (Ot Verlinskogo do batik Zuya) told me that the archives of Artemovsk (the modern name for Bakhmut) contain documents confirming that Verlinsky’s father was a businessman of the second guild, working in the extraction and sale of salt.

Indeed, it’s not even true that he learnt the rules of chess in Odessa:

“I found out that Verlinsky learnt the rules of chess at a young age and became a strong player while still in Bakhmut, rather than
in Odessa, as was previously believed to be true, after I visited Artemovsk and the local museum, which is the oldest in the Donetsk region.

“The archive material provided to the authors of this book testify that the whiz-kid of Bakhmut had no equal at chess in the town apart from the many-times town champion, founder and chairman of the Bakhmut Chess Club Vladimir Maximilianovich Stebelsky,” Radchenko wrote in his book.

So, let’s take a quick look at Stebelsky, who became Verlinsky’s first coach. After graduating from the medical faculty of Moscow State University in 1885 (meaning that he studied together with Anton Chekhov!), he was appointed head of Bakhmut Regional Hospital, while also working as a doctor at the local technical college. Little Boris Verlinsky caught meningitis and came to see him as a patient. This was a tricky illness to treat; in fact it was almost untreatable at the time, and it could destroy your brain.

The doctor recommended that the boy put himself not only through physical exercise – gymnastics and swimming – but that he also take up music and chess. He believed that these disciplines would help him to mitigate the consequences of his illness – impaired speech and deafness. So that is how Stebelsky became Verlinsky’s first coach. Unfortunately, the archives failed to yield the name of his violin tutor.

Nevertheless, Boris’s hearing continued to worsen, and his parents decided to move to Odessa on the doctor’s advice, hoping that the warm climate and Black Sea would help their son to overcome the ravages of meningitis. It also had the advantage that close relatives of his father lived there.

The Odessa Chess Society officially opened its doors on 28 February 1900, initially located in the building of the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Co. Club on 1 Richelieu St. – next to the famous Opera Theater. This building no longer exists – it was hit by a bomb when German aircraft attacked the port in 1941.

This club had a second name – the Traders’ Assembly – which, according to its charter, was supposed “to provide its members and their families with the opportunity to spend free time in comfort and pleasure.”

Boris joined the chess club at the Traders’ Assembly and gradually became one of the best players in the city. He came second in the 1906 Odessa Championship and won the city-wide competition in 1912. Moreover, two years before that, he won the 1909-10 Southern Russia Tournament mentioned earlier, in the biography of Pavel List.

Verlinsky achieved a relatively poor result in the 1909 Russian Amateurs Tournament in St. Petersburg: tenth equal with Petr Romanovsky out of seventeen participants. It was at this tournament that Boris first met (and played against) Alexander Alekhine, the tournament winner. Their encounter was included in the collection of the future world champion’s 300 best games. By 1913, however, Verlinsky managed to come third in the same tournament.

Verlinsky was to enjoy his greatest successes after the Civil War ended, when he moved to Moscow to be at the epicenter of Russian chess. Nevertheless, he didn’t sever his ties with Odessa, continuing to take part in tournaments in Odessa and other parts of Ukraine. Indeed, Alexei Alekhine, the world champion’s brother and secretary of the Ukrainian Chess Club, continued to write “Odessa” after Verlinsky’s name even after the latter had moved to the capital.

Verlinsky achieved the title of master in 1924, having come tenth equal in the third USSR championship. The following year, he came fourth after scoring six points against the seven best players in the tournament. Boris was first equal with one other player in the 1926 Ukrainian Championship and won the Moscow championship two years later. 1929 saw his historical victory in the sixth USSR championship, held in Odessa. According to that championship’s regulations, this victory brought him the permanent title of first grandmaster of the USSR.

The subsequent “combination” with the grandmaster’s title seemed like a sick joke. The highest chess title was suddenly abolished in 1931 “in order to eradicate the concepts ‘champion’ and ‘championship’ from our usage once and for all.” Then it was reinstated four years later, after which Mikhail Botvinnik became the “second first” Soviet grandmaster. Thanks to the efforts of Anatoly Karpov and Yuri Averbakh, justice was restored not long before the collapse of the USSR and Boris Verlinsky was once again listed as the first grandmaster of the USSR.

The Odessite’s last significant success was recorded in 1931, when he came third equal with three others in the seventh USSR championship. After that, his results spiraled downwards, due to health problems and general aging.
“I can still wave a sword around, but instead of cutting down my opponent, it falls out of my hand and hits me on the head!” was how Boris Markovich once explained his failures.

Music helped to alleviate the bitterness of defeat. Chess master Vasily Panov, who played alongside Verlinsky in the 1934 Uzbekistan Open Championship, recalled:

“I had to manage everyday affairs for both of us and totally look after Verlinsky, as he was deaf and dumb and spoke (if you could call it that) in a course, hoarse whisper, and could only lip-read. Nevertheless, he was a pleasant, interesting companion, and highly cultured. It was particularly remarkable that, despite his deafness, Verlinsky was a passionate music lover. Whether in Moscow or Tashkent, he was always keen to attend symphonic concerts and was a huge fan of the musical celebrities of the time.”

FIDE assigned Boris Verlinsky the title of International Master in 1950 for “past achievements”. Whether or not he heard about this is unclear. The first Soviet grandmaster died in Moscow on 30 October 1950.

THE CHESS SHOWMAN

The guest left the city the following day. Odessa News of 27 April ran with a review of the fun chess event, although it scolded the tour’s organizers for... insufficiently challenging the grandmaster:

A.A. Alekhine left Odessa yesterday for Kiev, where he also plans to hold a number of chess parties to support chess playing Russian prisoners of war. The visit by such a famous and interesting chess player has had a big impact on local chess life. It has been a long time since we saw such a buzz at the Writers and Artists Club during the chess soirées.

At the same time, we have to admit that Odessite chess fans could have done more to make use of the two-week stay by one of the best players in the world. Of the three simul that Alekhine played, only the eight blind simultaneous games were interesting for their quality. Moreover, he only played one game with our strongest players, and that was a consultation game.

Actually, during the maestro’s lengthy stay in Odessa we could have organized an entire tournament, and not just individual games, and we could have organized simul and blind simultaneous games during the rest days.

So, are you wondering whether Alekhine demonstrated his full chess show repertoire in Odessa? Of course he didn’t! Two years later, the grandmaster held a combined blind-seeing simul in Petrograd! This story was dug up by Sergei Voronkov in British Chess Magazine (No. 3, 1956). Odessite Vitaly Halberstadt recalled in his article “Reminiscences of Alekhine”:

Petrograd, 1918. I heard that Alekhine was going to give a simultaneous exhibition at a chess club which met at the Society of Commerce and Finance. Despite my great timidity (at that time I was still a schoolboy), I went to the address indicated and on paying 50 kopecks was admitted to the playing room. Through an incredibly thick haze of tobacco smoke I watched a magnificently handsome young man play twenty ordinary simultaneous games plus two blindfold with great speed. I placed myself behind a player who appeared completely at ease. Alekhine arrived in front of the board. As the player hesitated before making his move, Alekhine looked at him ferociously for a few seconds and then declared, “You resign.” Astonishment on the part of the player – and then Alekhine conscientiously demonstrated in reply to the one possible move a winning variation involving a piece sacrifice, scattering three or four pieces on the ground in the process (Alekhine’s movements were already rather of a nervous character); after which Alekhine continued his round, stopping from time to time to dictate his blindfold moves.

Vitaly Iosifovich Halberstadt (1903–1967)

Vitaly Halberstadt was born in Odessa on 20 March 1903 (new style calendar). According to the register of births, marriages and deaths of the rabbinate, the boy was assigned the Biblical name Samson.
Following extensive anti-Jewish pogroms, his parents decided to leave Odessa in 1905, and the family moved to St. Petersburg, where the young man acquired a basic legal education. The revolution and subsequent Civil War once again uprooted the family. Vitaly and his parents emigrated to Germany in 1919 and then settled in France.

Together with Abraham Baratz – who designed Alekhine’s headstone – he came first equal in the 1925 Paris Championship. Halberstadt scored good results in many other French tournaments and championships. He was an active member of the P.P. Potemkine Russian Chess Club in Paris, whose patron was Alekhine’s wife, the Odessite Nadezhda Fabritskaya.

Halberstadt was also an international master and international judge of chess compositions (1957). He published over 200 works (20 of which won first prizes). He edited a chess studies column in the French magazine Thèmes 64 and authored several chess books.

“He was an outstanding chess composer. His studies were most elegant and are a great way to learn the endgame,” wrote Filip Bondarenko, a historian of chess studies.

He fell into depression after his wife was killed in a road accident in 1962 and stopped composing studies. He died in Paris on 16 October 1967.

ALEKHINE’S ODESSA RELATIVES

Admit it, are you not surprised by the report in the newspaper that a whole week passed between Alekhine’s arrival in Odessa and his first event? What was the reason for such a long period of inactivity, and where was the maestro during those seven days? Don’t forget that the tour took place during the war, and the grandmaster planned to head for the front once it was over.

Perhaps Alekhine had relatives in Odessa and he spent the first days with them? This version was supported by a story told by the now deceased director of the Children’s Chess School Ivan Postol. He recounted that an elderly lady claiming to be Alekhine’s relative appeared at the school in the late 1970s. This visit was so unexpected that the then club director, Eduard Peikhel, assumed that she was making it up and didn’t pay any real attention to her. Postol very much regretted not asking this lady about her apparent relation to the great chess player and not asking her to leave contact information. All that Postol could recall was that she worked in some public organization.

It wasn’t until autumn 2014 that I managed to find some information on Alekhine’s Odessite relatives. I was taking some good friends on a tour round Odessa and, naturally, I broached the subject of Alekhine. Amazing as it sounds, one of my guests turned out to be the granddaughter of that same lady who had turned up at the club in the late 1970s! So we began a correspondence, fragments of which I reproduce here.

I only have scantly facts about my grandmother. Her name was Anastasia Mikhailovna Vorobiova and her maiden name was Gorbatenko (but another version was Gorbatenkova). Her father was called Mikhail and her mother Valentina. She also had three sisters: Lelya, Lilia and Zoya. My grandmother was the eldest. She was born on 10 November 1905. I don’t know where. Her father was a railway engineer. He was the head of a major interchange station, Slavyansk, which belonged to the Southern Railway Network.
I don’t know when the family moved to Odessa. My second cousin (Lelya’s granddaughter) claimed that Alekhine was somehow related to us (I don’t know how) and that he would visit, bringing the girls paper and colored pencils. I have no information on when this happened and that’s all I know. I will be glad if this helps in your research. I do have an old photograph where my grandmother as a little girl is held in the arms of her mother, with her father next to them.

She then sent me a scan with the following letter, and I asked her to try and identify everybody else.

I don’t know who the other people in the photo are. Nor do I know who took the photo or where. I assume it was around 1907–09. Unfortunately, I don’t know where in Odessa my grandmother lived with her parents. After she married and until she moved into our apartment she lived on Yaroslavsky St. (now Troitskaya St.) right at the bottom, towards Shevchenko Park. I don’t remember the building number; my mother once pointed at it.

My grandmother’s father died at the end of 1916. My grandfather Georgy was helping the family and suggested to my great grandmother that he marry the eldest daughter – my grandmother Tasya (Anastasia). She was sixteen years younger than him and didn’t want to get married, but agreed to do so in order to help the family. My grandfather found places for the younger girls at a children’s home and bought them food. He worked for the Party after the revolution. My grandmother was sixteen when she married him (this was around 1921). Their marriage produced three children: two sons and a daughter (my mother). I know that during the war my grandmother was the head of a college and was evacuated along with it away from the front. Then she returned together with the college to liberated Odessa on 10 April 1944. While a pensioner, she worked for the regional party office, where she was head of the committee for women’s friendship of all countries (Anastasia Mikhailovna Vorobiova was head of the Odessa Department of the Committee of Soviet Women – S.T.). My grandmother died on 20 March 1979 and is buried on the central alley of the Second Christian Cemetery.

Oh, it’s a tough task finding the relatives of famous people through the thickness of time! The Alekhine-
Prokhorov family tree is quite extensive, and even now it is difficult to identify from which branch the Gorbatenkos or Gorbatenkovs sprouted. My attempt to dig out the truth, using archives in Voronezh and the help of historians, failed to produce results. Research along his mother’s side also proved fruitless.

I also tried to find information in the archives of Slavyansk, but there isn’t much there. Nevertheless, some oblique references did materialize:

The Slavyansk interchange station was built in 1869 and did indeed belong to the Southern Railway Network. The town of Slavyansk was part of the Kharkov Gubernia until 1925. This explains why Alexei Alekhine, Alexander’s older brother, moved to Kharkov after the revolution – they had relatives there.

The story of the Odessa railway begins in 1865. The railway was owned by the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Co. until 1894 and was only then nationalized. A number of specialists from the Southern Railway Network were transferred to Odessa in 1894 to strengthen the local workforce and train them. One of these was Mikhail Gorbatenko – whom we assume to be Alekhine’s relative. This is all I managed to find out. Maybe one of my readers will manage to learn more.

But then, in December 2015, Odessite relatives of Alexander Alekhine from the Prokhorov side of his family got in touch with me. It turns out that the world champion’s mother, Anisya Prokhorova, had a cousin (or second cousin) called Sergei Prokhorov. By a twist of fate, his descendants ended up in Odessa. Unfortunately, as in the previous case, no documentary evidence that they were relatives remained.
Alekhine arrived in Odessa on a chess tour for the second time on 2 October 1916. His first simul was held on 5 October. *Southern Thought* provided the details in advance:

“This Alexander Alekhine will hold a simultaneous exhibition today in the city duma to raise money for the Odessa-Serbia fund. The maestro will play six blind simultaneous games. In parallel, he will play a game against P. List, where both play without seeing the board. The entrance fee is 2 rubles 35 kopecks (including the contribution to charity). Players pay an additional ruble.”

*Southern Thought* then reported the results on 6 October. It’s clear from the story that the number of players willing to take on Alekhine had risen to nine: “Last night’s simultaneous exhibition with Alekhine ended with a great result for the maestro. Alekhine won all eight games completed. The ninth, a game played by heart (*that’s exactly how it was written in the newspaper – S.T.*) between Alekhine and List, was stopped after two hours of play with an approximately equal position.”

*Odessa News* carried a longer report:

*This time the maestro played not 8, but 9 games, and played extremely quickly – play ended after 3 hours and 50 minutes. Combined, the games contained over 300 moves, meaning that Alekhine played 80 moves per hour, without looking at the boards. He managed to win 8 games, while his opponent in the ninth, Mr List, who was also playing*
blind, abandoned the game on move 17 with a worse position.

The audience included a delegation from the local Serbian colony, headed by the Serbian General Consul M.P. Cemovic. The secretary of the city duma was heavily involved in organizing the event. Thanks to him, the evening was a great success and – a big piece of news – a lady even played on board 8; she shared the fate of the men playing on the other boards.

Once Alekhine had left Odessa News provided details of the “blind show”:

If you compare Alekhine’s recent display with the first one held in April, then the first thing you notice is the speed with which the maestro played all the games, and the second is that the players this time around were incomparably stronger. This time, consultation with other strong players was also allowed. The maestro really only had one opponent in one or two games, the rest were effectively against several at once.

Alekhine has left Odessa for Moscow, where he plans a big chess event that is also for charity. The maestro told us that he will return to Odessa later.

As you can see, this time the funds raised from the blind simul went not to Russian chess players held by the enemy, but to the Odessa-Serbia fund. What was this mysterious charity (which some sources called the Fund to Help the Serbian People)? Why did its name feature a city and a country? Surely “Russia-Serbia” would have been more logical?

In actuality, following the outbreak of war, huge numbers of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians and Macedonians had joined the Russian forces, as they didn’t want to fight for the Austrians. By summer 1915, a large number of such defectors and war prisoners had assembled. A military commission was established to recruit them to join the volunteer Serbian army. This commission was run by the Serbian consul in Odessa, Marko Cemovic. The volunteers were brought to assemble in Odessa and then sent along the Danube to Serbia. As a result, over 5,000 fighters had joined the Serbian army by the end of 1915.

Soon, this channel was closed off by the Austrians. Then, the Serbian government received permission from the relevant services of the Russian Empire to begin building a Serbian volunteer battalion in Odessa that would fight on the Russian front. By the end of April 1916, over 10,000 volunteers had signed up, and the battalion was transformed into the first Serbian volunteer infantry division!

So many people wanted to join the division that a decision was taken at the end of that summer to create a second division and to thereby establish the Serbian Volunteer Corps.

Serbian Army General Mihailo Zivkovic, who was due to take command of the new corps, arrived in Odessa on 7 September. The Head of the Odessa Military Region even issued an order to mobilize all war prisoners “of South Slav nationality.”

The recruitment of the corps coincided with Alekhine’s second tour. The city leaders understood perfectly well that his arrival in Odessa could be exploited to attract volunteers. So that’s what happened. The Odessa-Serbia fund, claiming to be helping the Serbian people, actually raised cash to fund the new corps. It was no surprise that, thanks to such powerful promotion, the Serbian corps was fully staffed by the middle of November.

Odessa News also reported that the local authorities were extremely active in organizing Alekhine’s second tour, highlighting that they provided the city duma as the venue. Actually, the city government also helped organize his first tour. And there was nothing unusual about that! The Odessa Duma was led at the time by the well-known chess player Boris Pelikan, who had at one time been on the management committee of the Odessa Chess Society. Moreover, Pelikan played a major role in establishing the Serbian Volunteer Corps and was active in running the Odessa-Serbia fund – for which the Serbian government awarded him the order of St. Sava.

On 10 May, two weeks after Alekhine finished his first tour, Emperor Nicholas II visited Odessa, accompanied by a large military entourage. Boris Pelikan welcomed the monarch, his family members and the high-ranking military men accompanying him on behalf of the city authorities. He invited the illustrious guests to lay the foundation of a square by planting a variety of young trees, and the guests duly obliged. The program for the tsar’s visit additionally included a military inspection of the volunteer corps. After the inspection, Nicholas II thanked Pelikan for putting
his organizational talent to serving the Fatherland and helping their Serbian brethren.

So now, dear readers, it should be clear why Alekhine’s second Odessa tour was held under the “Serbian flag”, at the instigation of Boris Pelikan. The head of state himself blessed Pelikan for his fine efforts to support the allies!

**Boris Alexandrovich Pelikan (1861–1931)**

Boris Pelikan was born in Odessa in 1861. He graduated from the law faculty of Novorossiysk University. He began his career in Taganrog in 1882, where he served as a volunteer in the infantry regiment under the city leader Rear Admiral Pavel Alexeevich Zeleny.

Boris had the good fortune to marry Zeleny’s adopted daughter. When, in 1885, his father-in-law was transferred to Odessa as the city leader, Pelikan moved with him, returning to the city of his youth.

Being a relative of the city leader was a huge career advantage! Pelikan started to work in several businesses. He was the legal advisor to Credit Lyonnais and the Santsenbakher Brewery, as well as a management board member at the Bessarabia-Tavrichesky Land Bank.

At that point in time, Boris Pelikan was known for his avid support for liberal reforms. He even opened an office in his father-in-law’s home to receive visitors lodging complaints, including against Zeleny himself! The quick-tempered city leader did not put up with his son-in-law’s “liberal jinks” for long, and expelled Pelikan from his home. Note, however, that during the time that Zeleny ran Odessa (1885–1898) there wasn’t a single anti-Jewish pogrom!

With the start of revolutionary activities in 1905, Pelikan became an active participant of the monarchy movement in Odessa. In fact, Alekhine held similar views. Pelikan was elected a city councilor. He was a member of the city executive in 1907–1912 and headed the city from 1913 to 1917.

This man was bursting with energy. Scandals accompanied him throughout his political career!

In 1908, he founded the Odessa branch of the Mikhail Arkhangel Russian Popular Union, thereupon falling out with many of his political associates. Then it got worse. In 1912, he proposed a plan to the imperial government that, acting in a legal grey area, would influence the outcome of election campaigns for various government bodies. Pelikan met the interior minister personally to attempt to convince him that money and competent leadership would create wonders at the polling stations. The Interior Ministry didn’t risk adopting Pelikan’s election methods, which their inventor would bitterly regret.

Yet, Pelikan skillfully implemented his ideas in Odessa during the city duma elections in spring and summer 1913. His supporters secured a clear victory, and Pelikan became the duma leader (the only such case in the history of the monarchy movement!). His opponents attempted to challenge the outcome of the elections in court. However, the Odessa Judicial Chamber, which was under Pelikan’s control, “failed to find any evidence of unlawfulness in his actions.” Complaints to the Senate were also in vain – from the legal point of view, there were no grounds for complaint. It wasn’t until 1917 that the Emergency Investigation Commission of the Provisional Government brought criminal charges against Pelikan. He was arrested and jailed. Ironically, it was the Bolsheviks who inadvertently helped release him after they took power – he escaped Odessa in the confusion. Serbia didn’t forget the good deeds of the knight of the order of St. Sava and granted Pelikan asylum. In exile, the irrepressible Odessite continued to play a significant role in the monarchy movement. He wrote articles about the lost Russia, attacked his opponents viciously, and... continued to follow chess-related news!
Pelikan died in Belgrade in March 1931.

Let’s now return to chess. Only one game from the blind simul has survived. It lasted an hour and a half.

No. 7. Queen’s Gambit Accepted
ALEKHINE – N. KRAUZE
Blind simultaneous game
Odessa, October 1916
Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 dxc4 4.e3 b5 5.a4 Qb6. An alternative is 5...b4 6.Na2 e6 7.Bxc4 Ba6, simplifying the defense through exchanges.

6.Nf3 e6 7.Ne5 Bd6?!
A mistake! The correct continuation was 7...Nf6 8.axb5 cxb5 9.b3 Bb4 10.Bd2 0-0 with approximately equal chances.

8.f4.
8.axb5! Bxe5 9.dxe5 cxb5 10.Ne4! is stronger, and white is pressing black.

8...Bxe5?! There was no need to give up the bishop pair. The correct continuation was 8...Nf6! 9.Be2 Nd5 10.axb5 cxb5 11.Bd2 a5! with chances for both sides on the queenside.

9.fxe5 f5 10.e4 Ne7 11.Bg5! Ng6. 11...b4 12.a5 Qc7 13.Na4 h6 14.Qh5+ g6 15.Qh4 fxe4 16.Bf6 with a strong attack for white was no better.

12.exf5 exf5 13.axb5 cxb5 14.Be2 a6?? Black fails to sense the danger and loses precious time. He should have completed his development: 14...Bb7! 15.Bf3 a5 and so on.

15.0-0!? Black’s position would have been hanging by a thread after 15.Nd5! Qa7 16.Bf3 0-0 17.h4 h6 18.h5!

15...Nxe5?? It’s a poisoned pawn! He could have continued to defend with 15...Ne6! 16.Bf3 0-0 17.Be3 Bb7 and so on.

Now, however, white’s pieces charge into the black camp like an angry mob.


MUSTN’T FORGET BORIS!

Alekhine’s second program in Odessa included a series of friendly games with Boris Verlinsky. There are no records of the match’s overall score. Verlinsky wrote later, “I scored a good result from my friendly games against Alekhine.” The following game is one of these good results.

No. 8. Scotch Game
B. VERLINSKY – ALEKHINE
Odessa, October 1916
Commentary by S. Tkachenko

13...d5!? This sharp move had the aim of shaking things up. Black could have equalized with 13...Nxe3 14.Qxe3 Qd7 15.Ng5 Bf5 16.Be4+ Kh8 17.Be6 Bxe6 18.Qxe6 Qxe6 19.Nxe6 Rf7, where he has addressed all his weaknesses.

14.Ng5. White could have gained good attacking chances after 14.Bg5! Qe8 15.Nc5 Ncd4 16.Bd3 b6 17.Nxe6 Nxe6 18.Rae1, where the white bishop pair is much stronger than black’s two knights.

14...Qf6?! It would have been better to deprive white of the bishop pair: 14...Nxe3 15.Qxe3 Bf5 with equality.


18...Ne5 19.Bh5 g6 20.f4!? Nc4! 21.Qf2 Nce3. The careful 21...Qf6! looks better.

22.g4!? It seemed obvious for white to transpose to a rook endgame with an extra pawn: 22.Bxe3 Nxe3 23.f5! Qxf5 24.Qxf5 Nxf5 25.Rxe8+ Rxe8 26.Rxf5 gxh5 27.Rg5+ Kf8 28.Rxd5 and so on. However, rook endings are known for their drawish tendencies. Therefore, white accepts the challenge!

26...c5? However, the way to refute white’s strategy was with 26...Nxa2! 27.Qxa2 Re1+ 28.Kg2 Qxc2+ 29.Bf2 Qxb2 30.Qh3! Re7 31.Qc8+ Kf7 32.Bxb7 Qe2, and it’s not clear how white can exploit the power of the bishop pair.


COMPENSATION FOR LEAVING SOON

Alekhine’s second tour was much shorter than his first. As “compensation” for such a quick departure, the grandmaster provided details of his time at the front to Nikolai Laurent, editor of the chess column in Odessa News. Naturally, Laurent shared these details with his readers:

After his trip to Odessa in April, the maestro visited Kiev and Moscow. He then set off for the front, where he spent several months as the head of a mobile Red Cross squad. A.A. Alekhine selflessly provided first aid to the injured on the battlefield, often under enemy artillery and machine-gun fire. He was awarded two George medals for this. Once, he carried an injured officer from the battlefield, for which he was awarded the order of St. Stanislaus with swords.

Helping the injured in an extremely dangerous environment, A.A. Alekhine was twice the victim of blast injuries. The second time, he was hurt so badly that he had to spend several weeks in the military hospital at Tarnopol.

After recovering but still in the hospital, he felt a strong desire to play chess. So the hospital administration organized a blind simul for him, just about the only such blind simul in history. Tarnopol chess players were invited to the hospital, and the maestro took on five of them without seeing the board. He won all five games.

Below we show one of these games, which was remarkable for its elegant sacrifices leading to mate just as much as for the unusual circumstances in which it was played.

The newspaper then adds the game with nothing but the moves. Below, we show it together with commentary from Alekhine’s book My Best Games published in Moscow in 1928. Amid his analysis, he writes that the game was played in the military hospital at Tarnopol in September 1916.
Tarnopol, September 1916
Commentary by Alekhine

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.exd5 Nxd5 5.Ne4. White more often plays 5.Nf3, but the move played isn’t bad either, preventing 5...c5.

5...f5. This leads to a fatal weakening of the center. He should have played 5...Nd7 followed by c7-c5.

6.Ng5! A good move, whose aim is to establish one of white’s knights on e5 as soon as possible.

6...Be7 7.N1f3 c6. Losing time. He should have played 7...0-0 straight away.

8.Ne5 0-0 9.Nf3 b6 10.Bd3 Bb7 11.0-0 Re8. If 11...Nd7, then 12.c4 N5f6 (12...Nxe5 13.Nxe5 Nb4 14.Be2 c5 with an equal position was stronger) 13.Ng5 and so on.

12.c4 Nf6 13.Bf4 Nbd7 14.Qe2 c5. He had to play 14...Nf8. The move played allowed white to end the game elegantly.

15.Nf7!! Threatening 16.Qxe6 with smothered mate if the black queen retreats to c8.

15...Kxf7 16.Qxe6+! Kg6. If 16...Kxe6, then 17.Ng5#. If 16...Kf8, then 17.Ng5 wins.

It’s now mate in two: 17.g4! Be4 18.Nh4#.

This report from Odessa News and the game provided consist of the sole publication known today to relate details of Alekhine’s experience at the front. The last issue of Chess Messenger (No. 19–20, 1916), following which the magazine ceased publication, reprinted this report.

For the sake of completeness, we also show here the scant details provided in that magazine’s No. 11–12 (1–15 June): “Maestro Alekhine is currently absent from Moscow as he is at the front, where he has a commission with a first aid unit.”

Based on the information in the Odessa newspaper, as well as the (so far!) one and only photo of Alekhine in military uniform, Sergei Voronkov has attempted to dig deeper into the grandmaster’s odyssey. He has described his research in detail (“Russian Sphynx 4”) published (in Russian) on the ChessPro website. Here we
reproduce his research and the unique photo (on the next page):

Commenting on the photo, Voronkov writes: “Alekhine in an officer’s uniform with the Red Cross sign on his chest. (On the right he sports the badge of an Imperial Law College graduate – S.T.). This photo may have been taken in Moscow in June 1916 before he left to join the army involved in battle. Unfortunately, no photos of Alekhine at the front have been preserved. Or perhaps they have just not yet been found?”

He then provides his research:

The article doesn’t state on which front Alekhine fought. Later, he reported it himself – Galicia. Although this was no secret to the initiated. The city of Tarnopol (today known as Ternopil), captured from the Austrians in spring 1916, was in eastern Galicia. The name of the front is an important clue to understanding what Alekhine didn’t want to disclose – he participated in the famous Brusilov Offensive! It’s possible that he took the decision to volunteer on the wave of patriotism following the success of Russian forces.

Have you ever wondered for how long Alekhine fought? For some reason, none of his biographers address this question; well, you can work it out for yourself. At the beginning of June 1916, he was still playing consultation games in Moscow – meaning that he probably only reached the army at the front in the middle of the month. And yet as early as 26 September he was giving another simul in Moscow, on 37 boards (and that was after suffering blast injuries!). That’s three and a half months in total. But of those, at least one and a half were spent on treatment and travel. That leaves two months. Not very long, it would seem, to manage to deserve so many awards – medics don’t go on the offensive. Though it’s well known how generous the authorities are following a successful attack.

And how long did he spend recovering in hospital? According to the article – several weeks. Alekhine himself stated a similar length of time in the book Chess Life in Soviet Russia published in German in Berlin, 1921. Everything seemed clear... However, years later, in a famous article about playing blind, he suddenly wrote: “I was bed-ridden for many months in the military hospital at Tarnopol.” And none of his biographers has been surprised at this inconsistency. What “many months” did Alekhine mean when he was only absent from Moscow for three and a half months? No, this phrase would be repeated in various books, embellished by new and dramatic details. One big-name historian ascribed an infernal character to it: “For many months, I lay motionless, chained to the bed...” Well, it would be nice to know. Did Alexander Alexandrovich deliberately ascribe “bravery” to himself, or did he simply have a poor memory of details in his life, with his complaints about having a “terrible memory” not actually pretentious at all? After all, he suffered blast injuries twice.

In the Odessa article, Alekhine called himself the head of a mobile Red Cross squad, but the appendices to a magazine called Niva (November 1916) state that he was the assistant to the head of a mobile Red Cross squad. I think that this is closer to the truth, as, unlike the newspaper, Niva relied on official information. Indeed, Alekhine
would later write that he arrived at the front after being “posted to the Red Cross.”

Oh, and what was written about his military past in the émigré press? I came across the most absurd version in the Warsaw-based newspaper For Freedom! (2 December 1928): “Alekhine spent his war years as a commander in the airborne squad of the Red Cross.” It took time to work out what they meant – simply, this was how they had translated “mobile squad” (“flying squad” in Russian!)

Let’s now turn to Alekhine’s opponent. He is shown as “Feldt” in both Chess Messenger and the Odessa newspaper. Alekhine calls him “von Feld” in Chess Life in Soviet Russia. The aristocratic “von” is omitted in Alekhine’s My Best Games but the initial “M” is added, and the German edition adds the letter “t” at the end of his surname (moreover, according to this book, the simul contained six games, it took place in 1917, and in a monastery hospital rather than a military one). Finally, in Vasily Panov’s collection of Alekhine’s 300 Best Games, the surname is also shown as “Feldt”.

Well, it then turned out that this wasn’t his surname at all, but a pseudonym. So who was hiding behind it? At first, he was thought to be the injured Austrian POW Leon Stolzenberg – a 20-year old inhabitant of Tarnopol at the time who had something of a role in the hospital between doctor and doctor’s assistant and often played chess with Alekhine. He later moved to the USA, where he became a pharmacist and a well-known chess master.

But no – Stolzenberg himself denied this! Albrecht Buschke wrote a series of articles in US magazine Chess Life entitled “Alekhine’s Early Chess Career”, one of which, published in 1951, reported that a Leon Stolzenberg from Detroit had been present at a blind simul in Tarnopol in 1916 and that he told the magazine that the opponent shown in Alekhine’s book as “Feld” was actually a lawyer whose name was Dr. Fisher.

However, different information is provided in the book America’s Chess Heritage by Walter Korn (New York, 1978). According to that account, Stolzenberg, who had worked as a medic at Tarnopol Hospital during World War I, fixed the mistake included in the collection of Alekhine games published in Berlin in 1921 by stating the opponent as a Dr. Martin Fisher, an “intern”. An intern here would have meant either a student doctor or a young doctor working under the supervision of more senior colleagues and living by the hospital. Clearly, this has nothing to do with a lawyer in any case. The name Martin, moreover, is an important missing link that explains why the initial “M” was added.

But why the name “Feld”? One perfectly possible explanation is that it was a contraction of “feldsher” (a historical doctor’s assistant or mid-level medical staff in Russian and some other languages). Thanks to his blast injuries, Alekhine may simply have been unable to remember his opponent’s surname, unlike the surnames that he heard more. So maybe, he then went and called him “Feld” (which in German additionally means the field of battle and a square on the chess board), and then went and added ‘von’ to make it sound neater.
Lists of injured and ill soldiers recuperating in military hospitals and infirmaries. Published for the first time

Well, I really appreciate Sergei Voronkov’s research, uncovering inconsistencies in the dates given in different sources!

The honors lists would be expected to reveal a fuller picture about Alekhine’s wartime whereabouts – two George medals and the Order of St. Stanislaus third class (with swords) weren’t awarded for the sake of it. The hospital lists, where meticulous clerks recorded how and under which circumstances each soldier got injured, might also have provided missing information. It’s also known that lists of injured and shell-shocked officers sent from the front
were not kept secret, and were in fact printed in the *Russian Word* newspaper (for those who don’t know, Alekhine graduated from the law college as a Titular Counselor, which according to the military table was the equivalent of a staff captain – a junior officer (“*ober* officer”) in the Russian army, ranked between a lieutenant and a captain).

The Red Cross Information Department also published lists of injured and ill soldiers staying in military hospitals and infirmaries twice per month. I reviewed these huge volumes for 1916 covering the Moscow and Voronezh districts, but found no reference to Alekhine spending time in a military hospital or infirmary. Voronezh district edition No. XV for 1916 reports an injured Egor Denisovich Alekhine. Maybe he was one of the grandmaster’s relatives.

Many well-known historians who have studied Alekhine’s biography have wasted much time ruining their eyesight in the Central State Military History Archive of the USSR. None found any honors list describing Alekhine and the medals and order awarded to him.

Well, this is almost true. There is an Alexander Alekhine included in the list of recipients of the order of St. Stanislaus third class (with swords!). It was awarded to the grandmaster’s father, Alexander Ivanovich Alekhine, in 1888. After Alekhine’s father died on 28 May 1917, the order was of course inherited by his children, so it is perfectly possible that Alexander Alekhine the chess player wore it on his officer’s uniform. But to be awarded the order and to inherit it are quite different things!

Amid the documents of the Russian State Military History Archive, the author of this book managed to fish out case No. 905 on 133 pages (archive 496, list 3), which contains an alphabetical list of persons awarded the George Cross, fourth class in 1915–1917. This long list contains record No. 808734, confirming that a certain Alexander Alekhine was awarded the George Cross, fourth class. However, a cross and a medal are not the same. Indeed, the George Cross, fourth class was awarded only to privates and non-commissioned officers (“*unter* officers”, ranking below “*ober* officers”). Such a cross could be awarded to junior officers as well from 24 June 1917, and only upon a decision by a general meeting of the soldiers of a particular company. Our Alekhine did not meet any of these criteria. Unfortunately, this case doesn’t indicate the person’s patronymic, recruitment location or achievement for which the award was made. Maybe this was another of the grandmaster’s relatives.

Is it possible that the future champion actually invented all of these awards and his blast injuries, hoping that the official documents would be lost in the fog of war?

That seems strange, given that the lists of holders of the order of St. Stanislaus, third class, and of George medals were published in the newspapers and could never be erased.

To answer all these questions, we need to reconstruct the full picture in detail of Alekhine’s involvement in World War I. We attempt to do so in the following section.

**ALEKHINE’S “OFFICER UNIFORM” REVISITED AND...AN OFFICE ROMANCE!**

It would be a mistake to think that Alekhine’s involvement in World War I was limited to the Brusilov Offensive, where, in his own words, he twice suffered blast injuries. Alexander Alekhine’s
war began much earlier! Long before heading for the front, he worked on a committee of a paramilitary organization known as the Zemgor.

Government newspapers at the time carried the following description of this organ: *At the beginning of the war, the tsarist government allowed the liberal bourgeoisie to establish the Russian Zemstva Union and the Russian Cities Union. These two NGOs merged on 10 July 1915 into the United Russian Union of Zemstva and Cities, or Zemgor for short* (Note the zemstva were local government bodies – S.T.).

This organ was initially focused on organizing hospitals, production of medication and looking after injured and ill privates. Later, it was allowed to help supply the front with food and munitions. The government accorded the Zemgor the rights of a paramilitary organization. Its officials wore a paramilitary officer’s uniform and were exempt from military service.

A list of persons awarded by His Highness (i.e. the Tsar), up to and including 10 April 1916, the Sign of the Red Cross established on 24 June 1899, appeared in *Government Messenger (Pravitelstvenny vestnik)* (No. 128, 15 (or 28 new calendar) June 1916). This list includes our own Alexander Alekhine, indicating the Zemgor as his place of work: “Staff Member of the Committee to Provide Aid in the form of Clothes and All Necessities for the Ill and Injured Soldiers Repatriated to their Motherland. Titular Counselor Alexander Alekhine.”

*A fragment from the newspaper Government Messenger, reporting that Alekhine was awarded the Sign of the Red Cross. Published for the first time*

*Government Messenger* was a fairly large newspaper, which showed in small print the names of persons granted various awards or recognition. Finding the required name in its pages is no easy task.

So this means that, by the time Alekhine first toured Odessa (April 1916), he was already a staff member of a Zemgor committee!

And there’s more. Look at the last name in the fragment from *Government Messenger*: “wife of attorney Alexandra Bataeva.” She was Alekhine’s first wife, who as can be seen from the text was married to a lawyer! So, it turns out that the grandmaster first met his future wife working at the Zemgor. An office romance!

Also of note was the fact that, despite the large network of gubernia, district and city committees, there were only two cities in the empire – Petrograd and Odessa – with executive departments of the Main Committee of the Zemgor. This was understandable, since Petrograd was the capital and Odessa was a strategic port.

So it turns out that Alekhine’s first tour to our city was actually a Zemgor initiative. After all, as we already know, all the funds collected from his first chess tour were allocated to help Russian chess players taken prisoner. A special fund was set up for them at the Zemgor. And it’s not out of place to highlight that one of the leaders of the Odessa Zemgor was also the chairman of the Odessa Department of the Imperial Russian Technical Society and a big chess fan, Mikhail Vasilevich Braikevich. I discuss this remarkable man in the chapter on the grandmaster’s third tour in Odessa.

It’s beyond the scope of this book to discuss the Zemgor and its staff more widely. I only highlight a few episodes in its activities relevant to Alekhine.
Let’s pass the mic to witnesses and participants of those events. Ksenia Alexandrovna Kuprina, the daughter of the famous writer, recalls: “In those days, the Russian Cities Union attracted all sorts of rabble avoiding the front, working as assistants. We called them ‘zemhussars.’”

The writer Konstantin Pautovsky describes the attitude of army officers to the “zemhussars”. Like Alekhine, he worked as a battlefield medical assistant under the Zemgor:

I left for Brest. I travelled in a first class rail carriage full of officers. I was very embarrassed by my uniform, stripes with one star and a cutlass with a shiny hilt. The captain stinking of tobacco, travelling in my cabin, noticed my unease, asked who I was, and gave me some invaluable advice.

“Son,” he said, “try to salute frequently and only say two phrases: ‘may I’ when talking to your seniors, and ‘you’re welcome’ when talking to juniors. That will save you from all sorts of trouble.”

But he turned out to be wrong, this grouchy old captain. The next day, I went to take lunch in the restaurant car. All the tables were occupied. I only noticed a free space at a table where a fat general with a grey moustache was sitting. I approached him, bowed slightly and said:

“May I?”

The general was chewing on his roast beef. He mumbled something in reply. His mouth was full of meat, so I failed to make out what he said. But it seemed to me that he had said “you’re welcome.”

I sat down. The general, having swallowed his beef, stared at me for ages with his round, incensed eyes. Then he asked me:

“What are those garments, young man? What uniform is that?”

“That’s what they issued me, your excellency,” I replied.

“Who issued that?” the general exclaimed in a terrifying voice. The entire carriage fell silent.

“The Cities Union,” your excellency.

“Sacred mother of god!” he screamed. “I have the honor of working in the office of the supreme commander, but I never suspected anything like that. Anarchy in the Russian army! Anarchy, collapse and depravity!”

He stood up and, snorting loudly, exited the carriage. It was only then that I noticed the aiguillettes and imperial monograms on his stripes.

Dozens of mocking officers’ faces then turned to me.

“My god you were lucky!” a tall cavalry captain at the next table told me. “Don’t you know who that was?”

“No.”

“General Yanushkevich, a member of the office of the supreme commander Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich. His right-hand man. I advise you to return to your carriage and not stick your nose out of it until you get to Brest. If it happens again you might not make it.”

