

The Life and Games of Vasily Smyslov

Volume II The Challenger 1948-1953

Andrey Terekhov



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The Life and Games of Vasily Smyslov
Volume II: The Challenger
1948-1953
by Andrey Terekhov

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Introduction

This volume, the second in the biography of Vasily Smyslov, covers the period from spring 1948, after the world championship match-tournament, to the end of 1953, when he won the Candidates' tournament in Zürich.

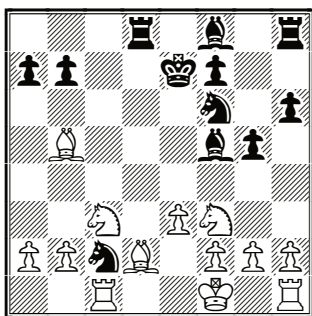
These years were marked by the intense struggle between several world-class players, such as Boleslavsky, Bronstein, Keres and Reshevsky, all fighting for the right to play a world championship match with Mikhail Botvinnik.

Smyslov's trajectory during these years was not without its ups and downs. In 1949 Smyslov became the Soviet Champion (jointly with David Bronstein), for the first and only time in his career. However, from 1950 to 1952 he hardly won any titles. At the 1950 Candidates' tournament Smyslov finished third behind Boleslavsky and Bronstein, and after that his results continued to deteriorate. In the next three Soviet championships he did not score a single medal, while Paul Keres won twice in a row (in 1950 and 1951). It seemed that Smyslov's halcyon days were already behind.

Everything changed after Joseph Stalin's death in March 1953. One could theorize whether Smyslov felt reinvigorated by the changing political climate of the country, or if it was a mere coincidence. In any case, in late 1953 he won a marathon, 30-round Candidates' tournament in Zürich, finishing two points ahead of his main rivals – Bronstein, Keres and Reshevsky.

Zürich 1953 was certainly the tournament of a lifetime for Smyslov. This victory helped to establish him as “the first among equals” and a strong challenger for the world crown.

Smyslov would spend the next four years wrestling with Botvinnik for the ultimate title, eventually becoming the seventh world chess champion in 1957. These years, which will be the subject of Volume 3, would prove to be the peak of Smyslov's chess career.



16.e4! ♖×e4

16...♗d4 17.♗×d4 ♖×d4
18.♗e3+-

17.♖×c2 ♗d6 18.♗d4!

An elegant solution. 18.♖c1? would be a terrible mistake because of 18...♗×b5 19.♗×b5 ♗d3+ and White must start all over. However, there was also a prosaic path to victory for White: 18.♗d5+ ♗e6 19.♗c7+ ♗e7 20.♖c5+-.

18...♗×b5

The point of White's last move was 18...♗×c2 19.♗d5#. A very economical mate with each square around the black king controlled by only one white piece!

19.♗×f5+ ♗f6 20.♗×b5

♗×f5 21.♗e2 Black resigned as there are no more tricks left.

(61) Smyslov – Botvinnik

19th USSR Championship

Moscow 1951

Ruy Lopez [C92]

The 19th Soviet Championship was not one of Botvinnik's finest moments. After winning the 1948 world championship, Botvinnik did not play a single tournament game until his next world

championship, a 24-game match with Bronstein in 1951. Botvinnik barely drew the match, and it became clear that he was no longer dominating the field as he did in the 1940s. Botvinnik tried to reestablish himself in the 19th USSR Championship but only finished in fifth place with 10/18.

Smyslov finished a full point ahead of Botvinnik, but that was only good for fourth place. Keres won the championship with 12 points, but of even more concern, second and third places were shared by the representatives of the "new generation," Geller and Petrosian. The recent world challenger Bronstein was further down, sharing sixth to eighth places. The Soviet (and the world!) chess scene suddenly became very crowded.

This game took place in the seventh round. In some way, it is reminiscent of the Smyslov-Botvinnik encounter in the 1944 championship, but with the roles reversed. This time it was Botvinnik who led the tournament with five points and Smyslov had 3½. However, after losing this game, Botvinnik only scored 50% points in the rest of the tournament, while Smyslov went on a spurt and even shared the lead with Geller after 12 rounds. Alas, after that Smyslov lost two games in a row and was overtaken by Keres, Geller and Petrosian.

