

Alekhine's Odessa Secrets: Chess, War and Revolution

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Translated from the Russian by Ilan Rubin

Edited by Reilly Costigan-Humes (English version) and Sergei Voronkov (Russian original)

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Cover page drawing by Anna Fokina: *Historians failed to establish who was painted in this picture and what impact they had on the fate of the great master.*

First published in Russia in 2017

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ISBN 978-5-9500433-3-8

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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



Standing at the back, left to right: Ahues, Hirsch, Kruger, John, Przepiorka?, Flamberg, Maljutin. Standing, second row: Janowski, Fahrni, Duras (behind), Dr. Vidmar, Carls, Bogoljubow (behind), Marshall, Hild, Robinow, Post, Dr. Tartakower, Schellenberg, Alekhine, Breyer, Reti, Sosnitsky (behind). Sitting: Rommig, Gudehus, Chairman of the German Chess Union Gebhardt, Tarrasch, Spielman. Source: <https://chesscafe.com/book-reviews/mannheim-1914-and-the-interned-russians-by-anthony-gillam/>

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 Lissan'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 up 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 Bezkrorny, 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. Bezkrorny played a lot of chess in Paris, winning several tournaments at the Café de la Régence. After returning to Russia, Bezkrorny 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 Bezkrorny'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.

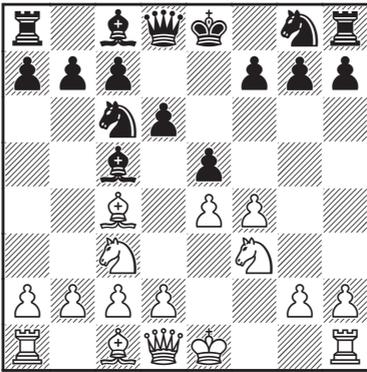
No 1. King's Gambit Declined
ALEKHINE – I. GREENBERG

Blind simultaneous game

Odessa, April 1916

Commentary by Alekhine

1.e4 e5 2.f4 ♖c5 3.♞f3 d6 4.♙c4 ♞c6 5.♞c3. *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...♙b6 (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...♞f6 6.d3 ♞a5. CA: **6...♙g4** or **6...♙e6** are better and more typical moves here. After the move played and the subsequent exchange, white gains an advantage in the center.

7.♞e2 ♞xc4 8.dc ♞e7 9.f5 ♙b4. CA: From this square, the bishop can no longer keep white from developing comfortably, as the move ♙e3 is always possible in the future, whereas the knight on c3 constantly threatens d5.

10.♙d2 ♙d7 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.♞he1 h6 13.h3 ♙c6 14.♞d3 ♙xc3. After exchanging on 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 d5.

15.♙xc3 0-0-0 16.g4 ♞b8 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...♞d7 18.♞e2 b5 19.a4! With this move, white launches some neat combination play.

CA: Otherwise, black would have played **19...♞b6** and taken control of a4 and c4.

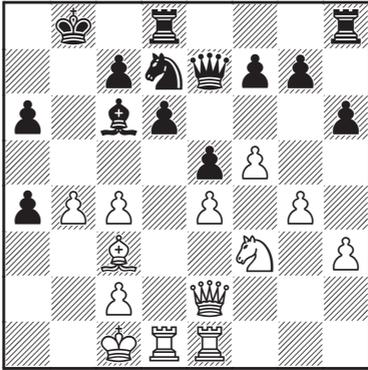
The computer doesn't approve of white's pawn charge. It prefers an exchange with 19.cb, which leads to an approximately equal position.

19...ba.

(See next diagram)

20.♞d5! 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...♙xd5 (as 21.♖a5 was threatened)

21.ed. CA: Threatening 22.c5.

21...♖b7 22.♖b2. CA: Not 22.♘d4 due to 22...♚g5+. If now 22...♚f6 to prevent the white knight from invading, then ♘f3-d2-e4 etc.

22...♖b8. A poor and pointless move. It would have been more logical to play 22...♘b8 (threatening c7-c5) or 22...♖a8.

23.♘d4! ♚h4. 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.♘c6 ♚xh3. Worried about white attacking with 25.♖a1, ♖xa4, 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.♖a1 ♘f6 26.♖xa4 ♚xg4. CA: Black has not only picked up two pawns but has brought his queen into play.