And here’s another vignette from the Russian officer and military writer Nikolai Kolesnikov, where he discusses attitudes towards “zemhussars”:

Young prim dandies, the sons of bored fathers and Messalina mothers (promiscuous women – S.T.), failed to hear the call of the Motherland, closed their ears to the cries of the wounded and the ghosts of death. So that they weren’t embarrassed to meet the looks of girls and wounded soldiers in grey army overcoats on crutches, they also wore army overcoats. The would organize Great War masquerades. They would dress up in fantastic uniforms, bearing sabers, stripes and monograms. Goofy “zemhussars”. Brilliant “uhlans of the Red Cross.” They would appear on the home front in medical bathing teams, at food handouts, and wound re-dressing teams, and they would save their despicable, lewd, pathetic body of a cretin, slave and coward.
So now, dear readers, it should be clear why Alexander Alekhine, after completing his initial chess tours, set off to join the army at the front on behalf of the Zemgor as part of a Red Cross mobile squad. He could no longer bear the frowning and mockery. There is a war on, people would say, and here he was, a member of a well-known family, hiding behind his home front service with the Zemgor, and gallivanting around the country playing chess.

Now, Alekhine had a great opportunity to get out of an uncomfortable situation. The Supreme Commander of the South-Western Front, General Alexei Brusilov, appealed to the Zemgor leadership to organize a network of hospitals in schools, monasteries and elsewhere before the planned offensive. After all, it was obvious that personnel losses would increase by several times in an offensive. In its turn, the Zemgor leadership asked its staff to help the Motherland at a difficult time, on a voluntary basis, of course. Our Alekhine was among the first wave of volunteers. Alekhine was photographed in a picture dated 1916 in “zemhussars” uniform (and not in an officer’s uniform as was incorrectly believed earlier!) just before they were dispatched to the Galician front.

After returning from his military commission, it seems that Alexander Alexandrovich slightly exaggerated his achievements and wounds at the front, which was perfectly easy to explain and understand. Now he could firmly look Muscovites in the eye, as he had drunk from the gallantry of the war front and had even risked his life saving the injured.

Actually, the author of this book will be overjoyed if somebody is lucky enough to find honor lists in the archives with the grandmaster’s name or Red Cross lists confirming his treatment for blast injuries in Tarnopol hospital.
CHAPTER 4

ALEKHINE’S THIRD ODESSA TRIP

AN OASIS IN THE CRUCIBLE OF CIVIL WAR

Alexander Alekhine arrived in Odessa for the third time in the middle of October 1918. Since his previous trip the Russian empire had undergone a few changes.

Bread riots, anti-war demonstrations and unrest among the thousands of garrisoned soldiers had paralyzed Petrograd at the beginning of 1917. This led to the February Revolution. The State Duma decided at this tragic time for Russia to take power. The Duma’s Provisional Committee announced the composition of the Provisional Government’s cabinet on 2 (15) March. Alekhine’s ultimate boss in the Zemgor, its Chairman Prince Georgy Lvov, was appointed Prime Minister. Representatives from the Provisional Committee Alexander Guchkov and Vasily Shulgin went to visit the Tsar that day. Under pressure from his guests, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in favor of his brother Michael. Together with his abdication, the Tsar signed a back-dated order appointing Lvov Prime Minister.

However, power was never transferred to his brother. The next day, Grand Duke Michael announced that he could only assume power if the people were to express such a will, and through a Constituent Assembly. He ended his speech by asking all Russian citizens to support the Provisional Government. And that is how, somewhat comically and without resistance, the 300-year old Romanov monarchy collapsed.

After a lot of ministerial reshuffling, the Provisional Government lasted just over six months, and it was brushed aside by the coup of 25 October (7 November) 1917. The Soviets took power. The revolutionary wave, with its epicenter in Petrograd, extended to ever more regions of the Russian Empire, then transforming into the tsunami of the Civil War.

By the time Alekhine had arrived in Odessa for his third visit, the civil disturbances had embraced just about the entire empire with their flame. Military action had already morphed from local violence into wide-scale battles. Society had split into two irreconcilable camps: the Whites and the Reds. And all this time, World War I continued, which also played a profound role in shaping the country.

Following the October coup, Russia essentially withdrew from the war. The Soviet government signed a one-sided agreement with the Germans known as the “Brest Peace” (the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk) on 3 March 1918. According to this “peace treaty”, Russia lost some of her territories, including Ukraine, where the Ukrainian People’s Republic had been established by that time. Interestingly, the Ukrainian delegation also participated in the peace talks with Germany, and was the first to sign an agreement with it – an agreement that promised Ukraine protection and patronage. This happened after forces of the red commander and former Odessa officers’ school instructor Mikhail Muravev had occupied Kiev on 26 January (8 February), whereupon they drove the government out and caused a bloodbath.

By the beginning of May 1918, the entire territory of Ukraine was occupied by German forces. However, a little earlier, the Germans had ‘rebooted’ the dysfunctional Ukrainian government, where socialists of various tendencies and racketeers dominated! The background to this was that Abraham Dobry, the trusted banker of the commander of the German occupying forces, had disappeared in Kiev on 25 April. The commander was furious upon learning that the leadership of the Ukrainian government had organized the kidnapping and was demanding 100,000 Romanov rubles to free him. In reply, a squadron of German soldiers dispersed the Central Rada. The extortionist ministers were thrown in jail and seven thousand Grain Growers Congress delegates brought to Kiev in advance declared Pavel Skoropadsky Hetman of the newly proclaimed Ukrainian State’s new government. His official title was: “His Lordship the Most Illustrious Pan Hetman of All Ukraine.” The Rada was, naturally, deemed illegal and was dissolved by the hetman’s first decree.
Skoropadsky’s appointment met an enthusiastic response from the majority of the population, which was desperate for law and order and didn’t want to break from Russia. Bear in mind that Pavel Skoropadsky had been a lieutenant general in the Tsar’s army. This is why army professionals dreaming of creating a strong army with the hetman’s support that would fight back against the Bolsheviks flocked to Ukraine from all corners of the former Russian Empire. Industrialists, entrepreneurs and culture professionals followed in the soldiers’ footsteps. They hoped to take refuge from the civil strife there. Kiev and Odessa thus gradually became oases of peaceful life during this unstable period. The capital’s historians can tell you about Kiev, but let me initiate you into Southern Palmyra’s everyday life at that time.

A multitude of cabarets and variety shows opened in Odessa. Theaters and classical musicians toured. Literary soirées were held. Performances by Alexander Vertinsky – Alekhine’s favorite singer – were madly popular. Silent films were shot starring Vera Kholodnaya. Cultural organizations sprang up: The Union of Theater People, The School of Performing Arts, The Free Workshop of Plastic Arts, and so on.

Historians who have studied the short-lived government of Hetman Skoropadsky criticize him for his “tough policy of Ukrainization and effective ban on the use of Russian.” Actually, that’s not very accurate. It’s true that this was the dominant policy in Kiev and certain other Ukrainian cities, and sometimes it was implemented quite ridiculously. Here’s an example of the forced Ukrainization: One of the hetman’s decrees declared: “Orchestras are playing monarchist Russian songs at the request of restaurant clients...those present listen to the music and stand up, acclaiming it...I order: 1. Arrest any participants of such demonstrations and deport them to Russia.”

However, the wave of Ukrainization avoided Odessa. It’s true that several schools began teaching in Ukrainian that September,
and newspapers and magazines started to be printed in the official language. Nevertheless, the latter’s share in total editions was far less than that of Russian publications. Moreover, three new Russian-language book publishers sprang up in Odessa in autumn-winter 1918: Southern Universal Library (edited by the famous Odessite writer Semyon Yushkevich), Russian Book Publisher in Odessa (edited by Alexander Kipen), and the Gnosis Publishing House of Academic Literature.

Studying documents of those years, I reached the conclusion that Odessa lived a parallel life, overlapping with Kiev only where the most life-changing matters were concerned. Moreover, Odessa was sometimes ahead of the capital in the implementation of important plans. For example, the hetman’s government was desperate to expand its own academic community. With this in mind, the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was founded on 27 November, headed by Russian academician Vladimir Vernadsky. Yet, this idea had been implemented in Odessa more than two months earlier! The polytechnic began its long life on 18 September. It was to bestow a whole slew of scientific talents to the world. Further, much earlier, on 23 February, the Odessa Agricultural Institute opened.

Academic and creative thought was also wide awake in Novorossiysk University. The Student Chess Club made huge efforts to organize the Odessa championship over 17 June to 25 July. This was the strongest championship in the city’s entire history! Moreover, these “students” made a daring attempt to hold an All-Ukrainian tournament with the participation of both the local elite and invited masters. Oh, how they dreamed!

Chairman of the Student Chess Club F.L. Shpanir has raised the matter of organizing a permanent chess club. The Odessa Chess Assembly’s charter has already been drafted and will be submitted for approval in the coming days.

The planned club will not limit itself to local interests. An All-Ukrainian tournament will likely be organized in Odessa at Christmas and, in addition to 3-4 strong local masters, E.D. Bogoljubov, A.M. Evenson, F.N. Duz-Khotimirsky, M.L. Lovitsky, N.N. Rudnev, Bogatyrchuk and others will be invited.

Maybe the Odessa Chess Assembly is destined to occupy that honorable place in the Russian chess family that has belonged up to now to the Petrograd Chess Assembly.

This optimistic news story was published in the magazine Southern Light in July 1918. Actually, the publication contained several mistakes: Duz-Khotimirsky’s patronymic was Ivanovich, while an unwarranted letter ‘i’ appeared in the surname of well-known maestro Moissei Leopoldovich Lovtsky.

This is an opportune place in our book to tell you now about an almost forgotten man, Mikhail Vasilevich Braikevich, thanks to whom the polytechnic and agricultural institutes opened, various cultural events and art exhibitions were organized, and the chess tournament was planned.

All the more so, as this remarkable man worked in the Odessa Zemgor leadership who had arranged Alekhine’s first tour. In fact, Braikevich was also a friend and colleague of Alekhine’s future son-in-law Vadim Iznar (known as Isnard once in France). But I digress...
Mikhail Vasilevich Braikevich (1874–1940)

Mikhail Braikevich was born in Odessa in a noble family. After completing his schooling at the Realschule, he won a place at the prestigious St. Petersburg Railway Engineering Institute, where he was one of the best students. After graduating in 1897, the young engineer built a sea-port in Liepaja (Latvia) and then constructed...a large armed ship at the Nikolaev wharf!

In just a short period of time – from December 1908 to July 1911 – Braikevich designed and built a railway line 142 km long to the port city of Yeysk in the Kuban (in today’s Krasnodar Territory). In the first year of its operation alone, it recorded a profit of 560,000 full-weight Tsarist rubles!

Braikevich returned to Odessa in 1911. He bought a land plot on Chernomorskaya St. and designed and built a mansion there for himself and his family. This attractive building currently houses the General Consulate of the Turkish Republic.

Braikevich was appointed Chairman of the Odessa branch of the Imperial Russian Technical Society in 1914. He was the direct superior of the first Odessa chess champion, Vasily Vladimirov. The same year, Braikevich became vice-president of the Odessa Society of Fine Arts. He founded an annual stipend for talented students at the Odessa Arts College and managed to get the state to pay for the brightest students to continue their education.

Mikhail Braikevich was a leader of the Zemgor’s Odessa Committee in 1915–1917. He organized a number of events that raised money to help the wounded and prisoners of war.

After the city head Boris Pelikan was arrested in March 1917, the Provisional Government’s Interior Minister appointed Braikevich in his place.

While being the city head, Braikevich was simultaneously Chairman of the Odessa Regional Military-Industrial Committee, Chairman of the Energy Board, and was also in charge of all sea deliveries. He not only managed to prevent the city budget from collapsing, but actually increased revenues several times over compared with the year preceding the war!

The Provisional Government recognized the Odessa chief’s organizational talent and appointed him Deputy Trade Minister at the end of September 1917. However, Braikevich soon resigned after a disagreement with the Minister and returned to Odessa, where he edited and published the Economist magazine in both Russian and English, and helped the city to implement important projects, one of which was opening the polytechnic.

Braikevich took part in the Iasi conference on military assistance from the allies to bring order to the Russian Empire on 14–23 November 1918 as a delegate from the Cadets Party. I discuss this conference in more detail later in this book.

After returning to Odessa from the conference, Braikevich threw himself into the thick of city life. He was re-elected the city head on 17 December, and remained so until mid-March 1919, when he handed over to the Socialist Revolutionary (and chess player!) Grigory Gold several weeks before the French were evacuated from Odessa.

Realizing that the Reds would show no appreciation for his good deeds, Mikhail Braikevich and his family left for Batumi on 2 April, and from there to Crimea. He was evacuated to London in 1920. Leaving Odessa forever, Braikevich donated 300 books on construction and engineering to Novorossiysk University, as well as over 100 paintings from his unique collection.

Once in England, the Odessite collected new paintings, which are currently on display at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.
With his knowledge and talent, Mikhail Braikevich proved useful to his adopted country. He soon became the head of the Economic House Construction Company. He continued with voluntary work too. He was an active member of the Russian Society for Aid to the Starving in Russia, The Russian Trade and Industry Union in Paris, The Union of Qualified Russian Engineers, and many other organizations.

Mikhail Braikevich died in London on 12 February 1940. The Paris-based Russian-language newspaper *Latest News (Poslednie novosti)* wrote “this man had so much bubbling energy, with such young eyes glistening from under his bushy grey eyebrows, that it is impossible to think of him in eternal rest with his vibrant nature.”

**AN HONORARY MEMBER OF THE STUDENT CLUB**

So now, dear readers, do you understand why Alekhine was so keen to return to Odessa in October? The chess tournament persuaded him. And, of course, the grandmaster planned to wait out the difficult times in Southern Palmyra. If he could play in some exhibitions and earn a bit of cash during this time, even better!

*Odessa News* (20 October 1918) was quick to provide information about the chess master’s visit in its Chronicle column: “The famous chess player Alexander Alekhine has come to Odessa for several days.” Although why it assigned only “several days” to the visit is a mystery known only to the reporter who wrote those lines.

The *Lights (Ogonki)* magazine (2 November) provided a more detailed report by its chess editor, Nikolai Laurent, entitled *Alekhine in Odessa*: “A.A. Alekhine has come to visit Odessa. Although the maestro has already been staying here for around two weeks, he still hasn’t played any serious games against strong local players and hasn’t played any simul, blind or otherwise. This unfortunate circumstance is, we believe, entirely due to the insufficient organizational ability of Odessa’s chess players.”

These articles imply that Alekhine arrived in our city around 18–19 October.

And this is what *Lights* wrote three weeks later (23 November): “Successful negotiations are underway to hold a tournament in which no more than 5–6 of the best local players will participate together with A.A. Alekhine. It will be a double round-robin, which will obviously increase general interest in the tournament. Invited Odessites include: B.M. Verlinsky, Y.S. Vilner, P.M. List, N.E. Laurent, and a representative of the student chess club. It would be great to have Kh.A. Lerner participating as well, but unfortunately he cannot play, as the Bialystok champion is seriously ill.”

As you can see, the tournament organizers curbed their appetites and decided to limit themselves to Alekhine taking on the local chess elite.

The following issue of the magazine reports on Alekhine’s participation in the work of the student club:

*A general meeting of the student chess club at Novorossiysk University was held. The following persons were elected to the presidium: F.L. Shpanir (chairman), V.L. Gonsiorovsky (deputy chairman), V.P. Matlitsky (secretary), D.I. Russo (treasurer) and G. Grigoriev (equipment secretary). Candidate members are: I.G. Rozhinsky, K.I. Vasyutinsky and V.N. Butalov. The following were elected to the audit committee: K.I. Vasyutinsky, N.E. Laurent, I.S. Pen and A. Shkolnik.*

*A.A. Alekhine, who was present as a guest, was unanimously elected an honorary member of the club.*
During the short period of its existence, this chess club racked up many achievements. As well as organizing the 1918 Odessa Championship, it held numerous student tournaments, simul, and problem solving and study competitions. It’s no exaggeration to say that it was a true chess club. Membership was open only to the university’s students.

In its first ever issue (18 May 1918), \textit{Lights} describes the challenging circumstances under which the students were able to achieve their dream:

\begin{quote}
At one point in time, chess in Odessa came to a virtual standstill. Following the requisition of the premises at Robinat’s café, where the players previously gathered, they have moved to the Dulberg coffee house (3 Krasny Lane), where they play in a quite unsuitable environment. The chess club has not yet opened.
\end{quote}

Last autumn, the student chess club started to function very successfully, taking up residence in the zootomy auditorium (in the university’s main building). The club has 72 members, two of which are honorary: Professor D.K. Tretyakov and N.E. Laurent. A student called F. Shpanir is the chairman. Apart from its usual meetings, the club has organized a slew of chess events. For example, a consultation game was held on 9 November in which three club members took on N.E. Laurent. Mr. Laurent won his game. N.E. Laurent also gave a simultaneous exhibition on 1 November (+3–7=1), while B.M. Verlinsky gave an exhibition on 19 November (+16–2=2). 9 January saw a simul by Y.S. Vilner and Kh.A. Lerner making moves alternately (+9–1=2), and then another simul was held on 6 April by Mr. Vilner (+5–1=4).

I managed to find a unique document in the State Archive of the Odessa Region recounting how the student chess club was established. This document was a petition addressed to the Rector of Novorossiysk University, the writer and doctor of church history Alexander Dobroklonsky.

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Petition to the Rector of Novorossiysk University to provide the student chess club with a facility for chess meetings. Published for the first time}
\end{quote}

\textit{To the Rector, Novorossiysk University}

\textit{Petition}

The students first thought of organizing a chess club at the University a long time ago, but it has only now become possible to implement it. The idea of organizing the club has gained huge interest, and 125 people have signed up for the club in just one week. There is clear demand for this club. Our action group petitions you to come to the nascent club’s aid and provide premises for it.

We plan to hold meetings four times per week, on Sundays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays after 6 p.m. Given that you are unable to provide the assembly hall or pure mathematics classroom to the club, we have the honor of asking your permission for us to meet at one of the below-listed facilities. The zootomy auditorium in the main building would be extremely comfortable, as it contains narrow tables that are very convenient for our game. We assure Professor Tretyakov that we will leave all the laboratory equipment untouched. There will always be members of the presidium present and in charge, who will watch out for the equipment.

In the event that you are unable to provide the laboratory to the club, we highlight the following facilities, albeit less comfortable ones, which are nevertheless suitable for our purpose: auditoriums No. 1, 2, 3 and 4 (in the main
building) and No. 5 and 9 (in the law building).

We very much hope that you will not allow the nascent club to die, as we are unable to find facilities other than the University.

The club will cover all heating, lighting, servicing, and other costs involved.

Action group
20 October 1917

The name of the honorary member of the student club and big chess fan Professor Tretyakov, thanks to whom the students were provided with a facility for their chess sessions, is known to only a small circle of academics. We need to correct this injustice!

Dmitry Konstantinovich Tretyakov (1878–1950)

Dmitry Tretyakov was not an Odessa native. He was born in the Yaroslavl Gubernia in 1878 in the family of a village teacher. He graduated from the Rybinsk City Grammar School at the top of his class in 1896 and gained a place at the natural sciences department of St. Petersburg University’s Physics and Maths Faculty. After graduation, he worked for some time at his alma mater.

He moved to Odessa in 1912, where he was appointed extraordinary (non-staff) professor at Novorossiysk University. Tretyakov proved himself to be a talented organizer of research and education in our city. He headed the lecture committee of the Novorossiysk Society of Natural Scientists, and was also its vice president for many years. He gave lectures on zoology at the Women’s Medical Courses. Thanks to his efforts, the zootomy laboratory at the University’s Zoological Museum became fully operational – the laboratory that housed the student chess club.

Tretyakov was elected in 1919 chairman of the South Climate Society, which studied natural resources in Southern Ukraine. With his involvement, the Odessa Museum of Natural History opened in 1920 in the former Vorontsov Palace, and then, in 1922, the first zoo opened in Odessa next to the Palace.

At the initiative of Professor Tretyakov, the Zoological Biological Institute was founded in 1929 on the basis of the university’s Biological Scientific Research Department. The same year, he became a member of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Then, just before war broke out, the talented academic was awarded the honorary title Honored Scientist of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In 1943, after Ukraine was freed from German occupation, academician Tretyakov moved to Kiev, where he was appointed head of the Zoological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The last two years of his life were the most difficult for this outstanding scientist. Speaking out in the defense of geneticists, Tretyakov was subject to a barrage of quite un-chess-like attacks from supporters and adherents of Stalin’s favorite, Trofim Lysenko.

The honorary member of the student chess club died from a heart attack on 26 September 1950.

THE VISIT TO THE NEWSPAPER AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The ending of the game between Alekhine and Hofmeister was first published in Odessa News
While waiting for the tournament to begin, Alekhine didn’t just visit the student chess club of Novorossiysk University. He was also a frequent guest at the Odessa News office. During one of his visits, Alekhine showed Nikolai Laurent a unique ending from one of his games played just before his trip to Southern Palmyra. The editor of the chess column would never have dreamed of such a present, and took great delight in sharing this beauty with his readers in the issue dated 13 November.

As Sergei Voronkov justifiably highlights in his article “Russian Sphinx 5” on the ChessPro website, “this work of art has now been analyzed to death.” Indeed, Garry Kasparov even commented on this rare ending solution in the first volume of My Great Predecessors.

Voronkov’s publication contains an interesting tale by Grandmaster Grigory Levenfish about Alekhine’s opponent, Vladimir Hofmeister:

The fashionable Reiter Café opened in 1913 on the corner of Nevsky Prospect (St. Petersburg) and Sadovaya St. It included a chess room next to the billiards rooms. Alekhine spent many afternoons there. There was nobody there who could challenge him playing a normal game, but he had an interesting opponent if he were to play a handicapped game – Vladimir Hofmeister, who was at best an average club player. I [Levenfish] would give him a pawn and two moves start. The results were about even. Alekhine would give him a knight start (now it’s clear why white is a knight down in the diagram! – S. Voronkov), and Hofmeister would also put up a stake three times higher than Alekhine’s. The size of the stake depended only on Alekhine. Hofmeister would agree to any. The stake was serious – 50 rubles versus 150. Hofmeister would play to exchange and simplify, and if he managed then Alekhine would lose. Whereas were Alekhine to create complications, the latter would play remarkable, pretty combinations. Unfortunately, all of these games have been lost, although many of them were as good as Paul Morphy’s handicapped games. Alekhine included only one head-spinning ending in the first volume of his selected games (Bulletin No. 5 of the Alekhine Memorial Tournament, 1956).

We now hand over the mic to the original source in Odessa: “The maestro A.A. Alekhine has recognized the following ending, played recently in Moscow, as his very best.”

No. 10
ALEKHINE – V.I. Hofmeister
Moscow, 1918
Commentary by Alekhine
Black is threatening both 1...Nf5(e4), and 1...Nf1+ in this position. The game ended as follows:

1.e5! It’s interesting that, following this move, the white queen will have nowhere to escape if it gets attacked.

1...b5. If 1...Nf5(e4), then 2.cxb6! If, however, 1...Nf1+, then 2.Kh1 Ng3+ 3.Rxg3 Qxg3 4.cxb6! Qxd6 5.Rxc8+ Qb8 6.b7+, and white wins, ending up with an extra pawn.

2.axb5! It looks like white is closing his own file. However, he has calculated far ahead.

2...Ne4. If now 2...Nf1+, then 3.Kh1 Ng3+ 4.Rxg3 Qxg3 5.b6! Qxd6 6.cxd6 Rxc2 7.dxe7 Bxe7 8.b7+ Kb8 9.Bh2+ Rc7 10.Bf4! (a beautiful move and, in fact, the only one; he could have also won with: 10.g4 Bc5 11.Kg2 Bd4 12.Bxc7+. – S. Voronkov) 10...Be5 11.g3 Bd4 (Alekhine included the moves 11...hxg3 12.h4 in his games collection. – S. Voronkov) 12.Bxc7+ Kxc7 13.d6+ Kb8 14.d7 Bb6 15.gxh4 and wins.

3.b6! Nxd6 4.cxd6 Rec7. 4...Qg3+ is obviously met by 5.Kh1, and not 5.Rxg3. If 5...Rxc2 then white replies 6.b7+ and 7.Bxa7+. He cannot play 4...axb6 due to 5.dxe7. This move makes the win much more difficult, if not entirely missing it: 5...Bc7+ 6.Kh1 Rg8! 7.Re3 Bc5 8.d6 Qf5 (but not 8...Qxe3? 9.d7!) 9.Rd2 Qd7 and so on. Alekhine later found the correct path: 5.Rxc8+! Ka7 6.dxe7 and so on. – S. Voronkov.
The most interesting continuation is 4...Bc7. Then 5.b7+ Kb8 6.dxc7+ Rexc7 7.Rxc7 Qg3+ 8.Kh1!! Both of white’s rooks are under attack but black cannot capture either of them.

5.b7+ Kb8.

6.d7!! Another unexpected move for the finale!

6...Qg3+ 7.Kh1! Black resigned. A finale remarkable both for its complexity and beauty.

I deliberately show separately from this commentary an interesting variation after black’s first move that places a question-mark against Alekhine’s entire combination attack.

Let’s turn to Sergei Voronkov’s article, which examines this alternative in detail:

In his games collection, Alekhine completes the first variation as follows: 1...Nf5 2.cxb6! Nxd6 3.b7+ Rxb7 4.axb7+ Nxb7 5.Rxc8#. However, in his book Alexander Alekhine (1973), Kotov demonstrates an interesting defensive resource that was shown to him by chess players from East Germany:

2...Qxg2+!! 3.Rxg2 Nxd6 4.b7+ Nxb7 5.axb7+ Rxb7 6.Rxb7 Kxb7, and after 7.Rg7+ Rc7 8.Rg4! f5 9.Rb4+ Ka8
10.Rf4 white only has a better endgame.

Nevertheless, you can’t trick the “iron knight” so easily! Instead of 4.b7+, it spluttered a little and then showed the amazing 4.a5!! with the idea of 5.Rgb2 (white doubles his rooks on the b-file after virtually any move by black), thereby brilliantly confirming Kotov’s own words: “Given that chess players throughout the world have been analyzing this combination by Alekhine for over half a century you cannot avoid being surprised by the unlimited possibilities in chess!”

Kasparov also found the move 4.a5!?, but believed that it only led to a draw: 4...Rd7 5.Rgb2 Rb8 6.Be3 axb6 7.axb6 Bxb6 8.Rxb6 Rxb6 9.Bxb6 Nc4 and so on.

However, the move 6.Be3 is clearly not the strongest, because it’s due to this move that white cannot capture with his rook on move 9. The winning move here is 6.Kh1!! – although to see it from such a distance is hardly possible! If 6...f5, then 7.b7+! (oddly enough, both 7.Bh2 and 7.Bd4 are weaker) 7...Nxb7 8.Bh2, for example: 8...Bxa5 9.Bxb8 Nc5 10.Re3! Nxa6 11.Re8 Bb6 12.Bc7+ Kb7 13.Bxb6 axb6 14.Re6! 6...axb6 7.axb6 Bxb6 8.Rxb6 Rxb6 9.Rxb6 is no better, as black loses the pawn on f6 (9...Rd8 10.Re6! or 9...Nc8 10.Re6, and black cannot play 10...Rxd5? due to 11.Rf8).

And yet black did have a defense. Like everything that is genius, it was very simple: 1...Re2! (Kotov), and the threat of 2...Nf1+ and Qxg2# forces an exchange of rooks – 2.Rxe2 Nxe2, after which it’s black who is winning, not white!

The same issue of the newspaper contained problem No. 11, whose author was indicated as N. Olar (in fact, Nikolai Laurent hid under this pseudonym).
According to the instructions, white retracts his last move and instead forces black to mate white in one move. Two readers from Odessa and two from elsewhere will receive a chess book as a memento from the author for the correct solution. If there are more correct answers, the winners will be selected by lucky draw.

The editors announced the results two weeks later:

Solution to the problem by N. Olar published in Odessa News No. 10841 on 13 November. With his last move, the white king captured a knight on g2. Retracting this move and replacing the knight, we place the white king on f3. Then white plays 1.Bh6-f8, after which black can checkmate white with either of two knight moves.

A.A. Alekhine, who had solved this problem, pointed out that if one were to place the white bishop on f8, and the white rook on c5, then white’s first move would be 1.Rc5-c2!, and that would make the problem even more difficult.

Alas, the lucky draw failed to select Alekhine as one of the winners.

And more on the topic of Alekhine and chess composition – the world champion devised an impassioned explanation of his love for this intimate side of chess: “The very idea of chess composition is close to my heart. I would be happy to create works quite alone... But this opponent, this colleague forced on you...he brings so much disappointment to the true chess artist who desires not only to win but above all to create a work of enduring value!”

Apart from successful solutions and elegant words about chess composition, Alekhine’s portfolio includes problems and studies that he himself composed. It seems to me that one of his works has its origins in Odessa.

First let’s turn to problem No. 12 composed by Odessa chess player Yakov Vilner. This composition appeared in a little-known Kharkov newspaper, where Alexei Alekhine edited the chess column.

No. 12.
Y. vilner
Kharkov Proletariat (Kharkovsky proletariat), 1925
(corrected version)
White to mate in 3 9+8

The only path to mate in 3 is 1.e3! Qxh6 2.Qe4+! (threat) 2...Kxc4 3.Nb6#. Two more lines involve sacrificing the white queen: 1...Nd7 2.Qe6+! Kxe6 (2...Kc5 3.Ra5#) 3.Bf7# and 1...Ne6 2.Qe4+! Kxe4 3.Bc6#. Additionally: 1...Nb3 2.Qe4+ Kxe4 3.Bc6# (2...Kc5 3.Qe6#; 2...Ke6 3.Qc4#) and 1...e4 2.Qf5+ Kc4 3.Nb6#.

Three white queen sacrifices weren’t a novelty by then, but I think this problem must have impressed the Kharkov chess community.

And now to composition No. 13, composed by the world champion. Note that the original version of this problem had a “dual” in one of the variations. The grandmaster’s idea was re-used in 2012 by three composers – Igor Agapov, Viktor Aberman and Anatoly Vasilenko.

No. 13.
A. ALEKHINE
L’Italia Scacchistica, 1932
(corrected version)
White to mate in 3 13+12

After a brilliant start (a sacrifice plus a free square for the king!) – 1.Qc4!! white threatens 2.Qd5+ followed by mate.

If black accepts the sacrifice with 1...Bxc4 then white wins with 2.Nxc4+ Kf4 3.d3# or 2...Kf6 3.Ne4#.

1...Kf4 2.Qxd4+!! Nxd4 3.d3# (2...Kg5 3.Qe5#);
1...Kd6 2.Qc7+!! Kxc7 3.Nb5# (2...Nxc7 3.Ne4#);
1...Kf6 2.Qxd4+!! Nxd4 3.Ne4# (2...Kg5 3.Qe5#);
1...dxc3 2.Qf4+!! Kxf4 3.d4#.

In addition: 1...d3 2.f4+ Kd6 3.Ne4# and 1...Bd3 2.Nxd3+ Kd6 3.Ne4#.

Five white sacrifices. An ideal chess composition where the content is in harmony with the form!

Now, however, let’s take a closer look at Yakov Vilner’s problem and Alexander Alekhine’s creation. The sacrificial mechanism is the same in both cases! I have the feeling that the future world champion was familiar with the first of these compositions. It looks like Alexei Alekhine sent the Kharkov newspaper with Vilner’s problem to his famous brother. And that the latter beautifully expanded on the Odessite’s mechanism. And why not? After all, Alexei Alekhine disowned his brother (probably under duress) only in 1927.

THE CHESS CAFE AND ITS FAMOUS GUEST

Robinat’s café was at one time Odessa’s key attraction! It was located in the very heart of the city – at the intersection of Langeronovskaya and Ekaterinskaya streets. Local chess players referred to it as Café de la Régence, in honor of the famous chess café in Paris.

The owner of this respectable establishment was called Pavel (Paul) Genrikhovich Robinat (1847–1917). He adored chess. To the delight of Odessa Chess Society members, he opened a “games room” in his café. The café soon turned into the Mecca for Odessa chess players, upon which the entrepreneurial Frenchman started to charge for playing chess – 20 kopecks per hour. That was a considerable amount, given that the average monthly salary in the Russian Empire that year was 33 rubles and 4 kopecks.

Naturally, Odessa News could not leave such a novelty without comment (No. 5459, 1901):

"Odessa fans are clearly not used to this, as play has been reduced by half since then. As Mr Robinat, a most
passionate chess lover, told us himself, he is not looking to make a profit here, but introduced a charge for the prestige of the coffee house, in order to attract an aristocratic public to come and play chess.

If that’s the case, then we must expect Mr Robinat to eventually organize a small tournament in his café and to use the money raised from playing in his café as prizes, as the owner of the Café de la Régence in Paris does every year.

Unfortunately, I don’t have any reliable information as to whether Robinat actually organized a tournament with cash prizes in his café. There is information that, not long before the revolution, the Frenchman wrote a testament in which he left his café to his many staff and his chess room to Odessite lovers of the ancient game. However, Monsieur Robinat’s family heirs grouped together to prevent this noble feat.

Actually, that was not the only unusual act by this remarkable Frenchman! The Tour brothers, well-known satirists in Odessa, noted that “Robinat was a true master of the vulgar. He was once the host of the Folies Bergère cabaret in Paris. Robinat had a mad conductor who led the orchestra sitting on a ginger horse in his underwear. The dishes there were silver, with golden utensils.”

Robinat decked out his café in French style. He invested huge efforts and funds into it. The café’s adverts were published in Odessa newspapers in both Russian and French.

The Odessa bard Viktor Krukovsky dedicated these inspired lines to our hero:

In every passionate stanza
I will dress in glory him.
His café opened a window
To Paris, Vienna and Berlin!

According to the famous Odessite Leonid Utesov, Robinat’s café was “the center of business, intellectual and romantic life. Deals are struck here, politics debated, and dates arranged.” The café had a telephone (a luxury in those days!) which customers could use.

After the Civil War ended, Robinat’s café continued to function in the same format, but under new owners.

“The opening ceremony took place of the First Proletarian Café-Canteen in the former Robinat’s café.” (Izvestia (News) of the Odessa Soviet of Workers Deputies, 14 April 1920).

“The capacity of the First Proletarian Café-Canteen (the former Robinat’s café) has reached 600 people per day. There is a plan to double it. A second café for workers will be opened in a few days’ time on Gavannaya St., in the former Skveder café.” (Izvestia, 16 April 1920).

Many old Odessites remember the Volna and Ukraina restaurants, which opened in turn during the Soviet period where Robinat’s café used to be. Their customers could gaze at the carved wooden panels, fantastic stucco ceilings and huge chandeliers. These restaurants inherited this splendor from the famous café.

Pavel Robinat’s restaurant business flourished not only in Odessa. The fashionable France Hotel opened in 1886 on the Yalta seafront. It was owned by Pavel Robinat and Elena Latri, the eldest daughter of the famous seascape painter Ivan Aivazovsky. The building, constructed in a strictly classical style, contained 45 furnished bedrooms with sea views. The cost of staying there varied from one to fifteen rubles. Electricity and bedding were included in the price. The hotel housed an expensive restaurant.

Shops were located on the ground floor of the France Hotel. The most famous of them was Russian Cottage, which belonged to entrepreneur of the second guild Isaak Sinani. It sold books and newspapers, and was the first book shop in Yalta.

Russian Cottage was a great advert for the hotel, as it served as the meeting place for both Yalta-based and visiting intelligentsia. Anton Chekhov was a frequent visitor.

After Soviet power was established in Crimea, France Hotel was nationalized. The hotel was directly hit several times by munitions during World War II and destroyed. Pine trees and tamarisks now stand in its place.
Pavel Robinat was a well-known philanthropist in Odessa, donating sizeable sums to charity. Right until his death, he was Chairman of the French Charitable Society and was a committee member of the Refuge for Governesses and Nannies.

He died on 14 April 1917 and was buried in the First Christian Cemetery, which was barbarically destroyed at the beginning of the 1930s.

Alekhine’s notebook from his Paris archive contains seven friendly games from the Odessa period played in 1918 in Robinat’s café. Six of them were victories against Boris Verlinsky. He lost the seventh game, played against Verlinsky and another local. The games shown below were published by Yuri Shaburov and, according to him, are listed in the order in which they were found in Alekhine’s notebook. The two games dated 23 October 1918 below were dated 23 November 1918 in Shaburov’s work. However, we assume Shaburov’s version to be a typo, as otherwise the games are not presented in chronological order.

No. 14. Ruy Lopez

ALEKHINE – B. VERLINSKY

Odessa, 22 October 1918

Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxe6 dxe6 5.Nc3 Bc5 6.d3 Qe7 7.Be3 Bg4. Here or later, black could have exchanged bishops, e.g. 7...Bxe3 8.fxe3 Nf6 9.0-0 0-0 with approximately equal play.

20...Rc8. A waiting move. It would have been easier for black to defend after 20...Bf7 21.Rd1 Be6 22.Nh4 Rdg8 and so on.

21.gxf6 gxf6 22.Rhg1 Rhg8 23.Kb2 Kd7?! Black again fails to play 23...Bf7!

24.a4?! Charging through the center would have been even better: 24.d4! cxd4 25.exd4 exd4 26.Nxd4 c5 27.Ne2 Kc6 28.Rdf1 f5 29.Nf4 Bh7 30.e5!, and it’s tough for black to hold on.

24...Ke6 25.Ra1.

25...f5? The decisive mistake! Once again, he could have held on with 24...Bf7!

33.b4! Nf6 34.e4+ Kd6 35.Ra7. He could have won more quickly with 35.Rf1! Rf8 36.Rf5 and so on.

35...Rg8. 35...Rc7! was more stubborn. The game now ends with a direct mating attack against the black king, which is trapped in the middle of the board.

36.Rf7! Rg6 37.h4 Rh6 38.c4 Rg6 39.Nb7+ Ke6 40.Nd8+ Kd6 41.c5#. Verlinsky obligingly allowed Alekhine to checkmate him with a pawn move!

No. 15. Queen’s Pawn Opening

ALEKHINE – B. VERLINSKY
Odessa, 22 October 1918
Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.d4 e6 2.Nf3 c5 3.c3 d5 4.e3 Nc6 5.Bd3 f5!? A battle for the initiative!

17...g5!? This thrust is far from forced. It would have been fine to play 17...Rg6 Kh1 Bc7 19.N1d2 Rf8 with an advantage for black.


19...fxe4.

20.Rxd5!? This piece sacrifice was devised by Alekhine on the previous move.

23...Nd8?! The way to refute white’s ‘psychic’ attack was with 23...Qe6! 24.Qxe6+ Rxe6 25.Rxg5 fxg2 26.Rg7 Re7, and black wins.


28...Rxg4? Black again fails to notice the way to save the game: 28...Qe6! 29.Qxe6+ Rxe6 30.Rf6 Rxf6 31.Bxf6 Be7 with an unclear position.

29.Bf6! Qd7 30.Bxd8 Kxd8 (30...Qxd8 31.Qe6+) 31.Rxd6 Qxd6 32.Rd3 Qxd3 33.Qxd3+ Rd7 34.Qe2. The pair of black rooks is no match for the queen and menacing passed pawns.
The agony soon ended: 34...h5 35.f3 Rg3 36.Qf2 Rdg7 37.f4 h4 38.Kh2 R3g4 39.e5 Ke8 40.f5 Kf7 41.Qf3 Rd4 42.Qh5+. Black resigned. There is no protection against the pawn march to the promised land.

No. 16. King’s Gambit Accepted

B. VERLINSKY – ALEKHINE

Odessa, 23 October 1918

Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5 4.Bc4 Bg7 5.d4 h6 6.0-0 d6 7.c3 Nc6 8.g3 g4 9.Nh4 f3 10.Bf4 Nge7 11.Nd2 0-0 12.h3 d5?! This move allows simplifications that are to white’s advantage. The right continuation is 12...h5! 13.Bg5 Qe8, after which it’s hard for white to prove that the pawn sac is justified.


17.Qd2?! White replies with an inaccuracy of his own! He would have gained a better position after 17.Qb3! Qd7 18.Qxb7 Rb8 19.Qxc7 Qxc7 20.Bxc7 Rxb2 21.Rf2 and so on.

23. Kh2, after which black has to give up one of his bishops.

19... Ng6 20. b3?! This move allows the black rook to occupy the second rank. 20. Qg2! Nxf4 21. gxf4 Qh5 22. f5 and so on would have led to an approximately equal position.

20... Nhx4 21. Nhx4 Re2 22. Qd3 Re8?! He should obviously have doubled his rooks with: 22... Rfe8!


23... Rxa2 24. Bc2. White’s defense is also tough after 24. c4 Qd7 25. Nf3 b5 26. d5 Bf5 27. Qe3 Re8 and so on.

24... Qxb3 25. Rxa2 Qxa2 26. Bd2 Re8 27. Bf2 Qa1+ 28. Kh2 Qd1 29. Ng2? White doesn’t defend very effectively. 29. Qc4 would have offered much better resistance.

Black now gains a comfortable endgame with an extra pawn and a menacing bishop pair. Boris Verlinsky was obviously unable to defend this position.

...H5 white’s position is disastrous.


No. 17. Sicilian Defense

ALEKHINE – B. VERLINSKY
Odessa, 23 October 1918
Commentary by S. Tkachenko


Verlinsky didn’t risk capturing the second pawn, worried about white’s bishops. I wonder what Alekhine had prepared to meet the capture? After all, after 10...Nxc3! 11.Qg4 0-0 12.Bh6 Qf6 13.Bg5 Qe5 14.Rae1 f5! 15.Qc4 Ne4! black is absolutely fine.


12...Qd5. 12...Qc7! 13.Rad1 Bb7 14.Qe3 0-0-0 was stronger, challenging white to prove that the pawn wasn’t sacrificed in vain.

13.Qg3 Bb7 14.c4 Qd4 15.c3!? The computer suggests white should build on his advantage with 15.Rad1! However, Alekhine decided to confuse his opponent with a second pawn sac. Indeed, he manages to achieve this!