This game might seem very simple, but it deserves careful study. Smyslov's advantage was

never really that large and, according to the engine, the evaluation did not steer far from equality until the very end. However, defending Black's position in a practical game was by no means easy. White constantly had small, but annoying pressure, which took on different forms throughout the game, but never quite disappeared. Defending such positions is like trying to extinguish a peat fire. At times it might seem that the fire is out but then the whole field is suddenly in flames.

Smyslov was a master of such "slow-burning" games. At first glance it might seem that he was simply shuffling the pieces back and forth, but he was constantly posing problems, and it took a lot of effort to withstand the pressure. Among contemporary players, the main exponent of this style is Magnus Carlsen.

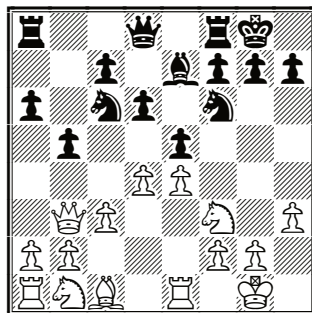
1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♞e1 b5 7.♙b3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3 ♙e6

Smyslov: "The variation characterized by 9...♙e6 belongs to the creative heritage of Chigorin. With the exchange of the light-square bishops, White's attacking chances are reduced, and the doubling of Black's pawns after 10.♙xe6 fxe6 is compensated by his initiative on the open f-file."

The ♙e6 line is only the seventh most popular move in this position. However, there are still more than 1,000 games played in this line so far. By the way, the

ninth most popular move in this position is... an agreement to a draw!

10.d4 ♙×b3 11.♙×b3



The pawn capture 11.e×b3 is just as popular and in fact Smyslov would later play it with both White and Black:

(a) 11...♙d7?! 12.d5 ♘d8 13.c4 ♘b7 14.♘c3 ♞fb8 15.c×b5! a×b5 16.♞×a8 ♞×a8 17.b4! (a standard way to lock in the knight on b7) 17...h6 18.♙d3 c6 19.d×c6 ♙×c6 20.♙×b5?! (perhaps it was better to start with 20.♘h4± ♠♘f5, as the pawn would not run away) 20...♙×b5 21.♘×b5 (Smyslov-Barcza, Bucharest 1953) and here Black could get some compensation by playing 21...♞b8 22.♙d2 ♘d8 23.♘a3 ♘c6 24.♘c2±, making it difficult for White to convert his extra pawn.

(b) 11...♙b8 12.d5 ♘d8 13.♘bd2 g6 14.♘f1 ♘h5 15.g4 ♘g7 16.♙h6 f6 17.♘g3 ♘f7 18.♙e3 ♙b7 19.♙d3 c6 20.c4 c×d5 21.c×d5 ♞fc8 22.♞ec1 ♙d8± White has more space, but Smyslov carefully exchanged all the pieces and drew – Ciocâltea-Smyslov, Skopje 1969.

(c) These days Black usually starts with a pawn exchange, 11...exd4 12.cxd4, and then chooses between 12... ♖b4!? or 12...d5 13.e5 ♗e4.

11... ♖d7

The most popular continuation, but there are many other options.

Botvinnik had already played this line before. That game went 11...exd4 12.♗xd4?! (the natural 12.cxd4 is stronger) 12...♗xd4 (12...♗e5!? ♠ c5-c4) 13.cxd4 c5 14.dxc5 dxc5 15.e5 ♗d7 16.a4 c4 17.♖g3 ♖e8 18.♖d1 ♗h4 19.♖g4?! (this is risky, but White did not go for all the trouble only to bail out with 19.♖c3=) 19...♗xf2+ 20.♖xf2 ♗xe5 21.♖xd8 ♗xg4+ 22.hxg4 ♖axd8 23.axb5 axb5 Bronstein-Botvinnik, USSR (ch) 1944. Black is slightly better but the position is complex, and Bronstein managed to win in the end.

