

Masterpieces and Dramas of the Soviet Championships

Volume II (1938-1947)

Sergey Voronkov

Masterpieces and Dramas of the Soviet Championships: Volume II (1938-1947)

Author: Sergey Voronkov

Translated from the Russian by Alexei Zakharov

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov (www.elkov.ru)

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Front cover: Berlin, 1946. Soviet chess players outside the Reichstag on their way to the historic tournament in Groningen.

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(for the 64 newspaper), it didn't affect the precision of evaluations and lines.

No. 138. King's Gambit C31

Keres – Lilienthal

Leningrad – Moscow 1941, round 19

Annotated by P. Keres

1.e4 e5 2.f4. Again, the King's Gambit in a serious tournament game! As I've pointed out numerous times, I consider this opening to be as good as any other.

2...d5 3.exd5 e4 4.d3 exd3?

In the 12th Soviet Championship, Petrovs played 4...♖f6 5.♗d2 exd3 6.♙xd3 ♖xd5? and quickly lost (*see game 122*). Lilienthal, trying to avoid this line, chose another system, but, unfortunately, it wasn't the best either. He should have played like in the above line, but improving on it with 6...♗xd5.

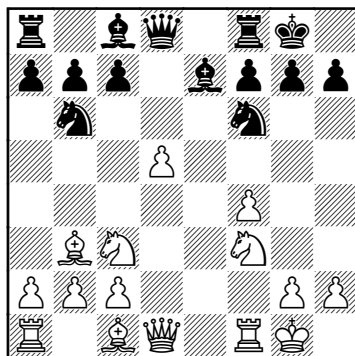
The move 4...exd3 had a good reputation: before Lilienthal, black had won four games out of five in this line (Marshall won three and Vidmar one), with only A. Rabinovich losing to Alekhine.

5.♙xd3 ♗f6. 5...♖xd5 doesn't work due to 6.♗c3 ♙b4 (6...♖xg2? 7.♙e4!) 7.♙d2 ♙xc3 (7...♖e6+!? 8.♖e2 ♗f6) 8.♖e2+ and ♙xc3, with an advantage for white.

6.♗c3 ♙e7 (6...♗xd5 7.♙b5+!) **7.♗f3 0-0 8.0-0 ♗bd7 9.♙c4.** The simplest. White defends his extra pawn and retains a better position, because he controls all the central

squares. Black's opening structure is refuted.

9...♗b6 10.♙b3.



10...a5. A waste of time, because white could have countered the threat of the advancing pawn with 11.a3! The immediate 10...♙b4 was the best counterchance. This could be met, for instance, with 11.♖d3 (11.♖d4 c5!! 12.dxc6 ♖xd4+ 13.♗xd4 ♙c5 – *Botvinnik*) 11...♙xc3 12.♖xc3 ♗bxd5 13.♖d4 with good play and the bishop pair. 11.♗e5 is also strong.

I found some funny nonsense in a monograph The King's Gambit (1988) by I. Glazkov and Y. Estrin. Here's their note to the move 10...♙b4: "This position occurred in the game Keres – Lilienthal (Moscow 1941), and after 11.♗e5 ♙xc3 12.bxc3 ♗bxd5 13.♙a3 ♖e8 14.♖d4 c6 15.f5, white got a clear advantage." First of all, this was not of course played in the game, and, secondly, the position is completely equal, for instance: 15...♖c7 16.♖ae1 b6! 17.♗xc6 ♖xc6 18.♙xd5 ♗xd5 19.♖xd5 ♙b7 etc.

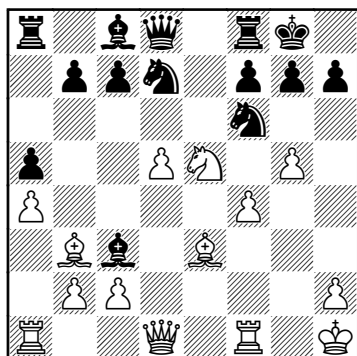
11.a4 ♖c5+. What does this check accomplish? If black wanted to develop his bishop to f5, he should have done this immediately; but 11...♙b4 was better, getting some counterplay.