15...Qxc3 16.Bd6! 0-0-0? The king should have stayed in the center! After 16...Qd4! 17.Be5 Qg4 18.Qxg4 Nxg4 19.Bxg7 Rg8 20.Bc3 c5! black stands no worse.
17.c5!? Sacrificing a third pawn!

17...bxc5. After the precise reply 17...Ne8! 18.Rfd1 Nxd6 19.cxd6 c5! only white can lose.

18.Bb8! Qa5 (18...Ne8!) 19.Be5!? There would be an amusing draw by repetition after 19.Qxg7 Qc3! 20.Qg3! Qa5 21.Qg7! and so on.

19...Nd7? A knight on the edge of the board is not always ugly: 19...Nh5! 20.Qe3 Qa3! 21.Rfd1 c4!, and black forces advantageous exchanges.

20.Bxg7 Rdg8 (20...Rhg8 21.Bxh7) 21.Rab1 f6. Black’s best chance was to play the exchange down: 21...Qc7 22.Qxc7+ Kxc7 23.Bxh8 Rxh8 and so on, although the outcome of the game would be beyond doubt.


No. 18. Caro Kann Defense
B. VERLINSKY – ALEKHINE
Odessa, 3 November 1918
Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 Bf5 4.Bd3 Bxd3 5.Qxd3 e6 6.Ne2 Qa5+ 7.c3 Qb5 8.Qc2 c5 9.0-0 Ne6 10.Be3 Nh6

15...Bxa3?! The computer advises retaining the bishop: 15...Bb4 16.Qd3 Be7. However, after 17.Rab1 white has a positional advantage.

16.bxa3 Na5. 16...Ne7 17.Rab1 Qa6 18.Ng3 Rc7 19.f5 with a strong attack for white is no better.

19...Nc4 20.Qf4 Rg8 21.Ng3 Qxa3 22.Rxf7 Ne3.

Verlinsky has played a great game. However, just a step from victory he suffered a moment of madness.

23.Rfxb7?? Happiness was so close: 23.Qxh6 Kxf7 (or 23...Rc1+ 24.Rxc1 Qxc1+ 25.Rf1!) 24.Rxb7+, and the black king is doomed.

23...Rf8. Now it’s black who forces mate: 24.Qxh6 Rc1+ 25.Rxc1 Qxc1+. Therefore, white resigned. Yes, the chess wit was right when he claimed that it’s “hard to win a won position.”

The next game introduced the very first issue of Chess Sheet (Shakhmatny listok) (6 December 1922).

No. 19. Danish Gambit
ALEKHINE – B. VERLINSKY
Odessa, 4 November 1918
Commentary by Alekhine


9.Bb5 c6 10.f4! cxb5. After 10...Neg4 11.Bc4 white also has an irresistible attack.

11.fxe5 dxe5 12.Be3! The decisive move. Its strength is due to the fact that black has no satisfactory way to develop his king’s bishop. If however 12.0-0 Be5+ 13.Kh1 0-0 and so on, black can mount a successful defense.
12...Bd6. Or 12...a6? 13.Rd1! Qc7 14.Bb6 and so on.

The correct move is 12...a5! 13.0-0 (13.Rd1 a4!; 13.Nxb5? Bb4+) 13...a4 14.Qxb5 Bd6! 15.Rad1 Qxb5 16.Nxb5 Bb8!, and black remains a pawn up.

13.Nxb5 0-0 14.Rd1 Ne8 15.0-0.

15...Qe7. Black cannot avoid heavy material losses; for example, 15...h6 is met by 16.Rxf7 Rxf7 17.Nxd6 Nxd6 18.Rxd6 and so on.

Actually, 15...h6 gave black chances to save the game. In this line, instead of mistakenly capturing with 17...Nxd6?, black had to play 17...hxg5!, after which he is winning!

After 15...h6 it’s better to capture on f7 with the knight: 16.Nxf7! Rxf7 17.Nxd6 Nxd6 18.Rxd6 Qxd6 19.Rxf7 Kh7, and, although white has a notable positional advantage, there is no apparent forced win.


17.Rxd6! Qxd6 18.Rxf7 is also winning, for example after 18...Kh8 19.Qd5.

19.Rxd6 Re8. If 19...Rf8 then white wins with 20.Nh6+ and so on.

20.Bg5. From here, many roads lead to Rome. For that reason, white plays somewhat carelessly from here on.

20...Qc7 21.Qb3. White could also have sacrificed his knight: 21.Nh6+! gxh6 (21...Kh8 22.Rd8!) 22.Qb3+ with a decisive attack.

21...Be2! The main aim of this move is to switch the bishop to c4 if necessary. However, as soon becomes apparent, this bishop move contains a more subtle purpose.

22.Nxe5+ Kh8 23.Rc1. In what at first glance appears a totally hopeless position, black finds an unexpected resource that nearly saves the game, and it is only refuted by chance.

23...Rf8! A remarkable move that appears to counter all of white’s threats.

Nevertheless, white had a very tricky move at his disposal that immediately determines the result.

24.Qd1!! After this the result is clear. The players continued:

Odessa News also carried a report on the chess battles seen in Robinat’s café (10 December 1918):

A.A. Alekhine, although unable to play serious games against local players as the tournament that has been planned for ages keeps getting postponed, nevertheless plays friendly games from time to time in Robinat’s café, where the chess room has reopened following the closure of the branch of the Austro-Hungarian Bank in the upper building.

A.A. Alekhine usually crushes anybody daring to challenge him.

Recently, however, two local amateurs playing a consultation game managed to defeat the maestro. This “friendly” game lasted a full five hours. Black lost because he chose a risky opening that is only appropriate for non-serious games. White expertly took advantage of all the opportunities that this risky approach provided.

The newspaper provided the game, but without any commentary.

No. 20. Ruy Lopez

W. BRANNASKY AND B. VERLINSKY – ALEKHINE
Odessa, 3 November 1918
Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 d6 4.d4 Bg4?! Alekhine often played this dubious move in friendlies.


9...fxe4 10.Nxe4 Nf6 11.Bg5 a3. Black’s best continuation was probably to drum up counterplay on the queenside: 11...Rb8 12.Qxa4 Bxf3 13.gxf3 Rxb2 and so on.


19.g4. The position of the black king has been weakened, and white goes for a pawn storm. The computer prefers the quiet: 19.0-0 Ra6 20.Rf6e1 Bf7 (20...Rxc6 21.Nd4!) 21.Qc2 Kg7 22.Qe1 Rxc6 23.Qxa3 with a better position for white.

19...f4? A bad decision. Black would have obtained an approximately equal position after 19...Bg7! 20.Qg5 Bxd5 21.Qxd8 Rfxd8 22.cxd5 a4! and so on.

25...Rc5? The correct continuation was 25...Bxe4! 26.Qxe4 Qxg5 27.Rdg1 Qh6 28.Ne3 d5 29.cxd5 Rc5 30.Nc4 c6 31.dxc6 Rxc6 32.Nxa5 Rd6, with approximately equal chances.

26.Ndc3 a4?! The computer recommends avoiding sharp lines: 26...Qe8 27.h4 h6, inviting white to look for attacking opportunities.

27.b4! Rc6 28.b5 Rb6 29.Nxa4 Bxe4 30.Qxe4. This is a critical position. The white pieces, unlike black’s, control all the central squares.

30...d5. An attempt to confuse white. The best continuation in this difficult position was 30...Rb8 31.h4 Qe7 32.Nc3 Rfc8. However, after 33.Nd5 white would have a solid positional advantage.

In the remainder of the game, the consultation team played with confidence and coolly converted their advantage:


Verlinsky’s partner was Doctor of Philosophy and editor of the chess column in Odessaer Zeitung Wilhelm G. Brannasky. According to Odessa newspapers, he confidently won a “match tournament in Odessa” in 1914, 1.5
points ahead of second placed Nikolai Laurent and 2 points ahead of third placed Evgeny Ratner, a journalist. According to *Southern Light*, Brannasky’s playing style was “remarkable for its solid play and deep understanding.” He emigrated to Germany after the revolution. Unfortunately, nothing more about his fate is known.
ALEKHINE’S IMAGINATION

Odessite Alexander Iglitsky wrote about the atmosphere in Robinat’s café in a bulletin called For the World Championship (Na pervenstvo mira) (No. 16, 1956). His article was titled Alekhine Imagines:

Robinat’s café played a role in Odessa’s chess life quite similar to that played by Dominique’s restaurant in St. Petersburg or the Warsaw Coffee House in Kiev. The small room where the chess players met was always filled with grey-blue tobacco smoke. The dry and sharp knock of the wooden pieces on the marble tables on which oil-cloth chess boards were placed would be interrupted by sometimes overjoyed, sometimes bitter exclamations. The ungainly noise from the billiard hall could be heard through the door.

One day – this happened in 1918 – a tall, broad-shouldered, fair-haired man aged about 25 entered the chess room and asked in a sharp voice whether anybody would play a game with him. This daring of the completely unknown visitor, who had the temerity to challenge everybody present rather than respectfully observe the game being played by recognized strong players, had to be punished immediately. The second-strongest player in Odessa, Yakov Vilner, took it upon himself to spar with the stranger.

The table around which the strict examiner and brave alien now sat was soon surrounded by chess regulars, who were expecting to have some fun and dish out reprimands befitting the circumstances, spiced with witty Odessite vocabulary.

But the unexpected happened. The first game, in which Vilner, predictably, didn’t make too much of an effort, ended in his defeat. Burning with the desire for revenge, he quickly reset the pieces. This time he played much more carefully, yet could not avoid defeat. Vilner then played the third game totally seriously, as well as he could. It lasted around two hours, which was very unusual for the chess room. It was as though he was defending the chess honor of the city. Vilner managed to steer the game into an ending, but he was thereupon completely outplayed.

Vilner’s third defeat was met by complete silence. Wiping his brow, Vilner asked him:

“Tell me please, what is your name?”

His opponent hadn’t managed to answer when the door sprang open and the champion of Odessa, B. Verlinsky, entered. Seeing that something unusual was happening, he quickly pushed his way to the table and, fixing his eyes on the winner, moved towards him with the loud exclamation:

“Alekhine!”

Had the king on the chess board left the e1 square all by itself and hopped along the black and white squares it would not have produced more of an impression than the magic word uttered by Verlinsky.

Alekhine! The author of captivating combinations, the lord of our chess thinking, the unrivalled master of sharp and unexpected attacks was sitting with us! And we thought we would make fun of him!

This was the first time that I heard applause in this room. The players laughed with pleasure, not at Vilner, of course, but if anything at themselves.

“Well, shall we continue?” Alekhine asked Vilner smiling. But the latter half seriously, half jokingly asked for a knight start. Alekhine of course refused to accept such a handicap but right away asked all present to solve a problem that he clearly recalled once the question of a handicapped game arose.

“The conditions are the following,” Alekhine said. “White starts without both rooks. In return black plays without his f7 pawn and white plays the first eight moves, but can only move pieces within his half of the board. You need to set the white pieces up so that white can mate in four moves or less no matter what move black plays.”

After this puzzle, Alekhine challenged us to another one. From the normal starting position, white’s first four moves have to be as follows: 1.f3 ~ 2.Kf2 ~ 3.Kg3 ~ 4.Kh4. Black replies to each of white’s moves, but he is not allowed to interrupt the imaginative march of the white king. Black has to checkmate white as soon as the latter’s king reaches h4. What are black’s moves?

Anybody who has met Alekhine is aware of his burning love for chess and his obsession with chess as an art form.
It’s hard to imagine Alekhine not involved in chess. He readily played against the best chess players in Odessa despite being head and shoulders above them, analyzed positions with them and solved the tough problems and studies that they had specially chosen to challenge him. I remember how Odessa chess problemists once bet Alekhine that he couldn’t solve an extremely difficult five-move mate with a time limit of one hour. Alekhine accepted the challenge. Bending right over the board (he was slightly short-sighted) and endlessly smoking papirossi cigarettes, blotting everything else out of his mind, his eyes were glued to the board but at no point did he touch any of the pieces. Forty-five minutes later he demonstrated the correct solution with a beaming face.

Enchanted by Alekhine’s play and brilliant analysis, we would sit in the club until late and would only leave upon the fearsome attack from the angry watchman. Alekhine, though, argued with him several times, such was his desire to sit at the board until morning – all he needed was a willing audience more or less capable of understanding the positions arising during his lightning-quick analysis.

Alekhine often shared his latest analysis with us. Let me show you a piece here. It is typical of just how carefully and deeply Alekhine checked all commentary appearing in the press, in particular, that written by the then world champion Lasker and by Capablanca.

Lasker commented on the collection of games from the international Chigorin Memorial (St. Petersburg, 1909). As was typical for the then world champion, he would often provide just a general evaluation of the position, limiting himself to outlining the right game plan. Alekhine would make the effort to carry out more extensive and fastidious analysis in order to either confirm or refute Lasker’s conclusions.

In his notes to the game Forgacs – Spielmann, after the moves 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bg5 Bb4 5.e5 h6 6.exf6 hxg5 7.fxg7 Rg8 8.h4 gxh4 Lasker wrote: “It would have been simpler and more active to first play 8...Rxg7. If white then plays 9.Qh5, black develops with 9...Ng6.” Lasker’s commentary ended here, inviting the reader to conduct further analysis himself.

This is how Alekhine continued it: 10.Qh8+ Bf8 11.h5. With the crushing threat of h5-h6-h7.

Lasker clearly assumed that black had sufficient defense after 11...Bd7! 12.h6 Rg6 13.h7 Ke7! 14.Bd3 (14.Qg8 Bh6!) 14...f5 (14...Rh6 15.Nh3 and 16.Qg8; 14...Bg7 is more stubborn) 15.Qg8 Bg7, and it looks at first glance that black has demonstrated white’s entire maneuver to be unsound. However, Alekhine demonstrated a deeply hidden resource that decisively strengthens white’s position.
16. Bxf5! exf5 17. Rh6!! Not the immediate 17. Nxd5+, as after 17... Kd6 white does not appear to have a clear way to win.

17... Bxh6. A more resilient continuation is 17... Qxg8! 18. hxg8=Q Rxg8 19. Rxg6 Kf7 20. Rxg5 Nxd4 with chances to save the game.

18. Qxg6 Qf8 19. Nxd5+ Kd8 20. Qg8!, and the pawn on h7 gets promoted.

Here is another example of Alekhine's rich imagination.

1. e4 e5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. f4 Bc5. Alekhine invented an interesting combination in this position. Admittedly, it is not entirely sound, but its surprise effect quickly broke the resistance of clearly weaker players. In particular, he used it with persistent success in simuls. The game often continued as follows:

5. Bxf7+ Kxf7 6. fxe5 Ne8. If 6... Bxg1, then 7. exf6 Bb6 8. fxg7 with a crushing attack. Alekhine's opponents would reject the move 6... Nxe5 because of 7. d4. However, black could then counter with 7... Nxe4!

7. Nf3 Rf8 8. d4 Bb6. A mistake! He should play 8... Be7 and black has better chances.

9. d5 Ne7 10. d6 cxd6 11. exd6 Ng6 12. Qd5+ Kf6 13. Bg5#.

During his stay in Odessa, Alekhine worked on the manuscript of My Best Games. His handwriting was abominable, and we ardently rewrote the almost illegible pages of the future book. This work by Alekhine also gave rise to a multitude of chess events and episodes.

The conversation once turned to the famous 1895 Hastings Tournament. When describing the play of Chigorin and other players, Alekhine said that he had a high estimation of the games from that tournament and that he was quite familiar with them. We soon learnt what he meant by “quite familiar.” As luck would have it, one of the Odessa players had a collection of games from the tournament with him (in German). So we decide to “test” Alekhine, who proposed that we open the book at random and undertook to reconstruct from memory the game on that particular page. He didn’t make a single mistake. He actually knew all the games from that tournament by heart – even those of Vergani, who had come in last place.

After playing a 25-30 board simul, it was no effort at all for him to play through all of the games the following day, without any hesitation. This could partly be explained by the fact that he always tried to play his best no matter who his opponent was or what type of game it was, and he would suffer considerably if he lost, even during a simul.

Alekhine also possessed an excellent photographic memory. He only needed to look at a table consisting of rows of digits for a few seconds to answer without mistakes questions such as where such and such a digit was located, or which digit was located at the intersection of such and such a row and column.
Alekhine left an ineffaceable imprint in the memory of everybody who met him over the chess board.

Let's now return to the problems that Alekhine set in these recollections. Have you managed to solve the future world champion’s challenges?

No. 21.
A. ALEKHINE


If now 8...d6, then 9.Bg6+! hxg6 10.Qxg6+ Kd7 11.Nfe5+ dxe5 12.Nxe5#.

He cannot avoid mate in four after 8...Nh6 9.Bg6+ hxg6 10.Qxg6+ Nf7 11.Nce5 d6 12.Qxf7#. Black gets mated even earlier if he chooses other lines.

No. 22.
A. ALEKHINE

The second problem has the following solution: 1.f3 e5 2.Kf2 Qf6 3.Kg3 Qxf3+ 4.Kh4 Be7#!
Let’s now switch from the problems to the recollections. I admit that this story first seemed like a chess fairy tale to me. How could nobody have recognized the brilliant Alekhine in the noisy Robinat’s café? Of course, from the point of view of a modern person armed with mobile internet, Skype and TV, such a story sounds absurd. But let’s not forget the time in which our heroes lived. Not only was there no internet, but news didn’t travel so fast then. The Odessa newspapers had written nothing about Alekhine’s life since his visit to the city in October 1916. Chess Messenger was unable to fill the information vacuum – it had shut down due to financial problems. Moreover, the foundations of the state were being destroyed, the bloody Civil War had begun and Russia had only recently exited World War I. It was quite natural for Alekhine’s noble image to fade into oblivion after two years of this hellish chaos.

And most importantly of all, don’t forget that Alekhine went to Odessa in a time of conflict, when mortal danger could await him at every station. Any local red commander could have had Alekhine lined up and shot, suspecting him of being “bourgeois” or a tsarist officer rushing to join Denikin’s forces on the Don. Therefore, Alekhine certainly didn’t wear his military dress coat during his stay and, naturally, it was perfectly plausible for the Odessa chess player not to recognize the guest from Moscow among the café’s many customers.

You should not be concerned about the fact that the “dumb” Verlinsky dived towards Alekhine with a shout of joy. Firstly, he was not 100% deaf and dumb. Secondly, somebody with even severely impaired speech is still capable of uttering a word in a state of emotional uplift – just ask any specialist doctor.

There are, however, some errors in the article. After all, 38 years had passed since that meeting, so the author could well have forgotten some details. For example, Yakov Vilner was the Odessa champion in 1918, not Boris Verlinsky.

Now it is time to introduce the article’s author to the reader.

Alexander Mikhailovich Iglitsky (1901–1964)

Alexander Iglitsky was born on 27 November 1901 in Odessa in the family of the headmaster of the private Jewish grammar school Mikhail (Mendel) Moiseevich Iglitsky. He was the fourth and youngest child.

Iglitsky’s school opened in December 1905 in place of a male college of the second category, which taught up to the eighth class. It’s an achievement that the headmaster managed to open it at the very height of the first Russian revolution! The school quickly
became one of the most prestigious educational institutions in Odessa and beyond. Jewish children unable to obtain a place in state grammar schools came to study here from all corners of the Russian Empire. According to a government order, no more than 12% of the total children accepted to state grammar schools could be Jewish. But this quota didn’t apply to Iglitsky’s school! Further, Jewish teachers were not allowed to work in state grammar schools. However, teachers at Iglitsky’s school were not selected on ethnic grounds, only on the basis of professional knowledge.

“Teaching at the grammar school is ideal. All classes are full to overflowing, and there are now 400 pupils in total. The school’s financial state is great,” Odessa journalists wrote in 1908.

Mikhail Iglitsky was also a member of the Mathesis cooperative, which published text books and scientific literature. He type-set the publishing house’s catalogs and edited a number of books. By 1912, it was one of the largest and best-respected academic publishing houses in the Russian Empire. Incidentally, businessman of the second guild Moisey Shpentser, father of the poet Vera Inber and a cousin of Leon Trotsky, was a member of the cooperative, chairman and executive director of the publishing house.

The publishing house also did its bit for chess! In 1924, a year before it closed, Mathesis published a book by Max Lange called *Chess and its Basic Strategy*.

The talented teacher and publisher’s twilight years were sad – Mikhail Iglitsky committed suicide on 1 February 1912. The trigger for this tragedy was the death of his elder son, Ilya, a student at Novorossiysk University.

The story is as follows. After the bloody anti-Jewish pogroms in 1905 and the revolutionary upheavals, the situation at the university remained explosive. The rector at the time, Sergei Levashov, was an active member of the nationalist monarchist movement and a member of the main committee of the Union of Russian People. He enjoyed the full support of the now familiar Major General Ivan Tolmachev, the city leader and protector of the Odessa Black Hundreds.

Levashov was appointed head of the university in 1907 after a legal investigation was opened against the first democratically elected rector Ivan Zanchevsky, when the latter was accused of “indecisive actions to bring order to the university.” The case came to court in 1909 and Zanchevsky, after being found guilty, was banned from working in the service of the state.

The new rector immediately introduced strict rules. Law and order was ensured by plain clothes policemen and detectives. Nevertheless, student protests continued. A student meeting counting 300 people was held on 8 December 1910 in the large chemistry auditorium. Those present demanded the expulsion of police agents from the university, Levashov’s resignation, and a free election for a new rector. At that time, a lecture was scheduled to begin in the auditorium. A war of words broke out between the students coming to the lecture and those occupying the room. Black Hundreds provocateurs were identified in the crowd and a shoot out ensued. First year medical student Ilya Iglitsky received a gunshot wound to the head, and he eventually died from it, on 22 December.

Despite the massive public outcry (this tragedy was included in the agenda of a State Duma session), the investigation, which lasted over a year, failed to find the murderer. Mikhail Iglitsky’s close friend Yakov
Shatunovsky, Doctor of Mathematics from Strasbourg University (the same Shatunovsky who was a friend of Trotsky and after the Civil War occupied important academic and state posts in various Soviet establishments) recalled:

“The investigation was closed. And he would often ask me this question, which hung over him like a heavy stone: ‘How is it that the murderers have not been found, when everybody knows who shot Ilyusha?’ He took this to be a personal insult and was convinced that he was right. The first anniversary of his son’s death, the requiem, questions in the Duma – this would upset him time and again.

“Then, towards the end, he would often say:

“‘It’s so quiet at the cemetery... Calm, peaceful, feels good... I find it hard to leave it... I need to stay there... To go to Ilyusha.’”

Mikhail Iglitsky fulfilled his wish 14 months after his son’s demise, shooting himself in the heart on his son’s grave.

Following his father’s death, Alexander was the only male left in his family. After completing his schooling, he gained a place at Novorossiysk University, from which he graduated in what were by then Soviet times.

Alexander learnt chess in 1917. As the winner of the student tournament, he was admitted to the city master’s tournament the following year. Unfortunately, his first strong tournament was unsuccessful, and he came fifteenth and last.

Nevertheless, this failure didn’t break him. After the end of the Civil War, he played in all Odessa championships right until he moved to Moscow. His performances by then were much better. His best finish was third place in the 1925 championship. Only the master Vilner and strong first category player Sergei Ballodit were above him. Alexander Iglitsky was the only player to defeat the winner.

His chess prowess was known beyond Odessa, too. Alexander came first in the side tournament for amateurs held during the Russian Championship (Petrograd, 1923), winning 600 rubles for his efforts.

He inherited his father’s love of literature. He worked for some time at the Silhouettes magazine, where he edited the chess column together with Vilner. The chief editor, Mikhail Kapchinsky, was transferred to Moscow in 1925 and appointed director of First Cinema Factory Goskino. Several magazine staffers left with him, including Iglitsky. He relocated together with his mother and two sisters. His son was born in 1935.

The Chess Player’s Dictionary (1929) devotes a couple of lines to our hero: “Iglitsky, Alexander Mikhailovich (born 1901) – first category Moscow chess player. Editor. Participant in the tournament of cities of the third All-Union Congress, 1924.”

Alexander continued to play in tournaments in the capital. He took part in the Moscow championship finals several times. He won a number of tournaments for his profession, achieved success playing for the printers in team tournaments, and posted good results playing for Moscow. He took up correspondence chess in the 1960s and even played for the USSR correspondence team against Germany. Iglitsky won both his games in that match.

At various times, he worked as the editor of chess columns in the Red Star (Krasnaya zvezda) and Soviet Warrior (Sovetsky voyn) newspapers, as well as the Youth (Yunost) and Young Engineer (Yuny tekhnik) magazines. He also worked for 64. Iglitsky wrote a number of interesting memoirs and theoretical articles in the Chess in the USSR (Shakhmaty v SSSR) magazine and special bulletins. He edited the books Steinitz, Lasker and Master Sergei Belavenets.

Due to his poor health (he suffered from heart disease and asthma attacks), Iglitsky was not called up to the front in World War II. He was evacuated to Novosibirsk together with his family. Letters to his cousin, where he tells her about daily life on the home front, have been preserved:

Apart from writing for the Red Star newspaper, I spend my time when I can on another literary endeavor. I work with the local TASS Windows (Okna TASS) and some others. Recently, I also completed the script for a war film for the masses in three parts called Destroyers of the Tanks. The script has been accepted by the Mostekhfilm
Moscow Film Studio, which is currently located in Novosibirsk. The film is due to be shot soon in Moscow. I may start to work on a second script in the coming days.

Other than that, as you can imagine, life here is fairly dull. Most of my friends are dispersed throughout the USSR, and, unfortunately, none of them are here. There was one, Kolya (Nikolai) Ryumin, a well-known chess master, but upon experiencing the harsh Siberian environment he got ill and died – from acute TB. Admittedly, that was in Tomsk. They say that the climate here is drier. My health has also suffered greatly.

After the war, Iglitsky worked as an editor and literary staffer in the well-known journal New World (Novy mir), whose chief editor was Alexander Tvardovsky. It was Tvardovsky who managed to persuade the authorities to allocate Iglitsky an apartment in 1960, on Udaltsov Street. Until then, Iglitsky and his family were cooped up in a single-story wooden cottage with four tiny rooms in Sokolniki. His family shared the cottage with his mother, his cousin’s family, and his sister Olga’s family.

His nasty illness increasingly made itself felt by the end of the 1950s. “He is awfully ill. Is terribly out of breath. He has been invited to work for Week (Nedelya) on very attractive terms. He needs to work from home, they want to arrange a book review section like in New World” (from the memoirs of his older sister, Elena, dated 12 October 1962).

Asthma attacks had left Iglitsky bed-ridden in hospital by the end of 1963. His health was declining on a daily basis. He needed medicines that the country was short of. Grandmaster Salo Flohr, who was close to Iglitsky, helped to obtain them. However, temporary relief was followed by new attacks and, by then, his case was hopeless.

He died on 8 February 1964. Alexander Iglitsky’s remains were interred at the cinerarium in Donskoe Cemetery in Moscow.

FORGET THE TOURNAMENT

The fluid political situation in Ukraine forced the chess players to change their plans and the long-awaited tournament never took place. Hetman Skoropadsky’s tenure, during which the idea of a chess festival had arisen, was over by December 1918.

The first cracks in the hetman’s authority had appeared at the beginning of November, when the German Imperial navy revolted. Uprisings among the army followed the sailors’ example. These disturbances transformed into revolution and the overthrow of the German Kaiser and King of Prussia Wilhelm II. The ex-monarch escaped to Holland on 9 November. An agreement to cease military action was signed two days later. Thus, World War I came to a prosaic end. According to the most modest estimates, over ten million people had died.

Under the surrender terms, Germany was to exit the territories it had occupied under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

So what happened to Skoropadsky? Having lost his support from Germany, he made a desperate move – he completely changed his political allegiance. The hetman issued the proclamation of the federation between Ukraine and Russia. This document envisaged reestablishing a single state, in which “Ukraine will occupy one of the first places, as it was a cradle of law and order, and all citizens of the former Russia humiliated and repressed by Bolshevik despotism lived freely for the first time within its borders.” Skoropadsky also asked for urgent help from the British and French governments. The Triple Entente’s representatives didn’t refuse to protect Ukraine and promised the hetman military aid to defend the country against possible aggression from “Red Moscow” and to put down internal disorder. But it was too late.

This internal disorder rapidly morphed into an armed uprising. The Ukrainian nationalist Directory forces, opposed to both the Reds and the Whites and led by the former Red Cross mobile unit official under the Zemgor Symon Petliura, revolted. The German forces prepared to evacuate and avoided involvement in this internal Ukrainian conflict. After a short civil war, Kiev fell on 14 December, and with it, Skoropadsky, whose tenure lasted just eight months. Nevertheless, the Germans didn’t abandon the hetman in time of need and spirited him off to Berlin by dressing him in a German officer’s uniform.

Events in Odessa also developed rapidly. After hearing of Wilhelm II’s abdication, the collapse of the German
army and the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the military governor of Odessa and commander of the Austrian occupying forces in the South of Russia Lieutenant Field Marshal Eduard von Böltz shot himself on 9 November in his office in the Passage Hotel. Left without their boss, the disorganized occupying forces prepared to evacuate. Three rival centers of power existed in Odessa in the period 26 November to 17 December – effectively, anarchy.

The Directory’s government sent an ultimatum to the Odessa City Soviet on the morning of 26 November, stating that it was assuming all power in the city. However, the paper order failed to have the desired effect. By that time, the first special train with Serbian soldiers had arrived in Odessa under the command of the Entente, as had a Polish rifle regiment. Denikin’s Volunteer Army was also operating in Odessa. Its mobilization center actively enlisted officers and then sent them to join Denikin’s army.

Having sensed the crisis of power, Mikhail Vinnitsky’s outlaws known as the “guard” also took the initiative. The attacks and robbery by these “romantics from the big road” continued day and night. These outlaws were particularly fond of taking German and Austrian military property.

A French patrol on Nikolaevsky Boulevard. The photo states that it was taken in 1919, but I think this is a mistake. I estimate that it was taken at the end of December 1918.

The Directory’s forces victoriously entered the city on 11 December from the Big Fountain side. The hetman’s corps, which had been defending Odessa, capitulated almost without a fight. Some of Skoropadsky’s fighters ran away, some joined the rebels, while the rest decided to make it to the Don and join Denikin.

The French Consul to Odessa, Emile Henno, whose office was in the London Hotel, issued a demand to the Ukrainian forces to divide the sphere of influence. It was dangerous to argue with the authoritative Frenchman, and so the sides signed an agreement to split up the city. The Entente’s forces remained in charge of an important strategic asset, the port, as well as Nikolaevsky Boulevard and several districts by the sea.

A comic situation had now arisen in Odessa (laughter through tears!), with the city streets barricaded by chairs and benches and separated by string borders. Guards paced up and down self-importantly along both sides of these “barricades”.
Despite the existence of rival power centers (or anarchy, to be more precise) and the tense situation, chess life in the city refused to die. *Odessa News* continued to publish its chess columns. Alekhine played more simul s, and people met at Robinat’s café to play friendlies.

*Odessa News* published an announcement on its front page on Saturday 7 December for a chess evening:

*Tonight at 5 p.m. prompt, 7 December, in Central Hotel, 40 Preobrazhenskaya St. (use the restaurant entrance from the courtyard) the maestro A.A. Alekhine will play in a simultaneous exhibition against an unlimited number of all-comers. Free entrance. Stakes of three rubles. Each winner will receive 15 rubles.

*You need to bring your own chess set with you. Organizer: F.L. Shpanir.*

The newspaper’s fourth page repeated the information about the simul in the chess column, in slightly expanded terms:

*...this will be A.A. Alekhine’s first simultaneous exhibition this year. This is his third trip to Odessa since the war began, and simultaneous exhibitions during his previous visits were highly popular.*

The newspaper carried a report on the event the next day:

*Yesterday’s simultaneous exhibition by A.A. Alekhine was a great success and provided great pleasure to the public, who had filled the hall to overflowing. The maestro played 31 games, of which he won 28, lost two (to Rubenchik and Filshtein), and drew one, against the student Iglitsky. After this result was announced, the audience delivered a long round of applause for Alekhine.*

Soon after (18 December), *Odessa News* published an announcement on its front page of a second simul by the
famous guest:

Black Sea Club, 40 Preobrazhenskaya St. (entrance from the courtyard), Thursday 19 December 1918. Simultaneous exhibition by maestro A.A. Alekhine against an unlimited number of all-comers. You need to bring your own chess set with you. Free entrance. Stakes from three rubles. Winners will receive five times the stake. Begins at noon. Organizer: F.L. Shpanir.

And once again, the announcement was repeated on page four in a slighted expanded format.

Soon after, a third simul was held. However, this time, information was only carried on page four of the Sunday edition (22 December) in the chess column (edited by N.E. Laurent):

A simultaneous exhibition by famous chess player A.A. Alekhine will be held today at noon in the restaurant of the Central Hotel (40 Preobrazhenskaya St.). He will take on all-comers. Players are kindly requested to bring their own chess sets.

This edition also published two games from his first simul. However, let me first add a few words about the Central Hotel. It stood in the very center of Odessa opposite Cathedral Square. The building was erected in 1862 on the site of a house belonging to Felix de Ribas, who was forced to sell up to pay off debts. At first, it was a block of rented apartments. The building was then reconfigured as a hotel in 1874 in accordance with a design by architect Felix Gonsiorovsky. As you by now know, Central Hotel belonged to Alexander Velikanov – who had played against Alekhine in the first simul back in 1916. According to the reference book All Odessa 1911, the hotel offered “104 rooms from 1–5 rubles per night”. It included a restaurant promising its guests “two-course breakfasts for 50 kopecks and three-course lunches for 60 kopecks”.

The Central Hotel continues to function as a hotel today under the same name.

No. 23. Queen’s Pawn Opening
ALEKHINE – I. PEN
Simultaneous game
Odessa, 7 December 1918
Commentary by S. Tkachenko


13...b6. He could have completed his development with 13...Nb6!

14.0-0 Bb7 15.Re1 Qf6.
Black has battled successfully in the opening and has fully equalized. Naturally, Alekhine wanted more than a draw, so he decided to take a risk.

16.Bxe6? Bxf3?! Black could have won immediately with 16...fxe6! 17.Rxe6 Qf5!! 18.Rf6+ Qd5 and curtains.

17.Bxd7 Qg5 18.Qxf3 Qxd2 19.Qc3 Qg5?! He should have tried to convert his exchange advantage with 19...Qxc3 20.bxc3 Rfd8 21.Bc6 Rac8 22.d5 Kf8 and so on.

20.Bc6 Rac8 21.d5 f5?! This activity was totally unjustified! The obvious continuation was 21...g6 22.g3 Rfd8, neutralizing white’s menacing pawn.

22.d6! Qf6 23.Bd5+ Kh8 24.Qxf6 Rxf6?? A fatal error. The only way to hold on was with 24...gxf6! 25.Be6 Re5! 26.f4 Rd8 27.d7 Kg7 28.b4 Rc3 29.Bxf5 Kf8 and so on.

25.d7 Rd8 26.Re8+ Rf8. It looks like black has emerged unscathed, but actually...

27.Bf7! Black resigned.

There is no defense against the threat 28.Rxf8+ Rxf8 29.Be8!.
The opponent who nearly upset Alekhine in this game was Ilya Pen, an activist of the Students’ Club at Novorossiysk University. His father, a well-known journalist in Odessa Samwell Pen, was arrested in April 1919 and spent several days in a cheka jail. It’s perfectly possible that Alexander Alekhine shared his cell.

Later, while the volunteers were in power, Pen-senior wrote about his time in the claws of the cheka in a series of articles entitled *Cheka Horrors in Odessa Sheet*. Samwell Pen was lucky, as his case was entrusted to the investigator Valery Gorozhanin, who had earlier graduated from the Novorossiysk University law faculty. Pen recounted that Gorozhanin saved the lives of many of the cheka’s prisoners. This may have saved Gorozhanin from being shot after he was arrested by Denikin’s counter-intelligence forces once the Reds escaped from the city.

Yes, this was the same Gorozhanin who was friendly with Vladimir Mayakovsky. The latter wrote a poem in 1927 entitled *Soldiers of Dzerzhinsky* and dedicated it to Gorozhanin. Incidentally, Gorozhanin spent some time living in Paris in 1914 after he graduated, and he met Anatole France and Romain Rolland there. He was shot as an enemy of the people in 1938.

No. 24. Caro Kann Defense

ALEKHINE – K. VASYUTINSKY

Simultaneous game

Odessa, 7 December 1918

Commentary by S. Tkachenko


13...N5f6? A blunder! Only simplifications provided chances of mounting a successful defense: 13...Nxe5! 14.dxe5 0-0 15.Qg4 Kh8 16.Qe4 g6 17.Bh6 Rfe8 18.Qf3 Bf8 and so on.

14.Nxf7! 0-0. The knight is poisoned: 14...Kxf7 15.Qxe6+ Kf8 16.Qxe7+ and curtains. However, playing the exchange down only postpones the inevitable.


Alekhine’s opponent was another Novorossiysk University student, K.I. Vasyutinsky – who came fourth in the 1918 Student Tournament and played in the Odessa master’s championship the same year. His performance was
relatively poor, coming 11th equal with one other out of sixteen contestants, although he did manage to draw with the tournament winner, Yakov Vilner.

No information on the results from the second and third simul was published.

The Odessite newspapers were also silent about Alekhine’s blind simul held in December 1918. Alekhine faced eight opponents then. He included one of the battles in My Best Games. In fact, this book is the only source of information that such a simultaneous exhibition was played and how many opponents he faced. Unfortunately, the author failed to tell historians what his overall score was.

No. 25. Bishop’s Opening

V. GONSIOROVSKY– ALEKHINE

Blind simultaneous game

Odessa, December 1918

Commentary by Alekhine

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 c6! This is the most energetic game plan against the line that white has chosen.

4.Qe2 Bc7 5.f4 d5! 6.exd5. If 6.fxe5, then 6...Nxe4.

A better continuation would have been 6.Bb3! exf4 7.Bxf4 0-0 8.Nd2 dxe4 9.dxe4 a5 10.a3 Bg4 11.Ngf3 a4 12.Ba2 and so on. That said, black would still stand better.

6...exf4 7.Bxf4 0-0 8.Nd2. White is already lagging in development and cannot afford the luxury of winning a pawn with 8.dxc6 Nxc6 and so on.

8...cxd5 9.Bb3.

9...a5! This is played in order to provoke 10.a4 and hence weaken white’s queenside. 9...Re8 is weaker due to 10.0-0-0 and so on.

10.c3. This move loses a pawn. He should have played 10.a4.

10...a4 11.Bc2 a3! 12.b3 Re8 13.0-0-0. White has nothing better.


17.Bb2+ 18.Kb1 Nd5! This is terrible for white! The mate threat can only be parried at the cost of a piece.

21...Qe3! 22.Re1! White replies to the surprise with a surprise of his own, but this only saves him for an instant. 22...Bf5! (the decisive blow!) 23.Rxe3 dxe3 24.Qf1. Black announces mate in three: 24...exd2 25.Bd1 Ncb4! 26.~Nc3#. Wow!
THE MYSTERIOUS LINKS WITH THE WHITE MOVEMENT

Information that has somehow slipped the attention of Alekhine’s biographers was published in Odessa News at the end of 1918. Yet this information enables us to understand the reasons for Alekhine’s arrest at the beginning of April 1919. Moreover, the information in Odessa News is directly related to mysterious case No. 228 dated 16 November 1920, in which the cheka suspected Alekhine of collaborating with Denikin’s spies. Have I intrigued you? Let’s now turn to events in strict chronological order.

The following remarkable lines appeared in Odessa News on 8 December, after the detailed report on Alekhine’s simul held on 7 December:

One of the audience members was Chairman of the Petrograd Chess Assembly B.E. Malyutin, who is currently staying in Odessa. He has agreed to give a blind simultaneous exhibition next week. A.A. Alekhine will likewise give such an exhibition. It will also be possible to organize a blind alternating-move simultaneous exhibition during which Alekhine and Malyutin will make moves in turn without consulting each other. This format is big news: up to now, neither of these maestros has ever played under such difficult conditions.

Do you remember the photo of the Mannheim tournament at the very beginning of this book? I wrote: “This rare photo also portrays a person with whom fate would reunite Alekhine at the end of 1918, in Odessa. Indeed, the most intriguing story of the world champion’s entire Odessa period involves this man.” So it’s time to unravel the secret: this man was Boris Evgenevich Malyutin!

So what on Earth was he doing in Odessa, you may ask? It’s fair to assume that Malyutin had run away from the horrors of civil war. However, it wasn’t fear that brought this famous chess player to Odessa! Here is what Nikolai Laurent had to say about Malyutin’s motives for visiting our city in Odessa News dated Sunday 1 December 1918: “Chairman of the Petrograd Chess Assembly B.E. Malyutin is currently staying in Odessa after returning from Iasi, where he took part in the Iasi conference in the role of secretary.”

Laurent then goes on to explain exactly how Malyutin got to Odessa:

Malyutin left Petrograd on 8 October, once his status as a member of the Cadet Party Committee became very dangerous. Having obtained permission to leave for a small town next to Moscow (entry to Moscow itself is forbidden), Malyutin used his right to stay in Moscow for one day and then remained there illegally, when he had no “right to residence.” After making successful efforts to obtain documents according him the right to travel further, he made it to Orel, from which he managed, despite great difficulty, to reach Starodub (a town in the Bryansk region – S.T.).

It’s interesting that Malyutin had to make the entire journey to the border with Ukraine while having an illegal status. Having failed to obtain a Soviet pass, he took the risk of travelling on only his Ukrainian and German passes. He even lost those two passes during a 45 km night trip on foot, together with his briefcase in which they were kept. While in Orel, B.E. gave a blind simultaneous exhibition, playing ten games in the Jewish Communist Club, with a score of 9–1. He showed amazing stamina and strong nerves after such a tough and dangerous journey before the even more dangerous border crossing, yet achieved such an amazing blindfold result.