More than forty years later, Smyslov again reached this position with White and that time his opponent chose 11... ♖b8 (this move was also played by Maya Chiburdanidze in several women world championship games). Smyslov replied 12.♗g5 but after 12... ♖b6 13.dxe5?! (The paradoxical return 13.♗e3!?, exploiting the queen's vulnerable position on b6, is the best way to fight for an advantage.) 13...dxe5 14.♗bd2 ♗c5 15.♖e2 ♗h5 16.♗f1 h6 17.♗e3= the game petered out to a draw – Smyslov-Davies, Rishon LeZion 1993.

Korchnoi tried the combative 11...d5 twice. We will follow one of his games that was played already in the 21st century: 12.exd5 ♗a5 13.♖c2 exd4 14.cxd4 ♗xd5 15.♗c3 ♗xc3 16.♖xc3 ♗c4 17.♗f4 ♗d6 18.♗xd6 cxd6 19.d5 (Nigel Short suggested 19.b3! ♗b6 20.♖c6±) Lékó-Korchnoi, Dresden (ol) 2008.

Finally, we should mention the game in which Smyslov defended the black side: 11...♖e8 12.♗bd2 exd4 13.cxd4 ♗a5 14.♖c2 c5 15.b3 cxd4 16.♗xd4 ♖c8 17.♖d3 ♗c6 18.♗xc6 ♖xc6 19.♗b2 ♗d7 20.♗f3 ♗f6 and a draw was agreed – Kosten-Smyslov, Hastings 1988.

12.♗g5

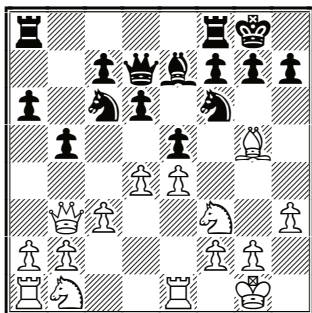
We have already seen a few games in which Smyslov played ♗g5 with the idea of exchanging the bishop for the f6-knight and transferring his own knight to d5. Smyslov was also fond of this plan against the King's Indian, trying to provoke Black into weakening his kingside with ...h6, and ...g5 to exploit the resulting weakness of f5. It is not easy to defuse this plan even if Black knows what's coming. As we will see, Botvinnik takes special care to prevent the positional bind, but in the process his pieces become somewhat uncoordinated.

Despite Smyslov's success in this game, 12.♗g5 did not catch on. Over time, 12.♗bd2 became a main line, with Smyslov himself later switching to this move, although without much success, as

Black learned how to deal with this opening concept:

(a) 12...♖fe8 13.♟f1 h6 14.♟g3 ♟f8 15.d5 Smyslov tries to implement his favorite plan but with all four knights on the board, it is not as effective. Black succeeded in pushing both ...c7-c6 and later ...d6-d5 without any positional concessions 15...♞a5 16.♞c2 c6 17.dxc6 ♞xc6 18.b3 d5 19.exd5 ♟xd5 20.♞d2 (20.♞xe5 ♞xe5 21.♟xe5 ♞xc3 22.♞xc3 ♟xc3=) 20...♞c7 21.♟f5 ♟f6 22.♞e2 ♟c6 ½-½ Smyslov-Bolbochán, Helsinki (ol) 1952.

(b) 12...♞a5 13.♞c2 exd4 14.♟xd4?! (14.cxd4 c5 15.d5!? ± Martín González-Fernández García, Spain (ch) 1983) 14...g6 15.♟2f3 c5 16.♟e2 ♞b7 17.♞h6 ♞fe8 18.♟g3 ♟c6 19.♞ad1 ♟e5 ½-½ Smyslov-Lengyel, European team championship 1965.



12...h6 13.♞xh6 ♞xh6

From the computer's point of view, the position is equal, but in a practical game this evaluation is almost irrelevant. There is a lot of play left and the position is more difficult to play with Black.

14.d5!

