SOVIET CHESS

BY JAMES McCORMICK

That the Soviet chess players are the best in the world is freely admitted by authorities on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Since World War II the attainments of Soviet chessplayers have been considerable. They have won and retained the men's, women's, and team world championships, as well as maintaining a commensurate position in such areas as chess theory, analysis, and promotion of the game. In less than fifteen years the Soviet players rose to this status from near obscurity. Since chess in the Soviet countries is at least equal in popularity to bridge in the United States, and since chess affords an excellent microcosm of the Russian socialist system, this paper will discuss the Soviet school of chess in terms of its history, practice, and theory.

Leading historiographers of Soviet chess are generally agreed that the founder of the Russian school of chess was Michael Tchigorin (1850-1908). One of the strongest players of his time, he worked tirelessly to promote chess in tsarist Russia. Because chess was not very popular he had trouble getting two hundred subscribers to his magazine. His significance for today lies in the fact that the official Soviet theory of chess is based on his views. Consequently, he is held in high regard. That his memory is venerated is attested to by the research the Soviet writers have done on him.

In the generation following Tchigorin many strong players arose in Russia, the strongest of whom was the great world champion Alexander Alekhine. He held the world title from 1927 to 1935 and again from 1937 to 1946. His reputation has undergone some interesting changes in the Soviet Union. Born to an upper middle class family in tsarist Russia, he left in 1920. For many years he was villified for deserting his homeland.

'At first Alekhine had expressed sympathy with the Soviet Government and its aim of constructing a new Russia. Then, suddenly, he turned violently against his country. He left it, never to return, thus taking the first steps along that path which, during the War, led him to serve the Nazis and attack non-Aryan chessmasters. We were not surprised: we had expected such deeds. Alekhine had merely completed his betrayal!'
Nicolai Grekov, Soviet Chess. Tr. by Theodore Reich. (New York, 1949)

A chess opening bearing his name was renamed. In recent years, however, he has been regarded as Russia's greatest player.

'Alekhine's talent is highly esteemed in the Soviet Union. Soviet masters have assimilated his creative principles and are developing them further.'
A. Kotov and M. Yudovich, The Soviet School of Chess. Tr. by L. Stoklitsky. (Moscow, 1958)

The probable reason for this change is that Alekhine, quite possibly the best player of all time, had certain chess qualities the Soviets have decided are of more importance than his political defection.

In Alekhine's era chess boomed as hundreds of thousands participated in organized activity. Since his death three Soviet players have held the world title, thus illustrating Soviet supremacy at the top level of play. But in the lower levels, also, the Soviets have led the world. After playing in a 1939 Russian tournament, the top American player Reshevsky said:

'When a large tournament is held

in the Soviet Union, the tournament committee finds it necessary to engage a large hall or theatre. Chess enthusiasts by the thousands queue up to buy admissions, and many are turned away disappointed when all available places are sold.'
Samuel Reshevsky, Reshevsky's Best Games of Chess. (New York, 1960)

An important factor contributing to chess popularity is active promotion in the Young Pioneer houses.

'The children's chess circles are conducted by highly qualified instructors. The clubs supply all the equipment and carry the cost of instruction. The chess class of the Moscow Young Pioneer house has a membership of 120--youngsters from 8 to 16 years of age.'
Boris Klalip, "Soviet Chess in Moscow," Chess. (December, 1946)

To explain, glorify, and advance chess in the Soviet Union a fairly well-defined body of theory has arisen. Chess is not considered a mere game but rather a creative activity to which scientific methods may be and are applied.

'Thus the creative views of Smyslov find their source first of all in the ideas of Tchigorin. Therefore it is not surprising that in his opinion the processes of a game of chess are transformed into a great art, and he, like an artist, invests in this art his innermost thoughts, deep emotion and genuine creative pathos.'
P. A. Romanovsky, "Vassily Smyslov," in V. V. Smyslov, My Best Games of Chess. Tr. and ed. by P. H. Clarke. (New York, 1958)

In addition to this artistic approach, which may serve as an example of Lenin's idea of replacing religion with art, the Russians feel that chess develops important personal qualities.