The article then turns to the fate of chess players in Petrograd:

Mr. Malyutin tells us that the Petrograd Chess Assembly was still functioning as late as July. This year, two tournaments were organized. The last one was won by the well-known amateur L.Y. Travin. Mr. Malyutin tells us the following about the fate of the other Petrograd Chess Assembly officials: P.P. Saburov was sent to carry out community work, loading coal on Gutuevsky Island. He had to spend several days there, until he was able to provide doctor’s testimony exempting him from such work. P.P. is currently in Kiev. E.A. Znosko-Borovsky, after being ill for a considerable time, moved to the south. G.A. Gelbak lives in Moscow as a staff member of an evacuated establishment. E.M. Konelman is also there. G.Y. Levenfish works at a factory in Petrograd. He studied engineering at university. A.F. Ilin (-Zhenevsky – S.T.) has had an interesting experience. As is well known, he was in his time
involved in the major incident at the Vitmar Grammar School. After being expelled from it, he was sent by the philanthropist Shakho to Switzerland, where he completed his education. After returning to Russia, he was called up for military service. He participated in military action as a warrant officer and is currently an active Bolshevik party worker. His position is no less than head of administration of the Commissar for the Blestyashchaya (“Brilliant”) Northern Commune! His “brilliant” Bolshevik career doesn’t prevent him from regularly going to chess club.

As a whole, Mr. Malyutin tells us, interest in chess remains as high as ever. However, the conditions in which the chess club is supposed to function are impossible: heating and staff are so expensive that the club, which has no card games, cannot survive.

**Boris Evgenevich Malyutin (1883–1920)**

Boris Malyutin was born on 14 August 1883 in a military family (his grandfather was a lieutenant general and his father was a major general). He was a hereditary nobleman and graduated from the Alexandrov Lycée at the top of his class.

He played in many St. Petersburg tournaments, and came fourth equal with two others at the 1909 Russian Amateurs Tournament. He was one of the strongest blind simul players in the Russian Empire. He often played blind simuls against ten players or more.

Malyutin was an excellent journalist and chess promoter! He edited the chess columns in the *Speech* – in which Lenin noted a wonderful study by the Platóv brothers – and *Modern Word* newspapers. He was one of the organizers of the unique correspondence match over 100 boards between North and South, in which Alekhine also played. Malyutin was on the organizing committee of the 1914 St. Petersburg tournament in which Lasker and Capablanca both competed.

In 1913, he was elected chairman of the Petrograd Chess Assembly and Deputy Chairman of the Russian Chess Union. He participated in the side tournament in Mannheim (1914), where he was arrested along with the other Russian players after the war broke out. He was exchanged for an important German government official in August 1916 and returned to Russia.

A member of the Cadets party, he served in the merchant navy department and then the financial department of the State Duma’s Chancery. He held the rank of collegiate counselor by 1917, the equivalent of a colonel.

Malyutin made it to the Don in 1919 to join Denikin’s forces. He worked in the Armed Forces of Southern Russia’s government’s central apparatus together with the famous chess player Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky. He edited the Cadet newspaper *Speech* in Rostov instead of Party Leader Pavel Milyukov, who had emigrated to Paris.

According to one unconfirmed version, he died from typhus in Rostov in 1920. A second version has that he was killed when Denikin’s army retreated from Crimea.

So, from the first part of the publication in *Odessa News*, we have learnt that Malyutin was the secretary of the conference held in Iasi (which was the capital of Romania at the time), 330 km from Odessa. This was an important meeting between representatives of anti-Bolshevik forces in Russia and the Entente and USA. The conference’s key goal was to provide military aid to the allies in order to crush the Bolsheviks.

The majority of the “Russian delegation” held a prep meeting in Odessa on 15 November before heading for Iasi. The conference there lasted until 24 November. The Russian delegates then returned to Odessa, where they continued to work on a “joint resolution on key matters” until 6 January 1919.
In his book *The Year of Intervention* (Berlin, 1923), one of the conference’s participants, Manuel Margulies, recalls several delegates whiling away the hours on the road to Iasi by playing chess:

“Milyukov plays chess with the famous chess player Malyutin, invited M.M. Fedorov (a well-known public figure and one of the Zemgor leaders – S.T.) in the role of secretary. Milyukov loses two games miserably. I laugh at him. ‘Playing against such a famous professional,’ Milyukov says justifying himself, ‘I feel what a bird feels when faced with a boa constrictor.’ The following two games restored the Cadet leader’s honor: one draw and then a win. Malyutin writes it down and later publishes it in *Odessa Sheet* as a game played with P.N. Milyukov.”

Margulies recalled the story incorrectly – this game was published in *Odessa News* on 3 December 1918, and not in *Odessa Sheet*. Further, the newspaper offered a different version of events:

Participants of the Iasi conference B.E. Malyutin and P.N. Milyukov played three games of chess on the road back from Iasi to Odessa. B.E. Malyutin, one of the strongest players in Russia, gave P.N. Milyukov a knight start. The Cadet leader, after losing the first two games, finally managed to win the third, executing a fine combination at the end, sacrificing a rook to checkmate his opponent. Here we show two of the games, which are of historical interest from the chess point of view. Further, B.E. Malyutin played three earlier games with P.N. Milyukov on the road to Iasi – one ordinary game and two with a knight handicap – and he won them all.

Here are the games described in the newspaper.

No. 26
B. Malyutin – P. Milyukov
*(white starts without a knight on b1)*

Commentary by N. Laurent


6...b5?! An unexpected move from the leader of such a careful party as the Cadets.

6...0-0 was more natural, to be followed by quiet development.

7.Bxb5 Bd7 8.Qe2 0-0 9.Bd3 Ne7 10.Ne5 Bxe5 11.fxe5 Ne4 12.0-0-0 Ne6 13.h4 f6. Milyukov was evidently afraid of trading his knight for a white rook (13...Ng3), due to the threat of a kingside attack.


B. Malyutin – P. Milyukov
(white starts without a knight on b1)
Commentary by N. Laurent

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4 Qh4+ 4.Kf1 f3? A very weak move. After the game, P.N. Milyukov admitted that he knows almost no theory in this gambit.

5.Nxf3 Qxe4 6.Bxf7+ Kd8 (if 6...Kxf7, then 7.Ng5+.) 7.Kf2! Nh6? 8.Re1 Qxe1+. If the queen moves away, then 9.Re8#.

9.Qxe1 Nxf7. Black has three pieces for the queen and still retains a material advantage.

10.d4 Bd6 11.Ng5 Nh6 12.Qe4 Re8+ 13.Kg1 c5 14.Nxh7 Re8 15.Bg5+ Be7 16.Re1 Ng8 17.d5 d6 18.Nf8 Bd7 19.Qf4 Nf6? The only way for black to fight on would be to evacuate his king to the queenside: 19...Kc7! and so on.
Apart from the disparate elite of the different political parties existing during the Russian Empire, Volunteer Army leaders also participated in the conference: General Alexei Grishin-Almazov and head of the Alphabet (Azhba) secret spy network Vasily Shulgin. This was the same Shulgin who accepted Nicholas II’s abdication and sat in the State Duma together with Alexander Alekhine’s father. Actually, the head of Alphabet got ill with the nasty Spanish flu on the way to the conference and was unable to sit in its sessions. Remaining in Iasi to get better, he only arrived back in Odessa in time for the closing debates.

As a reminder, former head of the Odessa Zemgor branch and Cadet Party member Mikhail Braikevich, who helped organize Alekhine’s first trip to Odessa, also participated in the conference.

The allies were represented at the conference by diplomatic staff in Romania: British ambassador Sir George Barclay, French ambassador the Count of Saint-Aulaire and that country’s vice consul in Kiev Emile Henno (the forum’s main organizer), American ambassador the Czech-born Charles Vopicka, and the Italian trade representative Giacinto Auriti. As is evident from the list, these western power representatives were not top-level and didn’t have the authority to take important decisions.

Well-known White Movement activist Vladimir Gurko wrote about the comings and goings during the Iasi conference in his memoirs From Petrograd to Odessa via Moscow, Paris and London:
You couldn’t imagine anything more curious, pitiful and ridiculous than the so-called Iasi conference, which was later written about in the Russian press as though it were of significance. It was held in what was essentially a basement in a Russian consulate building that was normally used – and this was easy to guess from looking around – as a storage for old archives and broken furniture...

Why these people had to go from Kiev to the basement of the Russian consulate in Iasi in order to draw up the program was inexplicable. I think that everybody there recognized that this work was pointless. Nevertheless, this didn’t prevent those present from making all sorts of eloquent speeches and arguing with each other until they had lost their voices or their physical strength.

Well, what did these random representatives of Russian society who had congregated in Iasi argue about? Oh, about absolutely everything! Typical endless and wish-washy Russian debates which supposedly resolved – all at once, rather than one at a time – all the issues about statehood, if not about the entire universe. Mixing the important with the mediocre, they would agree on words and then bicker over the commas...

They argued over the aid that the allies had to provide. They argued over whether this aid could be in the form of sending Romanian soldiers. In fact, Milyukov stated his sharp opposition to this idea, claiming that armed aid from Romania could lead to the complete alienation of Bessarabia, which had already been captured by Romania. They argued over who should head the Russian national forces aiming to overthrow the Bolsheviks and restore the previous Russia. The socialists backed the still existing but fatally weakened Provisional All-Russian Government that had been declared in Ufa. Others were in favor of a military government headed by the leader of the Volunteer Army, although some wanted Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich to be in charge. Actually, they argued about everything. To the astonishment of their Entente allies, they argued for ten whole days.

The arguments continued after the delegation returned to Odessa. The London Hotel, where the delegates were based, turned into a true discussion club. Arguments were constantly conducted in Emile Henno’s room about the concluding resolution’s wording and who should travel to Europe to meet the British and French government leaders. By the way, this hotel was just about the only place in Odessa where it was possible to live in relative safety. That is why many members of the business and cultural elite, including Alekhine, chose to stay there.

Meanwhile, the political situation in the city after the delegation returned from Iasi had become extremely tense. The Provisional All-Russian Government forces were rapidly capturing more and more territory. French ships waited in the Odessa estuary for favorable conditions to send troops ashore. The numerous centers of government highlighted in the previous section had almost entirely paralyzed city life.

General Grishin-Almazov’s military talent shone through in this crisis situation. He managed to put together a battalion of 1,500 fighting men with former Russian army officers as its core. Then, having gained moral support from the French command, he chased Petliura’s forces from Odessa after a two-week battle. His battalion’s losses amounted to 24 dead, over 100 wounded, and 30 officers captured (they would later be executed with cutlasses). The
enemy’s losses were many times higher.

Dmitry Lekhovich, a participant in those events, would later write about this operation:

_On 4 December (old style calendar – S.T.) the population of Odessa, which by then had lost all faith in the Frenchmen’s promises, were astounded to see French naval transport ships reach the city from the sea and unload an infantry brigade with artillery and a cavalry squadron. The French commanding officer, General Borius, demanded that Petliura’s forces leave the city. Having received a refusal, he accepted Grishin-Almazov’s request with pleasure to chase Petliura’s forces from Odessa using a volunteer brigade. Grishin’s initiative proved to be successful. Just one day later, local volunteers occupied the city, while Petliura’s forces, retreating a certain distance to the north, formed a half-circle around Odessa._

_Happy that no French blood had been spilt, General Borius offered Grishin-Almazov the position of Odessa Military Governor. After accepting this unexpected post, Grishin informed General Denikin, assuring him of his complete loyalty and requesting that the Supreme Commander approve his new role, in order to rule Odessa in the name of the Volunteer Army._

And so Grishin-Almazov was appointed Odessa military commander, with Vasily Shulgin as his closest advisor.

What happened to the other Iasi conference participants? A concluding resolution was finally adopted after heated debate, and the negotiators left to tend to their own affairs. Pavel Milyukov left for Europe as part of the Russian delegation to negotiate with the allies’ governments over specific military aid. Boris Malyutin headed for the Don to join Denikin, where he died in 1920, as I noted earlier.

Unfortunately, I failed to find any information in the Odessa press on the joint blind simultaneous exhibition given by Alekhine and Malyutin.

Naturally, many Odessa chess players and other ordinary people saw Alekhine in the company of Malyutin and other members of the Russian delegation. This gave rise to suspicion that he had links to the Entente’s and Denikin’s agents. Therefore, the version of the grandmaster’s arrest in April 1919 being prompted by a denunciation about his alleged collaboration with Denikin’s forces appears perfectly plausible.

However, a different version could also be true. According to this one, Odessa cheka officials found a case (or secret compartment) in Alekhine’s hotel room containing documents belonging to some officer. It’s perfectly possible that an alliance or volunteer officer left their belongings or papers in Alekhine’s room when they were being evacuated from Odessa. Maybe this officer was Malyutin himself? It’s a shame that it’s no longer possible to identify in which rooms Alekhine and Malyutin stayed. The London Hotel’s archives were lost during World War II.

To the disappointment of historians, the Odessa cheka branch’s archives never survived either. They were destroyed in a fire when the Reds retreated from the city at the end of August 1919. Therefore, it’s impossible to say anything with certainty – i.e. with documentary proof – about the reasons for Alekhine’s arrest.

Let me briefly state here my own version about the so-called receipt signed by Alekhine acknowledging payment of a large sum from Denikin’s counter-intelligence. This note was the signal for Moscow chekists to open case No. 228 against Alekhine in 1920 (I devote a separate chapter to
Due to his extended stay, Alekhine evidently spent heavily. Suddenly, a convenient opportunity presented itself for him to borrow a considerable sum, either directly from his close friends or using their guarantee. So who could have lent Alekhine 100,000 rubles purely on the basis of a receipt? For comparison, the average monthly salary in Odessa at the end of 1918 was 600 rubles.

Vasily Shulgin, the head of Alphabet, controlled a lot of money at that time. Studying the archives, I managed to find interesting information about the Odessa branch of Alphabet in 1919. Its total monthly expenses, on salaries of its residents, premises rental and other everyday needs, came to 38,750 rubles. However, in addition to his spying operations, Shulgin was charged with recruiting officers who would be sent to the Don to fight for Denikin, and that required additional large sums. I think it was Shulgin who lent 100,000 Tsarist rubles to Alekhine. The receipt would have been written for accounting purposes, and it came to light after the cheka smashed up Alphabet’s Odessa branch in autumn 1920.

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**FRENCH “AID” FOR ODESSA**

Odessa was placed under “French command” on 19 December 1918 after Petliura’s forces left the city. Ships reached the city with Greek and French soldiers. The number of allied troops in Odessa now reached 15,000. The French sent twenty tanks to support its army – these were a complete novelty in Ukraine. The plan was for the allies to march on Kiev and Kharkov, and from there to Moscow. It looked like the Bolsheviks’ days were numbered.
However, the French plans changed suddenly. The new expeditionary force commander Brigadier General Philippe d’Anselme and his chief of staff, Colonel Henry Freydenberg, adopted a policy diametrically opposed to that of the consul Emile Henno.

Whereas Henno assured Paris that Denikin’s Volunteer Army was the sole political force in Southern Russia that France would gain from doing business with, the new military leadership followed a multifarious policy and held talks with all anti-Bolshevik forces in the South.

Moreover, Freydenberg hated the White Movement. He convinced d’Anselme that the Volunteer Army was a reactionary force unsupported by the population.

Henry Freydenberg played his own “game” in Odessa, ignoring his boss. In fact, personal greed was his motivating factor. Rumors spread in political and business circles about a huge bribe – 5,000,000 rubles! – paid to him by the Directory. I think that the rumor was true. Why else would Freydenberg have suddenly become an ardent advocate of cooperating with Petliura’s forces, with whom the allies had been bitter enemies at the beginning? Moreover, according to testimony from his contemporaries, Freydenberg’s actions were “strikingly similar to the work of German and Bolshevik agents.”

Further, Freydenberg was an expert on the nuances of life in Odessa. There should be no surprise about this! He was actually born in Odessa (and not in France, as some sources suggest), into a well-off Jewish family. He moved to France as a child and received a military education there. His father was a shareholder in the well-known Franco-Belgian Coal Company and visited Odessa from time to time. Meanwhile, his mother and many relatives lived permanently in Odessa and only left the city together with Henry at the beginning of April.

As a result of Freydenberg’s imitation of massive initiatives, the French undertook no serious attack. Actions were limited to endless negotiations and meaningless talk. Naturally, the Bolsheviks took advantage of this. Leaflets were pasted around the city at night calling on the expeditionary corps soldiers to openly rebel against their officers. Further, the so-called Foreign Collegium, including the legendary Jeanne Labourbe dispatched from Moscow, actively spread propaganda. The French were only able to put an end to this group with the help of the Volunteer
Army’s spies.

The “Freydenberg bloc” finally got the upper hand at the beginning of spring. Consul Henno was recalled to France in March and General Grishin-Almazov was fired. His subsequent fate proved to be tragic. Grishin-Almazov left for Siberia at the start of May 1919 as the head of a military delegation to meet Admiral Kolchak. However, the ferry Leila on which the group had set off across the Caspian Sea was captured by the red destroyer Karl Liebknecht. Refusing to be taken prisoner, the General shot himself.

Cultural life in Odessa was reignited with the arrival of the French. Literary soirées with famous writers and poets resumed. Theaters, variety shows and cabarets opened. Film studios continued to make movies with Vera Kholodnaya. The richest people of the Russian Empire – millionaires such as Mantashev, Putilov and Lianozov – found a safe haven there.

What did Alekhine do there at this time? Yuri Shaburov, the author of a book called Alexander Alekhine. The Undefeated Champion (1992) wrote “between December 1918 and March 1919, Alekhine played a large number of friendly games and simul in Odessa, including a win against a local amateur recorded as ‘N. Kaufman’. The planned tournament was by this time clearly not going to happen, and Alekhine needed to earn money to feed himself and pay for his journey back to Moscow.”

Unfortunately, I was unable to find any information about Alekhine’s simul during the French occupation in local newspapers and other sources. However, the book Alexander Alekhine’s Chess Games, 1902-1946 by Leonard M. Skinner and Robert G. P. Verhoeven contains a blind simul game by Alekhine played in 1919 (the month isn’t shown), when Odessa was already occupied by French troops. The authors write that the game was first published, without commentary, in Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf on 16 April 1920. How did it end up published there? I have a suspicion that one of Alexander Iglitsky’s relatives was involved. His father, Mikhail Moiseevich Iglitsky, had three brothers and two sisters. They all emigrated from Russia in 1919–20, but in different directions – to Europe or America. It’s perfectly plausible that Alexander found the opportunity to send them this game. As an aside, one of Alexander’s distant relatives is the Belgian businessman and FIDE official Willy Icliki (his surname became “Europeanized”). Icliki’s great-grandfather was Mikhail Moiseevich Iglitsky’s brother.

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No. 28. Queen’s Pawn Opening

ALEKHINE – A. Iglitsky
Blind simultaneous game
Odessa, 1919
Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 c5 3.dxc5 Nf6 4.e3 a5 5.e4 Nxe4 6.Bb5+ Ne6? A mistake for which black may pay dearly. He should have blocked with the bishop: 6...Bd7! 7.Qxd5 Bxb5 8.Qxe4 Nd7 with equal play.

7...Bg4!? (7...e6! was better)


21.axb3 22.Nxb3! A mistake that hands the initiative to black. He could have gained an equal position with 22.axb3! Bxc5 23.Bxh7 Rxc5 24.Ne2 and so on.

22...Rxa2 23.Ra1 Re8 24.Rxa2 Rxa2 25.Nd4 Kf7 26.e6 Be8 27.Rd1. White’s best chance was to bring his rook into active play with 27.Rb1!

27...Be5?! He should have played 27...Ra5! 28.Rb1 Bd6 29.g3 Rc5 with a slightly better position.

28...Bb6 29.Bf4 Ra7 30.Rb1?! Here, however, bringing the rook into battle on the queenside brings no joy. He should have played 30.Rf1! Kg6 31.Kh1 Rb7 32.Rb1, where it’s hard for black to convert the advantage of the bishop pair.


32...Ke6?! Black could have wrapped up the game with 32...Ke7! 33.Rxf4 Ra1+ 34.Kf2 g5! and white’s rook is trapped.

33.Rxf4 Ra1+ 34.Kf2 Ke5 35.Re7+ Kf6 36.Ra7 g5 37.Kg3?! He could have put up more resistance with 38.e4! dxe4 39.Ke3 Ke5 40.Re7+ Kf5 41.Rf7+ Kg6 42.Ra7!, retaining excellent drawing chances.

38...Ra2 39.h4 gxh4+ 40.Kxh4 e3 (40...Ke5! was more precise) 41.Nd4 Bc4!? 42.Rxh7?? A tragic blunder! There is nothing for white to fear from an exchange of rooks: 42.Rxa2! Bxa2 43.Kg4 Bc4 44.Kf3, and a draw.

However, with the rooks still on board, white is lost: 42...Rgx2 43.Rh6+ Ke5 44.Kh3 Rd2 45.Kg3 Ke4 46.Re6+ Kd3 47.Kf4 Kxc3 48.Nf5 d4 49.Nxd4 Bxe6. White resigned. Despite the large number of mistakes by both players typical of a blind simul, the game is interesting and instructive!
The French troops’ sojourn in Odessa unexpectedly ended with an emergency evacuation at the beginning of April 1919. The evacuation was officially announced on the evening of 2 April. The troops embarked on their ships within 48 hours and left for the estuary.

Almost a hundred years have passed since that event, but the motives for the sudden retreat continue to puzzle historians. Why did this heavily armed, 15,000 strong French corps suddenly abandon the extremely important strategic center on the Black Sea, leaving the enemy vast supplies of food, military clothing and weapons? Were they afraid of the fast approaching Red Army?

Well, it’s true that partisan units from the former Petliura favorite and by then Red Army Ataman Grigoriev had carried out daring attacks against Directory forces and had chased them from Left-Bank and Central Ukraine. However, the brazen Ataman would have stood no chance against the French army. Indeed, he understood this perfectly well. That is why Grigoriev viewed the abandonment of Odessa as some sort of cunning trap and occupied the city only on 6 April – a full day after the French had left.

Soviet historians put this retreat down to the self-sacrificing efforts of the Bolshevik underground, which had managed to quickly radicalize the French soldiers. They argued that the allied commanders hurriedly brought their army home, fearing a revolutionary uprising among their own troops. This explanation is, however, clearly convoluted. Yes, there was unrest among the French forces, especially the navy. However, it is hard to believe that Bolshevik propaganda had managed to completely demoralize thousands of well-protected troops in just a couple of months.

The remarkable Odessite writer and local historian Nikita Brygin, who has gained access to secret archive information, has proposed
the version that the underground managed to infiltrate the interventionists’ radio station based on the Count Platov minesweeper and broadcasted an order to evacuate immediately, supposedly from Paris. This version is backed up by the publication in Odessa newspapers on 4 April of “sensational news” about the fall back home of Georges Clemenceau’s government.

Another version of the sudden French evacuation appeared in the émigré press after the Civil War ended. It stated that Henry Freydenberg received a huge bribe from the Reds in exchange for putting a stop to the intervention.

Whether that is true is now difficult to prove. The cunning Colonel would have been most unlikely to provide a receipt. Yet the version involving the bribe fits well with the fact that, as soon as Freydenberg arrived in Constantinople from Odessa, he resigned his commission and opened a bank in the city.

There is further indirect confirmation of a bribe – the furious Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau sent a dossier about Freydenberg to the French Supreme Military Court on 19 April for personally taking the decision to evacuate the allied troops from Southern Russia.

As it happens, Freydenberg managed to convince the judges of his innocence. Soon after, the Clemenceau government fell. France’s new leadership, which had campaigned to bring all troops home, turned a blind eye to the Colonel’s “frivolities.” He was reinstated in the military and dispatched to France’s African colonies.

It is interesting to take a look at Freydenberg’s later career. He was the military commander of Morocco in 1924–1929. He then became commander of the First Senegal Division and, after that, commander of French forces in Western Africa. Towards the end of the 1930s, he became commander of all French colonial troops. Freydenberg resigned again in 1938, but put his uniform back on upon the outbreak of World War II and again took command of the French colonial army. He was appointed commander of the Second French Army in May 1940. He was dismissed by Philippe Pétain after France’s capitulation. Freydenberg died in Paris in 1975 just short of one hundred years old, outliving many of this book’s heroes.

Moving forward in time, don’t forget that Alekhine volunteered for the French army in World War II. Which army? Alas, I was unable to find any answer to that question. It’s perfectly possible that his commanding officer was none other than General Henry Freydenberg from Odessa. By this time, though, the General’s surname had changed to a more French-sounding version, Fredemberg. History sometimes comes up with curious combinations!

The French evacuation from Odessa did indeed look like some secret operation, with the locals learning about it at the last minute. The writer Ivan Bunin, who lived in the city, wrote the following about the atmosphere in those April days: “I dashed out of my house, grabbed a cab and couldn’t believe my eyes. Loaded donkeys were running around, French and Greek soldiers were dressed in their marching kits, and horse-drawn carts were moving around with all sorts of military equipment.”

Not even the Russian soldiers knew about their allies’ plans. I recently read the memoirs of Yakov Kefeli, who
was a White Movement member. He knew well the Odessa military governor Lieutenant General Alexei Shvarts, whom the French command had appointed to the post in place of Grishin-Almazov without Denikin’s approval.

Kefeli provided a detailed account of the day when he learnt that the French were leaving Odessa: “We were sitting in my office in the morning when I was suddenly called to the phone by the staff general; somebody told me that the evacuation had been unexpectedly announced, and that all those who wanted to leave with them had two days to prepare. Everybody was in shock; nobody could make any sense of it. I set off to find the reason why. I was told that Clemenceau’s government had resigned and that the new authorities, not having much hope for their troops and not wanting to fight on, had immediately recalled the army.”

Vladimir Gurko, whom we have already encountered, recalled the last days of “French Odessa”, the difficulties in obtaining a visa, and the “joys” of evacuation:

It wasn’t the very fact of the evacuation, but the lightning speed at which it was executed, which resulted in the Russian forces having no opportunity to organize their own defense of Odessa. The local French military chiefs d’Anselme and Franchet d’Esprey were well aware of this, and were quite embarrassed about it when talking with Russians.

Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie threw themselves into obtaining visas to Western Europe. General d’Anselme’s office distributed the visas, and, in practice, the process was run by his chief of staff, Colonel Freydenberg, who had by that time already built up a quite unenviable reputation. His arrogance and rudeness elicited hatred among just about everybody, and he was a notorious bribe taker. Indeed, people claimed that it was impossible to obtain permission for anything in Odessa that required the French command’s consent without a bribe.

There can be no doubt that Freydenberg extracted a heavy price for visas. I personally knew of a case where he received 80,000 Romanov rubles, approximately 12,000 francs in those days, for two visas. The most interesting fact of all was that those visas turned out to be totally invalid. The French authorities in Constantinople refused to recognize them, even though they had issued them themselves, and only after receiving permission from Paris for each person individually – a stark example of murderous French centralization and mistrust of their own agents, even those as important as their supreme commissars.

In just a day or so, the London Hotel completely changed its outward features. The bourgeoisie formed a permanent queue there, joined by just about everybody else in Odessa desiring to leave the city. Many people without particular political views and who clearly didn’t have the cash required to survive in a distant country nevertheless took the decision to leave on the back of the spontaneous panic that had gripped the city. This eventually left them in a morass of deprivation and distress that would hardly have been worse had they remained in
All sorts of people turned up at the London Hotel and crowded into its large vestibule, many of them people you would not normally have expected to be there. They included a large number of Petrograd residents who had been deprived of the means to exist to the extent that you could see it not only in their clothing and shoes, but even on their face. Petliura officers turned up all of a sudden dressed in theater costumes. It turned out that they had made it to the hotel by some backstreets to try and recruit the population to fight alongside some still existing Petliura units in order to defend Odessa from the Bolsheviks.

The French command promised visas to France for all members of the Council of National Unity, of which I was one. However, when another of our members arrived at the respective office for this very purpose, he was unable to reach it through the crowd that had laid siege to the office. I then decided to head directly to General d’Anselme’s office on the nearby Primorsky Boulevard, located in the Petersburg Hotel that the French had requisitioned – only to come across utter chaos. It was quite easy to get to the office, but extremely difficult to find the relevant official. Wandering around the now mostly empty rooms that comprised the head office, I finally encountered some Russian officer who turned out to be a radio officer.

While I was still speaking with him, a small but stocky French officer appeared in the room who looked anything but French and curtly asked me what I wanted. When I showed him my papers, he explained somewhat rudely that he couldn’t help me. Not having any idea who I was dealing with, and seeing before me the image of French arrogance (whatever happened to politesse gauloise?), I felt no inhibitions in angrily pointing to the complete inadmissibility of such a tone. Indeed, I added a few unpleasant words about the entire office headed in Odessa by the notorious Colonel Freydenberg. In response to my invective, the French officer immediately got flustered, muttered some sort of apology, and disappeared.

The Russian officer who had watched all this turned to me after the Frenchman had left and exclaimed:

“At last somebody has stood up to that bully. About time too.”

“Yeah, who was he?”

“You mean you don’t know? That’s Colonel Freydenberg himself.”

Obviously, I gave up even trying to obtain visas following this incident. Luckily, as it happens, given that, as I mentioned already, those issued proved to be useless.
So now, dear readers, I hope you can see why there were only a few lucky people among the civilians who managed to buy ferry tickets, obtain visas, and sail for Constantinople or, at worst, who were evacuated to Crimea. There was no such choice for many Odessa residents or visitors, including Alexander Alekhine. They could only stay in Odessa and hope for indulgence from the Red authorities.
Red Army Ataman Nikifor Grigoriev’s forces entered Odessa on 6 April. Odessite journalist Kanterovich described the sight in detail:

The port was packed with abandoned cars, ammunition wagons, and spare vehicle parts. Pieces of silk lay on the ground along with champagne bottles, preserves and other goods. This was the port’s “trophy-like” appearance as Grigoriev’s partisans took control.

The population poured into the street, expecting to view a sea of soldiers’ heads and a forest of bayonets. They were immensely surprised, therefore, when this “army of victors” proved to be just a few cavalry and infantry units. This army consisted of three thousand men at best. Dressed in sheepskin hats and torn peasant overcoats, which were ill-suited to the time of year (the spring warmth was in the air), riding small and disheveled horses, the partisans surprised us by their low numbers and an appearance that seemed the complete opposite to the external splendor which had managed to blind the recently departed Franco-Greek army.

The Soviets took over the city that day, and their reign lasted until 23 August 1919. This was the most tragic period in Odessa’s history during the Civil War. The writer Ivan Bunin named these four-and-a-half months Cursed Days.

The very day after bloodlessly capturing the city, Grigoriev demanded that the Odessa bourgeoisie contribute 500
million Tsarist rubles, and with a deadline of midday on 12 April.

Iasi conference participant Margulies would later reflect on this “modest” request: “500 million rubles... It seems that even were they to collect all the cash in the city, they wouldn’t get to 500 million. It is obvious that such an amount cannot be delivered, either by the deadline or within any time frame. The Bolsheviks know this perfectly well, but they probably want a convenient reason to carry out repressions.”

The repressions began soon enough! The cheka began operations in the city as soon as the Bolsheviks took control. They began with arrests and soon after they turned to executions by shooting. Robinat’s chess room no longer welcomed players...

Vera Nikolaevna Bunina, the writer’s wife, recalled:

A huge poster is hanging on the former Robinat’s café, which since the very first days of the new conquerors’ appearance has been transformed into a Red Army barracks, with long johns and shirts constantly drying on the balconies. On the poster, a worker, a soldier and a sailor are pressing a bourgeois man’s huge stomach so that money pours out of his mouth. The people come to a halt, look at the poster, and then continue on their way. And I go on my way too, right up to the statue of Catherine, who is wrapped in a grey gown. Behind the statue, a huge poster in cubic style hangs above the cheka building – on it, somebody is standing with an unnaturally long leg on steps adorned with a crown, together with the inscription:

“Thrones are covered with the people’s blood
We will paint our enemies crimson with blood.”

I dug up an interesting article entitled *Prison on Catherine Square* in the newspaper *Izvestiia [News] of the Odessa Soviet of Workers, Peasants and Red Army Deputies* [hereinafter – *Izvestiia*] dated 8 April:
The volunteer counterintelligence forces [i.e. of the pro-Denikin forces who had governed Odessa with the French support until the Bolsheviks arrived] had taken up residence in Professor Levashov’s house on Catherine Square. The cheka took over the building after Soviet soldiers arrived in Odessa. The cheka members were horrified by what they saw in the former counterintelligence building. They found torture and inquisition instruments in the building’s labyrinths, including metal rods, pins and beds on which electric shocks were delivered. The attic contained the rotting body of a hanged comrade, evidently a worker.

So the punitive methods were actually inherited!

Izvestiia kept its readers constantly informed about what was happening at the Odessa cheka from its very first issues, strengthening the belief in their subconscious that the enemy never slept and that the harshest of measures were needed to counter its plotting. The 10 April issue ran an article On Cheka Activity, which reported: “In the three days that it has functioned, the extraordinary commission to fight the counterrevolution [i.e. the cheka] has made 107 arrests, mostly of active agents of the Volunteer Army’s counterintelligence forces. Having reviewed the cases, the commission agreed to free 35 people.”

Alekhine was also arrested in April (the precise date is unclear). The future chess master Nikolai Sorokin, living at the time in Odessa, witnessed his arrest. This is how it happened – after Robinat’s café closed, the chess players migrated to the Officers’ Assembly building. This spacious building, constructed in 1909 especially for Odessa military district officers, housed a gym and fencing hall, an army cinema, a library with a reading room, a shooting gallery, a billiards room, a canteen, and a chess room. An officer’s paradise!

At the very moment that Alekhine was engrossed in a chess battle (and Sorokin was playing at the next table) a man in a leather jacket appeared in the room and displayed an identity card with a triangular stamp stating “Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Odessa Cheka”. The chekist then approached Alekhine and demanded that Alekhine follow him. Alekhine asked if he could finish the game first. Surprisingly, the chekist didn’t object. After
the game ended, he delivered Alekhine to the cheka building on Catherine Square. His arrest was promptly recorded and Alekhine was taken off to prison.

Yuri Shaburov attempted to find documents in the archives explaining his hero’s arrest:

An analysis of documents about Alekhine in the USSR KGB Central Archive suggests that his arrest was most likely provoked by an anonymous letter. It contained some contrived fact about Alekhine’s “anti-Soviet activity”, backed up by biographical information that, at the time, would have been compromising...This could have been sufficient to lead to extreme measures.

Moreover, the anonymous grass would have been somebody very jealous of Alekhine’s talent, who was unperturbed at telling monstrous lies about him to gain revenge for defeats at the chess board.

Which Odessa chess player could have written this denunciation?

Chess master, writer and chief editor (1949–1981) of The British Chess Magazine Brian Reilly believed that the reason for Alekhine’s arrest was actually due to his staying at the London Hotel. His assumption was that Alekhine hired a room where a foreign officer had previously stayed who had built a hidden storage in the room to keep secret materials. After the allies’ sudden departure, the officer’s documents remained in the storage. The omnipresent chekists found them and arrested Alekhine, accusing him of collaborating with allied spies. This version sounds perfectly plausible. If, however, we replace “foreign officer” with Boris Malyutin, the version could be just as true!

Nothing good could come from Alekhine’s stay in a cheka prison. A nobleman and Duma deputy’s son, and the heir to the Trekhgornaya Textile Factory (the oldest such enterprise in Moscow). Just one of these three titles would have been sufficient to provoke hatred by the new authorities’ enforcers.

The author of this book has managed to collate the recollections of witnesses who spent time as guests of the Odessa cheka. They described all the pleasures of prison life. I would think that Alekhine felt much the same way.

Alexander Mikhailovich de Ribas wrote:

A round room on the first floor in Levashov’s house. Empty and dirty. To the left: a locked wooden door with a watch hole. To the right: a room for arrested “hostages”. Pale faces with trembling jaws peer out of it. A guard hangs about nearby, suffering from a lack of sleep. The clattering of weaponry can be heard from the courtyard through the large windows, as well as the endless cocking of guns and the Red Army soldiers’ specific lexicon of swearwords.

It sounds unbelievable, but cheka prisoners were allowed to play chess! According to the poet and translator Alexander Bisk:

I was arrested as a “hostage”. I went there instead of my father. I was struck above all by the fact that the chekist, who was dressed in the uniform of a Novorossiyisk University student, appeared alone and without any weapons. These people knew perfectly well that the bourgeoisie were an intelligent group of people who wouldn’t stoop to causing trouble. They even went to meet their deaths like obedient sheep.

By coincidence, I shared my cell in the cheka building with Fedor Yakovlevich Galperin (a participant in student tournaments – S.T.). We played chess constantly while our neighbors were being taken away to be shot, and this engrossment in our own little world protected us from further torture and worries.

A certain “V.O.” wrote about the atmosphere in the prison cells and the subtleties of the new justice system in a report called 56 Days in the Odessa Cheka:

Once I had been allocated a mattress and a corner to sleep in from the cell elder, most of my neighbors and I introduced each other. They included two local doctors, an engineer, several big-name communists, as well as many ordinary people. In total, the cell held 38 prisoners, and it was cramped. My immediate neighbor was a guy called Maximovich, who was a lawyer from Petrograd and also sang in the opera at various state theaters.
After getting to know them better, I learned that most of the prisoners had never been questioned, despite having spent 30-35 days in the cell, if not more. My assertion that the commissar who had arrested me without explaining why had told me that I would be questioned immediately upon reaching the cheka building and that in view of the fact that I was guilty of nothing whatsoever I would be promptly released, was met with a chorus of ironic comments and replies:

“No, just you wait – we were all told that we would be arrested for just half an hour, but no, they will ‘pickle’ you here for a month, stitch you up with a couple of fictitious cases, and maybe eventually get round to questioning you.”

A book was published in a limited edition in Odessa in 1919, once the Reds had evacuated the city, by K. Alinin called The Cheka. Personal Recollections of the Odessa Cheka Building. With a Portrait of the Cheka’s Victims. It contained just 92 pages, yet each was filled with mourning for the victims of the cheka’s tyranny. K. Alinin (clearly a pseudonym) wrote about the cheka prison in detail and the procedures followed there:

I was taken through the gates to the spacious courtyard of Levashov’s large house. At one time, a girl’s school was located there (apart from Y.A. Sokolova’s school this building also housed the commercial court before the revolution – S.T.). This spacious courtyard, where young girls had once played, was kept carefully swept by the prisoners, who as night fell – which was right now – bustled about with wheelbarrows and broomsticks. A sentry sat in the middle of the courtyard on the edge of a dormant fountain. From time to time, he would shout out exhortations to the ‘workers’ to work harder...

I was brought across the courtyard to the building for arrested persons. The head of that shift received me and led me along the corridor. He stopped by the door of a cell.

“Cell commissar!” the shift head announced. “Receive a prisoner.”

I entered the cell. It was once a classroom. Now, the room was separated in two by a wooden partition that extended half way up the wall. Wooden trestle beds lined the walls in both halves. A table separated each bed, where a group of prisoners would sit. I noticed bars on the windows, which had clearly been fitted recently. I recalled spotting several window grills being knocked into shape by carpenters in the courtyard. The words of the poet Vasily Zhukovsky flashed in my mind:

“We will turn the villages to ash, and the cities to dust,
We will turn the sickles and ploughs into swords!”

...And the schools into prisons, I added to myself...

Two of our comrades brought dinner at this point. Two buckets. One for each half of the cell, containing yellowish hot water with cabbage.

They placed the bucket on the table and all these starving people sprang on it. As though in competition and pushing each other aside, the prisoners dipped ladles hand-made from tin cans or cups crafted from bottles into the murky yellow liquid. Each vied to extract as much “soup” as possible. It was painful to observe these unfortunate members of the intelligentsia, people with a cultured mindset and exquisite tastes, who in their awful moral humiliation just about fell out with each other over a spoonful of disgusting dishwater.

A writer there noticed my discomfort.

“It’s terrible for you to witness all this because you’re not used to it,” he said. “Yes, this dog’s life can make you do anything. You’ll hear nothing but cussing in these walls. This cynicism, bloody cynicism that is all around us creates a real nightmare. They look at us like cattle on their way to the abattoir. Even then, the cows are treated better. We’re just dead men walking, most of us are condemned. And our jailers won’t let us forget it.”

Kalistrat Sadzhaya, when he was still a student at Novorossiysk University, 1915. He was appointed head of the Odessa Cheka Special Department in April 1919 and became known for mass arrests of the “antirevolutionary element”. Published for the first time.

When reading the recollections of Odessa prisoners who had by
some miracle avoided execution, I was intrigued by one question pertaining to the arrest of VIPs. Practically all the bigwigs who hadn’t got away from Odessa in time were arrested immediately. It seemed as though the cheka members were excellently informed about where people “from the past” lived or were hiding. Was this the work of secret agents, embedded in the “white society” even before the French had evacuated?

My intuition didn’t fail me – the chekists were indeed perfectly au fait with life in Odessa. During the French occupation, an underground Bolshevik revolutionary committee worked hard in Odessa to plant its agents across the city’s institutions. Their agents had even infiltrated the headquarters of the occupying forces! It goes without saying that the French and Denikin counterintelligence forces were wide awake too. Many revolutionary committee members were arrested and shot at the beginning of March. However, the Bolsheviks that survived didn’t forget their oppressors and exercised a bloody revenge once the Reds moved in.

The driving force behind the total persecution of the “enemies of the working people” was the head of the Odessa Cheka Special Department Kalistrat Grigorevich Sadzhaya (whose party pseudonym was ‘Kaleh’). Of Georgian descent, he had been one of the leaders of the underground revolutionary committee. It was his team members who had arrested Alekhine in the Officer’s Club.