Smyslov himself described this plan as follows: "This advance of the central pawn onto a light square is the idea of the previous exchange. Black can only get rid of his backward pawn by ...c7-c6, but then after d5xc6 the d5-square has been vacated for the subsequent maneuver of the white knight into the center."

14...♞a5 15.♞c2 c6 16.dxc6 ♞xc6 17.♟bd2

The pawn structure is similar to what we have already seen in Smyslov's earlier games with Denker, Rudakovsky and Najdorf. The key factor is that White has an "extra knight" compared to Black. If one of White's knights gets to d5, he can claim a clear strategic advantage. Botvinnik makes sure to get rid of his backward pawn before that happens.

17...♞ac8

Threatening b5-b4.

18.♞ac1 ♞fd8

The point of Smyslov's previous move was to meet 18...b4 with 19.c4. Over the years, Black became more adept in holding such positions (for example, a similar pawn structure often appears in the Sveshnikov Sicilian), but in 1951 and especially against Smyslov, few people would dare trying it.

19.♟f1 ♟c4

One of two reasonable ways to prevent ♟e3-d5. In the game, Black's knight would prove to be rather awkward on b6, so perhaps it was better to play 19...d5!? immediately. If White continues

with the same plan, then after 20.exd5 ♖xd5 21.♗e3 ♗e6 22.♗g4 ♗c6, the black knight is more active. However, White would still have some pull after 23.♗e2 ♖e8 24.a4!?

20.b3 ♗b6 21.♗e3 d5

Black finally achieves the desired advance, but it does not equalize completely. 21...h5 prevents White's next move, but at the cost of allowing 22.c4!? bxc4 23.bxc4, ensuring full control of d5. Both options are a bit unpleasant and choosing between two evils is never easy.

22.♗g4

White is posing small problems with every move. How does Black defend the e5-pawn?

22...d4?!

This advance is absolutely natural, especially since it forces the exchange of White's knight for a relatively passive bishop. However, the simplifications highlight the advantage of ♗f3 over ♗b6.

Smyslov notes that 22...dxe4 was insufficient in view of 23.♗f3xe5 ♗xe5 24.♗xe5 ♗b7 25.♖xe4 ♖xc3 (25...♗d5 26.♖d4! ±) 26.♗xc3 ♗xe4 27.♗c7±.

Smyslov does not mention 22...♗e6!, which was objectively best. Black is preparing to play ...♗g5 or ...h5, while the pawn exchange in the center 23.exd5?! ♗xd5 turns a "bad" knight on b6 into a great one on d5. Botvinnik might have worried about some tactical motifs on e-file, but after

24.♗gxe5 ♗xc3±, it is White who should worry about equalizing, as 25.♗g4?? even loses to 25...♗e2+!

23.♗xf6+ ♗xf6 24.♗b2!

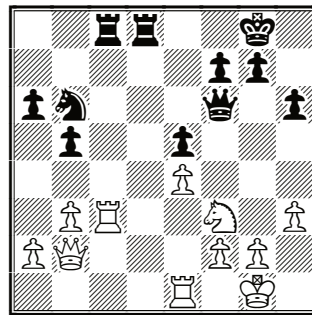
Threatening to take on d4.

24...dxc3

24...d3? is too optimistic.

Smyslov gives 25.♖e3 ♖d6 26.♖d1 ♖cd8 27.♖d2± and the pawn on d3 is bound to fall.

25.♖xc3



White no longer has the better pawn structure, but he still has the initiative. Right now, he is indirectly attacking the e5-pawn, which allows him to take control of the open c-file.

The biggest challenge for Black is the bad position of his knight on b6. Botvinnik finds a way to get it back into the game.

25...♗d7 26.♖ec1

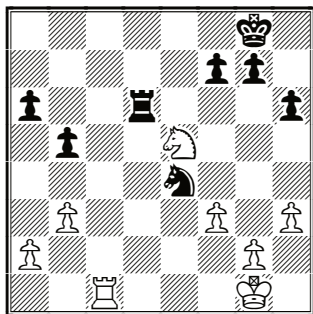
Smyslov noted that 26.♖d1 did not give White anything because of 26...♗f8!=.

