

THE RISE AND FALL of DAVID BRONSTEIN

Genna Sosonko

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David Bronstein – Chess Innovator

It gives me immense pleasure to introduce the first English edition of Genna Sosonko's book *The Rise and Fall of David Bronstein*, a work devoted to the life and times of a brilliant grandmaster who was just a step away from reaching the very summit of Mount Olympus, and who, in terms of his understanding of the game, undoubtedly belonged to the world champions' club. Bronstein's games were full of original, fresh solutions and exciting, amazing ideas nobody had ever come up with before. He possessed a unique vision of the chess board and was irresistibly drawn to unconventionality. Sometimes, ingenious concepts were hidden behind this unconventionality, ones that proved to be way ahead of their time.

Bronstein stands out from post-war generation grandmasters in terms of the sheer volume of his contribution to chess. He was one of the game's greatest popularizers. Take his famous book *Zurich International Chess Tournament* (1953), for instance: he wrote a truly iconic middle-game textbook based on the analysis of that super-tournament's games that proved to be useful even for average players.

Moreover, Bronstein was a genuine innovator – not only in opening theory, but in his very approach to chess. His idea of playing an eight-board simultaneous match between two players, as he and Tal did, was alone worth a lifetime of invention! But what about players providing running commentary during their games? Or a chess theatre showcasing great masterpieces of the past?... Alas, of the numerous innovations attributed to him, only rapid chess has caught on so far.

Actually, Bronstein was the first player to propose changing the starting position of the pieces, and he played so-called ‘Fischer Random Chess’ long before Fischer himself. Indeed, adding some seconds after each move was also his idea. David Bronstein invented both ‘Fischer Random Chess’ and the ‘Fischer chess clock’! He didn’t become world champion, though. He didn’t join that exclusive club... Had he done so, we would definitely be calling these innovations ‘Bronstein Random Chess’ and the ‘Bronstein chess clock’. The historical record needs to be set straight.

His 1951 match against Botvinnik that finished drawn with a score of 12 - 12 left a permanent wound in Bronstein’s soul and scarred him for the rest of his life.

Genna Sosonko, the author of unparalleled literary chess essays that subtly reveal the psychological background and the hidden forces driving events, tackles Bronstein’s trauma head-on. He reveals Bronstein’s challenging, contradictory and over-sensitive nature, shows his protagonist *from a number of angles, taking a step back and then approaching him from a different side, attempting to explain his motives*. And he achieves that, even though *mid-twentieth century Soviet reality was so complicated that nobody is truly capable of depicting it accurately*.

Genna possesses a sharp, critical mind. He is fantastically erudite across the humanities, and he has superlative knowledge of the chess world. I always read and reread his works avidly. His book *The Rise and Fall of David Bronstein* is no exception.

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CHAPTER 1

Regrets? I've had a few

“Botvinnik turned chess into a huge game. If it hadn't been for him, I don't know what would have become of chess in the Soviet Union. Until Botvinnik wrote his article in 1939 on preparing for chess tournaments the game was treated as an art. Yet chess became a tool for educating the masses in the USSR. The Soviet Chess School was a research project, and although it was established back in the 1920s, it really took off in 1945, when we scored a crushing win in a match against the USA. We simply didn't allow them to go beyond the opening, to scramble their fighter planes as it were. We destroyed them while they were still on the ground. What were they thinking – playing around with the pieces for an hour a day and then taking on Soviet chess players?”

“The thing is, I didn't actually want to defeat Botvinnik. I wasn't playing for glory. I have no interest in glory, in fact. I was simply trying to please the crowd. You see I was playing very subtly, generating ideas.

“And the reason I failed to defeat Botvinnik was that I couldn't get myself to accept this somewhat contrived world chess championship: the zonal tournament, interzonal, candidates tournament. Like a quarter-final, semi-final and final – just like the Soviet championships.