27.♚f1 (threatening 28.♖xa6 ♘xa6 29.♚a1+) 27...♖a8. CA: Thwarting the pawn charge with 28.c5.

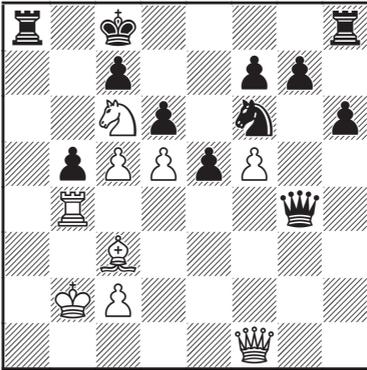
28.b5! CA: Tactically speaking, this is the most difficult move in the game. Not because of the actual continuation played, which was not too difficult to calculate, but because of the possible reply 28...♘d5. The main line that I had prepared was the following: 29.♖xa6! ♖xa6 30.ba+ ♘xc6 31.cd+ ♘xd5 32.♚b5+ ♘e4 33.♚d3+ ♘f4 34.♙d2#. However, black had a stronger counter to 29.♖xa6 – 29...♘xc3, after which white had to choose between a draw via 30.♘a5+ ♘b8 31.♘c6+ and playing to win via 30.♚a1 (30...♘d1+ 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...♘xd5?, black could have won after 31...♖b6! However, white was not required to play 29.♖xa6? – 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...ab. 28...♘d5 would have been met by 29.♚h1! White gains the initiative after this: 29...e4 30.cd ab 31.♖b4 ♚f3

32. ♖g1 ♜hb8 33. ♘xb8 ♜xb8 34. ♖xg7 ♖xf5 35. ♖d4! with excellent winning chances.

29. ♜b4! ♔c8 30. c5. CA: Finally opening up a path for the queen to invade the enemy camp.



30... ♖g3. In the Yugoslav Chess Almanac 1939 Alekhine changed the ending of the game, which was subsequently saved in Megabase: 30... ♖g5 31. ♖xb5 ♘xd5 (there is nothing better) 32. ♖b7+ ♔d7 33. ♘xe5+ de 34. ♖xd5+ ♔e7 35. ♖xe5+ (35. ♘xe5! would have saved white) 35... ♔f8 36. ♖xc7 (black loses, unable to connect his rooks) 36... ♖d8 (black would have won after 36... ♔g8 37. f6 ♖g1!) 37. ♖g3 f6 38. ♜b7 ♜g8 39. c6, and black resigned.

31. ♖xb5. Now black's position is lost. The game ends with fireworks, which is particularly remarkable as it was played blind.

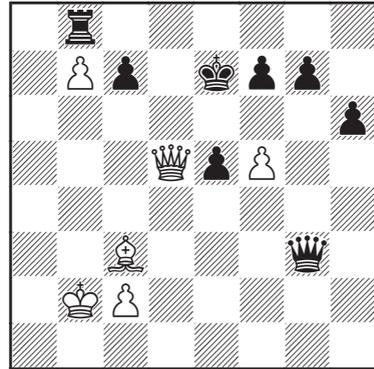
In reality, black is winning here! (S. Voronkov).

31... ♘xd5 32. ♖b7+ ♔d7 33. ♘xe5+ de 34. ♖xd5+ ♔e7 35. ♜b7 ♜hb8. Black would have won after 35... ♔f6! Now white can force a draw: 36. ♖d6+! ♔e8 37. ♖xc7 ♜xb7+ 38. ♖xb7, and black

should be grateful that he has the saving resource 38... ♜a2+ etc. (S. Voronkov).

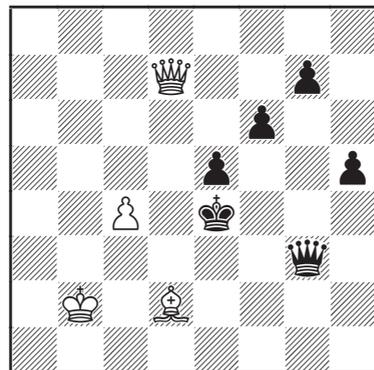
36. c6 ♜xb7+. Committing suicide! As before, he could have won with 36... ♔f6, for example: 37. ♖d7 ♖g1 38. ♘b4 ♖d4+ and exchanging queens (S. Voronkov).