12.♙h1 ♖f5 (12...♘g4 13.♘e4) 13.♘e5 ♖b4. Black is finally convinced that attacking the d5 pawn is necessary. But he's already lost several important tempi.

14.g4! ♖c8? Illogical, because black just admits that his last few moves were bad. The continuation 14...♙xc3 15.gxf5 ♖b4 16.c4 wasn't too pleasant for him either, but still, it was relatively better.

15.♙e3 ♘bd7. Of course, not 15...♙xc3 16.bxc3 ♘bxd5 due to 17.♙c5 and g4-g5 (or 16...♘fxd5 17.♙c5 ♖e8 18.♙xb6! – Riumin).

16.g5 ♙xc3.



17.bxc3. Here, white probably missed a good opportunity. I decided against 17.gxf6 because of 17...♘xe5 18.fxg7 ♖e8 19.bxc3 ♘g4 with counterchances for black, but it seems that it was possible to end the

game rather quickly: 19.fxe5! ♙xe5 20.♚h5 led to a fast win because of the catastrophe on f7. The game move, however, is not bad either.

The computer prefers 17.gxf6!

17...♘e4 18.d6. White mistakenly goes for material gain, losing his promising attack in the process. He should have played 18.♚h5 ♘d6 19.♙d4 and then bolstered the attack with ♖f3 or ♘g4.

But instead of 18...♘d6?, the correct move is 18...♘dc5!, not fearing to lose an exchange after 19.♙c4 ♙f5 20.d6 ♘xd6 21.♙xc5 ♘xc4 22.♙xf8 ♘xe5 23.fxe5 ♚d5+ 24.♙g1 ♖xf8! The computer considers 18.♙c4! ♘dc5 (18...♘d6 19.♙d3) 19.f5! the best move.

18...♘xe5? Lilienthal missed a great opportunity to save the game with an exchange sacrifice: 18...♘xd6 19.g6 hxg6 20.♘xg6 ♘f6! 21.♘xf8 ♙f5! Black would have some serious compensation for the exchange – the white king is exposed. White could probably still win with correct play, but only after a struggle, which he had to begin anew.

In the tournament book, Botvinnik “improved” the line with 20...♚e8 21.♘xf8 ♚xe3 “with some counterchances”, missing the lethal 21.♚h5!.

19.fxe5. Black resigned; maybe it was too premature, but still reasonable, because white threatens ♖xf7. For instance, after 19...cxd6, white wins with 20.♖xf7 ♖xf7 21.♚d5 and the subsequent ♖f1 or

(after ♖d7) e5-e6. There's no good defense for black, because 19... ♗xg5 doesn't work either due to 20. ♙xg5 and d6-d7.

In the first line, the winning move is 21. ♙xf7+ (21. ♖d5? ♖d7!=) 21... ♗xf7 22. ♖d5+ ♙e6 23. ♗f1+!

Smyslov's Favorite Move

This outstanding victory is the only match tournament game that Smyslov included in his game collections. Maybe because this game effectively decided third place: it was played in the penultimate round, with the opponents on equal points... The annotations of the 20 year-old youngster in 64 show that Smyslov didn't immediately embrace the pointedly laconic style characteristic of his later works.

No. 139. French Defense C19

Smyslov – Boleslavsky

Leningrad – Moscow 1941, round 19

Annotated by V. Smyslov

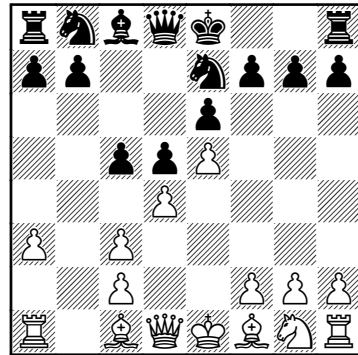
1.e4 e6.