“You see, who were world champions for me? Paul Morphy, Adolf Anderssen – now they were champions! Wilhelm Steinitz came up with the idea of a world chess championship. Then Emanuel Lasker said that it wasn't pieces who played chess, but people. After that, relations between chess players evolved into

those between boxers before a fight. So it all began with Lasker, and Botvinnik learned it from him – he really did look at his opponents with hatred in his eyes. It was an entire school of players who radiated hate: Lasker, Alekhine, Botvinnik, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov. Kasparov once said that he and I were from completely different generations, and therefore he would never play me. What was he going on about? Different generations? I'm still alive and still understand the game. They should invite me to a tournament. I'll go and play. But I don't have a rating – so as a chess player, I don't even exist. The very concept of 'World Champion' denigrates chess, no doubt about it. Of course, it's silly that I didn't defeat Botvinnik. After all, game 23 was a simple draw. Do you think I didn't see that knight move? Come on.

“I realize that you want to give everything a name, to analyze it psychologically. Or maybe even bring parapsychology into it. Let me say this: chess betrayed me. Betrayed me.

“To young players, the chess I played was the chess of the Middle Ages...or maybe even the Stone Age. Why did I play those idiotic games against the computer? What did I do that for? I merely wanted to demonstrate that the human brain could compete with a computer. Yet now it's obvious that the human brain is nothing compared with those hundreds of millions of operations the computer performs in a single second.

“Yeah, and my Zurich book that everyone glorifies. You know what? I can't stand it. Please write that down – I can't stand it! The book gets reprinted and published in other languages, yet I was left on the periphery of chess life.

“You are the first person I have said this to. Nobody has heard this up to now, do you realize that? Chess isn't worth being written about the way you write about it. It's not worth it. For example, you said that the tournament in Spain was strong. You say that

strong grandmasters played there. But what does strong mean, exactly? It used to be the case that chess players were interesting or uninteresting. But now they are all strong. Now someone who has graduated from high school is a strong mathematician.

“I don’t understand what is happening. I don’t know what’s right or wrong. I don’t understand anything at all. We’ve all been dragged into this hole. They said that chess is the same as Shakespeare, Velázquez, and Raphael. An art. That’s what they said, right? But what is it in reality? Nobody needs it, nobody. It’s neither good, nor fair – it’s cruel. I realize that you want to write about me. I realize that. But I also know that if you or somebody else writes something about me, it will be all wrong. It’s all wrong. It was you who told me about Richter, that at the very end he said that he wasn’t happy with himself, just wasn’t happy. I could say the same about myself. But who cares about that? I’m the guilty party, me. I probably did everything wrong. Wrong. All the wrong things.

“Nobody is interested in me and nobody needs me. As a person, I am leaving both the chess world and the real world. I regret that I devoted my life to chess, and not to something like art.

“And don’t you regret doing the same? You probably have the same regret. We were trapped in the same hole. A tiger hole. Do you know how they catch tigers in Africa? They start by digging a hole.

“You and I are in a similar hole, except that this hole is called “chess.” And I’m sorry that we were dragged into this hole, and that I couldn’t climb out of it. After all, chess is just the tiniest particle of human activity. It’s only chess players who try to pretend that it’s the most important activity in the world. My life is almost over, yet I don’t feel my age at all. My brain is still young. I still understand everything.

“I was interested in life, not just in chess, and I overestimated my strength. When I say all this I feel like I’m a stand-up

comedian, though. A comic figure, a person from a completely different world. In truth, I really am talking to you from another time.

“You see, in those days everything was completely different – it was the Cold War, and the war was played on the chess board, too. A war with pieces.

“I didn’t live my life right, not at all. I got it all wrong, everything. I believed in chess, that somebody needed it. It sounds like I’m reciting my own obituary, doesn’t it?”

