

Cyrus Lakdawala

# Botvinnik

move by move

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# About the Author

**Cyrus Lakdawala** is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the US.

## **Also by the Author:**

*Play the London System*

*A Ferocious Opening Repertoire*

*The Slav: Move by Move*

*1...d6: Move by Move*

*The Caro-Kann: Move by Move*

*The Four Knights: Move by Move*

*Capablanca: Move by Move*

*The Modern Defence: Move by Move*

*Kramnik: Move by Move*

*The Colle: Move by Move*

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# Introduction

*“All told, there is not a single weakness in his armour.”* – Reuben Fine.

On August 17th 1911, in St Petersburg, a titan of the game entered the world. Mikhail Botvinnik was born to a dentist mother, and a father who was a dental technician. He learned chess at the unbelievably late age (for a world champion) of 12. It was love at first sight. Botvinnik displayed staggering natural talent (although he claimed, rather outrageously, that he had little) and, through the help of his coach, Abram Model, won the 1931 USSR Championship at age 20, the youngest to do so. In this period he casually annexed a PhD in Electrical Engineering as well. In fact he continued work as an engineer even as world champion – unthinkable by today’s requirements to reach the most exalted level. Botvinnik claimed – a claim I don’t believe at all! – that his side job as engineer actually helped him in his chess, since he was always hungry to play.

By 1936 he was perhaps the strongest player in the world, demonstrated by his performance at Nottingham, with an undefeated tie for first with Capablanca and ahead of World Champion Alekhine. Due to the interruption of WWII, Botvinnik had to wait twelve long years before he became the official sixth World Champion, after having won the great 1948 World Championship tournament at The Hague/Moscow. He dominated the event, surging a full three (!) points ahead of his closest rival, Smyslov. There were whispers that the Communist Party authorities forced Botvinnik’s Soviet rivals to throw games, but there is no proof of this. A similar charge was made later that Bronstein was forced to throw the next to last game in his World Championship match versus Botvinnik, yet Bronstein’s widow vehemently denied the claim and said Botvinnik drew the match (and retained his title) fair and square.

Max Euwe noted: “Most players feel uncomfortable in difficult positions, but Botvinnik seems to enjoy them!” The match format, Botvinnik’s forte, he considered the ultimate test of one’s character. Botvinnik held on to the title, which he subconsciously considered his private property, for a full 15 years, with two intermissions – when Smyslov and Tal briefly “borrowed” his title. Botvinnik’s lengthy reign quite possibly surpassed Lasker’s, since Lasker tended to dodge his great contenders, whereas Botvinnik faced all of them. Botvinnik, through dint of his superior preparation methods, decisively won both rematches. Smyslov he simply outprepped and outplayed strategically. But perhaps most impressive was how he dodged Tal’s frantic attempts to complicate and forced his younger, less ex-

perienced (World Champion!) opponent into blocked positions and endings. Botvinnik quashed every attempt to confuse, and regained the title in convincing fashion, albeit bolstered by Tal's ill health.

Botvinnik – along with Morphy, Capablanca, Fischer, Karpov (and Carlsen!?) – was the greatest strategist of his day (or any day!). An argument can be made that Botvinnik was the single most important chess figure of the 20th century—yes, you heard me correctly. Perhaps even more so than Fischer. The reason: players such as Capablanca, Alekhine, Tal, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov and Carlsen are merely isolated geniuses, all of whom produced beautiful games, yet none revolutionized modern chess training into a formulation, a school. Botvinnik, on the other hand, through his intensely rigorous pre-game preparation techniques, was the father of the Soviet School of chess and, by proxy, the father of all modern day professional preparation and coaching. Botvinnik's secret (to Westerners) training techniques may be the main reason the Soviets took sole control over the world championship title for the next quarter century, when only the anomaly of Bobby Fischer ripped it from Soviet hands. The reason we all so frantically order and study the latest opening books is due to Botvinnik, who understood the deep importance of opening theory and pre-game preparation.

One senses from Botvinnik's play, the residue of a rigorously efficient personality, utterly incapable of tolerating failure in himself. And when he did fail (his losing matches versus Smyslov and Tal) he returned to the rematches with demonic resurgence, upending the pretenders to what he considered his private kingdom: the title of World Chess Champion.

He was a stern man, who, from my personal 1977 simul meeting with him as a teen, lacked affability. (He slammed and screwed in the pieces when he moved and glared at your terrified, pimple-faced writer through those scary coke-bottle glasses of his, as a stern principal would to a difficult student.) Botvinnik, a lifelong, devout Communist Party member, was a man his peers mostly disliked and distrusted, yet couldn't help but respect. He was prone to make outrageous overstatements on perceived character flaws of his rivals, and yet, one senses, never bothered to ponder any particular defects in his own. Through chess, this incredibly confrontational personality discovered a novel method of diverting his monumental inner aggression into the harmless realm of the abstract.