26...♖xc3 27.♗xc3 ♗d6! 28.♗c6 ♗f6!

Counterattack is the best defense in this symmetrical position. However, White is the first one to strike, so Black still

needs to solve some practical problems.

**29. ♖×d6 ♜×d6 30. ♘×e5
♘×e4 31. f3**



White is planning to attack the weak pawns in his opponent's camp (a6, f7), as well as to grab more space on the kingside.

31... ♘g5?!

So far Botvinnik defended brilliantly, but in time trouble he is no longer able to find the most precise moves.

The best reply was the sharp 31... f6! 32. ♘g6 ♖h7! 33. ♘f4 ♘g5 34. ♜c7 ♘e6 35. ♘×e6 ♜×e6=. Smyslov does not mention 32... ♖h7, considering instead the more natural 32... ♘g3 33. ♖f2 ♘f5 34. g4± “creating a threatening position on the kingside.” The engine states Black is fine after 34... ♘d4 35. f4 (35. h4 f5 is also not much for White) 35... f5 36. ♜c8+ ♖f7 37. ♘e5+ ♖f6 but it does look scary, especially in time trouble.

32. f4 ♘e6

A bit passive, but still perfectly reasonable. Black keeps all the weak squares under control and plans to get his king to the center.

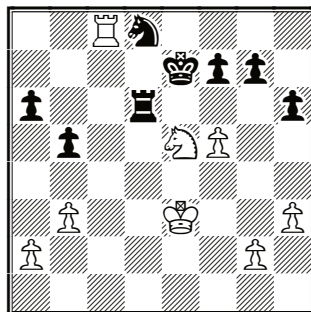
32... f6?! 33. ♘g6 ♘f7 34. f5± is unpleasant for Black, but for some reason no one mentioned 32... ♘e4!?, which gives Black active counterplay for a pawn: 33. ♜c8+ ♖h7 34. ♘×f7 ♜d2. It seems that Black is able to hold, for example, 35. f5 g6 36. ♜h8+ ♖g7 37. f×g6 ♖×g6 38. ♘×h6 ♜×a2 39. ♘g4 a5± and the most likely outcome of the pawn race is the drawish endgame ♜+♘+♗ vs ♜+♘.

33. f5 ♘d8 34. ♜c8

White's position looks better, but it is difficult to turn the “optics” into something tangible.

**34... ♖f8 35. ♖f2 ♖e7
36. ♖e3**

Smyslov notes that the pawn endgame after 36. ♜×d8 ♜×d8 37. ♘c6+ ♖d7 38. ♘×d8 ♖×d8 is drawn: 39. ♖e3 ♖e7 40. ♖d4 ♖d6 41. b4 f6=.



Despite minor improvements that could have been suggested here and there, Botvinnik has done a good job of defending a slightly worse position. Over the past 20 moves, he constantly faced difficult choices but managed to keep White's advantage to the

minimum. However, these decisions consumed a lot of time, and just before the 40th move he starts to falter.

36...♖d1!?

The first move in the wrong direction. Smyslov points out the best defense: 36...♖d5! 37.♗d3 ♖xf5 38.♖a8 ♗c6 (38...♖f6!? also holds) 39.♖xa6 ♗d7=, or 37.♗e4 ♖d2= with a double attack on the white pawns.

37.♖a8

The engine prefers a different implementation of the idea that we will see in the game: 37.♖c7+ ♗e8! (the point is that after 37...♗f6? 38.♗d3! White will emerge with an extra pawn, for example, 38...♗xf5 39.♖d7 ♗e6 40.♖xf7+ ♗g5 41.♖a7±) 38.♗d3± However, this is too subtle, especially in time trouble.

37...♗f6??

Botvinnik finally cracks under pressure. 37...♖d6? was no longer working, as the pawn endgame after 38.♖xd8 ♖xd8 39.♗c6+ ♗d7 40.♗xd8 ♗xd8 41.♗d4+- is lost.