These fragments of conversations with David Bronstein are taken from the last fifteen or so years of his life. There’s no question he was a pessimist. But did he always think like that? What about when he was a little kid, back in 1936 when he showed up at the House of Pioneers in Kiev? When he was winning just about all the post-war tournaments? When he was facing off against Botvinnik and was a hair’s breadth from being crowned world champion? When he was playing games that continue to amaze chess lovers to this very day?

Well, it’s not only success at the board that defines a chess player’s place in the history of the game. The depth of their games, the originality of their ideas, and boldness to venture into the unknown are valued just as highly by true chess connoisseurs as their tournament performances and ELO ratings.

A copy of a famous painting, no matter how brilliantly reproduced, is worthless. That’s doubly true for a copy of a copy. In chess, you encounter dozens or even hundreds of copies of the same ideas, over and over again. Theory is based on thousands of positions that have been repeated millions of times and effectively crystalized. You can attempt to trace any idea back to its origins, back to the person who first came up with it. David Bronstein was one of those pioneers.



Bronstein vs Petrosian

When playing over Bronstein’s games of the post-war decade you see that a lot of ideas that are well-known today were introduced by him. Indeed, Yuri Averbakh believes that Kasparov made a mistake by calling his book series *My Great Predecessors*, since he “implicitly accorded only world champions the right to exercise influence over the development of the art of chess. This is particularly unfair in relation to Bronstein, who in his day contributed just as much to the game as someone like Smyslov, for example.”

Former world champion Tigran Petrosian once said: “Young players believe that modern chess began with *Chess Informant*¹, but players of my generation know that it began with David Bronstein.” In fact, that’s not just what people in Russia thought. Bronstein’s ideas were a true revelation in the West. Pupils of the classical school of former world champion Max Euwe were astounded by the games of the young Bronstein: “How could he have played an

¹ A key international chess publication in the pre-internet age

opening as unsound as the King's Indian? Surrendering the centre just like that? Unbelievable!"

Over sixty years have passed since he reached his peak – when he drew his world title match – yet there is still no consensus regarding Bronstein's contribution to the game. While some consider him to have been one of the most outstanding chess players of the twentieth century, there are others – pragmatists – who consider him the most overrated, as a survey by the German chess magazine *Schach* revealed.

Bronstein's colleagues viewed him differently. When I claimed Bronstein and Samuel Reshevsky were of the same calibre in a conversation with Smyslov, the latter disagreed: "No, you're not giving him enough credit. David Bronstein was world champion material!"

Bronstein's uniqueness makes it hard to define him using standard measures. To say he was a remarkable player is redundant: anyone who is even mildly familiar with his games knows that. When talking about a player of that calibre it's difficult not to show what made them great, but in Bronstein's case, saying that there aren't enough texts or diagrams from his games to show fully the beauty of his ideas and the flight of his fantasy may apply to him more than to any other player.

When I still lived in the Soviet Union we barely knew each other. We would occasionally exchange a few words at tournament press-centres. Those exchanges are of no interest, although they're still firmly imprinted in my memory.

We got to know each other at Hastings (1975-1976), when we saw each other every day. Although Victor Korchnoi and I would spend nearly every evening walking along the town's blustery seafront, I devoted a great deal of time to conversations with Bronstein.



The Author with David Bronstein, Tilburg, 1997

Then there was a good ten-year gap since Bronstein didn't play in any tournaments in the West, while I was prohibited from playing in the Soviet Union. We started seeing each other regularly in the late 1980s. First in Holland, at the Interpolis tournaments in Tilburg, at the Donner Memorial in Amsterdam, and tournaments with human and computer players in The Hague. Then in England, Belgium, and France, where he played in club competitions, and, of course, in Moscow when I visited post-Perestroika Russia.

Thinking back to my time with Bronstein, I would like to talk not so much about an outstanding chess player, but about him as a person. Knowing very well that an individual is an inseparable whole, I have nevertheless attempted to separate the great player from an extraordinary person plagued by his own weaknesses and insecurities.