## **Botvinnik's style**

With Botvinnik, there emerged a new style of play I call *power chess*—high end aggression, yet arising from strategic, not solely tactical bases. To my mind Vladimir Kramnik (Botvinnik's student—yes, yes, I know: nobody equates Kramnik to such an aggressive style, but having written a book on him, I declare to you it's true!) is Botvinnik's spiritual chess son, who embodies Botvinnik's power chess in the present. As Capablanca, Alekhine, Keres and others learned to their dismay, Botvinnik was not a man to be trifled with in battles of calculation power, and when he seized the initiative – especially in his prime – his fortunes always rose. Initiative was always the prime focus as we see in this book over and over

again, Botvinnik rejecting material offers if they interfered with his initiative, the way a picky eater walks through an unappetizing discount buffet line with a nearly empty plate.

Botvinnik claimed his great weakness was his inability to spot combinations at critical junctures. But I harbour grave doubts about Botvinnik's self-confessed, purported weakness. Having gone over most of his games in preparation for the book, I was staggered to discover that Botvinnik virtually never missed a combination in his prime – the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s. If *Houdini* saw it, Botvinnik saw it too. His alleged weakness began to arise from the late 1950s onward, when Botvinnik was past his prime (yet unbelievably, still world champion!).

Botvinnik, like Lasker before him, cultivated a psychologist's insight into each of his rival's shortcomings, and deftly and diabolically weaponized this understanding over the board in his pre-game preparation. For instance, if he played Keres, he would try and reach a position where it was bad for Keres to open the game (e.g. the white side of a Nimzo-Indian, where Botvinnik's side had the bishop pair), and yet Botvinnik knew Keres loved open positions! If he played Tal, he frustrated the Latvian's love of tactics by bogging him down in blocked positions and endings, where Botvinnik reigned. Conversely, against the sedate Petrosian, Botvinnik would jar him by provoking an early crisis and opening the position. In this fashion, Botvinnik filed away his opponent's quirks and weaknesses for his own future reference.

## King of the Opening

Botvinnik plumbed the depths of the early stages of the game, understanding and dissecting his lines the way a novelist's head is populated with a cast of dozens of characters. Botvinnik virtually kept his opponents in mental shackles, most breathing a relieved sigh if they managed to escape that phase of the game. He understood his opening systems like no other before him. So intimately and deeply did he understand the nuances, that even players such as Keres, Tal and Smyslov sometimes failed to emerge alive from the opening stage. He was the first world champion truly to weaponize the opening phase of the game, using it as a whip, which had the effect of cowering nervous opponents into meek theoretical dodges. Each early crush of a strong GM opponent came across as a warning shot to posterity itself.

Botvinnik, like Alekhine before him and Fischer after him, strove for perfection in his pre-game prep, with a work ethic bordering on fanaticism. He exemplified the spirit of modern professionalism – an anomaly in his age – of a game which was then considered a hobby, a pleasant intellectual pastime, in which one relied upon natural ability. He never played blitz: “Yes, I have played a blitz game once,” he said, “It was on a train, in 1929.” He was also vehement in his scorn for the memorization of opening variations without understanding: “Memorization of variations could be even worse than playing in a tournament without looking in the books at all!”

He was methodical, almost to the point of predictability. He would bring to each game a thermos of secret content to nourish his brain. When his clock ran, Botvinnik would calculate variations in purely mathematical fashion (“If 23 ♖xe6, then I have the trick 23...♗h7!”

etc). When his opponents were on the move, Botvinnik worked schematically, verbally forging plans and potential futures.

Botvinnik's opening/pre-game research produced a rich yield of new understanding, branching out in multiple directions. Through his unbelievably high level of erudition, Botvinnik gave direct theoretical challenge to the opening ethos of his time in a compendium of lines, including the French Defence, Caro-Kann, Grünfeld, Sicilian Dragon, Nimzo-Indian, and many, many other lines. In fact, he continually altered and improved upon theory in whichever lines he played, always at the forefront of theory. He had a disconcerting habit of radically altering long-held assessments, almost as a routine occurrence, and systematized opening knowledge to new, previously unheard of levels. I for one am grateful to Botvinnik, since those who lack the creativity to invent ourselves (e.g. your writer!), can still imitate giants before us, who blazed new theory on a routine basis.

Here we see the 14-year-old Botvinnik dismantle a great world champion in a simultaneous game. We are reminded of the words from The Who's *Acid Queen*: "Your boy won't be a boy no more; young, but not a child."

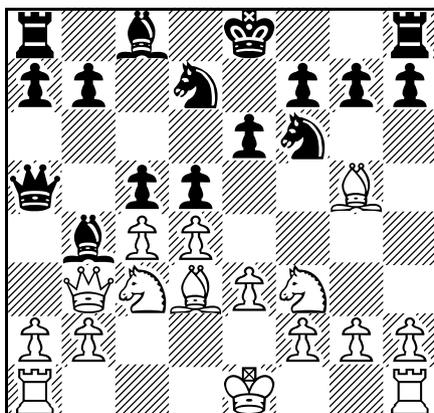
*Game 1*  
**J.R.Capablanca-M.Botvinnik**  
Leningrad (simul) 1925  
*Queen's Gambit Declined*

**1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♗f6 4 ♙g5 ♘bd7 5 e3 ♙b4**

Botvinnik had a lifelong penchant for meeting queen's pawn openings with ...♙b4 and ...c7-c5, Ragozin-style positions. He sidesteps the more solid Queen's Gambit Declined lines 5...c6 and 5...♙e7.