Felix Zinko, the author of a book entitled Some History of the Odessa Cheka, wrote how a deputation of Odessites turned up at the jail to ask for the prisoners to be treated kindly:

“Comrade Sadzhaya,” the head of the delegation addressed him, “you campaigned against the death penalty yourself. You gave speeches at student meetings when you said that it was wrong to shoot people...”

“Yes, I said it was wrong to shoot people. But counterrevolutionaries aren’t people, they’re animals! And animals should be exterminated; I will exterminate them!”

Sadzhaya was born into a noble family on 22 October 1895. He spent 1915–1918 studying at the medical faculty of Novorossiysk University. However, he never graduated – Kalistrat’s head was turned by the winds of revolution. He joined the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and, by the beginning of 1918, was already a Red Army division commander in the town of Bolgrad, in the southern part of the Odessa region. He then went underground in Odessa. Sadzhaya was appointed head of the Odessa cheka in June 1919 and then head of the Kharkov cheka in 1922.

He was a high-ranking functionary in Soviet Georgia in the 1930s, including being head of the Adjara border guards at one point. He was arrested in summer 1937 and shot soon thereafter as “an enemy of the working people”.

EXECUTIONS BY THE ODESSA CHEKA

By the end of April, the tone of articles in Izvestiia had turned much sharper:

A carp is best fried in sour cream. The bourgeoisie likes a government that runs rampant and murders. Fine... With hatred in our soul and a powerful weapon we must make the bourgeoisie feel us. If we shoot several dozen of these scoundrels and idiots, if we make them sweep the streets and make their wives clean the Red Army barracks (a great honor for them, actually), then that will make them feel that our government is strong and that they can forget about help from the English or anybody else.
These words were disseminated in unison with ferocious encouragement from Martin Latsis, who was head of the Ukrainian cheka from 1919 to 1921:

*We are not waging war against specific people. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. Don’t waste time in the investigation looking for materials or proof that the accused took some action or uttered some words against the Soviet government. The first question we should ask him is to which class he belongs, what are his origins, upbringing, education or profession? These questions should determine the fate of the accused.*

It should now be clear that Alekhine had virtually no chance of getting out of the cheka prison alive.

Executions by firing squad were now carried out on an industrial scale. Nikolai Mer, the former commander of the prison on Catherine Square, recalled that virtually all chekists on the night shift took part. A truck engine would be started, the condemned would be completely undressed, and then 10–12 of them would be led to a cellar or garage, where the firing squad, mostly composed of men from China, would await them. Up to fifty prisoners would be shot dead each night, freeing up prison space for new ones. The bodies were then piled onto the truck and driven off to the Second Christian Cemetery. After that, they were thrown into a freshly dug trench.

Where did a mostly Chinese cheka firing squad come from?

The reasons for its existence dated back to 1914, when the Tsarist government started to bus in Chinese people to replace the Russian workers who had left for the front. Somebody had to work in the factories!

The Chinese had found themselves unemployed with the start of the Civil War. However, the Soviet authorities found a way to make use of this extra labor, turning them into firing squads and paramilitary units. A former lathe operator from Odessa called Iona Yakir, who later became a member of the Eighth Army’s Revolutionary Council, created a Chinese battalion in Odessa in summer 1919 which received a fixed payment for each day of its “labor”. The battalion had to work particularly “hard” during the peak of the red terror in Odessa, from 4 June to 23 August.

It’s also important to note that atrocities in Odessa in 1919 were not only carried out by the civilian cheka with its
headquarters on Catherine Square. The railway and coastal cheka branches also put a shift in, together with the Third Army’s Special Department. These punitive institutions also needed mercenaries. The Third Army’s Special Department issued 115 death sentences and that same Chinese cheka firing squad carried them out.

An execution was described in detail in *56 Days in the Odessa Cheka*, confirming the recollections of the prison’s commander:

The prisoners’ fears, which had surfaced in the morning, turned out to be justified. At five o’clock in the evening, a certain Burkov, senior aide to the cheka commander, turned up at the prison together with Fedka Bertum, a well-known Odessa cheka figure, comrade Vengerov, commissar of the cheka operational department (he was directly involved in executions), and a youth, barely 18, called Mikhail, who was in charge of the cheka prison department and later shot by the cheka for involvement in a robbery.

The mere fact of this group’s appearance at the prison was ominous, and the prisoners, sensing the approaching danger like meek lambs, paced their cells from corner to corner, emitting an indistinct murmur. Comrade Mikhail soon brought out a list of names and the condemned started to make their way to the courtyard.

“Cell number four!”, comrade Mikhail shouted outside our door. “Sentry, send out Brantman, ‘F-l’, ‘S-t’, and Maximovich to face the Revolutionary Tribunal. Quickly, with their belongings, into the courtyard.”

The hearts of all the prisoners started to beat hard. Everybody knew perfectly well that Fedka Bertum wasn’t taking anybody to the Revolutionary Tribunal, that it was a typical tactic employed by the cheka administrators not to tell the prisoners that they were condemned until the very last minute. The highly intoxicated Bertum and Vengerov, barely managing to stand on their feet, counted the men.

The prisoners didn’t pay much attention to Brantman’s name being read out – he was a professional robber and had spent time in jail previously. But this was not the case with Maximovich’s name. Highly emotional and waving his arms in the air, he asked the same question again and again: “Can they really shoot you without an interrogation and charges?”

Vikhman (the head of the operational department – S.T.) was the cheka’s resident thug. He personally took part in shooting prisoners. Everybody knew this perfectly well. Not only that, but if Vikhman didn’t like somebody’s face – or their reply – he was capable of shooting them right in the cell without asking for permission...

Harrowing scenes accompanying the parting of the condemned, the brutish behavior of Vikhman, who had lost every sense of humanity, and the tears of the remaining prisoners bidding the condemned farewell were my worst experiences during my time in jail.

The procedure for freeing people involved the same call-out as when prisoners were summoned to their death. This was a new and refined form of torture – the summoned prisoner didn’t know until he was taken into the office for which purpose he had been called out.

That happened to me, too. After 56 days and a short interrogation by an investigator, which lasted maybe half an hour, and during which no accusations were made against me and not even the most elementary components of justice were observed, I was called into the office, where the absence of the usual convoy convinced me that I was to be freed.

Lawyers and legal scholars living in Odessa were particularly victimized by the cheka. The writer and artist Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya (1908–1994) recalled:

In the early hours of 20 June 1919, all the court lawyers in Odessa were arrested in their apartments and shot that same night. Only two were known to have survived: Baron Gune von Gunenfeld and my father. I met the baron many years later in Romania. He claimed that he was saved by his brother, who had managed to buy his life for a million rubles in gold.

And this is what happened to my father:

We were woken up at night by the banging of boots and the clanking of gun butts. We all slept on the same wide bed in the only room in our apartment still allocated to us, the rest of the apartment having been sequestrated
following the revolution. Mother and my brother are crying, while I simply don’t understand a thing! I remember my father taking a small icon of the Savior with a silver cover from the wall and blessing us. Then they led him away. My brother and I – he in just a nightshirt and me with no clothes on at all – run after him, while Mother, standing in the middle of the street in her dressing gown thrown over her nightie, howls:

“Tonya, come back! Come back!”

Night. Darkness. And awareness of something irreversible.

Mother ran to Olginsky Descent, where, before the revolution, Father had got to the bottom of a complex case and as a result helped a large number of innocent poor people. In the middle of the night, she woke them up and asked them to sign a petition for Father’s release. And many of them signed it!

Then she appealed for help... to a chekist that she knew, a Greek with the surname Papaspiraki, a perfectly decent chap (hard to believe, but some were indeed decent!). He had been a frequent guest in our house in the past – he tried to court Marusya Olshevskaya, a pretty student and Father’s god-daughter, who had been brought up in our family after losing her parents. I have no idea what this chekist thought about his work. But it’s clear that he was depressed, as he soon after committed suicide by cutting his own throat with a razor. Papaspiraki didn’t give Mother any hope to cling onto, and only uttered:

“Everything will be decided by nine o’clock.”

What should she do next? Where should she go? Who might help us?

A church stood diagonally opposite our house along Marazlievskaya Street, on the corner of Alexandrov Park. Mother headed to it. Collapsing on her knees before Christ on a cross, she burst into tears, crying hysterically.

The priest came up to her:

“Have you lost a loved one, my daughter?”

“I don’t know, but probably,” she answered and explained her woes to him.

“You have children...And God is above all of us!”

And with this hope, Mother left the church.

“Ma’am! The Master has returned!”

This yell, by Froska, a former maid employed by Admiral Akimov, who had once lived in an apartment that shared our staircase, was heard by the entire street.

Mother lost all her remaining strength, and she collapsed on the stone steps of the church, extending her arms and silently moving her lips, as she was incapable of standing up or uttering a word.

So what had happened? All the lawyers – the night’s entire “catch”, apparently 712 people in total – had been herded into the building on Catherine Square that housed that menacing institution, the Odessa cheka. It was protected by barbed wire. The statue of Catherine the Great was wrapped in canvas with a red bonnet on its head. A din. A crush. The roar of truck engines working without mufflers. And Chinese people everywhere. And Latvians.

The names of new arrivals were shouted out from lists, and they were then brought out in groups of two, three or four people. Father followed them with his eyes, and failed to notice a man emerging in a leather jacket. The man stepped on something resembling a podium, flicked through some document, and suddenly addressed Father:

“Kersnovsky! What are you doing here?”

Father was startled but answered as calmly as he could:

“You probably know better than I do.”

“Off you go!”

Father didn’t move.

“Off you go! It won’t be pleasant if you stay here.”

Father turned around and headed in the direction to where everybody else had been led.
“Not that way!”

Father stopped. The man in leather said something in English to two Chinese men, and they led Father to the exit.

It is light again! The sky is once again above our heads. And the roar of the engines is growing fainter. Barbed wire in front of us and a narrow, twisting path circling the statue of Catherine and leading back – almost to the entrance. Father drops his pince-nez, and it takes him a huge amount of will power to pick it up and not leave it there.

At last, the barbed wire is behind us. Paving stones are now under our feet. Father reaches the corner, taking firm steps, and suddenly...

This famous lawyer and criminologist had never run so fast since childhood!

All this time, my brother and I had been alone in the otherwise empty room. I had curled into the side of the sofa and was crying. My brother, who had cried at night when Father was led away, had stopped crying by now – he was pacing around the room with clenched fists muttering:

“I’m nearly 14, I can join the Volunteer Army. I’ll get revenge. I’ll get revenge for Father!”

Then we looked at the clock hanging on the wall opposite the only window in what was now our communal apartment.

The arrow was fast approaching nine.

Suddenly, a shadow passed over the clock, and my brother, stamping his feet, shouted:

“Father, Father!”

Father appeared at the window. This was because we were not allowed to use the door leading to the corridor, and the window was now our “door”.

Bouncing into the room, he gave us a hug:

“Where’s your mother?”

We didn’t know.

“How did they let you go, Father?”

“I don’t know myself. It must have been a mistake. And maybe they will still come for me. Maybe very soon. I will wait for 20 minutes. Quickly go and find Mother!”

...A quarter of an hour later they came for Father again, but we were not at home.

The Kersnovsky family subsequently paid some Greek fishermen to take them across the sea to Romania, after which they moved into their country estate in the village of Tepilova in what was then Bessarabia.

Kersnovsky, an investigative lawyer, remembered where he had seen the man in leather earlier. He turned out to be the assistant to a well-known Odessa medic, Doctor Gimmelfarb. This respected doctor was accused in 1908 of (I quote) “violently pushing a nurse who was five months pregnant during an operation, as a result of which she miscarried”.

Newspapers supporting the Black Hundreds turned the allegation into a huge scandal: “What? A Jew has killed a Russian baby? This scoundrel shouldn’t dare to darken the precious doctor’s profession!”

Investigator Kersnovsky was put in charge of this case and, despite intense pressure from the city chief, Boris Pelikan, who is now well-known to us, he defended the doctor’s honorable name. The investigation demonstrated that the nurse had not miscarried at all, and simply wanted to slander the doctor. The case was high-profile, and even went as far as Nicholas II. His resolution was laconic: “Investigator Kersnovsky is right.”

It’s obviously impossible to identify the precise number of people killed in Odessa during the Reds’ second occupation from 6 April to 23 August (the first was their involvement in the shorter-lived Odessa Soviet Republic in January to March 1918). The officially accepted figures (from a commission that subsequently investigated the cheka’s repressions) are that around 2,000 people were executed and around 10,000 were arrested.
WHO SAVED ALEKHINE FROM DEATH?

There are many versions of and much speculation about the story of Alekhine’s miraculous escape from the cheka’s clutches. The reason is simply that no documents stating the reasons for his arrest or release have survived. As I noted earlier, a carriage with the cheka’s archives was burnt at the railway station during the Bolsheviks’ panicked evacuation of the city. It is possible that the carriage was deliberately set ablaze to destroy the documentary evidence of the Odessa chekists’ “achievements”.

How did Alekhine avoid the cheka’s bullet? One version doing the rounds alleged that the head of the Revolutionary Council, Leon Trotsky himself, was behind Alekhine’s release. According to that story, he personally visited Alekhine in jail, played a number of games with him, which he obviously lost, and then let the prisoner go! A wonderful-sounding version, but the facts do not support it. It is documentarily proven that Trotsky was never in Odessa in 1919, meaning that he couldn’t have personally set Alekhine free. It’s true that Trotsky had planned to visit Odessa in April or May and inspect the punitive institutions. For that reason, the city made extensive preparations to welcome the VIP. However, the plan was never actioned on due to the situation at the front and Trotsky never made it to Odessa. This is clear from both the Red Army archives and the newspaper reports of the time.

But here is what is really interesting about the Trotsky story – the September 1937 issue of Chess magazine (England) contained an article about Alekhine’s world championship victory over Euwe, in which it repeated this version of Trotsky’s intervention. Note that the article was published when Alekhine was alive and the champion didn’t contradict this disinformation. This, naturally, led to many historians asserting that Trotsky was indeed behind Alekhine’s release.

Why didn’t Alekhine deny this fairy tale? We will discuss this a little later...

There is also a version asserting that Alekhine avoided execution thanks to Dmitry Manuilsky, a prominent Bolshevik activist who had worked in Ukraine since April 1918. Yuri Shaburov believed this version to be closer to the truth. In his book Alexander Alekhine. The Undefeated Champion he writes:

It was no coincidence that Alekhine was freed from jail. It wasn’t just his innocence that underscores that, but also the fact that he had come to Odessa with the approval of Dmitry Manuilsky, an important state and party functionary. At the time, Manuilsky was working in Kiev, was a member of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee, and was the Peoples’ Commissar for Farming of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Odessa chekists were able to verify the testimony of the accused and discover that his reputation was beyond reproach. It is hence for that reason that, as soon as Alekhine was released from prison in April 1919, he went to work for the Party, in the Foreign Department of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee.

That version would have been fine were it not for the reason that... Manuilsky didn’t work in Kiev at the time and there was no way that the Odessa chekists could have got hold of him!

Manuilsky was only appointed to those positions in January 1920, by which time Alekhine was already living in Moscow. In fact, during the time Alekhine spent in the cheka prison, Manuilsky was himself under arrest!
Manuilsky had set off for France together with Inessa Armand and Yakov Davidov at the beginning of 1919 with a Russian Red Cross mission. The official purpose of the visit was to bring home 40,000 soldiers from the Russian Expeditionary Force who had found themselves on French soil during World War I.

A ferry called *Rus* arrived at the English Channel port of Dunkirk on 22 February, delivering Manuilsky and his team. The Soviet delegates were immediately arrested. The reason was that the French intelligence services had consistently told its government that the main purpose of the Soviet delegation’s trip was “to organize a series of terrorist attacks in France and spread Bolshevik propaganda.” The official note issued by the Peoples’ Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the French Foreign Ministry on 15 April 1919 has survived. It criticizes the actions of the French government for depriving “the Russian Red Cross mission, sent to France for a purely humanitarian purpose, of the chance to provide assistance to Russians left in France in dire straits.” The mission’s members were only freed in June 1919. Hence it’s strange that Shaburov failed to check where Manuilsky was in April and May of that year.

A book by Hans Muller and Adolf Pawelczak published in Berlin in 1953 titled *Alekhine the Chess Genius* considered a version that one of the five revolutionary tribunal judges chose not to sign Alekhine’s death sentence out of respect for the famous chess player. It’s true that the revolutionary tribunal’s procedures did require a unanimous decision by the judges in order to issue a death sentence. However, this version hardly seems believable in view of Alekhine’s subsequent service for the regional party. It’s conceivable that one of the judges was deeply affected by Alekhine’s difficulties, felt sorry for him and refused to sign the death sentence. However, to then allow a member of the nobility who was meant to have been sentenced to death to work for the state is anything but plausible. For that to have happened, Alekhine would have required powerful protectors.

After writing his book on Alekhine, Shaburov came to Odessa hoping to gain access to materials of the Odessa District branch of the Ukrainian Security Service, which, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, took charge of KGB case archives. However, no materials from 1919 were to be found in those archives (at least that was stated in the official response to his request). Nevertheless, Shaburov’s trip to Odessa was not in vain! One day, he visited Evgenia Vasilevna Vladimirova, daughter of Vasily Vladimirov, one of the founders of the Odessa Chess Society, whom we have already encountered. She shared with her Muscovite guest her father’s recollections of the events in Odessa during the Civil War. About the constant change of rulers. About chess life in that frightening time. About how her father was unable to accept Soviet power for many years. The icing on the cake, though, consisted of her father’s words that Alekhine “owed his life to the chess player Vilner, who at the time worked in the revolutionary tribunal.” (Evgenia Vladimirova told me personally in 2009 about her meeting with Shaburov and that she told him her father’s story about how Vilner had saved Alekhine.)

Following this meeting, Shaburov added Yakov Vilner, 1918 Odessa Chess Champion, to the list of Alekhine’s saviors in lectures he gave.

**Yakov Semyonovich Vilner** (1899–1931)
Yakov Vilner was born on 13 September 1899 in a lower-middle class family (the so-called “meshchanstvo”). He was saved from bloody anti-Jewish pogroms at the age of six. Yakov saw the early winds of revolutionary anarchy impacting the settled life of his home city of Odessa. His youth coincided with the start of World War I. Slightly older, he witnessed the collapse of the mighty Russian Empire and the subsequent bloodbath of the Civil War. He saw the multiple changes of government in Odessa over 1917 to 1920.

Vilner played his part in the creation of the new, Soviet state – he did much to rejuvenate chess culture in the city, republic and country.

At the end of the 1920s, the Odessite was suspected of harboring sympathies for the by now exiled Leon Trotsky and was placed under observation by the security services. He promptly moved to Leningrad, where the opposition was still powerful at the time. However, the climate of Northern Palmyra was a poor choice for this chronic asthmatic and his life was cut short by his ailments on 29 June 1931.


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Ф. П. Богатырчук

Мой жизненный путь к Власову и Пражскому манифесту

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«Чёрный» рынок в СССР.

«Чёрный» рынок в СССР был весьма странным учреждением, непонятным для человека, живущего в нормальных капиталистических условиях Запада. Официально он был нелегален. Во-первых, это значило, что власть предержащая имела право в любой момент привлечь к ответственности продавца и покупателя, а всё продаваемое или купленное — конфисковать без всякой компенсации. Во-вторых, в восемнадцатом, девятнадцатом и начале двадцатого годов военного коммунизма, никакой стабильной валюты не было. Для Киева и всей Украины исключением были благословенные времена Гетманшины и Добромы, когда какая-то твёрдая валюта существовала. Однако эти моменты быстро тоже понесли ветер.
Actually, it was Fedor Bogatyrchuk who first mentioned Vilner’s role in saving Alekhine, in his Russian-language book published in San Francisco in 1978 entitled *My Life Journey to Vlasov and the Prague Manifesto*:

*Late in the winter of 1918-1919 (or early spring 1919, I can’t remember the exact date), Alexander Alekhine came to visit unexpectedly, on his way from Odessa to Moscow.*

*He was in great spirits, and nothing about him hinted at his recent experiences, of which he didn’t say a word. I’m not sure why, but he showed me just one relic from his stay in Odessa—a communist party membership card.*
Knowing Alekhine’s social position and material situation (he had graduated from the Law College, which only admitted children from wealthy families, his father was a leader of the Voronezh nobility and his mother was a co-owner of the famous Prokhorov Factory), and also given my youth, I was stunned at Alekhine’s transformation into a member of the proletariat. Well, I didn’t know what Alekhine had had to put up with after the revolution, and what had forced him to change his life like that. I learnt that later from the Odessite master Vilner.

Having found himself transported by the outburst of revolutionary passions to Odessa, Alekhine was unable to afford a ticket on one of the ferries taking refugees to the capitalist world. Instead, he was faced with the challenges – how to survive in the world’s first workers’ and peasants’ fatherland and how not to lose hope of becoming world chess champion. A fan of his chess genius found him a safe job – in the commission for confiscating property from the bourgeoisie. Yes, such institutions existed in those times! Servicing in the commission entailed joining the party, which Alekhine hence did.

Just how Alekhine carried out his duties in that contemptible institution, and what the quality of his work was by proletarian standards, is covered by a hazy mist. But there was a crack of thunder at the end of 1918, and Alekhine was arrested by the local cheka. The secrets of Alekhine’s case have been buried forever in the archives of the “punitive sword of proletarian justice.” Only one thing is known for sure, that Alekhine was secretly tried for his crimes and sentenced to death. Vilner told me that, while working in the Odessa military tribunal, he found out about the sentence just a few hours before it was due to be carried out, and that he immediately sent a telegram to Rakovsky, the then Ukrainian Prime Minister, with a request to save Alekhine.

Fortunately, Rakovsky had already heard of Alekhine’s chess genius and immediately called the Odessa cheka via a direct line. There is only one clear fact about what happened subsequently – Alekhine was freed that same evening and placed in the hands of comrade Rakovsky. It’s possible that Alekhine was unaware of both the sentence and the subsequent events, as the proletarian Nemesis simply shot the condemned in the back of the head without bothering to announce the sentence. As I noted earlier, his high spirits didn’t give anything away...

Bogatyrchuk’s recollections actually need a bit of revision. Don’t forget that his book was published sixty years after those events. As a result, many dates and details had by then been erased from the author’s memory.

Firstly, Alekhine arrived in Kiev in passing in the summer, not in the winter or spring. “I worked in the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee’s Foreign Department from April to July 1919,” Alekhine stated during an interrogation by the cheka in 1921. Obviously, further, Alekhine was arrested in April 1919 once Soviet power had been established in Odessa, and not at the end of 1918. He then went to work in the Foreign Department (and not in the commission for confiscating property) once he had been freed from jail.

And what about his communist party membership? It’s possible that Alekhine joined the Ukrainian Bolshevik Party, which was part of the Russian Bolshevik Party at the time. I investigated this version. The Odessa Region State Archive contains lists of party members and candidates for membership covering 1918 to 1920. Alekhine is not listed among Odessa members in 1919. Alekhine himself, under interrogation by the cheka, claimed that he had been a candidate for membership since August 1920. Bogatyrchuk most probably mistook Alekhine’s commissar ID as an employee of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee for a party membership card.

I spent a long time trying to get to the bottom of Yakov Vilner’s telegram, sent directly to the powerful Ukrainian leader Christian Rakovsky, in this miraculous version of Alekhine’s liberation. A person would only have sent such a message were they sure that the recipient would read it and get involved—such were the stakes involved. Maybe Vilner knew Rakovsky personally? That would have explained why he addressed the telegram to the Prime Minister.

The archives provide an answer to that question. It turns out that Rakovsky was well aware of the situation in Odessa, and played an important role in establishing the Odessa Revolutionary Tribunal. He personally delivered, in
April 1919, the decrees and documents required for it to start its work – which I expand on a little later. It’s possible that Vilner met Rakovsky when receiving these documents.

It’s also well known that Odessa was Rakovsky’s favorite city. “On the first of May 1917, I was freed by the Russian garrison in Iasi. The first city I visited after being released was Odessa. This is where I began my struggle against the war and defensism,” Rakovsky wrote in his memoirs. But that’s not all. Christian Rakovsky was one of the Odessa cheka’s founding fathers. During the Odessa Soviet Republic of January to March 1918, a so-called Autonomous Collegiate to Combat Romanian and Ukrainian Counterrevolution was established in the city – a prototype of the cheka. Rakovsky was appointed head of this “Collegiate”.

I found the relevant document signed by Rakovsky among declassified Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee documents dated 1919. It’s hard to believe that the Ukrainian Prime Minister would take part in a Gubernia committee meeting and even sign its documents, but that is indeed what happened!

I’m sure you, dear readers, are dying to know about the so-called “firing-squad lists” in which Vilner read that Alekhine’s life was hanging by a thread. Actually, several pages are devoted to this in the book by Alinin referred to earlier:

In large centers such as Odessa, all limits to the cheka’s powers prescribed from the capital were completely ignored. The local legal department of the Soviets of Workers Deputies tried in vain to establish some sort of control over the cheka. All such attempts met steadfast resistance from the cheka leaders. The only concession that the Odessa cheka ever made was to inform the legal department of the lists of prisoners.

According to a decree, all legal authority on Ukrainian territory belonged exclusively to the peoples’ courts and revolutionary tribunals. A note to article No. 1 of this decree stated that, in respect of especially important cases requiring an urgent decision, the cheka had the right to issue verdicts provided they informed the revolutionary tribunals about them each time. This rule was completely ignored by the Odessa cheka, which didn’t bother to tell the tribunals about a single sentence that it passed. Moreover, given that cheka prisoners often had to wait for months for their case to be resolved, it is clear that urgent decisions weren’t required.

Actually, the Odessa cheka didn’t trust the tribunals and only handed it cases that it didn’t care about...

...The cheka existed and acted like an entity located not only beyond the law and control, but as one that was completely unapproachable. It’s no surprise that everybody behind whom its doors closed considered themselves dead men walking. And if anybody did manage to get out of its bloody walls alive, they would do so physically and mentally broken, crippled for life.

The question arises why Vilner sent a telegram to Rakovsky, rather than involve local influential comrades from the revolutionary tribunal in saving Alekhine.

Was Alekhine’s case so hopeless that there was no choice but to appeal to the Ukrainian leader? My archive searches convinced me that only by involving Rakovsky could Vilner ensure Alekhine’s release: the Odessa revolutionary tribunals only started to function...
officially towards the middle of May. Prior to that, almost a month was spent just setting them up.

Izvestiia wrote on 11 April, “The Provisional Justice Commissar has received a telegram from Kiev with the following contents: ‘The People’s Justice Commissariat requests that the Odessa Revolutionary Committee immediately establish a legal department and take measures to organize revolutionary tribunals and people’s courts. Justice Commissar: A. Khmelnitsky. Head of the Judiciary Department: E. Shtirvind.’”

Then, on 17 April, Izvestiia reported “the revolutionary tribunal should start operating in around one week’s time. Up to now, the main obstacle to opening it was the absence in Odessa of a full set of decrees from the center pertaining to the Justice Commissariat. Unfortunately, despite telegraphed requests to send them urgently, only some of them have so far been received from Kiev... Comrade Khemlnitsky was recently tasked with reviewing those decrees received from Kiev and drawing up the tribunal’s procedures.”

Only the personal intervention of Soviet Ukraine’s leader hastened the process. Rakovsky arrived in Odessa by train on 20 April and delivered the decrees on the Justice Commissariat necessary for the revolutionary tribunal to start work. Interestingly, Rakovsky didn’t stay in a hotel, but instead chose to reside in his “personal train carriage” at Odessa Main Station, where he received various delegations and petitioners. Rakovsky didn’t stay long in Odessa. He left on 23 April.

There was another curious fact. While Rakovsky was in Odessa, Izvestiia reported the execution of a number of former Soviet officials:

By decrees of the Odessa Emergency Committee [i.e. the cheka] for Combatting Counterrevolution and Insider Crimes, the following persons were executed by firing squad in the second half of April:

– Blinov, Tikhon Demyanovich (former political commissar of the 5th Soviet and 3rd Amur Border Mounted Platoon). For unauthorized illegal requisition and extortion, for counterrevolutionary and anti-Soviet violent activism in the building of a Soviet institution, and for insults accompanied by threats of violence with weapons against official, on-duty representatives of Soviet institutions.

– Kovalev, Anton Pavlovich, pseudonym “Antonov” (a member of the secret operative department of the Odessa cheka) for theft and for personally appropriating 4,000 rubles.
Well, there you are – some people stole much more than that but were never executed. How come? “Punish your own people, so that others are scared”? Or were these executions put on specially for the Ukrainian Prime Minister, to demonstrate that the law was the same for everybody, even for cheka staff?

Then, on 4 May, Izvestiia published an article entitled In the Cheka. It’s so interesting that I reproduce it in full below:

San Francisco newspaper New Dawn (Novaya zarya) dated 14 May 1929 containing an interview with Alexander Alekhine, where he mentions being in the cheka jail

Operations at the cheka are being set up and surveillance is now working intensively. Generally speaking, there is lots of work to do – there are still many remnants of the volunteer and even tsarist regimes in Odessa, which need to be isolated and prevented from propagating violence against Soviet power.

Our correspondent, accompanied by the local cheka head, visited prison cells last night where he encountered various big shots from the tsarist and volunteer regimes. Here you can find General Ragoza, the former War Minister during the Hetman government, as well as the well-known General Bezradetsky. Other celebrities including Chaim Gran – the right-hand man of Rabbi Avinovitsky, a member of the tsarist council of spiritual administrations. Financiers are here too: Persits and Zlatopolksy. They share a cell
with a former sentry who shot workers for “attempting to run away.”

The prisoners are held in large cells with plenty of light. They are given quality food, hot meals twice a day, and half a pound of bread per day.

The only deficiency in the cheka’s structure is its small number of peoples’ investigators, as a result of which many innocent people end up languishing in prison for several days. That said, as the cheka head told our correspondent, this is being addressed — efforts are being made to increase peoples’ investigator numbers, which will enable the prompt release of the innocent.

Izvestiia’s 7 May edition reports important news:

The revolutionary tribunal will begin operations on Saturday 10 May at 11 a.m. (new time). The following cases will be heard:

1. About the murder by gunshot of Red Army soldier Ivanov.
2. About Lazarnik and Epelbaum, accused of fraud.

Entrance to the hall by special passes only.

So it appears that the revolutionary tribunal only began to sit on 10 May — more than a month after the cheka’s operations began.

Alekhine didn’t like to recall his time spent in Odessa in 1918–1919. The only interview in which he mentioned – briefly – his experience with the Odessa cheka was dug up by Sergei Voronkov. It was published in the émigré newspaper New Dawn (San Francisco) on 14 May 1929:

While visiting Odessa, I was arrested by the Bolsheviks and locked in a cheka cellar. The Bolsheviks found some foreign correspondence on me and this was enough for them to charge me with spying for the Entente.

I shared my cell with General Ragoza, the former War Minister under Hetman Skoropadsky. Ragoza was shot.

They received an order from Moscow that I was only to be shot were they to find serious and real evidence. They didn’t find any however, and I was released.

Professor of Medicine and former rector of Novorossiysk University Sergei Levashov, who we referred to earlier and in whose estate the cheka had established its prison, was shot on the same day as Alexander Ragoza. The sentence was confirmed by the former medical faculty student of the same university and head of the Odessa cheka in 1919 Kalistrat Sadzhaya. Izvestiia reported these deaths on 5 July 1919:
List of people executed by the cheka: ...Professor Levashov; former War Minister under the Hetman government Ragoza – shot on the basis of the Red Terror declared by the Odessa Soviet of Workers, Peasants and Red Army Deputies.

Interestingly, Sergei Levashov and Alexander Alekhine’s father were both Deputies of the Fourth Duma. The extent to which they knew each other is unclear.

**Alexander Frantsevich Ragoza (1858–1919)**

A hereditary nobleman. Russian infantry general. Commanded the Fourth Army from August 1915 to February 1918 on the Western and Romanian fronts.

Became Minister of War in May 1918 in Hetman Skoropadsky’s government. He left for Odessa after the Hetman resigned with the aim of joining Denikin but didn’t make it. Arrested by the cheka immediately after the Reds captured Odessa. It’s known that, whilst in prison, he had an encounter with his former subordinate Captain Nikifor Grigoriev, who had first defected to Petliura and then became the ‘Red Ataman’.

Ragoza was shot on 16 June 1919 for refusing to serve in the Red Army.

**Sergei Vasilevich Levashov (1857–1919)**

A hereditary nobleman. A famous Russian medic and academic. A student of Sergei Botkin. Graduated with a top class degree from St. Petersburg Medical and Chemical Academy (1878). Foreign correspondent-member of the Parisian Therapeutic Society (1899). Chairman of the Society of Russian Doctors (1905). Professor (1903) and Rector (1907) of Novorossiysk University. Ran the university’s clinic. His time in office saw the start of the first experiment in Russia to admit female students. A founder of the Women’s Higher Medical Courses in Odessa (1909).


**ALEKHINE’S TIME IN THE COMMISSARIAT**
Nadezhda Erantseva’s house, where the Foreign Department of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee took up residence in 1919
Rakovsky’s personal intervention to free Alekhine from the cheka prison also explains why Alekhine was then immediately employed in the Foreign Department of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee. Nobody would dare challenge the leader of Soviet Ukraine!

Interestingly, the headquarters of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee were located in the London Hotel, which we have already encountered. Meanwhile, the Foreign Department was located on 4 Stolypin Street (today this is 6 Sadovaya Street), near the post office. The building dates to 1862 (designed by Vladimir Nimets), and until the revolution it belonged to Nadezhda Erantseva – patroness of the Sreten Committee to Help the Needy. Her husband, Ivan Nikolaevich Erantsev, was the chairman of the Odessa district nobility.

The main functions of the Foreign Department were to record and issue passes to citizens traveling abroad, to correspond with foreign representatives on immigration matters, and so on. Izvestiia frequently published decrees and announcements of the Foreign Department but without showing the names of its chiefs or employees.

I managed to dig up information about Alekhine’s work in this institution in a different source. An article entitled Pages of Recollections was published in 1994 in a journal called Messenger of the Jewish University (Vestnik Evreiskogo Universiteta) (No. 3, Moscow–Jerusalem), written by the well-known Russian lawyer and political activist Oskar Osipovich Gruzenberg.

He wrote about his life in Odessa during the Civil War and his unsuccessful attempt to flee the city in 1919, once the Bolsheviks had occupied it. His memoirs include a meeting with Alekhine:

Someone had attacked Odessa and someone else had retreated. The avengers rubbed their hands in glee: “We’ll soon get our own back and squeeze the red wine out of these pathetic liberals!”

Well, actually, those dudes’ hopes were dashed. The Bolsheviks arrived with their own cruel system. I soon felt unwanted, like a stranger. A new world buzzed around me, and I neither understood nor accepted it. I looked at it the same way that gawkers outside watch other people dancing through their windows. They don’t hear the music through the double-glazed windows and the dancers’ moves hence appear absurd.

I soon got a summons to the cheka. I arrived at the stated time. The head of the legal department received me – a young man who appeared intelligent, yet neurotic.

He began to question me directly, without any tricks: “You probably have no idea why I summoned you? I did this in your interests. Allegations have been made against you by Doctor of Philosophy Tumim, describing you as a dangerous counterrevolutionary. What are these allegations about?”

I shrugged my shoulders, as if to say, “I haven’t a clue.” Suddenly my memory, which had grown weary from endless wandering from place to place, threw up a stark recollection.

“Just a minute. Let me try and get my thoughts together, so that I don’t cause any alarm in my testimony. Allegations have been made against you by Doctor of Philosophy Tumim, describing you as a dangerous counterrevolutionary. What are these allegations about?”

I shrugged my shoulders, as if to say, “I haven’t a clue.” Suddenly my memory, which had grown weary from endless wandering from place to place, threw up a stark recollection.
“There’s no way to understand how this dumb philosopher thinks – maybe he wanted to get into our good books. We’ve issued an order to arrest him for impersonation, though he threatened us by mentioning the name of our prominent comrade Doctor Rakovsky. If you want, I can order Tumim to be brought here. He’s a very curious figure – a born shyster who grasses on the innocent.”

I turned this offer down, as I considered Tumim to be mentally ill for his inexplicable hatred towards me – my ignoring his summons was hardly a sufficient excuse for grassing on me.

Once the interrogation was over, the head of the legal department spoke a little about himself, that his service was getting him down, but that he had a useful role to play by softening the atrocities of the revolutionary terror.

“It wasn’t due to greed that I joined the Bolsheviks, it wasn’t to make a career. Everything is so screwed up in Russia that reforms won’t make any difference – everything needs shaken up big time, even if it’s harsh. I gave up university a few years ago and began to wander in the back of beyond, in abandoned monasteries, to try and figure out the peoples’ soul, but I couldn’t grasp it: fear everywhere, a feeling of hopelessness and servility...”

I began to write down my testimony. The investigator paced the room, stopped by the window facing the courtyard, and beckoned me with his finger.

“Do you see over there those big yellow gates? They used to be for the shed housing the carriages. But the shed is now used as a morgue – that’s where the firing squad operates. The truck engine is started so that the shouting isn’t audible, and then the prisoners get shot in the back of the head. The third day was so awful that I still can’t come to my senses. They shot more than ten people but they didn’t even bother to shoot them at the back of the shed – no, the firing squad let loose as soon as they entered the building! There’s one man I can’t forget – when he saw a bunch of corpses heaped on top of each other he exclaimed in a childish cry: ‘Mommy!’ – just like how I called for my mother when I was a frightened child. Since starting this job, I’ve become an alcoholic. I used to hate alcohol, but now I knock back vodka at night – otherwise, the fear and pain keep me awake.”

“Hey, why do you turn to drink to turn off your conscience? You are a committed Bolshevik, and I won’t even mention your religion. Surely you can be useful to your party in some cultural role? Any chekist could do the work that you do here.”

“That’s the bourgeois in you talking! Assume the more pleasant work, wear the velvet gloves, avoid the heavy lifting! Well, we can’t be choosy – we do the jobs we’re assigned. I try to be fair, without being too harsh. Whether that’s easy or hard for me is a personal matter, but no revolution is possible without terror. I think that you, too, after the provisional government’s attempt at running the country through persuasion rather than force, would also turn to terror.”

“Oh no, I would never issue a death sentence – for me, both the Reds putting a bullet in the back of your head or the Whites hanging you with as much indifference as a laundrywoman hanging out the washing are equally unacceptable. But it’s pointless discussing that. Your kind treatment of me – another in your place would have got me killed based on Tumim’s allegations without any investigation...”

He interrupted me:

“You are mistaken. We know that you are our enemy, but we haven’t forgotten everything, we haven’t forgotten that you defended the Soviet of Workers Deputies, you defended Maxim Gorky, Korolenko and many other revolutionary heroes.”

“Even better... Grant me permission to move abroad. You have no need for me, and I don’t feel comfortable here.”

“That doesn’t depend on me, but on our comrade Alekhine. Although the actual chairman of the commission dispensing permits is somebody else, it really depends on Alekhine’s discretion.”

“Alekhine? The chess player? He was a guest of my daughter in St. Petersburg. He goes round claiming to be a black hundred. His joining you, especially in a managerial role, is odd. It’s hard to ask a favor from a schemer in fancy dress.”

“Well it’s all the more to Alekhine’s credit that he managed to read the signs of history, which you, so-called leftists, have proved unable to do. Anyway, whatever your opinion of Alekhine, if you want to leave, you will have to
I appeared at the commission. The chairman turned out to be a student from St. Petersburg whom I knew. He proffered me a hand in a friendly manner and stated congenially that I had frequently given him money to pay for his studies. I replied jokingly that we, the bourgeoisie, didn’t remember such trifles and shook his hand. But I suddenly felt disgusted at the thought of shaking Alekhine’s hand and that of another commission member, a well-fed young man seemingly of a merchant background in expensive riding breeches.

As a result, I was the only person that day to be refused permission to emigrate...

So now it should be clear why Alekhine was silent about his life in red Odessa. He didn’t have anything to boast about.

Alekhine quit the Foreign Department at the end of July 1919 and left for Moscow. Denikin’s forces then captured the city on 24 August.

Oskar Osipovich Gruzenberg (1866–1940)

Oskar Gruzenberg was born on 15 April 1866 in Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk). He graduated from the law faculty of Kiev University in 1889. He worked as an attorney in the St. Petersburg Judicial Chamber. One of the founders of the Law (Pravo) newspaper, in which he edited the crime section.

A well-known lawyer. A consummate orator. He was in charge of legal cases and defended famous writers and social and political activists: Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Korolenko, Korney Chukovsky, Pavel Milyukov, and Leon Trotsky.

He defended Menahem Beilis in the famous trial in 1913 when the latter was accused of the ritual murder of a little boy. Gruzenberg’s closing speech at the trial lasted six hours (including breaks). Beilis was freed by the jury.

Gruzenberg was elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1917 in the Jewish national list, but he then gave up his mandate. He lived in Odessa in 1918–1919. He founded the Jewish Self-Defense Union and Council to Organize Help for Pogrom Victims.

He emigrated in 1920, living in Germany, Latvia and then France, where he ran a law practice. Once abroad, he published a journal entitled Courts and the Laws (Sud i zakon).

He died in Nice on 27 December 1940, and he was reburied in Tel-Aviv in 1951.

CHESS DUELS IN RED ODESSA

Yuri Shaburov noted, “All these momentous events together with his new job restricted Alekhine’s opportunities to play chess with the locals. Nevertheless, he did manage to play some friendlies. In particular, he fiercely punished N. Kaufman on 26 June for opening inaccuracies, winning a game in just eight moves.” Alekhine preserved this miniature for history, writing it down in his notebook.