37. cb ♜b8.



38. f6+! ♔xf6. 38... gf would lose to 39. ♘b4+ ♔e8 40. ♖c6+ ♔d8 41. ♘e7+, and black is destroyed (S. Voronkov).

39. ♖c6+ ♔f5 40. ♖xc7 ♜xb7+ 41. ♖xb7 f6 42. ♖d7+ ♔e4 43. ♘d2 h5 44. c4.



44... ♖d3. This only hastens the inevitable. White threatened 45. ♖d5+ and then queening the c-pawn.

44... h4 was better.

In this case, the 'inevitable' would have been a draw: 45. ♖d5+ ♔f5 46.c5 h3 47.c6 ♗g2! 48. ♖d7+ ♔g6 49.c7 ♗b7+ and h3-h2 (S. Voronkov).

45. ♖xd3+ ♔xd3 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. ♔e1! h3 48. ♔g3 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 gambit.

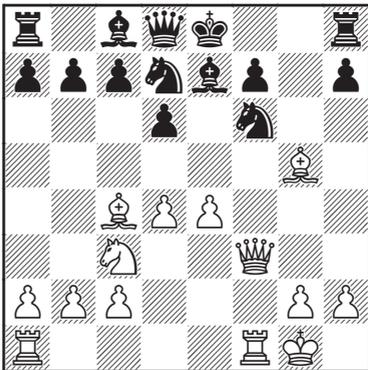
No 2. King's Gambit Accepted ALEKHINE – A. VELIKANOV

Blind simultaneous game

Odessa, April 1916

Commentary by S. Tkachenko

1.e4 e5 2.f4 ef 3. ♖f3 g5 4.d4 d6 5. ♔c4 g4 6. ♔xf4 gf 7. ♗xf3 ♞f6 8. ♔g5 ♔e7 9.0-0 ♞bd7 10. ♞c3. 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.



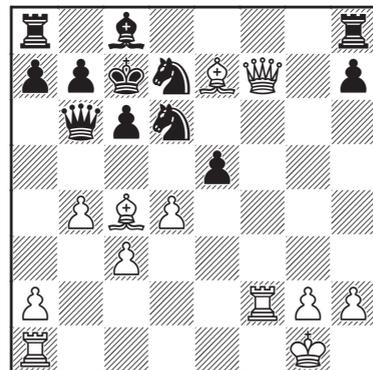
10...c6. Black could have played the defense 10...h6! 11.e5 hg 12.ef ♔xf6 13. ♖d5! 0-0 14. ♞e4 ♔h8! 15. ♞xf6 ♞xf6 16. ♗xg5 ♞h7!, and there doesn't appear to be any way for white to break down black's defensive walls.

11. ♖f2 ♗a5?! 11...♗b6! was more precise, and white would then have to force a draw: 12. ♔xf7+ ♔xf7 13. ♗h5+ ♔g8 14. ♔xf6 ♞xf6 15. ♗g5+ and so on.

12.e5! de 13. ♞e4! ♞xe4 14. ♗xf7+ ♔d8 15. ♔xe7+ ♔c7 16.b4! The best solution would have been 16. ♖e2! ♞d6 17. ♔xd6+ ♔xd6 18.de+ ♔c7 19. ♗f4! ♗c5+ 20. ♔h1 ♞b6 21.e6+ ♗d6 22. ♗f7+ ♔b8 23.e7 ♞xc4 24.e8 ♗xe8 25. ♖xe8 ♞b6 26. ♗xh7 a6 27. ♖f1 with an advantage for white.

16...♗b6? Black fails to take his chance to smother the charge by the 'blind' master: 16...♗a3! 17. ♖f3 ♗b2 18. ♖d1 b5! 19. ♔b3 ♞d2! with an approximately equal position.

17.c3! ♞d6. He cannot save himself after 17...♞xf2 18. ♔xf2 a5 19. ♗g7! ♖e8 20. ♔c5!, where black's queen is condemned.



18. ♗e6? In *Chess Messenger* Alekhine subjects this move to minor criticism,