**6 cxd5**

Capablanca beat Edward Lasker from Black's side after 6 ♗f3 c5 7 ♙d3 ♚a5 8 ♚b3?.



**Exercise (combination alert):** Although White's last move was a blunder, very few of us are awake to combinational possibilities this early in the game. What did the usually hyper-alert Capa miss here?

**Answer:** He missed the bizarre anomaly 8...b5!!, winning material no matter how White responds.

Instead, the game continued 8...e4? (the natural move but not the best) 9 0-0!? (offering material for development) 9...g5 (Capa always veered toward the simple, avoiding the great complications arising from 9...xc3 10 cxd5! which *Houdini* rates at even) 10 xg5 cxd4 11 b5?! (White should sac with 11 exd4! dxc4 12 xc4 xc3 13 xe6! fxe6 14 xe6+ d8 15 bxc3 with reasonable attacking chances for the piece) 11...c5 12 c2 xd3 13 xd3 a6 14 xd4 dxc4 15 xc4 d7 and Capa went on to out-technique his opponent from this point in Ed.Lasker-J.R.Capablanca, New York 1915.

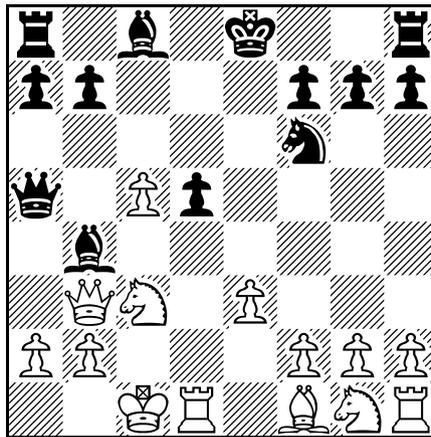
**6...exd5 7 b3**

The queen is vulnerable on b3, both to a future ...c7-c5-c4 (or d4xc5 xc5), and ...e6. Today, 7 f3 and 7 d3 are normally played at this point.

**7...c5 8 dxc5 a5**

The queen piles on to the pin with the routine of a farmer deciding which of his unfortunate chickens is to be tonight's dinner.

**9 xf6 xf6 10 0-0-0?**



Overly optimistic. The white king's counsellors, fatal advisors, whisper sweet promises of conquest into his ears, and convince him to sign an unwise declaration of war. This opportunistic decision isn't exactly born of the precision or logic to which we are normally accustomed from Capablanca. If you decide to embark on an adventure, be sure not to run into the waiting arms of an enemy! When the powerful congregate in a fixed location, it makes for a tempting target if you are an assassin. Capa launches an unmodulated notion

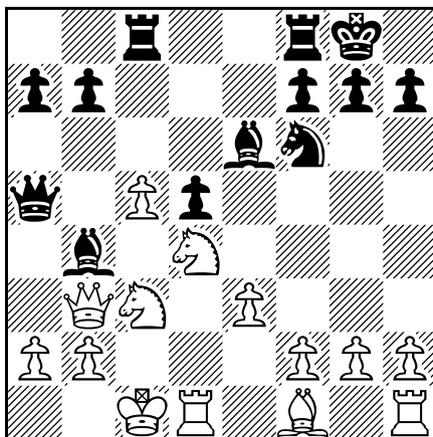
with, one senses, mingled misgivings and exuberance, allowing his king to wander precipitously far from the natural security of his own side. Indeed, he ventures an agitated and clumsy demonstration on the queenside, which soon gets drowned out in a barrage of black threats.

**Question:** This decision certainly doesn't fit Capablanca's profile, does it?

**Answer:** Agreed, but simul exude their own social mores. Capa, not being clairvoyant, doesn't realize the kid in front of him in the simul is destined to be a world champion. Compare this game to Botvinnik's upending of Keres in Game 25. At this point Capa fails to acquire understanding of his rising misery index.

10...0-0 11 ♘f3 ♙e6 12 ♘d4 ♖ac8

Perhaps the wrong rook. I would have played the other one to c8; i.e. 12...♖fc8! and if 13 c6 bxc6, when the a8-rook is available for b8.



13 c6

Capa desperately attempts to block the open c-file.

**Question:** Yes, but at the cost of opening the b-file! Shouldn't White just play for an ending with the simple 13 ♖b1 ♙xc3 14 ♗xc3 - ?

**Answer:** Capa loved endings – but not *lost* endings, which he would enter after 14...♗xc3 15 bxc3 ♘e4! 16 ♖c1 ♘xf2 17 ♖g1 ♖xc5, when White's strategic woes continue to accrete like a chemical company's effluent, surreptitiously dumped into the local river.

13...♙xc3

13...bxc6 looks promising as well.

14 ♗xc3 ♗xa2 15 ♙d3 bxc6 16 ♖c2!

A little simul cheapo, threatening ♖a1.