No. 29. Queen’s Pawn Opening

ALEKHINE – N. KAUFMAN

Odessa, 26 June 1919

Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 c5 3.Bf4 cxd4 4.Bxb8 Rxb8? He should have brought his queen out first with 4...Qa5+ 5.c3 and only then captured the bishop: 5...Rxb8 6.Qxd4 Nf6 with an equal position.
5.Qxd4 b6 6.e4 dxe4 7.Qxd8+ Kxd8 8.Ne5. Black resigned (see diagram), as he is going to lose the exchange.


Another game with Kaufman was published in the second issue of a magazine called *Universal Education – For a New Army (Vseobuch – K novoi armii)* on 20 April 1920. Alekhine wrote in the commentary that he played it the previous June, although the date itself was not provided.

No. 30. Queen’s Pawn Opening

ALEKHINE – N. KAUFMAN
Odessa, June (?) 1919

Commentary by Alekhine

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 c5 3.dxc5 Nf6. If 3...e6 white could reply 4.e4.

4.e4 e6 5.cxd5 exd5 6.Be3 Na6 7.g3 Bxc5 8.Bxc5 Nxc5 9.Bg2 0-0 10.0-0 Bf5. A more natural way to defend the isolated central pawn is by playing 10...Be6.

11.Nc3 Re8 12.Nd4 Bg6 13.Bh3! The main purpose of this move is to prevent black’s rook from moving to c8. At the same time, the bishop is excellently placed on h3.

13...Nce4. An inaccuracy! The correct continuation was 13...Qb6 14.b3 Rad8 15.e3 Nfe4!, where black is equal.


17...f6 18.Rb5 Bf7 19.Rf3 a6 20.Rb4 Qa5. The immediate 20...Qc7 is a little better.

21.Rfb3 Qc7!? Black had several interesting alternatives. After 21...Nc5! white has only one way to maintain equality: 22.Nc6! bxc6 23.Rxb8 Nxb8 24.Qxb3 Qe1+ 25.Bf1 h6 and so on.


22.e3. This move is played to prepare the subsequent combination. White first has to prevent a check by the black queen along the g1-a7 diagonal.

22...b5 23.a4 bxa4.
24. Ne6! This is the point of white’s build up. Were black to play the quiet reply 24...Qa7 (24...Bxe6 25.Bxe6+ with the following rook exchange and Qxd5 is even worse) 24...Qa7 25.Rxb8 Rxb8 26.Rxb8+ Qxb8 27.Qxd5 Nd6 28.Qc6 white has a clear advantage. Therefore, black tries to save the game via complications.

Actually, black doesn’t have to take on b8 at all. The correct continuation is 25...axb3! 26.Rxe8+ Bxe8 27.Qxb3 Bf7 with an approximately equal position.

24...Rxb4? A mistake! After the cool-headed 24...Qa5! 25.Rxb8 axb3 26.Rxe8+ Bxe8 27.Nd4 Kf8 28.Qc1 Qd2 only white can lose.


Obviously a typo somewhere! Black simply plays 30...Ne3+ here and wins white’s queen. Instead of 29.Kg2?? white wins easily with 29.Nd6! Nxf1 30.Qd7. Alekhine’s erroneous commentary on move 30 is unfortunate but well-known.

27...a3 28.Qe8 Rb1+ 29.Bf1 g6 30.Nxf6+ Kg7 31.Nxe4. White plans some interesting combinations. However, he could have won simply with 31.Nd7! Kg8 32.Qf8+ Kh8 33.Nf6, all the more so as black could have met the move played in the game with 31...dxe4! 32.Qc3+ Kg8 33.Qxa3 Bc4 and drawing chances.

Alekhine’s explanation for his oversight on move 31

31...a2 32.Qc3+ Kh6. Obviously the only move, as retreating the king to the back rank loses immediately due to 33.Qa3+ or 33.Nf6+.

33.Nd6. It’s interesting that 33.Ng5 even loses after 33...Bg8. Now, however, such a move by black is met by 34.Nf5+, while 33...Be6 is met by 34.f5 and white wins in both cases.

Actually, 33.Ng5 Bg8 leads to a draw: 34.Qf6 a1=Q 35.Qf8+ Qg7! 36.Qc8 Qa1 37.Qf8+ etc.

The move played by white misses the win. The right way to win was: 33.Nd2! a1=Q 34.Nxb1 Qxb1 35.Qh8! and so on.

33...a1=Q. Black misses the reply 33...Be6! 34.f5, and now, with the f5 square occupied, 34...Bg8! draws.

34.Nxf7+ Kh5.
35.Kg2! A very attractive idea, the key to which is white’s next move. White is threatening Be2#.

35...Rxf1. A somewhat better continuation would have been 35...Rb2+ 36.Kg1 Rb1, after which white would have had to transpose to a winning ending with 37.Qxa1 Rxa1 38.Kg2.

36.Kh3!! Now black can’t avoid getting mated.

36...g5 37.g4+ Kg6 38.Ne5+ and black is mated in five moves or less.

In a later publication, Alekhine explained his oversight on move 31 as follows:

“As an explanation as to why I missed a simple win, the thing is, I played this game the day after I was freed from the cheka. While I was at the cheka, I was in serious danger of getting checkmated and so I was still tired.”

If this story is true, then Alekhine was released from the cheka in June, as implied by the game’s date shown in the publication. However, under interrogation from the Moscow cheka on 12 February 1921, Alekhine maintained that he “worked at the Foreign Department of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee from April to June 1919.” So which is the true version?

In my view, and for obvious reasons, Alekhine was more honest during his cheka interrogation, and the game was played at the end of April, rather than in June.

I spent ages trying to identify ‘N. Kaufman’, the future world champion’s opponent in these last two games, among Odessa chess players. However, no such player was listed.
The authors of an article called *The Unknown Alekhine (Neizvestny Alekhine)* in *Chess in the USSR* No. 5, 1983, G. Antonov and M. Yudovich, believed that Alekhine’s opponent was called I. Kaufman. Maybe Shaburov just got the initial wrong?

My research discovered, however, that the truth was somewhere inbetween! Alekhine’s actual opponent was an Odessite named Abram Evgenevich Kaufman (and not Arthur Kaufmann, as is sometimes suggested – there is no evidence that Arthur Kaufmann, another chess player, was in Odessa at the time).

**Abram Evgenevich Kaufman (1855–1921)**

A well-known journalist focusing on social commentary. After graduating from the Second Odessa Grammar School and the Commercial College, he attended lectures at the law faculty of St. Petersburg University. While studying, he wrote articles for Odessa and St. Petersburg newspapers.

He returned to Odessa in 1889. He worked in all of the city’s leading newspapers: *Odessa Sheet* (as the editor’s assistant but, in practice, as the chief editor!), *Odessa Messenger* and *Odessa News*. He founded and edited a literary compendium in 1892 called *Response (Otklik)*, profits from which were donated to a charity aiding the hungry. He was also the publisher and editor of a bi-monthly newspaper called *Musical Self-Education (Muzykalnoe samoobrazovanie)*.

Kaufman moved back to St. Petersburg in 1904. He was the executive editor of a weekly newspaper called *Stock Exchange News (Birzhevye Vedomosti)*. He was its correspondent in Bohemia, Turkey, Italy, and Germany. He wrote several books, brochures, and articles about the Jewish question.

He returned again to Odessa after the February revolution, where he lived until August 1919. He then went back to Northern Palmyra. He was elected chairman of the Society for Mutual Aid of Writers and Scientists. Thanks to his personal involvement, many writers and scientists in Petrograd were wrenched from the adhesive hands of the cheka.

Kaufman wrote under the pseudonyms “Acquaintance” and “A. Evgenev”. He published a book called *Portraits and Silhouettes: From the Notebook of an Old Journalist*, which describes his encounters with Tchaikovsky, Stasov, Borodin and other leading musicians.

He worked as the editor of *Messenger of Literature (Vestnik literatury)* right until his death. He died from a heart attack in 1921.
CHAPTER 5
THE ODESSA TRIPS REVISITED IN MOSCOW
UNDER SURVEILLANCE BY THE CHEKA

After returning to Moscow, Alekhine passed an entrance exam for a place at the First State School of Cinematography under the leadership of the famous film director and big chess fan Vladimir Gardin. Interestingly, Gardin moved to Odessa in 1922, where he opened the Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration. This institution was renamed the Odessa Artistic Film Studio in 1938. It started to publish the magazine *Silhouettes*, which because the first such publication in Soviet Ukraine to include a chess column. This column was run by Alekhine’s good friends Yakov Vilner and Alexander Iglitsky.

However, Alekhine gave up film making at the end of 1919 and focused his energy on chess. He won the first championship of Soviet Moscow and the Russian Chess Olympiad.

His private life also saw changes. He married Alexandra Lazarevna Bataeva, whom he knew from the Zemgor, on 5 March 1920. Then, on 13 May, Alekhine was appointed an investigator in the Wanted Persons Department of the Central Police Office. He worked in that role until 13 February 1921.

It seemed that the greatest dangers were now in the past. However, dark clouds again conspired against him. The cheka decided, once again, to investigate him, on 16 November 1920. Yuri Shaburov described this case in detail in his article Under Surveillance by the Cheka (*Chess Messenger* No. 10, 1992).

Investigation No. 228 was sparked by an anonymous telegram from Odessa:

“Comrade Latsis has received an original receipt from Comrade Tarasov signed by the chess player Alekhine for a sum of around 100,000 rubles from the Denikin Counter-Espionage Department while Alekhine was in Odessa.

One month ago, Alekhine’s address was Tverskaya Street, Lux Hotel (now the Central Hotel on Tverskaya – Shaburov), Moscow. Last year, he moved here from Odessa. He is currently working in Moscow as an investigator of the Criminal Investigative Commission. He lives on the fifth or sixth floor. Appearance: taller than average, thin, very jumpy, an irregular step, age 30–34, can be found in the Chess Club. Information from the former head of the Odessa cheka.”

The words “Establish his place of residence and work” were written in red ink diagonally across the telegram with an illegible signature.

Executive of the Investigative Department of the Cheka Levinthal, marking the document “Top secret”, tasked Comrade Valentik with ascertaining Alekhine’s address. A laconic report was attached to the task: “Established at Comrade Levinthal’s request No. 21. Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine. Resident of Moscow. 27 years old. Serves in the Central Wanted Persons Department, currently resides at Lux Hotel on Tverskaya, room number 164. Agent No. 7.”

As we see, the plot was woven just like in a detective story.

There was also another copy of the same telegram, but with different resolutions inscribed on it: in brown pencil – “Discuss”, then in red ink – “Comrade Latsis: what is this about?”

A note, again written in red ink, was attached, continuing this correspondence: “Comrade Latsis! I have taken over from Comrade Steingardt a case on Alekhine that nobody knows anything about. Your name is mentioned in it, so could you be so kind as to let me know what information you have? I’ve left the file on your desk and kindly reply by telephone No. 179, Secret Department of the Cheka, 25/1. Deputy Executive Officer, IV Department,” with an illegible signature.

The reply was recorded on the other side of the document: “This is just a telegram received from Odessa. I don’t know what has been done in respect to it. He was probably not found at the address indicated. 26/1–1921 citizen Latsis.”
This was followed by a coded, urgent request to Odessa: “Telegram from the Moscow Cheka to the Chairman of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka. The former Chairman of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka provided the following information: chess player Alekhine, who resides in Moscow, received around 100,000 rubles from the Denikin counter-espionage forces, for which he personally signed. What evidence, receipts and so on do you have? Inform us urgently. Head of the Secret Department of the Cheka.”

However, the telegram sent in reply brought no new intelligence: “Moscow, to head of the Secret Department of the Cheka Samsonov. from Odessa Gubernia Cheka S9 236/2735 31 2/8 II. Your telegram No. 4135/29/I/21 is unclear to us. Kindly elaborate. 2/2 1921 No. 2735. Chairman of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka Deich. Secretary Snegov.”

The telegram contained the following resolution:

“1) Comrade Deribas (illegible signature). 7/II 1921
2) What could be clearer than the telegram. Summon Alekhine and try to clarify – otherwise, the case will be sent to the archive of department No. IV (unclear signature).”

After that there was another note, written in the same “revolutionary” ink: “Summon Alekhine (he lives in the same hotel as Galinkovsky) at noon for interrogation. 19/II 1921 (unclear signature).”

And here I have the interrogation questionnaire from the cheka filled in by Alekhine himself:


Previous occupation and service: a) before the war in 1914 – completed my studies, b) before the February Revolution in 1917 – worked in the legal department of the foreign ministry, c) before the October Revolution in 1917 – the same, d) between the October Revolution up until arrest – Foreign Ministry, Interior Ministry (investigator with the Central Wanted Persons Department), Comintern.

I. In reply to the question about an exhaustive list of my work between October 1918 and now I declare the following:

a) Between October 1918 and April 1919, (when Soviet power was established in Odessa) I was in Odessa with the permission of Comrade Manuilsky, I made a living from chess simultaneous exhibitions, playing chess in Robinat’s café, I pawned some of my belongings and so on. I didn’t work anywhere.

b) Between April and July 1919, I worked in the Foreign Department of the Odessa Gubernia Executive Committee.

c) I moved to Moscow in August 1919, worked in the photo and films department of the Education Ministry (First State School of Cinematography) until December 1919.

d) I left for Kharkov in December 1919 with Comrade Danishevksy to work at the Kharkov Region Military and Sanitary Department. There I caught typhus, and was ill until February. I was then sent on several official trips to Moscow by Comrade Danishevksy in order to deliver food and reports.

e) I was transferred back to Moscow in May 1920 upon the suggestion of Comrade (surname illegible), and I worked as an investigator with the Central Wanted Persons Department.

f) I was seconded to the Comintern in the middle of June, as I am fluent in French and German. Since then, I have worked there as a translator, both of texts and at meetings.

II. In reply to the question whether, in 1919, I received any sums of money from anybody, including from a certain Tarasov, I hereby declare that I didn’t receive any sums from anybody.

III. In reply to the question whether I am acquainted with Latsis or Tarasov, I hereby declare that I know no such people.

Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine. 21/II–1921.
Nobody was in doubt that there wasn’t a shred of evidence against Alekhine, and the case was closed after his questioning.

It seemed that this put a full stop to the issue. Strangely, however, the folder with the case reappeared – in September 1938. This is proved by the existence of headed notepaper marked “NKVD [Interior Ministry] of the USSR. Fourth Department, 1st Office”, containing the following text:

“272405. 25 September 1938. Internal note. I am sending archived case No. 228 concerning Alekhine A.A. to the 3rd department of the 1st office of the NKVD to be placed at your disposal. Attachment: case on 10 pages.

Aide to the head of the 4th department of the 1st office of the NKVD Captain of State Security Fedotov, Deputy Head of the 2nd branch of the 4th department of the 1st office of the NKVD Senior Lieutenant of State Security Kraev.”

A resolution is written in blue pencil diagonally across the note: “4th department of the 1st office. I am returning this. I don’t understand why this correspondence has been sent to the 3rd department (illegible signature) 28.9.38.”

And it was only then that the file with Alekhine’s case was finally interred in the Central Archive of the USSR KGB, where it was inventoried in 1941 and assigned archive number R28167.

Shaburov’s extensive article requires some revision and explanation. I researched a number of points contained in this unique file stored in the KGB (now FSB) archive.

Let’s start at the very beginning. Soviet power was definitively established in Odessa on 7 February 1920, and the “competent organs” set to work straight away. According to records of the Odessa Gubernia Statistics Bureau, 10,225 people were arrested in the first eleven months after the Soviets regained control of the city. Of these, 1,418 were executed by firing squad, 1,558 were sent to prison camps and 4,464 were freed. The fate of the remaining 2,605 people is unknown.

The jump in repressions in Odessa was provoked by the arrival of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of the cheka, in summer 1920. He demanded that local comrades “fight even harder against counterrevolution and sabotage.” The Odessa chekists, as the above stats demonstrate, didn’t disappoint their boss. The White underground was hit particularly hard. Reports were constantly dispatched to Kiev and Moscow on the liquidation of a multitude of counterrevolutionary organizations. And there appeared to be lots of them in the city. According to a number of sources, up to seventeen spy circles of various countries and organizations were active in Odessa between November 1918 and April 1919. Naturally, their agents continued their work once Soviet power had been definitively established.

Odessa chekists came down particularly hard on the secret spy organization, Alphabet. The project to destroy it was personally led by Martin Latsis, head of the Ukrainian Cheka and who had, at one time (in summer 1918), headed the Russian Cheka.

Many of Alphabet’s agents were arrested and shot in summer 1920. That organization’s head, Vasily Shulgin, miraculously avoided arrest and managed despite huge hardships to reach Crimea. He wrote in his memoirs that the chekists killed around 7,000 enemies of Soviet power in 1920. It’s now impossible to establish who was right in terms of the number of people liquidated that year – the Soviet authorities or Shulgin.
It’s clear that the Odessa chekists discovered the receipt in Alekhine’s name for receiving 100,000 Romanov rubles during one of their operations against Alphabet.

As can be seen from case No. 228, the investigation was prompted by the telegram sent to Martin Latsis from a former Chairman of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka, which reported on Alekhine’s receipt. Latsis, without looking closely at the case, forwarded the telegram to Moscow, as that’s where Alekhine was now living. Let the capital’s agents deal with it! Case No. 228 was hence opened into Alekhine, which executive of the 4th department of the Cheka Secret Department Vilis Steingardt was tasked with leading.

This was followed by correspondence between the Moscow and Odessa chekists concerning the main evidence – the receipt. However, cardinal changes took place among the Odessa cheka leadership. The new chairman didn’t know anything about this “evidence”. The Moscow chekists then summoned and interrogated Alekhine, who denied the receipt had anything to do with him. The investigator took Alekhine’s word and closed the case. In a nutshell, that was the entire story.

Let’s now take a look at the people mentioned in the file. First up is the investigator on whom Alekhine’s fate depended. Vilis Krishyanovich Steingardt was born in Riga in 1888. He joined the cheka’s Secret Department after the revolution. Starting in summer 1918, he worked first as the Deputy Head of Military Counterintelligence and head of a special army department. He was then put in charge of censorship on the Eastern Front. After the Civil War, he was appointed an executive of the Secret Department. Steingardt was in charge of cases involving the White Movement. Colleagues recalled that he was no rampant implementer of “severe decisions”. Therefore, as is clear from his biography, he built a “career in reverse”, falling in rank from high command positions to those of a mid-level employee.

The FSB archive contains minutes from a meeting of the cheka presidium dated 27 October 1920. That day, it reviewed cases managed by the Secret Department. The presidium met in full. Head of the Secret Department Timofei Samsonov (Babii), who had once lived in Odessa, opened the session. The second agenda item was the case of Sergei Esenin, accused of being a counterrevolutionary. Vilis Steingardt, who was in charge of the case, presented his report. Having studied the case material and interrogated the suspect, he had prepared a conclusion that he submitted to the presidium which stated that Esenin’s involvement with counterrevolution was not proven. Steingardt proposed releasing the poet from prison on the basis of a personal guarantee from another well-known chekist and secret agent Yakov Blumkin (another Odessite!). The archives contain the text of this guarantee:

“25 October 1920. I, the undersigned Yakov Grigorevich Blumkin, residing at the Hotel Savoi, Room No. 136, take personal responsibility for Esenin. I guarantee that he will not hide from the court or investigation and will appear as soon as the investigation or court authorities summon him.” Esenin was freed that day.

Alekhine’s case met a similar fate! Studying the correspondence between the chekists and the sequence of judicial measures, I concluded that Steingardt deliberately slowed the investigation, thereby protecting Alekhine from serious trouble. Look at it this way – after Latsis washed his hands of the Alekhine case, the Moscow chekists began corresponding with the Odessa chekists, who, by this time, were led by Max Deich.

The new head of the Odessa cheka failed to understand what receipt they were all talking about, and asked his Moscow colleagues to clarify. He could, of course, have asked his predecessor – Vladimir Yakovlev. But former head of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka Yakovlev no longer lived in the city. In fact, Yakovlev had only worked in that
capacity for a very short time – from the end of July to the end of August 1920. He was a blatant sadist with a serious psychological illness who scared even hardened chekists. It’s known that, in a fit of fury, Yakovlev even shot dead his own father, considering him a “counterrevolutionary.” When his mother found out about this, she hanged herself. There are reports on the Internet even now that during his short period of power he personally shot around 5,000 people. Admittedly, this figure is probably severely exaggerated, but it’s clear how much fear he spread.

As I noted earlier, according to official figures 1,418 people were shot in Odessa in 1920 and another 2,605 disappeared without trace. Even combined, this is fewer than Yakovlev would have had to shoot during his month in charge.

Yakovlev handed over his Ukrainian duties at the beginning of the 1920s and returned to Moscow, where he continued as before in the sadly well-known department run by “Iron Felix”. His ability to “take decisions quickly” was of use in the capital, too. He took up residence in the Zamoskvoreche district of Moscow, in a spacious merchant’s apartment appropriated from a “class enemy”. His son, Egor, who became the head of state television company VTRK in 1991, was born in 1930.

Another former head of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka could have shed light on the Alekhine case – Stanislav Redens, who occupied the position from March until the end of July 1920. It was Redens’s agents who first scored significant success against Shulgin’s Alphabet, by infiltrating it with an agent provocateur. However, at the time of the Moscow-Odessa correspondence, he was also out of town. Having led the Kharkov Cheka for some time, he was then appointed head of the Crimean Cheka in December 1920, where he gained a reputation for the bloody purging of counterrevolutionaries on the peninsula. He was accompanied on that mission by Anna Allilueva, the sister of Stalin’s second wife. Anna also worked in the Odessa Cheka in 1920, and they married in the city.

Logic dictates that the Moscow chekists should have followed up with Yakovlev or Redens in order to thoroughly investigate the receipt, which would have taken considerable time but which from the point of view of law enforcement should have been done. Nevertheless, the correspondence suddenly ended at this point. Alekhine was summoned for questioning, where he denied everything. The investigator believed him(!) and let him off – somewhat unusual behavior by the chekists.

Another well-known Bolshevik became involved in the Alekhine case in 1921 – head of the cheka’s investigative department Terenty Deribas. It was he who proposed ending the correspondence and interrogating the chess player. There was an urban legend at the time of his service that his great-great grandfather – Felix de Ribas – was the brother of one of Odessa’s founding fathers, Osip Deribas. However, there is no documentary proof of this version.

It’s true that Terenty Deribas had frequently visited Odessa. Back in 1906, he had hidden from the Tsar’s secret police (the so-called “okhranka”) in the house that had once belonged to Felix de Ribas. However, unlike his famous relative, the future chekist hid in the cellars, and not in its luxurious chambers. Terenty visited Odessa again in 1923 for an inspection. By that time, the local law enforcement authorities had joined forces with the criminal underworld and had become their reliable protectors. Following his inspection, the entire leadership of the Odessa Cheka was arrested and shot.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find anything on the Mr Tarasov, who had reported to Latsis about the discovered receipt. Logic suggests that he was probably one of Yakovlev’s deputies and was personally charged with destroying Alphabet.

It’s known that the head of the Odessa Gubernia Cheka had a large number of deputies. Virtually all of them
would have wanted to score brownie points. For example, one of Yakovlev’s deputies was a certain I. Kravchenko, a semi-literate tailor who had a penchant for describing his achievements in great detail in his reports after each successful operation. This “talent of the sword and pen” was promoted from an Odessa role to work in Kiev, where he was charged with liquidating the Petliura underground. However, the Petliura agents were smarter – they drew Kravchenko into a trap where he was killed.

All sorts of people worked at the Odessa Cheka. Some of them were quite unusual. For example, Max Kyuss, author of the famous Amur Waves waltz, served there as the chief musician!

Let’s try and explain why Alekhine’s case suddenly resurfaced in September 1938. I think that it was sparked by the arrests and executions within the NKVD structures. This naturally involved rechecking all cases that the prisoners had worked on in order to identify any possible abuses.

Ironically, all of those involved in case No. 228, apart from Alekhine, were accused of anti-Soviet activity and shot. Martin Latsis was arrested at the end of November 1937 and shot on 20 March 1938. Vilis Steingardt was imprisoned in the middle of January 1938 and shot the same day at Latsis. Max Deich was arrested in summer 1937 and executed at the end of October. The prison doors closed behind Terenty Deribas on 12 August 1937, and he was executed at the end of the following July. Vladimir Yakovlev was also shot in 1938. Finally, Stanislav Redens was arrested on 21 October 1938. He was “lucky” to live longer (Stalin’s brother-in-law, after all!) – he was shot on 12 February 1940.

Finally, let’s examine another key point in the interrogation report, which clearly demonstrates Alekhine’s ability to interpret facts in his favor (as befitted his legal training!):

In reply to the question about an exhaustive list of my work between October 1918 and now I declare the following:

a) Between October 1918 and April 1919, (when Soviet power was established in Odessa) I was in Odessa with the permission of Comrade Manuilsky.

The uninitiated reader might conclude from this fragment of the interrogation that Alekhine arrived in Odessa on what might even have been a party mission assigned by the famous Bolshevik Dmitry Manuilsky. A cunning defensive move by Alekhine to claim the famous party member as his ally!

But what really happened? After the collapse of the Russian Empire, foreign departments were established locally by the Internal Affairs Ministry and party executive committees. These organizations, together with the Foreign Ministry, kept a record of all citizens legally travelling abroad.

This ministry’s decree established a procedure for travelling abroad. It required all citizens to receive a single-exit permit (“visa”) for each trip. The citizen wishing to travel had to file an application with the local office of the Foreign Ministry. A commission would consider the application and, sometime later, issue the permit. In order to travel from Moscow to Ukraine at the beginning of October 1918, which at that time was governed by Hetman Skoropadsky, Alekhine would have had to obtain three permits: Soviet, German and Ukrainian. Just remember Boris Malyutin’s problems with permits!

The Soviet permit issued to Alekhine was indeed signed by Dmitry Manuilsky. There is nothing surprising about that. At the time Alekhine set off, Manuilsky was in charge of relations with Hetman Ukraine, and it was his job to sign the permits. It’s known that Manuilsky (deputy chairman of the Bolshevik delegation) and Rakovsky held
negotiations with the Hetman government, as a result of which terms for a preliminary peace were signed on 12 July 1918 together with confirmation of the procedure for citizens to cross the countries’ borders. Manuilsky (who, by the way, had studied law in both St. Petersburg University and the Sorbonne) had no reason to prevent Alekhine from leaving Moscow and hence signed the permit. One lawyer helped another!

The version that Alekhine carried out some important business in Ukraine for Commissar Manuilsky has acquired imaginative details over time. An urban legend emerged that Alekhine was a double agent, working as both a red and white spy. I read in one book (The Adventure of Chess by Edward Lasker, quoting the chess player Ossip Bernstein who himself reported in 1946 that he was nearly shot by the cheka in Odessa):

> When the revolution broke out he served with the Intelligence Corps of the White Russian Army in Odessa. The Bolsheviks took the city, and he declared himself “liberated” and acted as a spy for them. After the White Russians recaptured Odessa, Alekhine declared himself liberated again, and he volunteered for counter-espionage. Eventually, the Bolsheviks prevailed, and Alekhine, not too sure that he had succeeded in destroying all damning evidence, summoned all his combinative powers to plot an escape.

This account can be dismissed, given that Alekhine lived in Odessa only under one period of White control and one period of Red control.

After his interrogation about case No. 228, Alekhine changed his life cardinaly. He divorced Alexandra Bataeva at the end of February and then married the Swiss journalist Anneliese Ruegg on 15 March. She had travelled to Moscow on Comintern business. He obtained an exit permit five weeks after his marriage:

> The People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs has no objections to the voyage to Latvia via Sebezh (a town in the Pskov region – S.T.) of citizen Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine, whose signature and fingerprints have been verified.

> Deputy People’s Commissar Karakhan.

> No. 01139-23 IV – 1921.

Alekhine and his new spouse arrived in Riga on 11 May. On 13 and 20 of that month he played two simultaneous exhibitions. The family then headed to Berlin. Alekhine never returned to Russia.

Don’t this wedding and rapid trip abroad resemble a carefully planned escape? After all, the exit permit issued to Alekhine only allowed him to travel to Latvia, and no further. Yuri Shaburov explained his actions as follows: “Could Alekhine have lived and worked [in Russia] peacefully, without expecting new threats around the corner? Somebody clearly had it in for him there and wanted to gain bloody revenge against him.”

It is clear that the threat of being called back to the cheka for yet more questioning about the Odessa receipt was real. Therefore, Alekhine, recognizing the precariousness of his position, skillfully arrange his flight. However, I don’t think it had anything to do with a maniac thirsty for his blood.

**ANOTHER PROTECTOR FROM ODESSA**

As is clear from the interrogation report of case No. 228 “Receipt of 100,000 rubles from the Denikin counter-espionage forces”, Alekhine worked for some time as a Comintern translator simultaneously with his work as an investigator with the Central Wanted Persons Department.
Comintern (the Communist International, or the Third International) was an international organization combining the communist parties of different countries. It functioned from 1919 to 1943. Comintern’s objective in 1919–1920 was to swap the capitalist way of life for a communist paradise through global revolution. It saw the planet’s future as a federation of Soviet republics throughout the world, and it was willing to organize anything necessary to realize this dream, including armed uprisings, sabotage, espionage, and so on.

Alekhine joined Comintern in June 1920. Actually, it was difficult for an ordinary person to be admitted – he would have needed a recommendation from a higher-up! An Odessite called Vasily Nikolaevich Russo, head of the Military Training Department of the Moscow Military Region, provided Alekhine’s recommendation. My guess is that Russo didn’t want to leave his “protégé” in the lurch once case No. 228 was opened against him, later in 1920. He was able to use his high-ranking position and his contacts (he had direct access to Lenin!) to throw a spanner in the works of the investigation. Russo was well aware that should it be proven that Alekhine had indeed taken Denikin’s money it would harm Russo’s reputation as well – he had vouched for Alekhine when he joined Comintern, and it would have looked like he failed to recognize an enemy.

In his Comintern file, Alekhine wrote that he belonged to the nobility, had no living parents, was a lawyer by training, spoke, read and wrote French, German and English, was married, and had been exempt from military service on medical grounds.

He further indicated that his average monthly income between the October Revolution and joining Comintern was 8,000 – 12,000 rubles. That was quite a lot, but hardly surprising!

According to a Moscow journal called Labor Statistics (Statistika truda) dated 1919, the average salary in Moscow at the beginning of 1918 was 382 rubles, and by the end of 1919 it had reached 600 rubles. However, prices then shot up so rapidly that that the concept of an average monthly salary became irrelevant. Compared with the pre-war year of 1913, the highest price rises were seen in salt, by 143,000 times, vegetable oil (71,000 times), sugar (65,000 times), and bread (42,000 times). The highest price rises in non-food items were in soap (50,000 times) and thread (34,000 times). Comparing these figures with Muscovites’ incomes is pointless, as there are no credible figures available. The population of Moscow had declined by around one half since 1913: some died, others emigrated or dispersed to villages or smaller towns, where they could eke out some sort of subsistence living off the land.

By autumn 1921, one pud (40 pounds, around 16.4 kilos) of rye mill in Moscow cost 140,000 rubles. A pud of potatoes cost 20,600. Then it got worse! The October 1922 edition of the Chess magazine cost 2,500,000 rubles! The government then carried out a currency reform, cutting out the long zeroes. Ten-ruble notes (and some coins) were introduced that were backed by the same amount of gold that backed 10 rubles in tsarist times. As a result, November’s edition of Chess cost just 40 golden kopecks.

In answer to the question in his Comintern file as to whether he had been subject to judicial investigation, Alekhine wrote a laconic “No”. Then, in August 1920, he became a candidate for membership of the Communist Party.
The archives show that Alekhine served in Comintern’s Organization and Information Department until 2 April 1921. He accompanied foreign delegations on trips across the country and he lived in the Lux Comintern Hostel on
Tverskaya Street until he left for Latvia.

Let’s now meet Vasily Russo, who recommended Alekhine for membership of the Communist International.

**Vasily Nikolaevich Russo (1881–1942).**

Vasily Russo was born on 13 January 1881 in Odessa (and not in St. Petersburg as Wikipedia and other sites suggest!).

He graduated from Odessa Art College with honors around 1900. He then continued his studies on a government grant in the St. Petersburg Arts Academy. After graduating from the Academy in 1910, Russo was involved in redeveloping mineral water resorts in the Caucasus, at Essentuki and Zheleznovodsk. A statue to the heroes of the 1812 war against Napoleon that he designed was erected in Maloyaroslavets (a battle site in the Kaluga region) in 1912.

His life during World War I and the Civil War is unknown, and it is unclear whether and where he served. By the early 1920s, Russo had been appointed head of the Military Training Department of the Moscow Military Region. This was a plum job, coming with the title of General!

Thanks to Russo, a grand six-room apartment (on the second floor of a building on the corner of Kamergersky Lane and Great Dmitrovka in the heart of Moscow) that belonged to the Military Training Department’s sports club was transformed into the Moscow Chess and Checkers Club in May 1920. This club hosted the Russian Chess Olympiad that October, which Alekhine won.

There was a long-held view that the first head of chess in the USSR was Nikolai Vasilevich Krylenko – the Chairman of the Supreme Tribunal, a key figure in Stalin’s repressions and who later became their victim. But that isn’t the case! Thanks to the efforts of Russian historian Vladimir Neishtadt, Vasily Russo’s once forgotten memoirs were brought to public attention. Russo wrote of chess and checkers during those years:

> At the very beginning of 1924 – in January or February – I was summoned by the head of the Military Training Department K.A. Mekhonoshin, who, aware of my previous work promoting chess and checkers in Moscow in 1920–1923, as well as my ties to the chess and checkers world at the time, proposed that I take it upon myself to arrange a chess and checkers movement in the USSR through the Supreme Council of Physical Education, of which he was the Deputy Chairman.

This offer was just what I needed. The work that I had carried out in Moscow promoting chess and checkers on behalf of the trade unions failed to encompass the entire movement. Schools, military and semi-military clubs were out of its scope. We needed a wider, more comprehensive organization that could reach all institutions and enterprises and manage all of them. The most acceptable format was a physical education organization. All we had to do was to contrive an internal ideological connection between chess and checkers, on the one hand, and physical education on the other. I
gladly accepted the proposal. I presented a report around the middle of March 1924 at a meeting of the Supreme Council of Physical Education chaired by N. Semashko. The key points of my report were then outlined in an article “Chess and Checkers and their Place in Physical Education” published in the first checkers section of the Red Sport (Krasny sport) magazine (No. 13–14, 1924). The article also repeated the resolution of that meeting issued in response to the report:

1) to recognize chess and checkers as a sport to be run on an equal basis with other sports by the physical education councils;

2) to organize chess and checkers clubs under the management of the supreme, gubernia and district physical education councils.

I remember insisting in particular on the clubs being named “chess and checkers” and not just “chess”. The opinion of those present was in my favor and the proposed name was accepted.

After this resolution was passed, the issue arose regarding the need to invite an authoritative figure to head the reborn organization. At this point K.A. Mekhonoshin, having learned from me about Comrade Krylenko’s interest in chess, proposed the latter’s candidacy. I replied that there could be no better candidate for the job, and those present hence voted to appoint Krylenko Chairman of the Chess and Checkers Club of the Supreme Council of Physical Education.

Vasily Russo was a Russian checkers expert and attained the title of Master of Sport. He was the main organizer of the first USSR checkers championships. Further, he published the first book on checkers in the Soviet Union, in 1924. Seven editions were printed and the book was translated into many languages spoken in the USSR. Russo wrote chess columns in nine periodicals. He was a member of the editorial boards of two magazines, 64. Chess and Checkers in the Workers Club (64. Shakhmaty i shashki v rabochem klube) and Checkers for the Masses (Shashki v massy) from 1924 to 1931.

After the Military Training Department was abolished, Russo went to work as deputy director of the State Tretyakovky Gallery. At the same time, he maintained his love for sculpture! The bust of Maxim Gorky that he created decorated the foyer of the Moscow Artistic Academic Theater in the 1930s.

The name Russo disappeared from the pages of chess and checkers publications at the end of the 1930s. He was arrested in 1938 after being denounced as an “enemy of the working people” and sentenced to five years in a prison camp. He died in the camp in 1942. The first leader of Soviet chess and Alexander Alekhine’s protector was rehabilitated after Stalin’s death.
Alekhine’s marriage to Anneliese Ruegg fell apart almost immediately after his escape to Europe. They had totally different interests. Once in Germany, Alekhine immersed himself in chess, playing match after match and travelling from tournament to tournament. His Swiss wife, on the other hand, burned with the desire to turn the entire world communist.

Alexander Alekhine’s son, also called Alexander, was born on 2 November 1921. Nevertheless, the appearance of an heir failed to glue this fictive marriage together. His son later said: “I really missed my father as a child. I saw him very rarely. Then my mother died [Anneliese died on 2 May 1934]. I was brought to Zurich, where my father was playing at the time. He already had a new wife, but my step-mother didn’t accept me, as she had her own children while my father was totally obsessed with his chess. They put me in boarding school. Naturally, I took offense. It was only when I grew up that I came to realize that chess for my father was much more than his family. It was his life.”

Actually, Alexander Junior had suffered a memory lapse. By the time the events he mentioned took place, Alexander Senior already lived with his fourth “new wife” – an American named Grace Wishar. Alekhine had married her on 24 March 1934, not long before Anneliese died. His new wife was 58 years old, and she didn’t have young children.

Meanwhile, the grandmaster’s third wife was an Odessite and widow of a General, Nadezhda Semyonovna Vasilevna (born Fabritskaya). Unfortunately, the biography of this remarkable lady, without whose support Alekhine would have been unlikely to capture the crown of world champion from Capablanca, has not been analyzed in detail. Moreover, the disparate information about her life has traditionally contained inaccuracies and downright blunders. I attempt here to right some wrongs.

Several years ago, my archive acquired a set of unique letters from Nadezhda Vasilevna’s daughter – Gwendolina Isnard. These letters consisted of her correspondence with grandmaster Alexander Kotov, in the late 1950s. While working on his book White and Black (Belyie i chernye) he discovered Gwendolina’s Paris address and asked her a number of questions about the heroes of his planned work – Alexander Alekhine and her mother.

The grandmaster’s wife, Elena Maxovna Kotova, sent me these priceless papers, and it is with her permission that I publish here part of the correspondence. The letters were in imperfect Russian, with spelling and punctuation mistakes reflecting that Gwendolina had lived far from her country of birth for around 40 years.

1) My mother first met A.A. at a press ball in 1921 held in the Hotel Lutetia in Paris. I don’t know the details, except that, according to rumors, it was love at first sight for both of them.

2) At the time, my mother was 48 years old (she was born in Odessa in 1873). Despite her age, she was both beautiful and charming. She was highly cultured, well-read, fluent in four languages: Russian, French, English, and German. When she was quite young, unlike her colleagues, she belonged to Odessa’s so-called “high society” (she was the patron of a number of societies, organized charity evenings, often went out or received guests, was known for her tact and good manners), was a bit of a leftie, and this impacted her behavior, as she would help the needy and misfortunate when she could.

   She played the piano well from childhood (she would practice for six hours a day) and, by the time she was sixteen, she would play in charity concerts. Later, in St. Petersburg, she published a newspaper called World (Svet), wrote a collection of stories that were printed in 1910, and also translated a number of texts.

3) I was born on 16 December 1899 (her letter contained a typo – 1989 – S.T.). As you can see from that, I was well into my adulthood by 1932, and although I don’t know what conversation you are referring to, my mother and I could discuss everything and anything!
4) Like all émigrés, I had to find a job after arriving in Paris. Knowing English and French fluently since childhood, I joined the English office of correspondence and translations. At first I was just an errand girl, but later, having mastered typing, glazing and management of the office, I took charge and ran the operation successfully and independently until war began in 1939. I then had to shut it down, as my clients mostly consisted of foreign tourists. I am now just a homemaker.

My husband, Vadim Nikolaevich Isnard, graduated as a railway engineer in 1916. He continued to work in this field as an émigré. He is currently a consultant engineer in a French company and deals with top local architects. He is also a talented painter and he does pastel paintings in his spare time. Plus, he used to be a top Russian tennis player.

We were both on friendly terms with A.A., spoke with him using the informal “tu” address and called him by his ultra-colloquial form “Shura”.

5) Yes, my husband and I attended the gala to honor A.A. organized by the full set of Russian émigré organizations. It was a formal and fun evening. There were speeches and dances. My husband spoke on behalf of sports organizations. From what I can remember, even A.A. danced!

In fashion for ladies at the time: knee-length skirts, cloche hats, boat shoes with very high heels and thick furry collars on fur coats! Funnily enough, the fashion that year is quite like today’s fashion...

6) Being the world champion, A.A. earned a lot of money. All his trips were paid for – rooms and accommodation in top-class hotels and casinos for free. And that’s without the constant galas held in his honor. My mother accompanied him everywhere. But they spent everything they earned. I’ve no idea what A.A. spent it on, but my mother, as always, helped and spoiled her nearest and dearest. She hardly spent anything on herself.

She also took great care of A.A.‘s second wife, a Swiss woman, and her son from that second marriage (A.A. was married in Russia too, but we don’t know anything about that wife). In truth, A.A. was totally indifferent to them, and they would have lived in dire circumstances if it wasn’t for my mother.

They lived in a small but cozy apartment – 211 rue de la Croix-Civert in Paris. My mother, just like in the past in Odessa and St. Petersburg, loved to entertain guests. Many grandmasters and lesser chess players were indulged by her.

7) They split up just as Mrs Flohr described. My mother suffered immensely, especially from knowing that Alekhine would go off the rails once no longer under her influence. He always had a propensity for alcoholism, and my mother always managed to address it successfully. My mother would never drink wine or spirits, and at any events held in A.A.‘s honor she would do no more than raise the glass to her lips. Here influence on him in this respect, and in others, was immense, and anybody who knew them would confirm it.