I found an incredible passage in the aforementioned Romanovsky manuscript:

"The tournament bulletin (No. 4) states that the Moscow player supposedly joked that the French Defense is a losing opening for black. It's probably not true, but Smyslov doesn't hide his negative opinion of this opening, saying that it's gradually losing popularity. This is the young Smyslov's opinion, and I think that the

bulletin's authors' trying to pass it off as a joke was unnecessary. This fact can be easily explained. Our chess press is currently headed by people who are used to thinking 'within the rules', by the pattern once set. So, everything that doesn't fit their strong opinions and concepts seems just a joke for them. I can almost hear them saying 'You're joking, right?' when their ears and eyes hear or see something new, fresh, beyond their scope. Stiff routine followers! I want to tell them so much, 'Move aside; don't interfere with the creative thinking of our youth...'"

**2.d4 d5 3. ♗c3 ♙b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3
♙xc3+ 6.bxc3 ♗e7.**



The starting position for numerous lines of research. The trade of black's king's bishop has led to a weakening of his dark squares. This will be especially noticeable if the white bishop moves to a3. The question is, should white play 7.a4 immediately, or settle for the calm 7. ♗f3 ? Without thorough practical testing, it's hard to

answer. At any rate, if white allows a queenside blockade, he should go for maximizing his chances on the kingside. It's possible that the position allows two interpretations, both of them beneficial for white. The maneuver ♖a5-a4 doesn't look dangerous, because using the queen for a blockade hardly makes sense.

Smyslov hesitated here because he had played 7.♗f3 against Botvinnik and lost that game (later, Tolush would play this move against Botvinnik twice – see game 167). Against Boleslavsky, who also stubbornly played this system with black at the match tournament, 7.♗f3 was also used by his opponents, but he, like Botvinnik, answered with the blockading maneuver ♖a5-a4. And then Keres played 7.a4 – the first ever try with this move, according to Megabase! However, after 7...♖a5 8.♙d2 c4 9.g3 ♙d7 10.♙h3 ♗bc6, Boleslavsky easily equalized. The second player who ventured to play 7.a4 was Smyslov...

7.a4. *This move became such an integral part of Smyslov's opening arsenal that Botvinnik even stated erroneously in Analytical and Critical Works that "the pawn advance a3-a4 on move 7 was probably first used by Smyslov in a game against me in 1944." Later, Fischer liked to play this move too, calling 7.a4 "Smyslov's favorite move"...*

7...♖a5 8.♖d2 ♗bc6 9.♗f3 c4? After this move, white's advantage increases; he shouldn't fear any complications in the center. However,

the exchange 9...cxd4 10.cxd4 ♖xd2+ 11.♙xd2, preventing 11...♗a5, also gives white better chances. 9...♙d7 was preferable here.

10.g3 0-0 11.♙g2 f6. *"This move is a part of the "Boleslavsky system", and it's necessary, because black can't allow the pawn to retain such a dominant position."* (Romanovsky)

12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.0-0. The opening was good for white. He has a space advantage and a convenient target to attack – the backward e6 pawn.

13...♙d7 14.♙a3 ♖e8 15.♗h4 ♗c8. 15...♗f5, trading the h4 knight, was preferable here.

16.f4 ♗6e7 17.♗fb1. Played to bolster and stabilize the queenside. Black can't create any counterplay and has to go on the defensive.

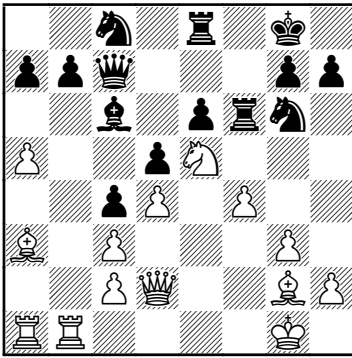
"This approach is very characteristic of Smyslov: first, immobilize the flank where his opponent may create counterplay, and only then go for the main operations." (Romanovsky)

17...♖c7 18.a5 ♙c6. The attempt 18...♗c6 didn't bring any relief. After 19.a6 b6 20.f5 exf5 21.♙xd5+ ♖h8 22.♖e1, the position opens up, which is better for white because of his bishop pair.

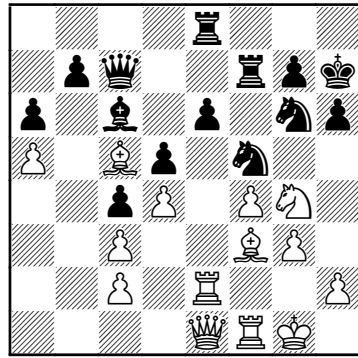
20...♗8e7! = is a stronger move, not giving away the important d5 pawn (21.fxe6 ♙xe6). So, 18...♗c6! was actually necessary.

