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Preface

Like any chess player who began taking the game seriously before 1991, I was intrigued by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It was a distant, mysterious and very closed world which somehow had discovered methods of thinking about chess that seemed to exist nowhere else.

After becoming an international grandmaster — and one who occasionally met Soviet players over the board — I wanted to know more about my opponents. And as someone who began reading Russian chess magazines as a high school student, this was a book I had been meaning to write for 35 years.

Excellent books on Soviet chess have been written before but they were devoted primarily either to the politics or to the chess. I wanted to write a book analyzing the Soviet achievement, with ample games and biographical detail, while recognizing that the chess could never be separated from politics in the USSR. The two were intimately intertwined, like sickle and hammer.

I had to set some limits on what could be a sprawling, impossible narrative. I decided to focus on players who lived and competed in the USSR from 1917 to 1991 — excluding masters from the “Soviet bloc” of Eastern Europe, or of the Baltic states before they were absorbed by Stalin in 1940.

The post-Soviet careers of men such as Alexander Alekhine, Yefim Bogolyubov, Boris Spassky and Viktor Korchnoi are considered when they affected Soviet chess.

I have tried to choose representative games that are little known in the West. Perhaps fewer than half of the games, game fragments and problems in the first 10 chapters have been published outside the Soviet Union.

The notes are mine except where indicated. In some cases I included original notes to indicate the annotator’s thinking at the time of play, such as Alexander Ilyin-Genevsky’s splendid account of his dramatic defeat of José Capablanca at Moscow 1925.

Inevitably I have relied to a great extent on Russian sources, which were particularly good in the period 1985–1995. During the *perestroika* era Soviet magazines such as *Shakmaty v SSSR* and *64* printed a remarkable amount of valuable, long-suppressed material about the past, even excerpts from Fyodor Bohatyrchuk’s controversial memoirs.

Some aspects of Soviet chess would be impossible to examine without such sources. For example, the Great Terror could not be done justice without Sergei Grodzensky’s articles in *64*.

In the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union some excellent books were published — in particular the chess encyclopedia edited by Anatoly Karpov, the biographies of Alekhine by Alexander Shaburov (1992) and of Vladimir Alatorsev by Isaac and Vladimir Linder (1994) and *Russians Against Fischer* (1994). Sadly, the Soviet chess publishing houses that once turned out editions of

100,000 copies now print only a few thousand.

A tour of the Chess Museum at the Central Chess Club, conducted by Yuri Aver-

bakh, was invaluable. The Cleveland Public Library, Hanon Russell and Jerome Bibuld were generous with help in obtaining photographs.

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Introduction

What Made Soviet Chess?

In a free government the Russian might appear with equal advantages in the military department; intelligent, active, reflecting and endowed with a spirit of calculation; he might succeed in every pursuit. At present he excels only at chess. —“The Critical Review,” June 1792

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics dominated the chess world for decades — men’s, women’s, team, student, and postal competitions. They had, as R.G. Wade observed, the most successful sports machine the world has seen. Yet this was a nation laid waste by civil war and epidemic disease in 1917–1921, weakened by periodic food shortages that lasted into the 1980s, and devastated by the cultural revolution of 1928–1931, the counterrevolution that followed, the Great Terror of the late 1930s and other ideological ordeals. And then came World War II.

The people of the Soviet Union were largely illiterate in 1917; an educated class developed only with great difficulty in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. As late as 1970 only 5.5 percent of the Soviet citizenry had received any education beyond the high school level, and only half beyond the seventh grade.

Yet the Soviets’ accomplishments in chess were immense. They vastly expanded the horizons of chess theory — virtually inventing the King’s Indian Defense and major lines of the Sicilian, for example, and creating a dynamic new style that changed thinking about material, the initiative and middlegame strategy. Yet this happened in a nation whose schools stressed memory and conformity, whose society discouraged en-

terprise and whose economy could not make a decent pair of shoes or tube of toothpaste. None of the explanations offered by the Soviets or their envious Western contemporaries about how they did it manages to tell more than a fraction of the story. It is true the Soviets created an excellent training program for young players. But this system arose in the *final* years of the USSR. The celebrated Botvinnik School opened in 1963 and closed a year later — and was not on firm footing until 1976. The comparable Petrosian and Smyslov schools began in 1977 and 1978 respectively. The Soviets developed a wonderful network of junior events — but this, again, was a product of the 1970s, a reaction to the traumatic experience of Bobby Fischer. The Soviets did not begin an annual junior championship until 1959, 13 years after the United States began theirs. The Soviet masters were the first government-paid chess professionals. But the monthly stipends, comparable to the salary of a well-paid engineer, were established around 1950, when the Soviet Union was already enjoying its golden age.

Schools, stipends, Pioneer Palaces and junior events were among many factors that made Soviet chess what it was. But perhaps the biggest factor was salesmanship: chess was promoted on an enormous scale and