My mother died on 30 January 1937. She was just 64, but her body and spirit were damaged by undeserved woes. You will say that the big difference in age played a role, but actually his last wife was also much older than him!

My mother’s remains are in the columbarium at Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, as she always said she wanted to be cremated. We held two requiems and funeral services at our house. A.A. never came to the funeral (as far as I know he wasn’t in Paris at the time), but he did send a telegram.
9/12/58

Хотя оно и выходит из-под моего перу, в студенческий период, не боюсь сказать этого: это скорее всего мое мнение. Но Вам, конечно, я думаю, как неплохо, сделала много рукописных штук, но не пришлося писать по новому. Но это не значит, что я не упивался!

Но пока домой Вам (наденит в 1935 году) — большой спасибо, — на него дизайн — по-прежнему фантастический, воспоминания — много о Африке.

Потом все фотографии, относящиеся к моим матери и А.А., я передала несколько лет тому назад и все равно их нет ни в одной шахматной газете. Но когда Вашей Московской шахматной секции. Писала еще, не найдешь-ли это-нибудь, именно Вас интересовать.

Не знаю, возьмете ли письмо — обширных итогах фестиваля "Мифография" в Сибири. Набор был оптимален, но, к сожалению, не совсем успешно.

Спасибо Вам за Ваше дружеское письмо. Будет очень приятно, если пришлет мне Ваши, уже напечатанные, письма об Африке. Надеюсь, что Вы мне прислать и Московские, и Петербургские — все, т.е. все мои письма. Разумеется, это упомяну прописью на многих страницах...
1) Моя мама погибла в 1921 году в балагане в г. Петрограде на балу пресса. Ее звали Людмила. Ее звали Людмила. Фамилии не знаю, знаю лишь, что это был с обеих сторон, как говорят француз, "un cercle de fondre".

2) Мой брат был младше 48 лет (родился он в 1878 году в Одессе). С детства на малой возраст, оно было еще слепо, красиво и поэтично. Меня меня он был более научным и умением. В ранней молодости, в отличие от своего окружения, нет сомнений, в "высшем свете" Одессы (совпадал данное направление многих общеин). Естественно, дигитов, многие в какие вступала и принимала у себя, отличаясь обычными манерами и "светскостью".)
сплошна была и "левицё" и превозбуждение, это во многом, помимо, как и когда-то, молча, люди путающимися и обезоруживавшись.

Была, в детских лет хороший пианисткой (работах по 6-ти часам в день) и устраивалась уже в возрасте 16-ти лет в благополучных концертах. Позже, в Ленинграде, была удивительной газетой "Свет" и сама написала сборник рассказов напечатанных в 1910-м году, а также сделала ряд переводов.

3) В рогачной 16-го декабря 1988-го года. Как видимо, в 1932-м году я была вполне врожденной женщиной, и, хотя не знаю о каком разговоре Вы говорите, мне с матерью моей иногда уже безмерно жаль и грустно.

4) Учился в Ленинграде, мне, как всем эмигрантам, более чем иным образом. Жалею с детства в
совершенно английском и французском, я никогда в английском
недолго ни переписывал и переводил. Вначале я
была "чевокой на подушках", а потом, увидев машину, кладцовскую, и, вообще,
организовав группу рабочих бригады, и, в
конце концов, приобретая это дело
для себя и успешно и самостоятельно
было его до войны 1939-го года.
Пришелось бы ликвидировать, т. е.
для квестура составлять, главным
образом, на иностранчных туфляках.
Также занимался волчьим домашним
хозяйством.

Имя. Василий Иванович
Знеч, Инженер Кузен, военное
освобождение — 1916-го года. В эмиграции
работаем по своей специальности.
В данное время, состоям инжене-
ром по земельным в одной
французском предприятии и
находится в контакте с выдающимися
землекопами архитекторами. У
него, также, большая дар в живописи.
мать, в свободные минуты, писала, наскоро. Кроме того, принадлежали к числу лучших русских писателей С. А. мог отдохнуть в друзьях, оптимистах и наркоманах друг друга по "пое". Вам же его "шуро".

5) Да, можно сказать, что в гестовании А. А. весьма русские зарубежные организации. Всё эти приехавшие, полностью и везде, были очень манерные. Они приехали от спортивных организаций. Наконец, мне вспомнилось, даже А. А. танцевал!

Фантастические вещи были: обнаружение колен, название "горшком", муфель "лодочкой" на речном космодроме и прохождение между воронами по мирам! Кинопроекция фотографий, могут быть каким-то утилитарно-положительным. Место тогда...

6) Радуемыхся А. А., как гения мира, очень хорошо. Все поедает: пирожки, колбасы и еда в
первоначальной препинаниях я, какое даром. И это, мне кажется, неплохим моментом, что мне, по
другому, мое имя вновь еще отсутствовало. Но противно им все: А.А.
неудобно на то, а, что мне, как
всегда, кому-то и баланса, как лила,
своих башмаков, пока же на себе только
шане: Оно еще написало о
второй уж не А.А., мабе, а
ее даже от этого второго брана
(А.А. ни телеги в России, но и не
об этой теме ничего не знаю).
Надо сперва, что сам А.А. ино-
весь в ним совершенно безрасс-
ним и, если бы не моих мамы, они
были бы в своем маленьком посте.

Мне они в маленьком, но
шпильке квартире, - 211, rue de
la Croix-Nivert в Париже. Моя
мама, как и прежде, в Одессе,
и Новосибирске, проговорила.
любимы у себя привилегии и
пользовались преимуществами профессоров и более солидных, махинаторов, находимы у неё настоящее.

7) Рассказывали ми программы, одной Вами описана 2-ая фронт. Мне
многие очень помогло это переживать.
Во, особенно от сгорания, что
ууже из-под ее висящих блестящих, Алексин назвал
"духом". Он всегда был склонен к
аппломажу, а проявление ему мно-го она всегда успешно боролась.
Ничто могло вдруг по моим
множеству, ни аннекс, а не-
каких признаков в нём А.А., дни
привыкли в свои станов
Её влияние на него в этом случае,
до и не молча в этом, что
приводило к все знавшие их, много
это поражающим.

Умерла наша мама 20-го января
1937-го года. Ей было всего 64 года,
Похороны моих матер и отца состоялись на кладбище Пьер Лашо в Париже, т.к. всегда говорилось на кладбище Париже. Мое отчество моих братьев и отцов не носит имена на дом. А.А. на похоронах не был (его, понятно, не было в Париже), мо жены оба телеграммы.

Letter written by Gwendolina Isnard to Alexander Kotov, dated 9 December 1958. Published for the first time

This letter not only expands Alekhine’s biography and that of his third wife, but also places a question-mark
against several widely-accepted elements of their biographies.

Previously, it was believed that Nadezhda Vasileva (Fabritskaya) was born on 19 March 1884 and was eight years older than Alekhine. However, according to her daughter, Vasileva was born in 1873. This means that Alekhine’s third wife was a whole nineteen years older than him, and not just eight!

Further, Gwendolina reveals that her mother died at the end of January, and not in the middle of February as was previously understood. This is, in fact, confirmed by chronicles from Parisian newspapers reporting on her death.

Moreover, she writes that her mother and Alekhine first met in 1921. Earlier research on his life reported that they only met in the mid-1920s. One well-known publication asserts they first met in 1924 at a ball marking a world industrial exhibition in Paris – which is odd, as no such exhibition was held in Paris that year.

In addition, as far as Nadezhda’s death is concerned, Kotov wrote in White and Black that Alekhine was present at her funeral:

Alekhine took another step forward. Now he found himself among Nadya’s close friends and relations. Upon recognizing Alekhine, they moved aside for him. Nadya’s daughter Gwendolina with her husband Isnard stood by the casket.

Nadya’s face hypnotized him and drew him towards her, while at the same time depriving him of the strength to move. Remorse, pity and pain took hold of him. After all, wasn’t he the reason for her early death? Wasn’t it his cruel abandonment that deprived her of the strength, hopes and desire to live? Yes, he had hastened her demise, pulled away the threads that tied her to this world. “Yes, I’m guilty,” Alekhine said as though executing himself, hunching over the dearly departed’s forehead. And then he whispered next to Nadya’s face: “Forgive me, my darling!”
Yet her daughter states that Alekhine wasn’t in Paris at the time of Nadezhda’s funeral and that he sent a telegram. Her claim is indirectly supported by the Parisian newspapers reporting on the funeral – Alekhine is never mentioned.

And what about their marriage? It was lazily claimed in some version that they were common-law spouses and never actually registered their marriage. That’s quite wrong! They lived together unmarried until 1928. However, Alekhine finally received a French passport in 1927 (he was naturalized after having lived five years in France), and they soon held a wedding. It’s interesting that Alekhine learned the news that he had obtained French citizenship during his match with Capablanca. This led him to joke, “the world championship match between the Russian and the Cuban ended in a victory for the Frenchman.” Until then, Alekhine had traveled on a Nansen passport, which was issued to Russian refugees and only acted as an ID document. Obtaining visas with this passport was a long and cumbersome process.

Actually, the Swiss authorities refused to recognize Alekhine’s marriage in Moscow to Anneliese Ruegg. As a result, their son was considered illegitimate for a number of years. It was only in 1928, after having obtained French citizenship, that Alekhine managed to get Alexander Junior officially recognized as his son.

Gwendolina’s letter implies that her mother, Nadezhda, was very modest and indifferent to the fashion of the day. However, that’s quite contentious! As can be seen from photographs (including those earlier and later in this chapter) her mother had a weakness for dressing up and expensive jewelry. The chess player Hans Kmoch recalled that, while the Alekhines were in Vienna, Nadezhda, covered in jewelry, would appear at the restaurant and the waiters would whisper among themselves “the Christmas tree is back.”

Let me also add some commentary to Gwendolina’s statement about her mother belonging to Odessa’s “high society.”

This house, located at 40 Koblevskaya St., Odessa, belonged to Semyon Fabritsky, Nadezhda’s father. Nadezhda was born and spent her childhood there.

Nadezhda Fabritskaya was born in an extremely wealthy noble family. Her father, State Counselor Semyon Osipovich Fabritsky, owned several houses in Odessa. He was an authoritative justice of the peace and, later, a city
duma member. Odessa newspapers of those years consistently mentioned him in respect of major projects aimed at the city’s redevelopment and economic growth.

Semyon Osipovich was a close friend of the city chief Grigory Marazli, well-known for his generous charitable initiatives. Their architecturally impressive country houses on Lidersovsky Boulevard were next to each other (these houses are now part of the Lermontov Health Resort).

Fabritsky was also a big philanthropist in the city and headed a number of charities. It’s quite natural that his daughter Nadezhda participated in these good deeds.

Moscow-based historian Sergei Karastelin wrote an article entitled Kuprin – Alekhine (64–Chess Review – 64-Shakhmatnoe obozrenie No. 11-12, 2012) about relations between Alexander and Nadezhda Alekhine as witnessed by the Russian writer Alexander Kuprin. According to the article’s author, Kuprin and his wife knew Nadezhda Vasileva even before she moved to Paris:

While Kuprin and his entire family were living in a guest house in Helsinki in June 1920 they got to know the widow of a Russian émigré General, Nadezhda Semyonovna Vasileva (née Fabritskaya) (1879–1937) who was living there at the time. The fun and talkative Nadine (as her close friends and acquaintances called her) charmed the Kuprins, and she became quite close to his wife Elena. They maintained their friendship in Paris, where the Kuprins moved in July that year and where Vasileva later lived.

He then turns to Alekhine’s marriage to Vasileva:

Their romance developed at breakneck speed and they married. The Kuprin family had the opportunity to witness the life of this married couple in great detail, from the beginning until their marriage collapsed, all the more so as Kuprin’s wife became Nadine’s very close friend. That is why the Kuprins were invited to the wedding. They weren’t just friends, they spent time together as families. The writer’s daughter Ksenia, who later became an actress at the
Moscow Pushkin Theater, recalled her parents taking her with them on several occasions when they went to visit the Alekhines.

Nadezhda turned out to be a great wife. She not only organized the everyday life of the future world champion, but brought calm to his raging soul, which was critical to his preparations for his world championship match.

The original fragment in Russian misspelled the heroine’s surname, but it also contains other mistakes which an attentive reader should find immediately. Karastatin, unlike the official version, gives Nadine’s year of birth as 1879, which is slightly closer to the truth. Nevertheless, he was still six years off!

However, this work suffers from a bigger error. The author grants Nadezhda the “title” of widow of a Russian émigré general. This implies that husband and wife left Soviet Russia together and that he died abroad.

Actually, the author is mistaken. General Vasilev, Nadezhda’s first husband, never left Russia!

My initial attempt to find useful information about her first husband proved to be in vain. Studying military documents and the chronicles of those times, corresponding with top military historians, I reached the mistaken conclusion that her first husband was Major General of the Tsarist Army Petr Gavrilovich Vasilev (1870–1920). A number of dates and other facts supported this version! He was born in Odessa and graduated from the Nicholas (I) General Staff Academy. He fought in several wars: the Russian-Japanese War, World War I, and the Civil War. Vasilev was put in charge of the Odessa Military District warrant officers school in 1916. He was a reserve on the staff of the Odessa Military District in 1917. In 1918, General Vasilev was appointed military adviser to Skoropadsky, and, after the Hetman resigned, he joined Denikin on the Don.

He commanded a large regiment of 16,000 men as they retreated from Odessa in 1920. The regiment, apart from serving soldiers, incorporated the wounded, officers’ families, civilians, and around 600 cadets from the Odessa Cadet Corps. Don’t be misled by this large number – no more than 3,000 of them were capable of firing weapons. The terrible fate of this regiment is recounted in the book 1920 by Vasily Shulgin, who was among its columns of vehicles.

The regiment retreated to the Romanian border, trying to save itself from the Red Army cavalry under the command of Grigory Kotovsky. However, all attempts at crossing the border were beaten back by the Romanian army. Refusing to place himself at Kotovsky’s mercy, General Vasilev shot himself in the temple near the village of Rascaieti (today located at the border between Moldova and the breakaway Transnistria Republic).

The time and place of Petr Vasilev’s military service appeared to be strong signposts in favor of the version that he had been Nadezhda Fabritskaya’s husband. Further, his age – three years older than Nadine – fitted this narrative too.

However, Gwendolina Isnard’s letters seriously question this version. She wrote in her letters that, after leaving Odessa, her mother lived for some time in St. Petersburg. Yet General Petr Vasilev never served in the northern capital.

So I started to look from scratch once again. Oddly enough, although Vasilev is a common surname in Russia, not many Russian tsarist generals bore this surname a hundred years ago. And the list I found contained only one who met the key criterion – he served sequentially in Odessa and St. Petersburg. His name was Major General Viktor Nikolaevich Vasilev.

The publication Lists of the General Staff (Petrograd, 1917) contains his biographical details. His list of achievements is huge, and I comment only on those relevant to our investigation.

Viktor Vasilev was born in a noble family on 10 March 1872. Unfortunately, his place of birth isn’t shown. He received his first military education at the Pskov Cadets School. He graduated with honors from the Nicholas (I) General Staff Academy in 1898 and then joined the general staff of the Odessa Military District (Gwendolina was born that year!). Vasilev was appointed head of the general staff’s personnel department at the Suomenlinna Fortress (now a Helsinki district) in 1903. He fought in the Russo-Japanese War. During part of 1909, he commanded an Imperial Guard battalion of the Semenov regiment in the St. Petersburg Military District.

Then World War I broke out. He was promoted to Major General in 1915 for his military achievements. Tragedy struck on 29 August 1917. Vasilev was arrested in Vyborg by revolutionary soldiers, tortured and murdered by being
thrown into the Gulf of Finland. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any photo of Nadezhda Fabritskaya’s presumed first husband.

MR. AND MRS. ALEKHINE: PARTIES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Mr. and Mrs. Alekhine’s finest hour together was when Alekhine defeated the great Jose Capablanca for the world championship. Up to then, Capablanca had crushed Alekhine in their games. The match lasted 34 games and ended on 29 November 1927 with a victory for Alekhine (+6–3=25).

The world champion returned to Paris from Buenos Aires in January 1928 to a whole series of events in his honor. The first celebration was held on 4 February at the office of the Illustrated Russia (Illustrirovannaya Rossiia) weekly publication. Leading lights of Russian émigré society came out to meet him – people whom he had met frequently in Odessa in 1918–1919: the politician Pavel Milyukov, the poetess Teffi (Nadezhda Lokhvitskaya), grandmaster Ossip Bernstein, and others. Wishes of good health and more victories flowed endlessly. Alekhine delivered a speech in reply during the ceremony. Then the guests danced until the party ended.
Чемпион мира за шахматной доской.

4 февраля редакция «Иллюстрированной России» чествовала А. А. Алексина в тесном кругу своих сотрудников и друзей. Наша фотография изображает момент, когда после чествования А. А. Алексин за шахматной доской разказывает собравшимся о перипетиях своей борьбы и победы.
A party held in the world champion’s honor at the office of Illustrated Russia. Alekhine’s wife Nadezhda is standing to his right. Her daughter Gwendolina is standing next to her. Nina Severskaya, winner of a beauty contest in the Russian émigré community, is standing behind Gwendolina. Ossip Bernstein is to the far right.

Illustrated Russia published its next issue shortly after, with photos from the event on the front cover.

Gwendolina’s letter reveals that her husband, Vadim Isnard, made a speech at the party on behalf of Parisian sports organizations. His name actually came up several times when I was studying archive material about Odessa. Readers may find it interesting to learn more about this man, who was close to Alekhine.

Vadim Nikolaevich Iznar (as his surname was written at the time) was born in Odessa in 1890. His father was a well-known official, Nikolai Nikolaevich Iznar. Iznar Senior was appointed general in the Railways Ministry in 1892 and worked as Chairman of the Military-Industrial Committee during World War I. Nikolai Iznar was responsible for supplying the army with equipment, uniforms and provisions. He was also a member of the Defense Special Council.

It is also worth mentioning that Vadim’s great grandfather, Nicole Iznar (Isnard), was invited to Odessa from France at the end of the 1820s to carry out land reclamation works. Moreover, Nicole Iznar was an expert in construction, in addition to his irrigation skills. He focused his energy on creating low-cost building materials and proved to be highly successful. Nicole then purchased a large land plot outside Odessa in the 1830s from Lieutenant General Lev Naryshkin, the cousin of Count M.S. Vorontsov. There, he built an arable farm, where he planted vines and produced wines, including Champagne.

Nicole Iznar already owned two houses in Odessa by the beginning of 1837 (according to local historian Oleg Gubar, they were located beyond the official city limits). One of the houses had two stories and was built using rammed earth materials that Iznar’s company had produced – which must have been a great advert for his business!

A strict commission inspected these buildings in 1858 and issued Nicole a certificate stating that “due to their extremely low cost and due to their strength they can be considered excellent and can be built anywhere, even in places with natural stone and timber forests, being of great use.”

How ironic then that Nicole’s grandson Nikolai Iznar, together with his wife, son and daughter, emigrated back to Paris in 1920. Vadim Isnard didn’t let his forefathers down, and also left a wonderful legacy in the scientific community. Gwendolina was clearly very modest about her husband’s talents, writing only that he graduated from the St. Petersburg Institute of Railway Engineers in 1916 and, once in emigration, was “a consultant engineer in a French company, and deals with top local architects.”

Actually, Vadim was on friendly terms with just about all of the top engineers who had been forced to leave Russia. He was a friend of the former head of Odessa and talented engineer Mikhail Braikevich, whom I portrayed earlier.

In 1920, Isnard became one of the founding fathers of the Union of Russian Certified Engineers and was its executive committee secretary for many years. He then became its chairman in 1932, after his father’s death. He was also a member of the major renovation engineering committee of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Paris.

Gwendolina also writes briefly about her husband’s other talents – painting and tennis. Indeed, Vadim Isnard’s paintings were frequently exhibited during various Russian Culture Days! As for tennis, he and some like-minded fellows founded the elite Russian Lawn Tennis Club in Paris in 1926 and he won the club’s accolade of Player of the Year on a number of occasions.

Actually, tennis was the family’s favorite sport. Head of the family Nikolai Iznar not only played very well but had been an honorary member of several pre-revolutionary clubs in Russia.
Vadim’s sister, Ludmila Isnard (1892–1983), was considered the best female tennis player in Russia prior to the revolution and was the first female Russian tennis player to take part in a competition abroad (at Monte Carlo in 1914).

Vadim Isnard lived to a ripe old age and died in Paris in 1980. He is buried at the Sainte-Genevieve-des-Bois Russian Cemetery.

Émigré Russia celebrated the victory of its countryman against Capablanca in fine style! At another gala – in the Russian Club – following the traditional toasts in his honor, Alekhine decided to cheer up his Russian fans (don’t forget that nearly ten years had passed since the Russian revolution). The world champion declared something like: “The myth that the Bolsheviks are invincible can be destroyed just like the myth of Capablanca’s invincibility was destroyed!” Whether this is what Alekhine actually said, or whether it was a product of émigré journalists’ imagination, is a matter over which historians continue to argue. However, for the Soviet chess leadership of the time it was an excellent excuse to settle accounts with the renegade celebrity. Justice Minister and Chairman of the Chess Club Nikolai Krylenko wrote in the press “The renegade Alekhine has placed himself beyond the chess movement of the USSR. After citizen Alekhine’s speech in the Russian Club, we no longer want anything to do with him – he is our enemy, and from now on we should treat him only as an enemy.”

The Moscow-based magazine Chess Sheet also published a letter by Alekhine’s elder brother, Alexei, who lived in Kharkov. That letter’s tone was fully in line with the missive of the Soviet chess chieftain: “I will never again have anything to do with Alexander Alekhine!” I think that Alexei’s disowning of his brother was forced upon him after pressure applied from Moscow.
Another event in Paris to mark the champion’s success. Alekhine and his wife are in the middle. The famous artist Marcel Duchamp is standing behind Nadezhda. The word “Indochina” can be read above the flags, but the other words are not visible. What was hidden behind this sign?

The years passed. Cracks appeared in relations between Nadezhda and Alexander Alekhine. It had nothing to do
with politics. There must have been another woman involved, as the French say.

With his French passport now in his pocket, Alekhine decided to become a Freemason. The masons’ archives show that Alekhine filled in an application to join the Astrée lodge on 21 May 1928. Having gained the recommendations of three lodge elders and having answered the questions on the form, he joined the lodge on 28 May, on the same day as Ossip Bernstein. Interestingly, answering the question as to why he wanted to join, Alekhine wrote that “spiritual loneliness” prompted him to do so. What was that about? Just some lah-di-dah phrase, or had dark clouds gathered over his marital relations?

The fact that Alekhine set off on a round-the-world trip alone supports the version that the family was in crisis. His roadshow began on 3 August 1932 and ended on 11 May the following year. Nadezhda remained in Paris, having become her husband’s authorized representative in dealings with the lodge. Two of her letters are kept in the lodge’s archives, and I reproduce them here.

The first, dated 19 September 1932, is addressed to the founder of the Astrée lodge, Mr Kandaurov:

My Dear Leonty Dmitrievich, Alexander Alekhine is currently in America, and he is asking me to remind you of the conversations you had regarding his round the world trip. Alexander will begin at the end of November, setting out from San Francisco.

He would be most grateful to you for any advice that you pass on to me personally – the exact plan for his trip is being drafted in Paris, therefore I need to have the names and addresses right here to convey them to Alexander later.

Our phone number is Vang. 48–32. I’m usually at home until 4 p.m. – could you be so kind as to call me?

Thank you in advance and please accept my deepest respect,

Nadezhda Alekhina.

The second letter is dated 24 October and addressed to “Venerable Master of the Lodge Mr. Smirnov”. A planned itinerary for Alekhine’s round the world trip is attached to it:

My Dear Georgy Yakovlevich, I would like to draw your attention once again to the fact that this itinerary is far from finalized or exact. I hope that nothing will be removed from it and that, gradually, lots more will be added. As we know from experience, Alexander Alekhine picks up a large number of invitations during his travels.

That is why I insist that you do not send your letters about Alexander Alekhine to the addresses (misunderstandings are always possible; there is always a risk that your messages will miss one another) and that you, instead, provide them to him before he leaves San Francisco, i.e. in the second half of November. Obviously, I am at your disposal to deliver your letters.

Please accept my regards and deepest respect,

N. Alekhina.

The ensuing correspondence between Kandaurov and Smirnov (the Freemasons didn’t believe in throwing letters away!) shows that Alekhine did not carry out any missions for the lodge during his cruise. “In my view, our brother is insufficiently aware of general Freemason issues. Together with the fact that he plans to visit countries where the brotherhood doesn’t congregate in such conditions as we have here (the U.S.A. and French colonies), this has prevented me from using his services,” Smirnov reported to his boss.

Alekhine’s chess cruise program included a small tournament in Pasadena, California. Here he first met the rich American lady Grace Wishar (1876–1956), who, unlike his previous wives, was a chess expert. “She is the only
person who understands me,” Alekhine said later. That said, he used to repeat: “I can’t play without my Nadine!”

After returning from his roadshow, Alekhine left Nadezhda. The marriage was officially over at the end of 1933, and Alekhine married Wishar at the end of March 1934.

Parisen Russian sharp-tongues reacted instantly to this news with an epigram (which rhymed in the original Russian):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He was a Titular Counselor,} \\
\text{She was a general’s widow.} \\
\text{He left, without saying goodbye to Nadine,} \\
\text{Finding peace in his castle.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Grace Wishar owned an ancient castle and a large estate near the French town of Dieppe on the English Channel.)

After the divorce, Nadezhda gradually declined. Friends and relatives attempted to console her, but all was in vain. Life for her had lost all meaning, and she died on 30 January 1937.

Sergei Karastelin found an obituary in the *Latest News (Poslednie novosti)* newspaper (which Pavel Milyukov edited) dated 9 February 1937 entitled “In memory of N.S. Alekhina,” written by Russian chess player Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky. This has never been republished previously:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We accompanied Nadezhda Semyonovna to her final resting place with a deep feeling of love, respect and, above all else, infinite gratitude for her participation and support in the Russian art of chess achieving its greatest glory. The world champion’s faithful companion, she helped him in his brilliant, often difficult and torturous climb to the highest peak of the chess universe, creating for him everywhere ideal conditions for his battles, bolstering his spirits and protecting him, resolving all external conflicts and difficulties even to the extent of complete self-disregard, and gaining, in so doing, unanimous respect.} \\
\text{Only those who know what big tournaments really involve, the demands they impose on chess players, the tension they cause, sometimes poisoning the life of those who surround them – only those who saw Nadezhda Semyonovna at critical moments of the chess battle can fully appreciate her huge contribution to the rise and flourishing of Alekhine’s genius. I hope that this personal feeling of witnesses and contemporaries will become everybody’s. Not just the Russian and French art of chess, but that of the entire world is infinitely in her debt.} \\
\text{Nadezhda Alekhina belongs to chess history, in which she is assured of an honorable and visible place alongside one of the greatest geniuses at the time of his most brilliant glory. The best wreath on her grave would be the belief that this glory has faded only temporarily (this is a reference to Alekhine’s defeat in his match with Euwe – S.T.) and will return even brighter than before. She herself needs nothing else, but our memory of her and love for her are assured forever.}
\end{align*}
\]

Semyon Fabritsky Junior, 1912

The uninitiated may assume that these are trite words in such circumstances. Well, have no doubt – these soulful lines are completely true! It is such a pity that they were forgotten in chess’s everyday hustle and bustle, and that the contribution of this Odessite to Alekhine’s ascent to the world champion’s throne is all but forgotten.

A memorial service was held on 14 March at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral located at 12 rue Daru, following the liturgy. The service was held to commemorate both Petr Potemkine, the founder of the Russian Chess Club (who had died in 1926) and Nadezhda Alekhina, an honorary member of the club. The Russian Chess Club paid for her funeral, as decided by its management committee.

Another Odessite who knew Alekhine well also accompanied
Nadezhda on her final journey – her brother, rear-admiral Semyon Semyonovich Fabritsky. Let’s take a look at this remarkable man!

Semyon was one year younger than his sister (he was born on 14 February 1874). “Since early childhood, when I would spend entire days on the Black Sea coast, I was fascinated by the sea and dreamed of becoming a sailor. However, my parents were much more interested in giving me a serious education, and I, instead, had to go to grammar school. It was only after I had completed my first four years that I was able to convince my parents to send me to the Navy College in St. Petersburg – and only with the help of family friends, who unexpectedly supported my wishes. After much wavering, and witnessing my stubborn and passionate desire for a seafaring career, my father finally agreed to take me to St. Petersburg to take the entrance tests,” the sailor, whose career took him from midshipman to rear-admiral, wrote in his memoirs.

Semyon became friends in the Navy College, where he began studying in 1888, with the future Admiral Alexander Kolchak. Apart from their common love of the sea, they both had an affiliation with Southern Palmyra! For those who don’t know, Kolchak’s mother, whose maiden name was Posokhova, was born into a well-known merchant’s family in Odessa. Her grandfather had been made a free citizen of the town and was a member of its local duma for many years.

One of the most memorable episodes of Semyon Fabritsky’s naval service was in 1906, when he was employed as a senior officer on the Polar Star imperial yacht. The following year, he was promoted to Aide-de-Camp of the Retinue of His Imperial Majesty. Nicholas II’s surviving diaries indicate that the emperor was of a high opinion of Fabritsky’s organizational talent and personal qualities.
During World War I, Semyon fought on the Baltic Sea, where he commanded an entire naval division. After the Tsar’s abdication, he refused to accept the Provisional Government’s policies and left service, thereby becoming a reservist. In 1918, however, he became a naval advisor in the Hetman’s army. After Skoropadsky resigned, he returned to Odessa together with War Minister Ragoza. Unlike his patron, he managed to join up with Denikin. He commanded the Don River Flotilla and eventually emigrated in 1920. He wrote an interesting and highly recommended book *Of Bygone Days, The Memoirs of an Aide-de-Camp to the Emperor Nicholas II* (Berlin, 1926). He moved to Belgium in 1935, where he was Chairman of the Naval Officers Union.

Fabritsky didn’t outlive his sister by much – he died in Brussels on 3 February 1941.

I had planned to end this chapter with my brief bio of Semyon Fabritsky, Alexander Alekhine’s brother-in-law. However, a chance find got in the way, and I had to make some late changes to my account.

It was only after this book [the Russian original!] was already typeset that I managed to dig out a fascinating article from the archives of the Odessa National Academic Library that contained a discussion of Alekhine’s first steps as world champion. To hide it from the readers would have been quite a crime!

The anonymous(!) article was published in the Odessa newspaper *Evening News (Vechernie izvestiia)* (No. 1440, 6 December 1927) and was titled *Alekhine to Return to the USSR!*

*According to information received, world chess champion A.A. Alekhine has expressed the desire to return to the USSR, having applied to restore his Soviet citizenship.*

*In respect to this news, Chairman of the Chess Club of the All-Union Council of Physical Education Comrade N.V. Krylenko made the following comments:*

“We have not received any official application from citizen Alekhine as of now. There are legal methods for doing this prescribed by law.”
“Alekhine had no grounds for complaining about the Soviet Union or about a lack of attention. If it is true that, during the New York tournament in 1924, he employed the tsarist tricolor as his emblem, then in his application he should indicate sufficient motives to provide assurance that his current request isn’t just the latest ‘chess combination’ by the world champion.

“We welcome and value all talents – including Alekhine’s talent – only to the extent that we can use them in our work to culturally develop and better the working masses. Alekhine needs to know this. If he agrees to seek out and maintain a common language with us, then he is welcome, since we do not bear grudges. If he doesn’t agree, then the USSR’s chess movement will continue without him.”

The reader should pay particular attention to the dates. Alekhine became world champion on 29 November 1927. Yet just a week later, the newspaper reported this momentous “decision” and Krylenko even had time to get his reply published in the article. Miraculous efficiency!
I wonder also when the newly crowned world champion managed to submit his application to restore his Soviet citizenship? After all, it was only just before his match with Capa ended that he obtained his long-desired French passport. Moreover, Alekhine only returned to Paris in January of the following year. The dates don’t really work, and Krylenko’s prompt reply also raises many questions.

So what was it? An attempt to test Alekhine or a more cunning plan? And if the latter, then why was a provincial newspaper the chosen outlet? Odessite publishers would have been most unlikely to print such a canard at their own risk, all the more so with commentary by the Deputy Justice Minister of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist
Republic.
CHAPTER 7

INTRIGUES AROUND THE CHESS THRONE

THE MATCH THAT NEVER HAPPENED

The story of Alekhine’s planned match with Botvinnik is well-known. Why, you make ask, recount it here? Well, for starters, there’s one angle that has not been highlighted before – two key men opposing the match, Reuben Fine and Boris Vainshtein, had Odessa roots! Our city continued to haunt Alexander Alexandrovich more than 25 years after he last visited it. Moreover, historians seem to have missed the fact that it was the Soviets who first suggested depriving Alekhine of his world champion’s privileges in respect of his title defense, offering in June 1944 to take the organization of the world chess championships upon themselves, before Fine had publicly come up with the suggestion that a regular championship tournament be organized. Then, there’s testimony with which western readers are unlikely to be familiar, that of Yuri Shaburov, about Botvinnik’s training program ahead of his planned Alekhine match, and of Mikhail Yudovich, about the 1947 FIDE congress that resolved to hold the world championship tournament.

Alekhine’s divorce and new marriage negatively impacted his chess form. No longer protected by Nadine, the world champion started to abuse alcohol. Grace not only failed to prevent this destructive behavior, but wasn’t averse to indulging herself, too. Caïssa, naturally, was unforgiving about such disrespect, and Alekhine’s chess crown temporarily passed to Holland’s Max Euwe on 15 December 1935. The challenger won the match 15.5:14.5.

Alekhine’s defeat sobered him up for a while. He decisively won the return match on 7 December 1937 (15.5:9.5), by which time Nadezhda had departed this world. Soon after that, World War II broke out, which was to impact each and every grandmaster.

War was declared during the Chess Olympiad in Argentina. Alekhine took to the radio and press to call for a boycott of the German team. The latter was kicked out of the olympiad by quite an original method – it was awarded technical 2:2 draws in the remaining three rounds. Interestingly, as the olympiad drew to a close, Capablanca once again called on Alekhine to grant him a return match. However, the champion refused to take up the challenge. His argument was that there was a war on and he planned to volunteer for active service. Actually, on the way back to France, Alekhine found the time to play and win two small tournaments.

Alekhine returned to Paris in early 1940 and joined the French army as a translator (although Hans Kmoch was to claim that Alekhine served in a medical capacity). However, France didn’t hold out long against Germany and signed its capitulation on 22 June 1940. According to the treaty, two-thirds of French territory (including the entire Atlantic coast, the north of the country and Paris) was placed under German occupation, while the remaining, southern part together with the colonies were placed under the control of the collaborationist Vichy government. Then, in November 1942, Germany took control of the whole of French territory and the Vichy government’s powers became nothing more than symbolic.

The best option for Alekhine and his wife at that point would probably have been to emigrate to America. However, they were worried that their castle by Dieppe would be ransacked and so they remained in France. Naturally, the occupiers could not fail to use such an important person as Alekhine for their propaganda purposes. All the more so, as many Third Reich “theoreticians” and “practitioners” were big chess fans.

At their request, Alekhine wrote his notorious article *Ariisches und judisches Schach (Arian and Jewish Chess)* in Pariser Zeitung in early 1941, where the theory of racial purity was transferred to the chess board. His article was reprinted in other publications and left a painful impression with any normal-thinking reader. Both the fact of collaboration with a fascist newspaper and, above all, the article’s contents, were to cause Alekhine huge problems later on. After the war ended, Alekhine, naturally, renounced the piece, assuring the chess world that his own version was heavily redacted.
The Parque Hotel in the Portuguese town of Estoril – the world champion’s final refuge

That happened later, but during the war the article served as Alekhine’s visa to tournaments and simultaneous exhibition roadshows, while providing protection for his wife.

After the war ended, Alekhine lived first in Spain and then in Portugal. Actually, he eked out a living from irregular chess income. Moreover, he began to suffer from cirrhosis of the liver as alcoholism got the better of him.

Meanwhile, chess life in liberated Europe slowly recovered, and Alekhine was invited to the first post-war tournament in London. However, the euphoria from this news quickly died – the tournament organizers suddenly cancelled their invitation. Ex-World Champion Max Euwe and a number of U.S. players had threatened to boycott the tournament if Alekhine were to participate. The reason for the boycott was Alekhine’s collaboration with the Nazis and his anti-Semitic article.

Alekhine was perfectly aware that harsher measures were likely to ensue – total isolation and withdrawal of his world champion title. In reply, he sent an open letter to the London tournament’s organizers and to the British and U.S. chess federations where he explained his actions. I don’t think that this was his main motive, however. Alekhine revealed in his letter secret negotiations for a world championship match with Mikhail Botvinnik, thereby prompting the leading light of Soviet chess to take measures in reply. A brilliant move by the world champion in a critical situation! Of course, Alekhine was grasping at straws in revealing these secret negotiations, which had, in fact, begun before the war began. What he was actually seeking was an affirmation of the legitimacy of his standing as world champion, as that would have complicated the procedure of cancelling his title.

Alekhine’s letter to the London organizers, first published in the Chess magazine, is well-known, but, for convenience, I reproduce it below:

Dear Mr. Hatton-Ward,

I have received your letter on my return from the Canaries on November 28th. Before I knew the contents of this letter it was manifestly impossible for me to undertake anything, for I had no idea what reasons had induced you to cancel the invitation. Now I can and must do it, and this not solely on account of the tournament which you are
organising – whatever purely chess interest it might have had for me – but especially because of these very reasons.

First of all you inform me that certain circles have formulated objections based on my alleged sympathies during the war. Now anybody not swayed by prejudice must realise what must have been my real sentiments towards people who took from me all that makes life worth living; people who have wrecked my home, pillaged my wife’s castle (and evidently all I possessed) and finally even stole my name!

Having devoted my life to chess I have never taken part in anything not directly connected with my profession. Unfortunately, all my life – especially after I had won the World’s Championship – people have ascribed to me a political aspect which is entirely preposterous. For nearly twenty years I have been nicknamed “White Russian” which was particularly painful to me, for this made impossible any contact with my country of origin which I have never ceased to love and admire.

Finally in 1938/9, I had hoped, over negotiations and correspondence with the U.S.S.R. champion, M. Botvinnik, to have put an end to this absurd legend, for in fact a match between him and myself in the U.S.S.R. was practically fixed. Then – came the war – and after its termination here I am, being vested with the degrading epithet “Pro-Nazi”, accused of collaboration, etc., etc.

In any event, far from bearing any ill-will towards you, I am grateful to you for having provoked this accusation – for the false position in which I have been placed during the last two years was in the long run morally intolerable.

Dr. Euwe’s protest I find far from surprising – the reverse rather would have surprised me. For, among the mass of monstrosities published by the Pariser Zeitung, insults were featured against members of the organising committee of the 1937 match; the Netherlands Federation has even addressed a protest on this subject with Mr. Post. At that time I was quite unable to do the one thing which would have clarified the situation – to declare that the articles had not been written by me.

Dr. Euwe was so convinced of my “influence” with the Nazis the he wrote me two letters in which he asked me to take steps in order to ease the fate of poor Mr. Landau and of my friend Dr. Oskam. The fact is that, in Germany and in occupied territory, we were under constant supervision and the threat of the concentration camp on the part of the Gestapo. Dr. Euwe’s reaction on my being invited is therefore quite natural; but, in common with so many, he is wholly mistaken.

The principal reason which has induced you to dispense with my participation is the “ultimatum” as you call it, of the U.S.A. Chess Federation. This is a serious matter, for these gentlemen have evidently taken their decision, giving reasons which in their opinion justified this step. I cannot at the moment know these reasons accurately, but I am entitled to suppose that it is a question of an accusation of collaborating with the Nazis. The term collaborator is generally used against those who, officially or otherwise, have acted according to the views of the Vichy Government. But I have never had anything to do with this Government nor with their representatives. I have played chess in Germany and occupied countries because this was our only means of livelihood, but also the price I paid for my wife’s liberty. Reviewing in my mind the situation in which I found myself four years ago, I can only state that today I should have acted in the same way. In normal times my wife has certainly the means and necessary experience to look after herself, but not in time of war and in the hands of the Nazis. I repeat, if the allegation of “collaboration” rests on my forced sojourn in Germany, I have nothing to add – my conscience is undisturbed.

It is another matter if facts are alleged against me which are non-existent, notably the articles which appeared in the Pariser Zeitung. Here I must object strongly. During three years, until the liberation of Paris, I had to keep silent. But at the first opportunity I have, in interviews, I tried to place the facts in their true perspective. In these articles, which appeared in 1941 during my stay in Portugal, and which became known in Germany as reproduced in Deutsche Schachzeitung, there is nothing that was written by me.

The matter which I had provided related to the necessary reconstruction of the International Chess Federation and to a critical appreciation, written long before 1939, of the theories of Steinitz and Lasker.

I was astonished, on receipt of letters from Messrs Helms and Sturgis at the reaction which these purely technical articles had produced in America and replied in this sense to Mr Helms.

It is only when I obtained knowledge of the perfectly stupid balderdash which emanated from a mind imbued with Nazi ideas, that I understood what was on foot. At that time I was a prisoner of the Nazis and our only chance was to
keep silent before the whole world. These years have destroyed my health and my nerves, and I am astonished that I can still play good chess.

My devotion to my art, the esteem which I have always shown for the talent of my colleagues, in short my whole pre-war professional life should have led people to think that the vapourings of the Pariser Zeitung were a fake. I particularly regret not to be able to come to London in order to re-affirm this fact in person.

Please excuse the length of this letter (of which I am sending copies to the British and U.S.A. Federations).

I remain, Yours sincerely,

Signed A. Alekhine

Madrid, December 6th, 1945.