19.♗f3. The knight has played his role on h4 and now gets transferred to a great position in the center.

19...♖g6 20.♘e5!



26...♔h7 27.♖f1 ♕c7 28.♖e1.



20...♗ce7.

“Indecisive!”

Botvinnik admonishes. “After 20...♗xe5 21.fxe5 ♖f7 22.♖f1 ♖xf1+ 23.♖xf1 ♕xa5 24.♗b4 ♕c7, black has nothing to fear.” In Selected Games, Smyslov delicately, without referring to the author, refuted this line by adding just one more move – 25.♖f4 with the threat ♖f8+! (25...h6 26.♗f3 and ♗h5 “with a decisive strengthening of the attack”).

21.♗c5 a6 22.♗g4. White has stabilized the queenside and is now planning to attack the kingside. First, he puts pressure on the e6 pawn.

22...♖f7 23.♖e1 ♗f5 24.♖e2 h6 25.♖ae1 ♕c8. 25...♗d7 doesn't work due to 26.♗xd5. The line 25...♖xa5 26.♖xe6 ♖xe6 27.♖xe6 also gives white the advantage.

26.♗f3. This move frees up the g2 square for the rook, intending to create the threat of moving the bishop to h5 and preparing the pawn advance h2-h4-h5, subsequently gaining space.

White has concentrated all his forces on the kingside. 28...♖xa5 is again bad for black: 29.♖xe6 ♖xe6 30.♖xe6, with white pieces invading; retreating the queen to c8 is probably not pleasant for anyone. So, only the game move remains.

28...♗f8. Botvinnik thought that “after 28...♖d7 29.h4h5 30.♗h2 ♕h6 31.♖d2 ♖f6 32.g4 hxg4 33.♗xg4+ ♕h7 34.♗xf6+ gxf6, black still had counterchances”. Smyslov (again, without trying to polemicize!) objected, showing the line 29.♗f2 ♗f8 30.♗h5 g6 31.♗f3, “threatening ♗g4-e5, and if 31...h5, then 32.♗h3, exploiting the weakening of black's pawn chain.”

The electronic referee chose Botvinnik's line because it... leads to a faster win! After 31.♖g2! (instead of 31.♖d2), the h5 pawn cannot be protected: 31...♖c7 32.♖e2, or if 31...♗h8(f8), then 32.♗xh5 ♕xh5 33.g4+ or 32.g4 hxg4 33.♗xg4+ and ♗e5.

29.♗e5 ♖f6 30.g4 ♗d6 31.♖g3 ♗f7. Black cannot save the game

with other moves either (31...♘e4 32.♙xe4+ dxe4 33.♘xc4, not fearing 33...♙b5 because of 34.♘d6). White will always find an opportunity for a pawn breakthrough.

32.g5 ♘xe5 (this sacrifice is forced because of the threat 33.g6+) **33.gxf6 ♘xf3+ 34.♙xf3 gxf6 35.f5!** This move leads to a quick win.

35...♙xg3+ 36.♙xg3 e5 37.♙eg2 ♘d7. Escaping the mate in three, the black king gets caught in a different mating net instead.

38.♙g7+ ♙h8 39.♙7g6 ♙h7 40.♙a3 exd4 41.♙c1! Black resigned.

Outwitting Himself

Ilyin-Zhenevsky: “This original opening hadn’t occurred in serious tournament practice for almost a hundred years. Lilienthal’s attempt to resurrect the long-buried opening from the ancient darkness was, of course, bold, but it didn’t bring him victory.”

After losing to Boleslavsky in the first leg, Lilienthal decided to confuse him in the opening, but ultimately... outwitted himself! The game was pretty good – and this was the only game annotated by Boleslavsky in the press (for *Shakhmaty v SSSR*).

No. 140. Elephant Gambit C40

Boleslavsky – Lilienthal

Leningrad – Moscow 1941, round 8

Annotated by I. Boleslavsky

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d5. This move is rejected by theory, and it’s unlikely

that anyone will breathe new life into it. At any rate, that didn’t happen in this game.