**16...c5! 17 ♖xe6**

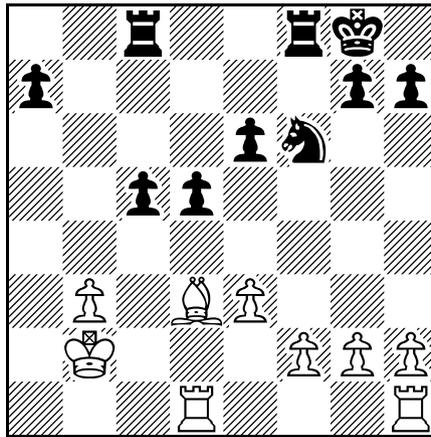
Not now 17 ♜a1?? cxd4 and wins.

**17...♗a4+!**

17...fxe6? allows an escape after 18 ♜a1 d4! 19 ♜xa2 dxc3 20 bxc3 ♖g4 21 f3 ♖xe3+ 22 ♔c1 and White should be okay, despite being a pawn down, since he acquires targets on a7 and e6.

**18 b3 ♗a2+ 19 ♗b2**

The queen abruptly decides to leave, absolving herself from all involvement in the matter. White's chances look grim in the ending when juxtaposed against Black's, but there is no real choice since retaining queens with 19 ♔c1?? fxe6 leaves White's king fatally exposed to the elements.

**19...♗xb2+ 20 ♔xb2 fxe6**

Understanding dawns, the “=” sign at the tail end of a difficult mathematical equation: White is completely busted. Not only is he a pawn down, his king remains terribly insecure. The young Botvinnik embarked on the final assault with great purpose, and never gave his legendary opponent a speck of hope.

**21 f3 ♜c7**

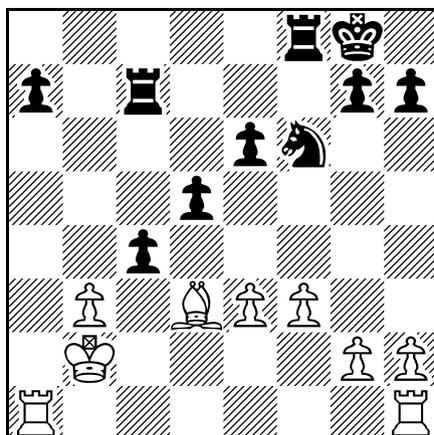
The immediate 21...c4! looks a shade more accurate.

**22 ♜a1**

22 e4! ♜b8 (22...dxe4 is met by 23 ♔c4!) 23 exd5 exd5 24 ♔c2 was White's best defensive chance.

**22...c4!**

Excellent judgment. Botvinnik's salivating remaining pieces luxuriate in the taste of hunting down a world champion's king. The attack isn't over, despite the fact that queens have come off the board.



**23 bxc4 dxc4 24 ♙c2 ♜b8+ 25 ♚c1**

The king lollaps around, the way a drunk attempts to get out of a chair but keeps falling back into it. When surrounded by the courageous, a man is ashamed if he doesn't follow suit. Unfortunately, 25 ♚c3? walks into 25...♘d5+ 26 ♚d4 c3! (threatening ...♜b4+, followed by ...♘xe3) 27 e4 ♖f4 and now 28 ♙e5 (28 g3? ♜d8+ 29 ♙e3 ♘g2+ 30 ♙f2 ♜d2+ mates in a few moves) 28...♘xg2 29 ♙xe6 ♜b2 is hopeless for White.

**25...♘d5 26 ♜e1 c3! 27 ♜a3 ♘b4!**

Threatening to capture on c2, followed by ...♜b2+.

**28 ♜e2 ♜d8!**

Toying with ...♜d2 ideas.

**29 e4 ♜c6!**

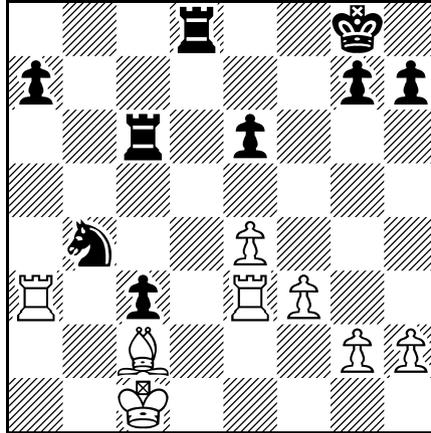
The rook affects a humble posture with a servile hunch to get past the guards.

**Question:** Why not 29...♜d2 immediately?

**Answer:** Even when busted, Capa was always alert to opportunities for mischief. In this case, destitute of defensive resources, White tries his hand in a semi-swindle with 30 ♜xc3! when he still harbours some hope of survival.

**30 ♜e3**

Botvinnik's attack, now completely out of control, transforms into an unalterable property of nature, outside of White's control. Capa continues to resist desperately as well as fruitlessly. 30 ♜xa7 ♜d2! also wins.



**Exercise (combination alert):** How did Botvinnik finish his great opponent off?

**Answer:** Now Black's trick works.

**30...♖d2! 31 ♖exc3**

31 ♗b1 is met by the crushing 31 ...c2!, so the bishop finds himself tied to the sacrificial altar.

**31...♖xc2+!**

The point: X-ray attack.

**32 ♖xc2 ♖xc2+ 0-1**

We are unaccustomed to a 14-year-old kid manhandling a reigning world champion in such a manner.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks as always to editors GM John Emms and Jonathan Tait for vigilantly cleaning up your careless writer's numerous goof-ups throughout the book. Thanks also to Nancy and Tim for proof-reading and computer back-up. May Botvinnik's iron logic percolate into deepened understanding for us all.