'Chess demands of its devotees inventiveness, resourcefulness, self-control, endurance, and concentration. Above all it requires reasoning power, imagination, and a strong will . . . . And as the young man improves himself as a chessplayer, he improves himself as a human being.
Grekov, Soviet Chess.

Because of the above reasons the Soviet government officially supports the game. Consequently the success of the Soviet players is held to be the result of the political system. Governmental aid is extended to schools, tournaments, and publications. In certain cases the leading players are subsidized by the state. Present world's champion Botvinnik expressed his appreciation:

' . . . When we Soviet masters take part in tournaments and study the game we know we are performing a thing of social value, a cultural activity, that we are bringing benefit to the Soviet state.'
M. M. Botvinnik, One Hundred Selected Games. Tr. by Stephen Garry (London, 1951)

American critics continually point out that state assistance is extremely important to Soviet players in maintaining their positions.

Patriotism is an important part of Soviet chess. Botvinnik says:

'And when we take part in international contests we defend the honor of our country.'
M. M. Botvinnik, One Hundred Selected Games.

The teams which represent Russia in the chess Olympiads are taken as seriously as the teams which go to the regular Olympic games. The teams are accompanied by seconds, officials, and even their own cooks. Several years ago in a match with the United States a Russian grandmaster made a sacrifice against the United States champion and won the game. Afterward a Russian embassy official criticized his countryman for taking risks on such an important occasion. The Communists take full propaganda advantage of their achievements by sponsoring many events in which they receive publi-

city. A Soviet writer remarked about the twelfth Olympiad:

'Bidding farewell to the growing number of their old and new friends, Soviet chess players wished them best success in chess, which is helping to promote cultural and friendly contacts between nations.'
Salo Flohr, Twelfth Chess Tournament of Nations. Tr. by W. Forelman. (Moscow, 1957)

Soviet chess theory is based on two premises, both of which reflect its homage to Communist ideology:

'First the influence of the traits of the Soviet man of the socialist era, an ardent patriot and tireless seeker of the new, and second, a deep approach to chess, a struggle against scholastic conceptions of the essence of the game.'
Kotov and Yudovich, The Soviet School of Chess.

In the first of these so-called characteristics a well-known tendency is revealed, self-criticism, or samokritika. For example, Botvinnik said of Alekhine:

'From him we can learn the psychological approach to the game and, possibly, creative self-criticism too, though in this respect Soviet masters have left him far behind.'
M. M. Botvinnik, One Hundred Selected Games.

Soviet chess players have made a dogma out of being different. Everyone is expected to contribute new ideas to the various phases of the game, such as the openings and the endings. Tchigorin was a strong advocate of creativity. The Soviets claim that the players of the decadent West are bound by scholastic theories which inhibit creative activity. These Western theories, developed mainly in Berlin and Vienna at the turn of the century, have been largely repudiated and discarded. However, echoes remain, for example:

'After all, great masters and beginners alike must obey the primary rules of development, and it is wrong to move the same piece twice so early in the opening without gaining some overriding or decisive advantage.'
H. Golombek, World Chess Championship, 1954.

The Soviets have accomplished great things in the area of chess, fully as great, if not as significant, as their recent space exploits. Whether or not one admires the methods of the Soviet school, one must admit that they obtain results.

THE CURIOUS TENSIONS OF CHESS

Those of you who get up early enough on Sunday may have tuned in to CAMERA THREE on Channel 11 at 9:00 A. M., July 2.

The first half of the program, entitled "The curious tensions of chess", was devoted to a display of antique chess sets from the Bach Gallery in New York. Along with the display, the narrator, Miles Herbert, gave a running account of the history of the game, which appears to have originated in India about 2,00 - 3,000 B. C. Historic personages who played the game were discussed, and a brief account of changes in the rules of play and the development of organized chess activity was given. The prominence of the Soviet Union in today's chess world was also acknowledged.

U.S. Champion Bobby Fischer was then introduced and asked the standard questions about his chess career. It seems that Mr. Fischer believes that we can beat the Russians but he didn't say how soon this would occur. The program wound up with a two minute game between Herbert and Fischer. Herbert lost on time.

We hope to see more chess on TV to increase the popularity of the game