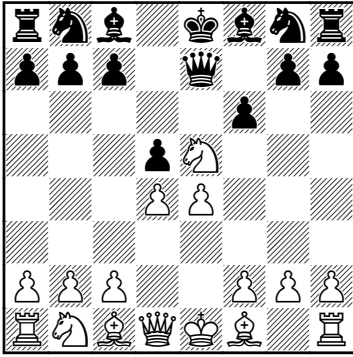
“Trying to ‘catch’ Boleslavsky in this old line is naive at the very least, because Boleslavsky is an expert on piece play. He, of course, didn’t know the ‘theory’ of this line, and this only helped him.” (Botvinnik)

3.♘xe5 ♙e7. 3...♙d6 is stronger here. Even though the game move is recommended in *Modern Openings (the Soviet Handbuch, edited by Levenfish and published in 1940)*, it cannot be good because it contradicts the principles of development.

4.d4 f6. *The mystery behind this move was uncovered by Lilienthal only late in his life, in the article “Champion Non Grata” (Shakhmatnaya Nedelya No. 17, April 2003):*

“Why did I make such an idiotic move as 4...f6?? The thing is, the Minsk master Gavriil Veresov visited me during the tournament. Before the game with Boleslavsky, I asked him, “Tell me please what should I play against Isaak? He’s one of the best theoreticians. He’ll likely play 1.e2-e4, what should I do?” And Veresov recommended 4...f6, because it would ‘be a surprise’ for Boleslavsky the theoretician. But the only thing that I got from this move was an ignominious loss.

Veresov died long ago. Gavriil, I’m sorry that I discussed your advice publicly. Rest in peace. Your friend Andre.”



5. ♖d3! The correct move, transferring the knight to f4. The *Modern Openings* recommendation 5. ♖f3 dxe4 6. ♖fd2 (based on the most “recent” game in this line, Jaenisch – Petrov 1844) is weaker – the white knight’s position is not too good.

5...dxe4 6. ♖f4 ♕f7? After this move, the game cannot be saved. It was better to play 6...♗f5 with the subsequent ♖c6 and 0-0-0, but even in this case white’s position is much better.

Botvinnik recommended 6...f5 7. ♗c4 ♖f6, “and black can hold”. Still, all this only contains scholastic value: it’s highly unlikely that someone will follow Lilienthal’s line...

7. ♖d2 ♗f5 8.g4! Immediately determining the bishop’s position: black either has to weaken the important e6 square or give up the e4 pawn. He preferred the former.

8...♗g6 9. ♗c4 ♕d7 10. ♕e2. Winning a pawn with 10. ♖xg6 and ♖xe4 was a very small achievement



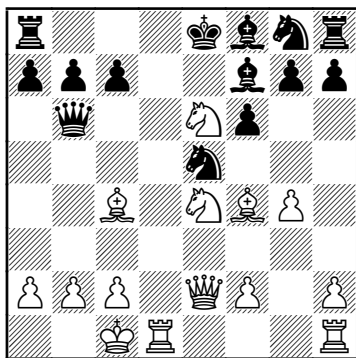
The paradoxes of the match tournament: Boleslavsky crushed Lilienthal (3.5–0.5), Lilienthal routed Bondarevsky (3.5–0.5), and Bondarevsky destroyed Boleslavsky (3–1)! On the photo by B. Vdovenko: Boleslavsky’s game against Lilienthal in the 1940 Soviet Championship. To the left – Levenfish is watching.

for such a position, and so I chose a different way to convert my advantage. Now white threatens 11.♖xg6 and ♜xe4+. And so, Lilienthal decides to capture the d4 pawn.

10...♜xd4 11.♖e6 ♜b6. After 11...♜e5, white had an immediate win with 12.♖b3, threatening ♜f4 (or 12.f4! – Blumenfeld).

12.♖xe4 ♖d7 13.♜f4. White isn't tempted by the opportunity to use the open e-file immediately – he first decides to bring out his last reserves to land the decisive blow.

13...♖e5 14.0-0-0 ♜f7.