Cyrus Lakdawala,  
San Diego,  
July 2013

## Chapter Three

# Riding the Dynamic Element

When researching this book I was surprised to read Kasparov's statement that Botvinnik, who we normally associate with iron logic and patient manoeuvring, was a veritable thaumaturge with the initiative, and worked wonders and miracles when he seized power over the board. In fact, Kasparov claimed Botvinnik's feel for initiative rivalled or surpassed that of any legendary player in the history of the game. As I went through more and more of Botvinnik's early games, I saw very clearly that Kasparov's assertion was true.

In this chapter, we examine Botvinnik's remarkable handling of the initiative, mainly from his heyday, from the mid 1930s to the early 50s. Botvinnik's disputatious pieces surge forth, always seeking initiative, always finding conflict. His initiative, like unfulfilled malice, had a way of growing by feeding on itself. Even players associated with the initiative, such as Keres, were often casually brushed aside by Botvinnik in his prime.

*Game 21*  
**M.Botvinnik-M.Vidmar Sr.**  
Nottingham 1936  
*Queen's Gambit Declined*

1 c4 e6 2 ♘f3 d5 3 d4 ♘f6 4 ♙g5 ♙e7

Back in the 1930s, virtually everyone played the Queen's Gambit Declined in response to 1 d4.

5 ♘c3 0-0 6 e3 ♗bd7 7 ♙d3

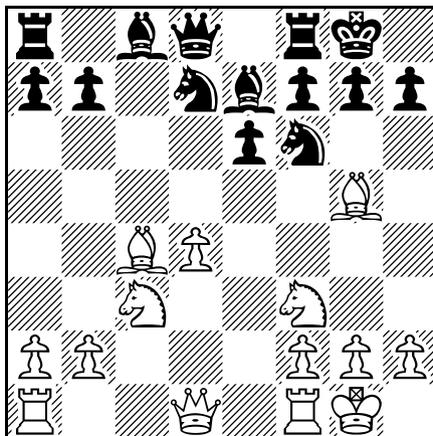
**Question:** Doesn't this lose White a tempo?

**Answer:** I'm not a big fan of this move, which obligingly cedes a tempo to Black. But it is played, even today by top GMs, so it can't be all that bad. I would go for 7 ♖c1, 7 ♜c2 or 7 cxd5.

**7...c5**

7...dxc4 8 ♗xc4 a6, inducing 9 a4, is more accurate and only then 9...c5 10 0-0 cxd4 11 exd4, when Black reaches a more favourable version of the game, since he goaded a weakening of the b4-square.

**8 0-0 cxd4 9 exd4 dxc4 10 ♗xc4**



Tyrants, in order to subjugate, keep the masses in the dark. They burn books, along with the heretics who read them. To my mind, Botvinnik, a similar iron-fisted despot in such structures, was possibly the greatest practitioner of all time of both isolani and hanging pawns positions, inviting them all his life, especially arising from his Nimzo-Indians. If you look at his isolani/hanging pawn games from the 1920s and 30s, his opponents look like bumbling incompetents, while Botvinnik, infused with knowledge which his opponents lack, appears as a modern day GM, like Carlsen or Kramnik.

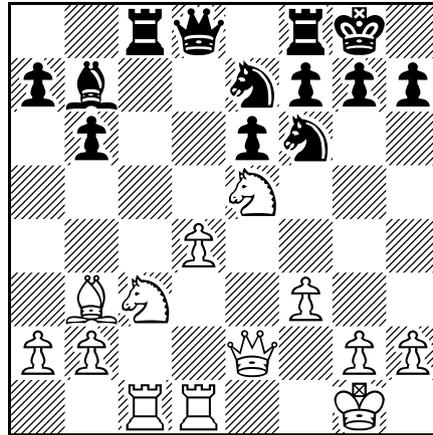
Kasparov writes that in such positions Botvinnik “disclosed virtually all their resources!” He continues: “But Botvinnik demonstrated that the activity of the pieces and the pressure in the centre more than compensate for the insignificant defect in the pawn structure.”

**10...♗b6**

Botvinnik suggested 10...a6 as Black's most accurate move here.

**11 ♗b3 ♗d7**

M.Botvinnik-A.Batuyev, Leningrad 1930, saw 11...♗bd5 12 ♗e5 ♗d7 13 ♗xe7 ♗xe7 14 ♗e2 ♗f6 15 ♗fd1 b6 16 ♗ac1 ♗b7 17 f3 ♗c8? (17...♗fd5 was necessary).



**Exercise (critical decision):** Black has just blundered. How did Botvinnik punish it?

**Answer:** Sac on f7 and force Black into a death-pin: 18 ♖xf7! ♜xf7 19 ♜xe6 ♜f8 20 ♗e4 ♜xc1?! 21 ♜xc1 ♗fd5 22 ♗d6 ♘a8 23 ♜e1 g6 24 ♗xf7 ♜xf7 25 ♜xe7! 1-0.

12 ♜d3 ♗bd5

Black should seek swaps in such isolani positions. Therefore 12...♗fd5 may be more accurate.