There was still a way to stay in the game, but it was based on a trick similar to the one that Botvinnik missed on the previous move: 37...♖e1+! 38.♗d4 ♖e2 39.♖xa6 ♖xg2 “with drawing chances” (Smyslov). This endgame is less clear than the one we saw in the variation after 36...♖d5. White’s pawns on the queenside seem to be more dangerous, although the computer still evaluates this position as balanced.

38.♗d3!+-

And just like that, the game is over.

38...♗c6?

This loses instantly, but objectively the position was already hopeless, for example, 38...♗b7 39.♖xa6+ ♗xf5 40.♖b6 ♗d8 41.♖xb5+ (Smyslov), or 38...♗e7 39.♖xa6 ♖g1 40.♗f4+-.

39.♖xa6 Black resigned as the knight cannot be saved.

The apparent simplicity of this game might be confusing. For example, Peter Romanovsky wrote in the tournament bulletin: “The intensive play should have ended in a draw, but then something unexpected happened. In the endgame with equal material, a half-hour before the end [Black] made three mistakes in a row. The last of them blundered a knight, so Botvinnik immediately resigned.”

This summary makes Smyslov’s victory sound almost accidental, and the players who analyze it today with the help of computers might come to a similar conclusion. However, from a practical point of view it is fully deserved. Smyslov consistently made Botvinnik choose between two or three options that led to almost equal, but rather unpleasant positions. White’s advantage transformed from a better pawn structure (the weakness of the d5-square) to a better placed piece (♗f3 vs ♗b6), then to an extra tempo in a symmetrical position, and finally to slightly more active pieces and more space in the endgame. While the advantage was

never substantial, Black was constantly under pressure. In a game between two engines it would not have mattered, but Botvinnik spent 2½ hours trying to figure out a path through the minefield and still went down in time trouble.

Defeating a world champion is always a great achievement, and this game illustrates Smyslov's deceptively simple, positional style at its finest.

(62) Lipnitsky – Smyslov
19th USSR Championship
Moscow 1951
Nimzo-Indian Defense [E33]

Isaak Lipnitsky (1923-1959) was a Soviet master who left a mark on the history of chess despite a very short life. His first steps in chess took place in Kiev around 1935, in the same group as David Bronstein. By 1939 he was already playing in the Ukrainian championship, finishing with a respectable “+1” score. During the war he served in the Soviet Army, earned the rank of major and was decorated with four orders and three medals. In 1947, he returned to Kiev and resumed his chess career. He won the Ukrainian championships twice, in 1949 and 1956. However, his biggest achievement was sharing second to fourth places in the 1950 USSR Championship, a half-point behind Paul Keres, but ahead of Smyslov, Boleslavsky, Geller and Petrosian.

In 1956 Lipnitsky published an

influential book, *Questions of Modern Chess Theory*, which was praised by Mikhail Botvinnik and Bobby Fischer. In the 21st century, this book was re-printed in Russia and also translated into English, becoming a hit more than 50 years after its initial publication.

Unfortunately, in the 1950s Lipnitsky's results went downhill due to his deteriorating health. He finished 15th-16th in the 1951 USSR Championship and 17th in 1952. Lipnitsky passed away at the age of 35 from a rare blood disease. During his short career he managed to beat Smyslov, Keres, Petrosian, Kotov, Geller and other strong players.

This game was played in the eighth round. Smyslov was coming off a victory over Botvinnik (see Game 61), not to mention the extra motivation of avenging a loss to Lipnitsky in the previous year's championship.

Smyslov and Lipnitsky would face each other one more time in 1952. Their final score was equal, +1 -1 =1. As fate would have it, Smyslov had the black pieces in all three games.

1.d4 ♟f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♟b4 4.♗c2

Lipnitsky's artificial play in this game recalls Smyslov's own self-destruction a few years earlier: 4.♘g5 h6 5.♘xf6 ♗xf6 6.♞c1 0-0 7.a3 ♘xc3+ 8.♞xc3 d6 9.♟f3 e5 10.d5 a5. White did not get anything out of the opening, but it does not explain what happened next: 11.♞g1? e4 12.♟d4 ♞e8