15.♖4g5! “Very elegant! Because of the threat 16.♖xf7, black is forced to capture on g5, which opens the e-file.” (Botvinnik)

15...fxg5 16.♜xe5 ♜xe6 17.♜xc7! Black resigned: he either gets checkmated or loses his queen.

The overall score was disastrous for the grandmaster: 0.5–3.5! Annotating the fourth leg game between the same opponents, Botvinnik remarked melancholically, “Boleslavsky

probably influenced Lilienthal in some ‘magical’ way...”

Pinpoint Preparation

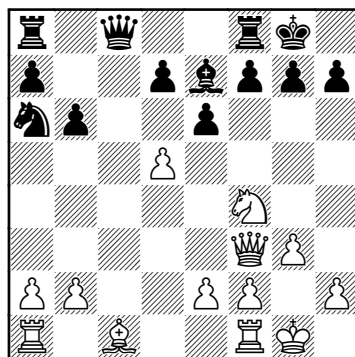
Keres: “This win by Lilienthal impressed me especially. Not only because I was on the losing side. If I was an outside observer, an objective spectator, I would have said the same thing: this, without a doubt, was a great creative achievement by the Moscow grandmaster.”

No. 141

Lilienthal – Keres

Leningrad–Moscow 1941, round 4

Annotated by A. Lilienthal



15...♜c2! Up until now, we had followed the 13th game of the Euwe – Keres match (1940). Keres played 15...e5 there, and Euwe sacrificed a pawn with 16.d6, even though he got nothing in return. Of course, it's not obligatory to sacrifice the pawn. 16.♖d3 or 16.♖g2 was good enough. The game move was a significant improvement by Keres.



Paul Keres and Andre Lilienthal during their third-leg game, the position before 6.♘f3. From V. Dvorkovich's archive.

The Living and the Dead

13th Soviet Championship: Moscow, 21st May – 17th June 1944

“It was a horrible time,
and only those whose spirit was not broken
managed to survive with their morals intact.”
G. Vishnevskaya, *Galina. A Life History*

This championship was scheduled for August 1941, with almost half of the line-up consisting of grandmasters. All six participants of the match tournament for the title of Soviet Absolute Champion received personal invitations: Botvinnik, Smyslov, Keres, Lilienthal, Boleslavsky and Bondarevsky, in addition to Kotov and Levenfish. There were 44 candidates for the remaining eight spots (including 37 masters!), who descended on Rostov-on-Don in the middle of June that year to determine who were the most worthy to fight for the highest title in the crucible of four semi-finals. The first round started on 15th June. However, the tournaments remained unfinished: in the very midst of the chess battles, a real war started, with Hitler launching the invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, on 22nd June, and the 13th championship was only held three long years later...

Master **Nikolai Golovko**, medical service colonel, recalled:

“The sunny green streets of the southern city. Mellow June evenings. The brightly-lit Sadovaya Street with a talkative crowd of smiling, smartly dressed people. Huge halls of a club (which now host the Musical Comedy Theater). And 23 chess tables, cordoned off from the lively, pushy Rostov chess fans.

All the cream of the crop of the pre-war chess youth had gathered there. The Rostov crowd favorite, tall, slender Mark Stolberg in huge horn-rimmed glasses and a new army uniform. During the championship, Stolberg was drafted into the army, but, at the request of local chess officials, remained temporarily in Rostov, at one of the garrison bases (*in fact, he was drafted in November 1940 and sent to the 9th artillery platoon of the Don division, stationed in Rostov; according to an eyewitness, he played “in the uniform of a Red Army private, wearing boots with puttees”*)... There were considerable expectations placed on the 17 year-old Kiev master David Bronstein, the Lvov champion E. Gerstenfeld, the very strong Moscow candidate master A. Eltsov and others. The youth was put to the test by such experienced masters as Ragozin,

Rabinovich, Makogonov, Lisitsin, Belavenets, Chekhover, Ilyin-Zhenevsky, Mikenas, Dubinin, Alatortsev, Tolush, Panov...

But the tournament never ended.