13 ♗e5 ♘c6 14 ♜ad1

**Question:** Why did Botvinnik avoid 14 ♗xc6 which picks up the bishop pair and also hands Black an isolani on c6?

**Answer:** This plan was tried in one game, D.Breder-R.Fridman, German League 2005. After 14...♗xc6, Black reinforces d5 with a strong grip. This plus the fact that White's e5-knight, a dangerous attacker, may be the superior piece was probably why Botvinnik rejected the idea, and I believe rightly so.

14...♗b4 15 ♜h3 ♘d5 16 ♗xd5 ♗bxd5?!

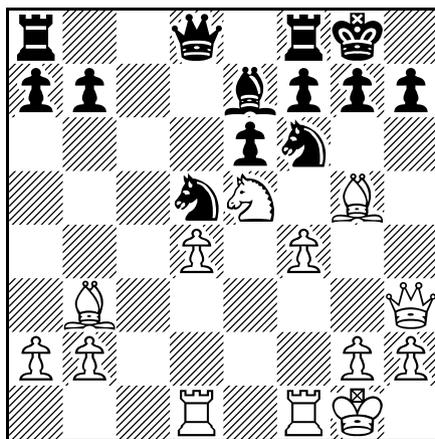
The knight moves out of his jurisdiction and holds little authority where he stands. This natural yet inaccurate move allows Botvinnik an attacking build-up on the kingside. Vidmar should have played 16...♗fxd5!. This minor yet significant emendation helps free Black's game.

**Question:** But with this recapture doesn't Black also move a defender away from his king and leave his b4-knight dangling on the queenside?

**Answer:** I prefer White after 17 ♘d2 ♗c6! (the wayward b4-knight comes back into play) 18

♙c2 g6 19 ♙h6 ♖e8 20 ♗f3 ♙f6, but Black's position is not so bad, and certainly infinitely better than what he got in the game.

**17 f4!**



From this point on, Botvinnik intersperses direct threats with strengthening manoeuvres.

**17...♖c8**

**Question:** I realize 17...g6 weakens, but isn't it necessary for Black to halt f4-f5 - ?

**Answer:** The trouble is that it fails tactically to 18 ♙h6 ♖e8 19 ♙a4, winning the exchange. *Houdini* thinks the thematic 19 f5! is even stronger.

**18 f5!**

Botvinnik massages his once rigid structure into relaxed pliability.

**18...exf5?**

Vidmar grossly underestimates the explosive potential to White's game. He had to try 18...♗d6.

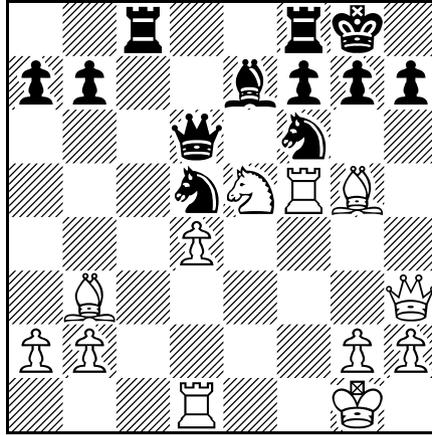
**19 ♖xf5**

The old black king's joints begin to ache from the inclement weather. White's rook looms ominously and pressures d5, f6 and f7, all tender points in Black's camp.

**19...♗d6**

19...♖c7 was better, but even then Black is busted after 20 ♖df1, and if 20...♗d6 then 21 ♗xf7! ♖xf7 22 ♙xd5.

Clearly, White prepares to make trouble on the kingside, yet the piece destined to perform the dirty deed for now remains shrouded in anonymity. Black just blundered in an already busted position. A hearing is convened and the sentence harsh.



**Exercise (combination alert):** How did Botvinnik exploit Black's last move?

**Answer:** Deflection/discovered attack. Force Black into multiple, deadly pins.

**20** ♖xf7!

Now White's forces dance with facile ease to the music of Botvinnik's desires.

**20...** ♖xf7

To negotiate successfully, one must first possess something of value the other side desires – a something Black utterly lacks. Vidmar can do nothing but glumly await the further deterioration of his once sound position.

**21** ♗xf6!

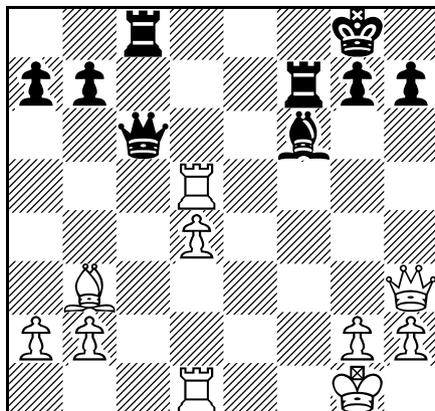
Undermining the defender of d5.

**21...** ♗xf6

21... ♖xf6 22 ♖xf6! exploits Black's dangling rook on c8.

**22** ♖xd5 ♕c6

One winces at the thought of Black's position. That's a lot of past sin to expiate. Black's queen backs off, exhaling reproachfully, while his king, precious little life left in him with such grievous threats pending, now comes to the awful realization that his so-called protectors are worthless. Some murmur prayers, while others lie around drunk.