As is well known, Alekhine’s arguments were rejected by the tournament organizers and both chess federations. As the London tournament ended, moreover, a committee was established, chaired by Euwe, to investigate Alekhine’s collaboration with the Nazis. The agenda also included depriving him of the world champion’s title and fully isolating him from the chess world: no tournament invitations, no simul, and no printing of his articles.

Of course, it was also in the interest of those who supported the boycott to carry it out. Euwe as the previous champion would have automatically been declared world champion once again. Americans Samuel Reshevsky and Reuben Fine would have been his most likely challengers. This version is backed up by the fact that, following Alekhine’s death, the next FIDE congress voted on a proposal to hold a world championship match between Euwe and Reshevsky (Fine had wound down his chess after the war and soon gave the game up completely).

Mikhail Yudovich, a member of the Soviet delegation, recalled the tense atmosphere at that FIDE congress in his book Vyacheslav Ragozin (Moscow, 1984):
I will never forget our delegation’s first outing to the International Federation’s congress held in The Hague, the Dutch capital, in 1947. Our delegation consisted of the deputy chairman of the All-Union Physical Education and Sports Committee D.V. Postnikov, V.V. Ragozin, and me. We flew on a Soviet aircraft to Berlin. Everything had been fine up to then, but after that the adventures began. Transport links in Europe were disrupted in the first post-war years. While waiting for the train to The Hague, we had to hang around in Berlin’s Eastern sector. Time went by, and it was becoming obvious that we were going to be late for the start of the congress. Which was a problem, because the key matter of the world championship contest was going to be discussed in the first days, as Alekhine had died while still champion in 1946 and the champion’s throne was hence vacant.

We were bringing strongly-argued proposals from the All-Union Chess Club to organize a tournament match for the world’s top grandmasters, and we were fully aware that the Americans would try to reach an agreement to organize a match between Reshevsky and Euwe, while the Dutch simply wanted to crown Euwe champion. Obviously, we were nervous; it would have been very disappointing to turn up late. Yet Ragozin maintained his conviction that our mission would turn out successful. We eventually got there late at night, and the congress was due to wrap up the following day. The matter of the world championship had already been discussed and delegates were leaning towards the idea of declaring Euwe world champion. A vote was to take place at the final session that would formalize this decision. Ragozin took the mic at the morning meeting. This was the first speech by a Soviet delegate at a FIDE congress. At first, they listened to him with much skepticism, but then with growing attention. The attempts by the Americans and Dutch to change the vector of discussion proved to be in vain. A historical decision was taken for chess – a match tournament of the world’s strongest GMs was to be held in Moscow and The Hague.

Many years later, at the 1972 Skopje Chess Olympiad, Euwe, after learning that I was working on an article about the world championship, said to me: “Don’t forget to point out that I was world champion twice – from 1935 to 1937 and for one day in 1947, until the Soviet delegation turned up at the FIDE congress.” Euwe was smiling and good-natured as he said this, but I remember back then in The Hague he had been angry and disappointed.

Ragozin’s speech at the closing session was only the tip of the iceberg. Much, if not everything, had been already decided in private conversations involving Dmitry Postnikov, the head of the Soviet delegation. As Yuri Averbakh aptly pointed out later, “this man was highly experienced, authoritative, from the tribe of Komsomol leaders that produced [former Soviet leader Yuri] Andropov, [former politburo member Alexander] Shelepin, [former politburo member Kirill] Mazurov, and other famous political leaders.”

Arguments about the extent to which Alekhine wrote his anti-Semitic article have not stopped. The arguments may be settled one day if the draft versions of the article are ever made available, written in Alekhine’s handwriting. French historian Jacques le Monnier claimed that he saw them in 1958, as Grace, before her death, had handed them to a friendly lawyer for safekeeping. Chief editor of The British Chess Magazine and Alekhine researcher Brian Reilly also confirmed their existence.

Under French law, these drafts may not be published before they are reclassified as public property, and once all of the family descendants agree. The former happened in 2017 after the waiting period expired. However, as of the publication date of the English translation of the work you are reading, they remained unavailable. Alekhine’s son had no children but Grace has living descendants.

The news from London that the chess world wanted to cut Alekhine off deepened his depression. His state of mind didn’t benefit from moving to Portugal shortly thereafter. Alekhine decided to live in Estoril, which he had already visited in January 1940.

Witnessing the state of their idol, Portuguese chess fans wrote to his wife in France: “Ever since your husband moved here, life has been unbearable for him. He is ill and doesn’t have the funds to support himself. He lives thanks to the charity of the guest-house’s management.” However, Grace never replied. There was, though, another version, that, following a long silence, she sent Alekhine a letter informing him that she intended to leave him.

But then, suddenly, the long-awaited letter from Moscow: “I regret that the war prevented our match from happening in 1939. I once again challenge you to a world championship match. If you agree, I await your reply, in which I ask you to indicate your opinion about the time and place of the event. 4 February 1946. Mikhail
I can just imagine the excitement with which Alekhine’s heart beat upon reading this. His isolation was broken and his plan had worked! Naturally, he agreed to play a match with Botvinnik. And he selected London as the venue.

What happened next is well known – the FIDE executive committee adopted a resolution on 23 March 1946 to organize a match between Alekhine and Botvinnik, but Alekhine was found dead the next morning in his hotel room.

We will return shortly to Alekhine’s mysterious demise, but let’s first take a look at the intrigues surrounding the champion’s throne that ended in tragedy. All the more so, as two Odessites were closely involved.

The desire to deprive Alekhine of his privileges as world champion first arose before 1946. Reuben Fine, an American whose mother came from Odessa(!), wrote an article in *Chess Review* in October 1944 where he stated that Alekhine could be considered just the nominal world champion from 1939. He proposed holding a tournament every two years among the six to ten strongest players in the world, with each player playing each other four times in the event of six participants, or twice in the event of eight to ten players. The winner would be declared champion. Fine proposed starting the process by holding a double round-robin tournament in New York once the war ended, with the participation of Alekhine, Botvinnik, Euwe, Flohr, Keres, Reshevsky, Smyslov and, obviously, Fine himself. Should Alekhine refuse, Fine argued, the tournament should go ahead without him, and he should be replaced by another player selected by an international committee.

The chess writer Jacques Hannak revealed that Fine had been the first player to come up with this idea, which he first explained to friends before writing it in *Chess Review*. Hannak suggested that Fine expected several hundred chess fans in the U.S. to come together and finance the tournament, and he reported that Fine also sent Botvinnik a message about it and began contacts with the Soviet authorities to discuss the idea.

Well, it’s possible that Fine was the first person to suggest the idea of changing the rules to decide the world champion among friends, but he wasn’t the first to come up with it publicly. The thirteenth Soviet championship ended in Moscow on 17 June 1944, with Botvinnik the victor. Then, on the 19th to 20th of the month, the All-Union Chess and Checkers Conference was held and included the following item in its concluding resolution:

> The Conference turns with friendly greetings to chess players of Great Britain and the United States of America and other freedom-loving countries and hereby declares its desire that the All-Union Chess and Checkers Conference take up the initiative to draft a statute for holding the world championship.

How should one interpret the desire of the Soviet Chess Club, which at the time was not yet a FIDE member, to draft new rules for determining the world champion? Well, the answer is surely that they were tired of being dictated to by Alekhine.

Let’s now turn to another Odessite who was a key figure in the “Alekhine boycott”, Boris Vainshtein, head of the All-Union Chess and Checkers Conference held and included the following item in its concluding resolution:

*Boris Samoilovich Vainshtein* (1907–1993)

Vainshtein was born in Odessa in 1907 in the family of a well-known sugar refinery owner. His father was the son of a...
businessman of the first guild, founder of *Emmanuel Vainshtein and Sons Trading House*. Its main business at the time was flour production. Interestingly, their mill still exists today, and is located in the Peresyp District of Odessa.

Another interesting detail is that Boris’s uncle, Grigory Vainshtein, donated several of the trading house’s buildings to the city in 1902, where he opened a millers’ school. This school later served as the basis for the famous Odessa Academy of Food Technologies that flourished in Soviet times. His uncle was also the Chairman of the Odessa Stock Exchange, a member of the Russian State Council, headed the Odessa Society for Spreading the Education of Jews, and ran the chemical department of the Russian Technical Society.

Following the revolution, Grigory Vainshtein emigrated to Paris, where he ran businesses belonging to the Rothschild family. He was a member of the Union of Russian Certified Engineers and knew Alekhine’s son-in-law Vadim Isnard well.

However, not all the Vainshteins emigrated to Paris. In 1919, to escape the contributions and more serious dangers, Boris’s father Samoil uprooted his family and moved to Tashkent.

In his new environment, the boy graduated from the Maths and Mechanics Faculty of Turkestan State University. He became a serious chess player and got to know the well-known master Fedor Duz-Khotmirsky in Tashkent. He became a key chess organizer in Uzbekistan. A first category player, he was chairman of the Central Asian Chess Club in 1928–1929.

Vainshtein worked in Central Asian Gosplan (the state economic planning committee), and was then appointed head of the planning department building the Baikal-Amur railway line. After military service, the fast-learner was noticed by the authorities and summoned to Moscow. By the age of 32, Vainshtein was the head of the planning department at the NKVD’s Main Industrial Construction Office. It was responsible for the construction of highways, oil refineries and other infrastructure. During the hardest years of World War II, 1942–1943, he was deputy head and then acting head of the Main Defense Construction Office of the Soviet Defense Ministry.

Boris Vainshtein was, for many years, the friend and second (more precisely, the guardian angel) of the leading Soviet grandmaster David Bronstein. Finding himself in Stalingrad (now Volgograd) during World War II, Vainshtein came across this half-starving, poorly-dressed youth breathing chess. Using his position of authority, Vainshtein got Bronstein transferred to Moscow, where David Ionovich lived for a long time in his protector’s apartment.

Vainshtein authored a number of interesting chess books. As far back as the 1930s, a number of chess articles were published in magazines by a certain “Ferzberi” (literally “queen-take” in Russian), written in lively and figurative language. Only a few people knew that Boris Vainshtein hid behind this pseudonym!

The Odessite devoted much time to philosophizing about chess and disliked its increasingly “sporting” tendency, where creativity at the board was replaced with rote-learning of variations. “There is no doubt that in the 21st century, or maybe even earlier, we will see the cult of beauty in chess undergo a revival. With each passing year, it will acquire human, kind traits,” he wrote in one of his works towards the end of his life. Vainshtein died in Moscow on 18 December 1993.

The question of whether the match with Alekhine was to take place has been analyzed in detail by Sergei...
Voronkov, and several of the above facts first appeared in his articles. Voronkov is the only person to have interviewed Vainshtein on a “chess” topic, and Vainshtein discussed the behind-the-scenes battles over this issue in detail. Here is an excerpt from Voronkov’s research:

In December 1943, head of the All-Union Chess Club Boris Vainshtein invited Botvinnik to lunch. The latter “put up his guard, guessing that the discussion would be about a match with Alekhine.” After all, what was the sense in discussing a match at the height of war? Bear in mind, too, what Botvinnik wrote in his book Achieving the Aim (1978):

“Lunch was excellent for those times: homemade cutlets and wine. I ate the cutlets but turned down the wine. Then it all began... Alekhine is a political enemy, you mustn’t play him, he had to be deprived of the champion’s title, the Soviet champion has to carry out his civic duty and be the first to demand that Alekhine be excluded from chess life. It’s hardly necessary to list all those demagogic arguments! Vainshtein spoke and Zubarev (head of the Sports Committee’s chess department – Voronkov) would just say ‘yes’ in agreement. Calmly, crisply and forcefully, I explain my point of view and disagree. Obviously, there was no way I could play a match with Alekhine with this chairman in charge.”

Now let’s hear Vainshtein’s story. He was silent about the issue almost his entire life, and it was only in summer 1993, half a year before his death, that he decided to voice his opinion (Chess Messenger No. 8–9, 1993). This is Boris Vainshtein’s reply to my question: “Could Botvinnik really have thought in 1943 that he could play a match with Alekhine when he knew that Alekhine was playing in German tournaments?”

“Botvinnik had been thinking about a match with Alekhine since 1936. Then, in 1943, when a turning point was reached in the war, he returned to this matter. He came to see me (not for the first time and not for the last time, by the way), and asked about a match. Mikhail Moiseevich writes that it was a luxurious meal but that he turned down wine. Yes, he didn’t drink the wine, but he did eat lunch in my home. And somebody with a different upbringing and different moral compass would have been quite unlikely to thus denigrate a man in whose home he ate lunch.

“Yes, he did ask about the match during our meal, and I replied that such a match was impossible, that Alekhine was a war criminal – and his crime was committed not against the Soviet Union but against France. He was an officer of the French army and, after France’s surrender, deserted to the enemy camp. He became a cultural advisor to Nazi General Hans Frank, one of Hitler’s bloodiest murderers. Botvinnik said that none of that mattered.”

Realizing “there was no way I could play a match with Alekhine with this chairman in charge,” Botvinnik followed a different, well-trodden path – he set about trying to get Vainshtein replaced. “My position,” he asserted, “gradually gained support. Vainshtein didn’t command the respect of the majority of All-Union Chess Club members. In any case, I went to the Party Central Committee. The club eventually held the meeting, with Vainshtein’s dismissal on the agenda. He fought desperately to defend himself. Vasily Smyslov then took the floor: ‘Former Chairman of the Club, Comrade Vainshtein...’ he began. Vainshtein didn’t let him finish – he just flung up his hands and capitulated right there and then!”

That sounds like quite a culmination. However, when Averbakh asked Smyslov about it many years later, Smyslov answered, “Actually, I made a mistake. I was under the impression that Vainshtein had already resigned.”

Naturally, interviewing Boris Samoilovich, I couldn’t not ask him about that meeting – and I was once again amazed at his phenomenal memory! That despite his being well over eighty years old:

“Later he [Botvinnik] again raised the question of a match. I was still working at the NKVD and asked Beria’s chief of staff, Lieutenant General Mamulov, about it, while adding that there was some doubt as to whether Botvinnik would win. Mamulov replied: ‘Whether he can win is irrelevant. There is no way the match can take place. Alekhine is a war criminal, and if he attempts to enter the USSR he will be arrested at the border and handed over to the French authorities. That is, if the French don’t extradite him from Spain first.’

“By that time, General Franco had begun to turn over war criminals, and Alekhine knew he had to leave for Portugal. Antonio Salazar didn’t have a policy of turning over war criminals, and the allies turned a blind eye to the matter. However, after Alekhine claimed that he had had nothing to do with either the fascist regime or the anti-Semitic articles published in Pariser Zeitung in 1941 (Vainshtein told me that these articles became known to the Soviets at the very beginning of the war: ‘Admittedly, they were not available to us in full. But it was enough to read
what had been published in the English magazine Chess’ – Voronkov), he was asked to come to France and face a French court. According to my information, Alekhine...was to be charged with treason. I don’t think that he would have actually been executed, but he could well have been sentenced to death – like Marshal Pétain.

“Alekhine naively assumed that Botvinnik would get Lord Derbyshire, then the President of the British Chess Federation, to agree. However, in reality, the matter was being considered at a completely different level.

“I wrote about this publicly in 1944. In particular, I wrote that by his actions during the war Alekhine had placed himself beyond the ranks of cultured humanity. When Botvinnik again raised the matter of a match at a Chess Club meeting, [the same meeting where Smyslov thought Vainshtein had resigned – S.T.] right at the end of the war, I asked him at point blank: ‘Mr Botvinnik, I’m not a Party member, but you are a Communist, and we are both of Jewish extraction. I cannot understand how you can shake a hand that is up to its elbow in the blood of Communists and Jews.’ To which he calmly replied that if his match with Alekhine didn’t take place then Euwe would simply declare himself world champion and would then lose a match to Reshevsky, as a result of which the world championship crown would slip from our grasp and wind up in America.”

“His views were quite logical.”

“Yes, but there was no way the match could take place! Evidently, Botvinnik simply didn’t grasp this and believed that Molotov could insist on a match. So actually I wasn’t the malign influence that Botvinnik seems to think. I was just better informed. And that’s why I published my suggestion, even before the war ended, to organize a match tournament with the world’s top players as soon as the war ended. I had in mind those who played at the AVRO tournament [in Holland in 1938] (obviously excluding Alekhine) plus Smyslov. And then either the winner would immediately be declared world champion (thereby turning that tournament into a world championship), or else organizing a match between the top two players, as the world championship was traditionally settled by a match.

“When the question of a match was put to a vote, I stated that I would simultaneously raise the matter of my own resignation – if the Chess Club Bureau voted for the match, then I would cease to act as its Chairman. They voted 5:4 against a match. I, of course, abstained, both as the Chairman and as I had intertwined the issue of my resignation with the vote. It was an open vote and I remember very well Kotov and Botvinnik’s future coach Ragozin voting against Botvinnik! But then, one of those present (I think it was Abramov) turned to Kotov and said: ‘Sasha, don’t you know there was a politburo meeting, and we decided that the match should take place.’ Kotov muttered: ‘I didn’t know... Let’s hold a re-vote.’ We voted again, and this time the Party members voted the ‘correct’ way so the resolution was passed – but, Vyacheslav Ragozin, I want to highlight this, he again voted against the match!”

“It sounds like the decision to play against Alekhine was taken at the highest level. Botvinnik would have been unlikely to act with such insistence if he hadn’t already made sure of strong support.”

“Yes, but there never was any such decision. Botvinnik most probably simply said to Molotov that the match was politically important, as otherwise the champion’s title would escape us, and Molotov agreed. Nothing else was needed. It wasn’t really a big deal! Stalin didn’t get involved in that sort of issue, Beria neither. And Molotov had sufficient authority to take the decision himself.”

As a reminder, this interview was published while Botvinnik was still alive, and Mikhail Moiseevich never proffered any refutations, at the very least in print.

And here’s one more witness testimony. Having heard from Boris Samoilovich that Bronstein was also at that meeting (without voting rights) I also “interrogated” David Ionovich when the chance arose. It turned out that that day had also left an imprint in his memory:

“It was July 1945, after the USSR championship. In my view, those present didn’t have a good grasp of the matter at hand. They criticized Vainshtein for working poorly during the war, that the chess movement was moribund. Then they demanded that the 64 magazine be urgently revived. Basically, everybody was unhappy... I was a bit surprised – after all, the All-Union Society of Cultural Exchange Abroad published a chess magazine in English and tournaments were organized, including the Moscow championship.

“Then, Botvinnik raised the matter of the match. I vividly remember Boris Samoilovich standing up – tall, handsome, young, in military uniform – and declaring: ‘I have to tell you that we haven’t earned any stripes today’ (then he pointed to his colonel’s epaulets), ‘we haven’t received any awards’ (and he pointed to the service ribbons
on his chest). That’s how he began and everybody started listening in silence. ‘As far as your magazine 64 is concerned, let me inform you that we haven’t yet restored publication of heavy industry newspapers and magazines.’ (I remember those words exactly, since I was shocked to learn that there was a shortage of paper in the country.) ‘And as far as a match with Alekhine is concerned, I can’t understand how you would shake a hand that is up to its elbow in the blood of Auschwitz and Majdanek.’

“I didn’t support Vainshtein’s views, I didn’t like him saying that about Alekhine. I didn’t even want to write about it in my book, but, seeing as you asked... You see, he was very angry with Botvinnik, who had organized all this pressure. After all, Vainshtein himself had arranged for Botvinnik to move to Moscow and had ensured him residency rights: he brought him in an official car to the central police station, took his passport, went to see the head and brought the passport back with a Moscow permanent residency stamp. As to what Botvinnik described from that meeting, well, it was something out of the history of theater (Chess in Russia (Shakhmaty v Rossii) No. 4, 1996).”

Let’s now look at the beef of Voronkov’s research. First fact – NKVD colonel and then head of chess in the USSR Boris Vainshtein was categorically opposed to a match between Botvinnik and Alekhine. His argument was that Alekhine was a war criminal and should face a French court. Then it would be up to a judge to decide either to grant Alekhine his freedom (and, therefore, to allow him to play the match), or to jail him. This position was also adopted by the “London Committee” organizing a boycott of Alekhine – first the court case, then everything else. Incidentally, the chairman of that committee, Max Euwe, also lived on occupied territory during the war years and had substantial interaction with the occupiers. After the war, he faced the committee and demonstrated his innocence.

However, Botvinnik had his own point of view in this respect, believing that his match with Alekhine was above international laws and rules. And the shaking of hands at the beginning of each game could be skipped: “I won’t proffer my hand to somebody like Alekhine!” Botvinnik assured another contender for the chess throne, Paul Keres, when the latter moved to Moscow after the war.

As we know, Botvinnik met Molotov at the latter’s office and obtained “high-level” permission to play the match. The powerful argument worked – simply depriving Alekhine of the title would mean surrendering it to Max Euwe, who would then lose a match to Reshevsky and the championship would slip off to the U.S.A., thereby damaging Soviet prestige and, as this couldn’t be allowed to happen, they needed to take pre-emptive action.

However, could it really have been the case that an experienced politician like Molotov failed to realize that if the Alekhine vs Botvinnik match took place, with the Soviet’s opponent suspected of war crimes and without having faced the courts, this would have hurt the country’s prestige even more? The Soviet Union consistently supported the view in all international institutions that suspected war criminals should be tried in open proceedings. Indeed, the USSR had frequently caught its allies shielding from justice scientists and cultural figures who had worked for the Nazis during the war. Why then did Molotov accede to the request to allow such a problematic match? And another question – why did FIDE go against the opinion of the chess majority and legitimize the match? At that time, FIDE was led by the Dutch chess player and trained lawyer Alexander Rueb, and I’m sure that he was acutely aware of the legal risks to such a match.

Of course, one can argue that not everything at FIDE depended on its president. The match organizer – the influential President of the BCF Lord Derbyshire – also wanted to become FIDE President and attempted to gain the support of the Soviet Union, which was set to join FIDE (it happened in 1947). And it’s true that FIDE depended a lot at that time on the whims of the chess king and didn’t hold the rights to the world championship. Indeed, many questions can be raised and arguments made.

Now it is difficult to get to the bottom of the intrigues, and, especially, find their documentary proof, surrounding the match with Alekhine, whose chess skills and health were clearly declining by this time. In any case, to grant permission for a match and to organize it are quite different things. One thing is for sure – Alekhine’s baggage created a lot of obstacles, and only his death removed them.

Not holding the match would have been contrary to the interests of its participants. Alekhine would have regained legitimacy as the world champion, allowing him to earn money and take advantage of the end of the boycott.
Botvinnik, meanwhile, would have gained a great chance to become world champion without the need for the group tournament.

Shaburov found documents in the Russian State Archive from the Physical Education and Sport Committee that shed light on Botvinnik’s preparations for the match. They included a document entitled *Draft Preparation Plan for M.M. Botvinnik in his Match with Alekhine*:

Two alternative start dates for the match were incorporated in the document – from 12 August 1946 and from 3 February 1947. The first option was considered to be extremely unfavorable, as they believed Botvinnik would have had totally insufficient time to prepare.

Both versions suggested holding a closed match with Keres (i.e. keeping the moves secret) over 20 games. The latter, also a potential candidate and with greater rights to a match, would have been unlikely to acquiesce without pressure from the authorities. They also included analytical work and sports training with Ragozin, Botvinnik’s long-term coach, according to a specially-designed program.

The second version incorporated a suggestion to bring another five specialists into Botvinnik’s team [and they are then listed – S.T.].

This way, Botvinnik carried out his idea that he had come up with during the war years to create an unofficial committee to prepare for the match with Alekhine. He planned to involve an entire team of specialists, as Euwe had done in 1935. This was obviously far from the one-on-one knights’ duel that Alekhine expected.

Further, Botvinnik demanded that optimal conditions be created for him during his preparation – a six-month break from his job, monthly financial support, to be put up together with his team and his family in the Pine (Sosna) guest house and in a sanatorium, official cars and an increased food ration. There was also a suggestion to provide him and Ragozin with new apartments, to assign him membership of the Kremlin clinic [which was reserved for the country’s VIPs – S.T.], and to provide him with durable goods and all the equipment required for a trip to England(!).

The draft plan was written in such detail, and so pedantically, that there can be no doubt that Botvinnik was the author. He prepared for the match very thoroughly and wanted to gain the maximum possible support not only from chess players but also from the government.

However, all these plans were thrown out the window in March 1946. Botvinnik wrote in his book *Achieving the Aim*: “I can’t remember whether we had already sent our reply about the match’s timing to England. Friends came to visit on Sunday 24 March 1946. We are sitting there talking and drinking tea. Then a phone call, a familiar voice. ‘This is Podtserob, [Botvinnik’s friend and at the time a senior aide to the Soviet Foreign Minister – S.T.] Terrible news. Alekhine died three hours ago.’”

Alekhine was found dead on 24 March at 11 a.m. by a Parque Hotel waiter who had brought breakfast to his room. The world champion was sitting in an armchair dressed in his coat and with his head tilted to the left.

**ALEKHINE’S MYSTERIOUS DEATH AND LENGTHY BURIAL**

Actually, as is well known, the Portuguese chess master Francisco Lupi, a close friend of Alekhine in his final years, provided a different version of his death in his article *The Broken King* (published in *Chess World*, 1946):

“All I know is that on Sunday morning about 10.30 I was awakened and asked to hurry to Estoril, because something had happened to ‘old Dr Alex’. I entered his room together with the Portuguese authorities. There he was, sitting in his chair, in so calm an attitude that one would have thought that he was asleep. There was only a little foam at the corner of his mouth.”
Yet why, I hear you ask, are we retracing these events too? Hasn’t everything about Alekhine’s death been analyzed, as it were, to death? Surely, between them, Edward Winter, Kevin Spraggett and others have thoroughly reviewed all the available information? Or does the author have a new conspiracy theory? In fact, there is quite an interesting Odessa trail that hasn’t been considered here either, concerning both the champion’s death and his subsequent burial. One of the versions of Alekhine’s death – perhaps a plausible one – is that Alekhine was killed by Soviet agents. In this case, the “Colonel Mustard, in the ballroom, with the spanner” may well have been a former Odessite – head of the NKVD’s Fourth Department Pavel Sudoplatov. Here I highlight an archive, currently closed, that could shed light on the involvement of agents under Sudoplatov’s command. Later, when Alekhine was finally buried in France, in 1956, his headstone was built by the chess player and sculptor Abraham Baratz, who had spent his childhood in…you guessed it…Odessa. And who filmed Alekhine’s burial and unveiling of his headstone? None other than the famous violinist and chess fan David Oistrakh, born and bred in Odessa. And we ask why that film is still unavailable more than sixty years later. So let us return to Mr. Lupi’s testimony.

Lupi claimed that four photos of the dead Alekhine were taken, from different angles. So far, only two photos have been published, one of which is reprinted here.

The autopsy was carried out at the Department of Forensic Medicine of the Medical School of the University of Lisbon. His death certificate was kept at the morgue in Campo Santana. It was written two days after his official date of death.
Alexander Alekhine, male, aged 53, a lawyer by training and a professional chess player, born in Moscow, Russia, a naturalized French citizen, residing in France at 11-bis Rue Schoeller, Paris, legitimate son of Alexander and Agnessa Prokhorov, died at 11 o’clock on 24 March 1946 at the Parque Hotel in Estoril by asphyxia due to obstruction of the upper air passages from a piece of meat. The deceased was married to Grace Alekhina. It is unknown whether he left any descendants or lawful heirs, whether he left any property or will, therefore the body will be buried in the First Cemetery of Lisbon.

Written by Asdrúbal d’Aguiar, married, doctor, resident at Amadora.

This certificate was produced by this office at 3 p.m., read, discussed and notarized by me, notary Maria Teresa da Costa Monteiro. Expenses – 3 escudos.

Institute of Forensic Medicine of Lisbon and Department of Civic Registrations. 27 March 1946.

Prior to the autopsy, the investigators were working on the theory that he had died from heart failure, and the photograph does not contradict this version. However, the autopsy concluded that death ensued from a piece of meat stuck in his throat. Yet if a person starts to choke they would instinctively try to remove the obstacle, rush to the window, move the objects in front of him (dishes as can be seen in the photo). This is clearly at odds with the picture of a “sleeping Alekhine.” All the more so, as his face contradicts the autopsy’s conclusion: death from asphyxiation would contort the face, on which blotches would appear, and blood vessels would burst. Even the most junior pathologist, looking at the photo, would assert that Alekhine’s death could not have come from choking.

Naturally, there was a suspicion that the death scene on the photo was a hasty fake. One could assume that the already dead Alekhine was hoisted into the chair (which seems to be confirmed by the resulting folds of his coat),
then the meat was shoved down his throat, his lips were smeared with froth and various objects were set out in front of him for maximum effect: the chess board, dishes, and a book.

And what about the book? The inquest report refers to a novel entitled *Vers l’Exil* by the English Catholic writer Margaret Sothern (1502–1568). It was open at a page with the line, “This is the destiny of those who live in exile.” A hint at Alekhine’s demise?

The investigation was carried out at lightning speed, and it was fairly obvious that the Portuguese authorities wanted to put the matter to rest as quickly as possible. Much later, some clues appeared that could shed some light on his death. For example, an account by a man who had lived for some time as a child in Estoril. He was a chess fan and his father paid Alekhine for his lessons. Then, one evening, the father and child were summoned to identify a body found near the hotel (the deceased had a notebook in his pocket containing their address and phone number). They identified the body as Alekhine.

It was also printed somewhere that a waiter from a restaurant in Estoril that Alekhine sometimes frequented had died. Before his death, this waiter admitted that he poured a light-colored powder into Alekhine’s food at the end of March 1946 for a large sum of money. Two foreigners provided him with the poison and the money.

It would have been possible to reopen the investigation, but nobody wanted to. That is why the main question – whose country’s secret services got rid of Alekhine? – remains unresolved. Actually, there aren’t too many alternatives.

The least likely version is that the French got him. The French Consultative Assembly passed two laws, on 24 August and 26 September 1944, detailing punishments for collaborators. In the course of the following year, several thousand death sentences were passed, with an unclear number carried out, and many more people were jailed. Many French ladies were publicly shamed for so-called “horizontal collaboration.” Some people were shown clemency by Charles de Gaulle.

However, by 1946, the thirst for revenge had been satiated and the death penalty was only used rarely. Indeed, Alekhine’s crimes hardly warranted the death penalty, and there were no grounds to send a group of agents to liquidate him. All the more so, as Alekhine was a naturalized Frenchman and the courts were more tolerant towards them than to naturally-born French citizens.

The most popular version of Alekhine’s death was that he died at the hands of the NKVD, who were under the command of the “founder of the Soviet special forces” (the “spetsnaz”) General Pavel Sudoplatov. “For many years I led the reconnaissance and sabotage service in Soviet security organs, from the end of the 1930s until the beginning of the 1950s, including during the Great Patriotic War,” he wrote in his memoirs.

By a twist of fate, Sudoplatov’s first experiences of sabotage operations were in Odessa, in 1919, to where the winds of civil war had blown this 12-year-old youth. Pavel remained in the city after the Reds abandoned it, living on the streets and earning money at the port and the market, and took advantage of opportunities to cause harm to Denikin’s forces.

The NKVD’s Fourth Department, which Sudoplatov headed, controlled toxicological and bacteriological laboratories. The purposes for which they developed poisonous powders and other unpleasant substances are fairly obvious.

Alekhine’s son, Alexander Junior, considered this version, liquidation by the NKVD, as the most likely. And it does indeed appear to be the most convincing.

Look at it this way – the world learned of the secret negotiations between Alekhine and Botvinnik that began at the end of the 1930s from the world champion’s letter to the London tournament organizers. Botvinnik, having made sure of Molotov’s support, began an energetic campaign to prepare for the match. The argument that Alekhine had soiled his reputation by collaborating with the Nazis and should first be tried was irrelevant for Botvinnik. Botvinnik even managed to remove the influential NKVD colonel Boris Vainshtein from his path to the world title. However, once the prospects for a match became real, the NKVD initiated the champion’s death. Once the champion was dead, Botvinnik’s status significantly increased – he was now a genuine candidate and could no longer be ignored. Consequently, the match planned by the Americans and Dutch between Reshevsky and Euwe no longer appeared in the eyes of the chess world as the clear-cut correct move in the new situation.
I wonder whether the NKVD asked permission from the country’s leadership to liquidate Alekhine, or whether it was the initiative of the sabotage department? Logically, given the importance of the deceased and the huge commotion that would be caused should the mission fail, the NKVD would have been quite unlikely to stick its neck out like that.

Nevertheless, this is all just speculation. Documents of the NKVD’s Fourth Department, or more precisely, Sudoplatov’s “Portuguese Diaries”, could provide answers to many of these questions. However, these archives are inaccessible to mere mortals. They are subject to a decree by President Boris Yeltsin dated 24 January 1998 “On the List of Information Classified as State Secrets.” Maybe one day the Russian leadership will change its mind?

Nor should we reject entirely the version of the involvement of western agents in Alekhine’s death. The international situation was highly complicated and explosive after World War II. The Soviet Union’s interests and those of its western allies were diametrically opposite and this impacted their relations. Stalin constantly highlighted in his speeches that the “main defeater of fascism” had more rights in post-war Europe and Asia. Indeed, he actively expanded communist influence in Europe.

At the same time, such an assassination would obviously have been like a red flag to an angry bull for British wartime Prime Minister and fierce anti-communist Winston Churchill. If, in pre-war Europe, Britain played a leading role in political games, it now had much more modest influence. Churchill’s anti-Soviet line was supported by the U.S. government and its new President, Harry Truman. The U.S.’s interests naturally extended far beyond the country’s official borders.

Churchill lost the British general election in July 1945 but became leader of the opposition. Believing that the U.S., at the time the sole nuclear power, was crucial in challenging Stalin, he headed across the Atlantic. He visited Fulton together with President Truman where he delivered his famous speech that signaled the start of the Cold War in March 1946. Global political tension was already intense and General Eisenhower’s office had prepared Plan Totality in August 1945 – the U.S.A.’s first plan for a war with the USSR, and one involving the United States employing nuclear weapons (the UK had begun to develop a plan for war against the Soviets even earlier, in spring 1945, at Churchill’s initiative).

In this environment, holding the Botvinnik-Alekhine match in London seemed incongruous with the Americans’ aim to keep the Soviets away from Europe. Moreover, the match would have helped to bring the USSR and UK closer together. The new Labour government in London was at that time less confrontational vis-à-vis Russia.

Lupi recalled finding Alekhine in total despair. Pointing at a newspaper which had printed Churchill’s Fulton speech, Alekhine complained at his bad luck, that the world had gone mad and was heading for another war, and that his match with Botvinnik was not going to happen.

I’m sure that the version that Alekhine was murdered by western agents will seem farfetched to most readers. Arguably there might have been a motive, but I’m not aware of any evidence. Still, it would be hasty, I think, to rule it out altogether. Western spy agencies also got up to all sorts of tricks in the post-war era, including the creation of “stay-behind” networks such as “Operation Gladio”.

Despite the speedy inquest into his death, it was many years before Alekhine was buried! Severe arguments arose between the French and Portuguese foreign ministries, and local Catholic elders, over where to bury the champion and with what rites. Alekhine became seriously religious at the end of his life and decided to convert to Catholicism. Moreover, there were rumors that a Catholic priest friend of Alexander Alexandrovich had demanded the investigation be continued, suspecting that the champion had met a violent end. It was three weeks later that Alekhine was brought in his coffin to the vault of a little-known Portuguese chess player. What was meant to be a temporary resting place turned out to be Alekhine’s “home” for another ten years.

In 1956, a series of chess events was planned to mark the tenth anniversary of the champion’s demise. The Soviets decided to hold a memorial tournament in Moscow. As part of the festival, the Russian chess authorities requested that Alekhine’s body be repatriated from Portugal to Moscow.

FIDE Vice-President Vyacheslav Ragozin flew to Paris to work out the details. The FIDE meeting had just about resolved the issue when Grace Wishar suddenly entered the room.

Alexander Kotov in his book *White and Black* reported Grace’s words as follows: “I heard the proposal of the
Russian delegate but I cannot agree with it. I’m the deceased’s widow and under French laws I alone can decide what to do with his remains. I don’t want my husband’s ashes to be transported to Moscow. I want to bury them here, in Paris, at Montparnasse cemetery. I want my dear Alex to rest next to my window... so that I can shed a tear on his grave.” Ragozin attempted to talk her out of it, but his arguments were in vain. This widow, who for ten years had shown no interest in where Alekhine was to be buried, suddenly demonstrated granite resolve: “Moscow has ruined my life quite enough! That’s enough! I don’t want to hear about Alekhine’s ashes being transported to Moscow and I insist unequivocally on my rights. If you take any other decision I will have the law on my side. I’ve already been advised by a lawyer.”

However, Grace Wishar never managed to “shed a tear” on Alekhine’s grave in Paris. She died shortly before he was buried and was laid to rest in the same grave.

FIDE acquiesced to the widow’s request and Alekhine was finally buried in Paris. His headstone was ordered from the Paris-based sculpture and chess player Abraham Baratz, who had once lived in Odessa.

Abraham Baratz (1895–1975)

Abraham Baratz was born on 14 September 1895 in Bessarabia, and not in Odessa as a number of sources suggest. But he did spend his childhood in Southern Palmyra, where many of his relations also lived. He studied in the Odessa Art College and emigrated to France after the revolution. He continued his studies in Paris at the prestigious National School of Fine Arts, where he mastered sculpture. He would later open his own studio on Montmartre.

He was first equal with Vitaly Halberstadt in the first championship of Paris in 1925. He won the tournament twice more, in 1927 and 1928 – both times outright. He was a prize-winner, sometimes first, at many other international tournaments.

He lived in Romania in the early 1930s and played for that country in chess olympiads in 1930 and 1931. He returned to France at the end of 1931. He edited a chess column in the Parisian magazine *Illustrated Life (La Vie illustrée)* in 1934 and was an active member of the P.P. Potemkine Russian Chess Club. He wrote a book of memoirs about Alekhine called *Testament d’Alekhine* (Paris, 1971).

He died in Paris in 1975.
In the spring of 1956, a modest casket with Alekhine’s remains was delivered by sea to Rouen, and from there it made its journey by car to Paris. The casket was placed in a vault built under the headstone in Montparnasse cemetery.

Baratz was close to Alekhine and was highly talented! The pedestal of Alekhine’s headstone was shaped into a chess board from Swedish red granite. A black obelisk was topped with a carving of Alekhine made from white Carrara marble. The obelisk was engraved in French in gold letters (with just his name and surname in both French and Russian):

Alexander Alekhine  
Chess genius of Russia and France  
1 November 1892 – 25 March 1946  
WORLD CHESS CHAMPION  
from 1927 to 1935 and from 1937 until his death.  
Below that is written:  
Grace Alekhine
Née Wishar
1876–1956.

The headstone was unveiled on 25 March 1956 at 11 a.m. It was a frosty morning. Despite the disagreeable weather, over a hundred people congregated. They included FIDE President Folke Rogard, Alexander Alekhine Junior, the Soviet Ambassador to France, UNESCO officials, members of the committee to create the headstone and, of course, chess players from a number of countries. France-based chess players included Alekhine’s friends Ossip Bernstein and Vitaly Halberstadt. Gwendolina Isnard, who had come to the cemetery together with her husband Vadim, made a speech with memories of Alekhine.

The largest and most senior delegation was from the Soviet Union – Grandmaster Ragozin (the head of the delegation), women’s world champion Elizaveta Bykova, future world champions Vasily Smyslov, Tigran Petrosian, Boris Spassky, grandmasters Paul Keres, David Bronstein and the Odessite Efim Geller.

Reigning world champion Botvinnik did not make the journey, which gave rise to much discussion and rumor. He limited himself to a telegram sent to FIDE Vice-President Marcel Berman:

Dear Mr. Berman, due to my work I regret that I am unable to come to Paris at the end of March.

I join the many chess fans throughout the world in remembering with kind words a man who worked hard at chess and made his contemporaries appreciate the beauty of chess in a new way. Regards, Botvinnik.

Following the unveiling of the headstone, those present then headed to a restaurant, where the world champion was commemorated. Unfortunately, the French newspapers were silent about the entire ceremony.
In fact, there was one more Odessite in the Soviet delegation – who made a video recording of the sad ceremony at Montparnasse. The famous violinist and big chess fan, David Oistrakh. Unfortunately, his film has not yet been shown to the chess world. It is kept in Moscow in the David Oistrakh archives in the M.I. Glinka State Central Museum of Musical Culture.

It’s well known that Alekhine loved classical music and would visit musical soirées if his tournament schedule allowed. But I don’t know whether or not he ever met Oistrakh, who toured Europe prior to the war. If they did meet, then only in secret. Oistrakh would have got into trouble had the Soviet authorities learned of any such meeting. Alekhine was still remembered for his words about “Bolshevik power” that he uttered during the celebration in Paris in 1928.

Unfortunately, the headstone got both Alekhine’s date of birth and date of death wrong. He was born (according to the new-style calendar) on 31 October and died on 24 March.

In 1996, the tenth world champion, Boris Spassky, donated money for the eternal remembrance of Alexander Alekhine to the famous Ionna-Predtechensky Monastery in the Kaluga Region of Russia. However, fate didn’t let Alekhine lie in peace on French soil. A hurricane broke the gravestone in 1999. The chess board was cracked and the upright headstone smashed to pieces. It was partially restored in 2003 (without the engraving of Alekhine, which was stolen). A new, bronze engraving was ordered from St. Petersburg sculptor Dmitry Kaminker (white marble was considered insufficient to cope with the capricious Parisian weather) in line with Abraham Barantz’s original design. It was paid for by Andrey Filatov, the current head of the Russian Chess Federation. Unfortunately, the mistakes with Alekhine’s dates of birth and death were repeated. Maybe the sculptor just wanted to stay true to the original headstone.