The next round is soon to be played, but will it be played? Many people are on the street. Everyone repeats the same word: war. I meet master Belavenets downtown. Sergei Vsevolodovich, usually calm and collected, is clearly anxious. "Nobody is interested in the tournament anymore. The games probably won't be played today. They say that Makogonov had already left," he said, then paused and added sadly, "I've got a feeling that I will not return from this war."

...The arbiters started the clocks in the tournament hall. They were ticking peacefully, even though they were already counting war time. The halls were so sad and empty... Players' hands over one board had even frozen together in a long parting handshake. My heart sank. I felt a sharp desire to say goodbye to everyone, literally every one of these people who had become even closer to me. I quickly walked around all the tables, shaking hands with my friends and comrades..." (64, No. 1, 1968.)

Botvinnik thought that "the Soviet chess school wasn't weakened during the war, and even improved from the creative point of view". Indeed, chess life was very active back then. Despite the tough situation at the front, tournaments including city championships were held, with grandmasters and masters playing, such as in Kuibyshev, Sverdlovsk and Moscow. In Averbakh's opinion, the 1943/44 Moscow Championship, featuring an extremely strong line-up, "essentially served as the national championship". Tournament bulletins were printed. *Ogonyok* and *Vechernaya Moskva* still sported chess columns. Even the chess department of VOKS, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, published the English-language monthly magazine *Soviet Chess Chronicle* (there was also a Russian version at first) – and on good paper to boot. Some issues were even printed on coated paper!

Boris Vainstein listed these achievements in an interview he gave me. He'd managed to reactivate the All-Union Chess Section in April 1942, and remained the editor of *Soviet Chess Chronicle* up until the magazine's closure in summer 1946, a full year after his resignation from the section chairman's post. Then he added, "In the end, I only want one thing: for chess players to remember me for the fact that we only lost a few masters on the battlefields during the war – Belavenets, Stolberg, M. Makogonov, Kaiev. There was no other area of culture that managed to safeguard its talent pool so well! Yes, the Leningrad master Vasilyev was severely wounded, too.

And Grandmaster Petrovs was imprisoned.” (*Shakhmatny Vestnik*, No. 8–9, 1993.)

The circumstances of Stolberg’s death were described many years later by **David Bubnievsky**, who served in the same regiment. Rather than going “missing in action” on 16th May 1942 while crossing the Kerch Strait in the evacuation from Crimea to get to the Caucasus bank, he died shortly before that, immediately after his regiment disembarked from boats near Kerch in Crimea after being sent there from Novorossiysk. On arrival, they were raked by German gunfire: “Chess master Mark Stolberg from Rostov was killed in the very first minutes. Nurse Ludmila Serdyuk ran to him, thinking that he was wounded. Alas, the little volume of Lermontov that he always carried was bloodied, and his eyes were staring into the sky.” (*Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, New York, 14th June 1996.) Later, in a conversation with Mark’s nephew Yuri Dreizin, the author confessed

that he “fibbed a little bit”: it was actually Schiller’s poetry, not Lermontov. And this little detail confirmed that he indeed spoke the truth – in one of the letters Mark sent from Novorossiysk to his sister, he wrote, “Klara! Read *Mary Stuart* by Schiller!” I found all this online, in Arkady Bushkov’s article *Chess. Rostov. History and Modernity... Mark Stolberg (part 5)*.



An appeal from the last issue of the 64 newspaper, dated 25th June 1941. It says “Be proud, be glad, join the ranks of the Red Army”, with “For the motherland! For Stalin!” adorning the flag. The publication of *Shakhmaty v SSSR* magazine also stopped in June...

In 2015, the site e3e5.com published poems about the Rostov semi-finals from **A. Model’s** archive (I don’t know whether they were printed before). The following excerpt contains the names of five of the semi-final participants who didn’t make it, for various reasons, to see victory in the war: Ilyin-Zhenevsky, Schneideman, Stolberg, Kaiev and Silich. Even though this poem was written on 21st June and only referred to the games, albeit with military allusions, it looks like the poet had foreseen the players’ fate...

With his kingside in disarray,	And Kaiev took a beating,
The experienced Zhenevsky fell.	And three zeroes in a row were scored
Poor Schneideman perished	By Ragozin Vyacheslav Vasilyevich.
Because he chose the wrong game plan.	Only the consistent Rovner and the
In a furious, stormy fight,	strong Silich ¹²
Stolberg and Tiurn are knocked down.	Still keep calm...