Black's game reeks of unpunished strategic crimes, mainly imputed upon multiple underestimations of White's power, as his seemingly endless initiative flows unpunctuated and without resistance.

**Exercise (combination alert):** How did Botvinnik finish the job energetically?

**Answer:** Overload, since c8 again hangs if the offered rook is taken. "This unnatural abomination is not by God's design!" rails Black's queen at the offending rook, who floats to d6 as if propelled by dark magic.

**23 ♖d6!**

Note that 23 ♜c5?? fails miserably to 23...♙xd4+!

**23...♚e8**

23...♚xd6 24 ♜xc8+ ♜f8 25 ♜xb7 ends the matter as well.

**24 ♜d7 1-0**

Black's queen and king curse White's forces in one language, then plead for mercy in another.

If all the games I annotated were this simple, my job would be so much easier! Vidmar was a strong GM, yet appeared crudely inept in comparison with Botvinnik. It felt like the skill gap widened as the game went on. Even top GMs of Botvinnik's day recognized their own marked inferiority – which was almost shouted out – in comparison to Botvinnik in his prime. Such was his dominance from 1936 to the early 1950s.

*Game 22*  
**A.Alekhine-M.Botvinnik**  
Nottingham 1936  
*Sicilian Defence*

Botvinnik acquitted himself well in his showdown against the reigning world cham-

pion, and at the height of Alekhine's powers. Alekhine himself wrote: "Botvinnik's wonderful achievement in Nottingham confirms that he is the most probable candidate for the title of world champion."

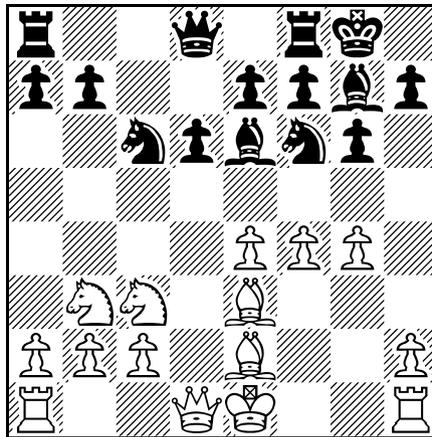
1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 g6

The obscure (for 1936) Dragon Sicilian apparently didn't come as a surprise to the heavily prepared Alekhine, perhaps Botvinnik's only equal in the opening phase of the game.

6 ♙e2

Alekhine would surely have jumped aboard the popular attacking set-up 6 ♙e3 ♙g7 7 f3 0-0 8 ♖d2, had it been invented at the time.

6...♙g7 7 ♙e3 ♘c6 8 ♘b3 ♙e6 9 f4 0-0 10 g4!?



In space, an object may generate incredible speed in the absence of friction's resistance. Botvinnik occasionally took on calculated risks; Alekhine, on the other hand, simply loved to gamble. It may be that Alekhine's brain had a curious defect: an enlarged lobe which controlled aggression. So to advise him to calm down would be belated and unheeded council. Here we see a brazen attempt by the world champion to put the young upstart in his place. (Unfortunately for Alekhine, Botvinnik's place at Nottingham was a tie for first with Capa!)

**Question:** The risk entailed in White's lunge feels disproportionately burdensome to the dreamed-of rewards, and it looks borderline unsound. Is it playable?

**Answer:** A crime in one society may be an honourable deed in another. I don't trust it under the theory: an attack must be comprised of more than just elemental will; there must exist an underlying strategic basis as well – a basis which I fail to identify in this position. But saying this, believe it or not, White's stats are quite reasonable after 10 g4! and it is still played by GMs today, so it must be sound or, if failing that, borderline sound.

10...d5

*Principle: Counter in the centre when attacked on the wing.* A logical temporary pawn

sac. Botvinnik hopes to deny Alekhine the attack to which he feels entitled. Botvinnik quickly adapts to the rapidly altering circumstances swirling about the centre. Now the combination of Alekhine's lust for adventure, mingled with Botvinnik's itch for counterplay tears a giant hole in the position's equanimity.

Alternatively, 10...♖c8 has scored well for Black; e.g. 11 f5 ♗d7 12 g5 ♘e8 13 0-0, M.Bartel-R.Wojtaszek, Wroclaw 2010, and here I would try 13...♗xc3! (a theoretical novelty) 14 bxc3 ♗g7.

**Question:** Are you serious? Black just gave up his powerful dark-squared bishop.

**Answer:** The reason I suggest giving it up, in order to damage the opposing structure, is that White's g-pawn sits on g5, blocking access to h6. I actually prefer Black's chances here, but please don't send me an angry Facebook message if you try my suggestion and get mated!

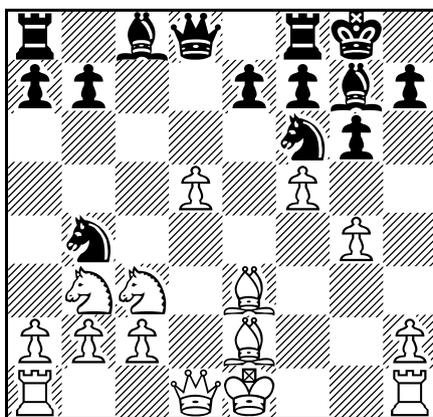
**11 f5**

Surging forward and knocking off a defender of d5.

**Question:** Isn't 11 e5 better, to keep the centre closed?

**Answer:** It isn't so closed after 11...d4! 12 ♖xd4 (12 exf6? ♗xf6 favours Black) 12...♗xd4 13 ♗xd4, and now in G.Levenfish-M.Botvinnik, Moscow 1936, Black pulled an overload combination with 13...♗xg4! and attained the slightly better position.

**11...♗c8 12 exd5 ♗b4**



**13 d6!?**

Alekhine's novelty.

**Question:** Why did Alekhine return the pawn?

**Answer:** He hoped to disrupt the flow of Black's initiative, and there is no way to hang on to the material anyway. For example:

a) 13 f3 g6 14 f3 has occurred four times and no one found 14...xg4! (a novelty) 15 xg4 xg4 16 xg4 xc2+ 17 f2 xa1 18 xa1 xc3 19 bxc3 xd5. I'm not exactly sure whose king is in greater danger, but I like Black's chances in this wild position.

b) 13 f3 g6 14 a3 f4 15 g2 a6 16 d3, intending to castle long next move, as in R.J.Fischer-S.Reshevsky, New York/Los Angeles (2nd matchgame) 1961, is the usual choice nowadays, when White looks like he has enough for a pawn.

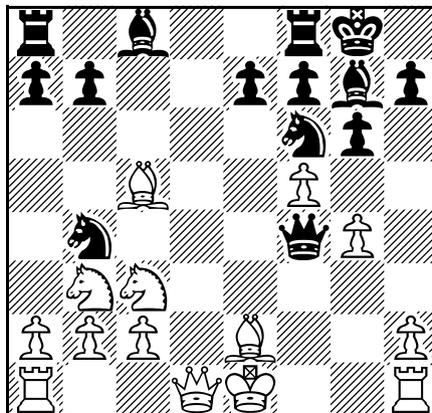
### 13...xd6

Botvinnik claimed 13...exd6 was unplayable but *Houdini* disagrees and offers 14 a3 e8! 15 g5 (certainly not 15 d2?? xg4! or 15 f2? xg4! 16 axb4 xf2 17 xf2 h4+ 18 g1 xf5 and White's exposed king spells big trouble) 15...c6 and it's anybody's game.

### 14 c5

The bishop looms menacingly, the same way I do when a student dares to yawn loudly during a chess lesson. The alternative is the crazy line 14 xd6 exd6 15 0-0-0 e8 16 g5 xa2+! 17 xa2 xe2 18 xd6 e8 19 d8 h6 20 d1 e5 21 e1 xe1+ 22 xe1 hxg5 23 xe8+ h7, when Black may be okay since he unravels with ...b7-b6 and ...b7.

### 14...f4



The queen continues to sow agitation. Black can also try 14...xd1+ 15 xd1 c6 16 g5 d7 17 f6 exf6! (Botvinnik suggests the inferior 17...h8) 18 xf8 xf8 19 gxf6 xf6, when his pawn and bishop pair give him more than enough compensation for the exchange.

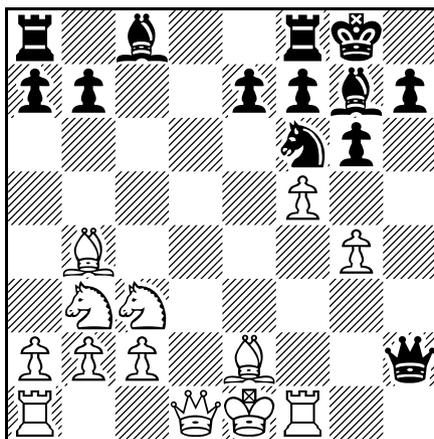
### 15 f1!

The rook hopes to circumvent the black queen's authority.

**Question:** Doesn't Black lack the funds to subsidize his expensive war? Now his queen can't cover the knight on b4.

**Answer:** This had been foreseen by Botvinnik. Play on!

15... ♖xh2 16 ♙xb4



If an assassin's target is one saturated in power, my advice is: don't miss. The creditors seize Black's assets, now in a state of arrears, on the queenside. But fortune is a fickle companion in times of confusion. Botvinnik had foreseen this position and had accurately calculated it to a forced draw. The possibilities appear as shifting shadows of leaves dancing in the sunlight.

**Exercise (critical decision):** Find the correct idea and work out Botvinnik's sequence. Black to play and force a draw:

**Answer:** Sac a second piece.

16... ♖xg4!

Through dark powers the shaman, in death, transfers his spirit into the body of the black queen, who rises to take up the battle once again. Botvinnik actuates the final lunge at White's king – not enough to kill, but enough to neutralize. With the sac he tears away the fabric of Alekhine's king's shelter, now exposed to the elements. The move order 16... ♖g3+ 17 ♖f2 ♖xg4! works too.

17 ♙xg4 ♖g3+ 18 ♖f2

The rook block is forced and a perpetual check ensues.

18... ♖g1+ 19 ♖f1 ♖g3+ 20 ♖f2 ♖g1+ ½-½

This game, like a sudden thunderstorm, erupts, rages for only a few minutes and, just as suddenly, subsides.