Yes, if we speak solely of “combat losses” among the masters, there are indeed only a few (Vainstein only forgot to mention V. Silich). However, as Yuri Lvovich Averbakh rightfully noted in his book *What the Pieces Don't Mention*, “if we look at candidate masters and first-category players who perished in the war, there were dozens, if not hundreds of them.” I will only name the most talented of them: Georgy (Bazyia) Dzagurov, Alexander Eltsov and Boris Stanishnev were killed defending Moscow in autumn 1941, Boris Vaksberg lost his life in 1943 and Mikhail Krolyunitsky lost his in 1945. And this was not because of some vicissitudes of fate: the leaders of the chess section deemed saving the masters their main goal (in addition to organizing chess work in hospitals).

N. Zubarev, who was the head of the Sports Committee's chess department in 1943, openly said as much in the 13th championship bulletin: “In the pre-war times, the Soviet Union was, without a doubt, the leading country in the world both in popularity of chess and the number of highly-qualified chess players. So attempts to save the highly-qualified chess talent pool, developed in our country after many years of hard work, in the difficult wartime conditions were only natural. The term “saving the talent pool” included maintaining their sporting form as well. For this purpose, a number of All-Union competitions were organized...”

However, let me remind you that all this work started only in spring 1942, and many masters wound up on the front lines in 1941, when there was nobody to think about “saving the talent pool”: all the Sports Committee's chess department staff lost their lives at the beginning of the war, and the All-Union Chess Section basically dissolved after its chairman, V. German, left for the front... Still, the leading chess players (as well as other outstanding cultural and art personalities) were exempt from army service and got evacuated to faraway areas of the country. There was a telling episode in V. Makogonov's recollections:

¹² Rovner and Silich's surnames sound similar to Russian words meaning 'consistent' and 'strong'. – *Translator*



In 1942, Lieutenant Colonel Boris Vainstein, the deputy chairman of the NKVD Main Defensive Construction Department, became the chairman of the All-Union Chess Section. Being a first-category player and a passionate chess lover, the famous chess writer “Grandmaster Ferzberi”¹, he managed to revive the section, organize chess work in hospitals and stage masters tournaments. “Fertzberi” is a slight distortion of the words meaning “take the queen”. From B. Vainstein’s archive.

“As soon as I returned from Rostov, I went to the Baku recruitment office, and they told me, ‘We’ll call you when needed.’ I went there a few more times and was ultimately told, ‘You are not eligible for conscription.’ However, Mikhail (*his older brother, who lost his master’s title during the 1935 “purge”*) was mobilized. He died at Kursk in 1943.” (From the book *Vladimir Makogonov*.)

The well-known Azerbaijani coach Chapai Sultanov wrote in his book *Chess... and Not Only Chess* that Mikhail “was arrested and died in a penal battalion.” Let’s check the documents. According to the OBD Memorial site, Mikhail Makogonov was drafted in December 1941. He served as an engineer in the 195th infantry division, got promoted to senior lieutenant in August 1942 and then went missing in action in November 1942... Where did 1943 come from then? One possible version: in November 1942 Mikhail was captured, fled from captivity and, as punishment, was sent to a penal battalion and was killed at Kursk...

This raises the question: why was Sergei Belavenets – one of the country’s strongest masters, a brilliant theoretician who took third place in the 1939 Soviet Championship – conscripted into the army? Even if he showed up at the recruitment office himself? Yes, I know that this happened on 19th October, at the height of the notorious “1941 Moscow panic”, but why, of all the masters who played in that showcase tournament (Riumin, Belavenets, Yudovich, Zubarev and Blumenfeld), did only he join the voluntary corps? I sometimes think: what if this had happened because his uncle was an “enemy of the people”? (See “The Fate of ‘Uncle Kostya’” in the chapter about the 1941 match tournament.)

Still, “non-combat” casualties among the masters were high. “During the evacuation from besieged Leningrad,” Averbakh wrote, “A. Ilyin-Zhenevsky