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REVIEWS

## A Great Player at His Peak

Taylor Kingston

*Botvinnik's Best Games, Volume 2: 1942-1956*, by Mikhail Botvinnik, translated and edited by Ken Neat, 2000 Publishing House Moravian Chess, Olomouc, Czech Republic, hardcover, figurine algebraic notation, 496 pp., \$39.00.

This is the second volume of this series, originally published in 1985 as *Analitecheskie i kriticheskie raboty* (Analytical and Critical Works), which until now was unavailable in English.

Volume 1, covering the years 1925-1941, was reviewed here recently, so we will not go over the same ground now; interested readers may consult the Chess Café archives.



The book is easily outlined. Almost all of it consists of games. A brief 8½ pages of historical narrative serves as introduction; Botvinnik may have felt he had already covered this in his autobiography *Achieving the Aim*. The games follow, 143 in all, annotated at length. Most are Botvinnik wins, but a fairly high percentage are draws. 130 are tournament and match games spanning the years 1943-1956, ordered

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chronologically, almost all from very high-level events. These are followed by 13 training games, played at various times over 1939-1954. There are also 18 pages of black-and-white photos, 16 pages of crosstables, and the customary index of openings.



*Photo: Moscow 1948. The last game of the final round of the World Championship Match Tournament.*



This book covers the period of Botvinnik's peak strength, the years leading up to his becoming world champion, and his attainment of the title in 1948. By 1942 he may already have been the strongest chess player in the world, but World War II curtailed any chance of a title match, and limited international competition in general. Still, Botvinnik stayed in top form, winning the 1944 and 1945 Soviet championships. This trend continued in international play after the war with major victories at Groningen 1946 and Moscow 1947, and culminated in the Hague-Moscow 1948 world championship match-tournament, which he won by a wide margin. Having attained the chess crown,

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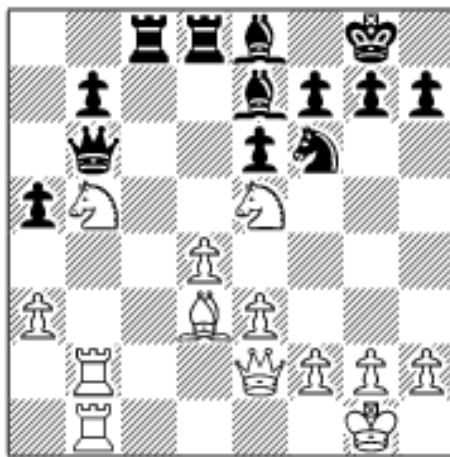
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Botvinnik concentrated on electrical engineering studies and played no tournament chess for a few years. This probably contributed to a slight decline from 1951 on, reflected in some lower-than-usual tournament finishes (e.g. 5th in the 1951 USSR championship) and close calls in world championship play, as he barely retained the title by drawing matches with Bronstein (1951) and Smyslov (1954). However, Botvinnik was still a great player, as shown by the 1952 Soviet championship (1st, after a playoff with Taimanov), and the very strong tournament Moscow 1956 (=1st with Smyslov).

Evaluating a book of this type is a straightforward process; not much matters except the quality of the games and annotations. That the games are of a high level is beyond doubt; they come from world title matches and some of the strongest tournaments of that era. Botvinnik's opponents include most of the day's best: Smyslov, Keres, Boleslavsky, Euwe, Reshevsky, Bronstein, Najdorf, Szabó, Kotov, Taimanov, Gligoric, plus many lesser-known but still very strong Soviet players: Ragozin, Kan, Suetin, Lipnitsky, Novotelnov, Lisitsyn, Tolush et al. The quality of the annotations is also very high, as the following examples illustrate.

For the most part, this is not a collection of stunning, flashy combinations. More typical is this situation, from Botvinnik-Lipnitsky, Moscow 1951. Here,



instead of any blockbuster piece sac, is the delicate but very instructive “creeping” move **21 Qd2!**, somewhat reminiscent of Alekhine’s 21 Qe2-d2 against Capablanca in their 34th match game, 1927. Botvinnik

informatively explains: “A very important subtlety. White simultaneously attacks the a5 pawn, threatening to win it by 22 Nc4, and defends the c1 square, releasing his rook at b1 from this mission. Now there is no defence against 22 Na7.” Play continued **21...a4 22 Na7 Qxa7 23 Rxb7** “This combination is only possible because the white Queen is at d2; with it at e2 Black would reply 23...Qxb7 or 23...Rc1+, remaining a piece up.” **23...Qa8** “It really would have been better to sacrifice the queen – 23...Qxb7 24 Rxb7 Bxa3, which would have given Black at least some practical saving chances, since he would have obtained a passed a-pawn.” **24 Rxe7** and White’s extra pawn eventually won the game (1-0, 41).

Where an impressive combination is involved, Botvinnik can be modestly low-key, or even painfully self-critical. It is interesting to compare Botvinnik’s comments about the game Smyslov-Botvinnik, USSR Championship, Moscow 1944, to those of his contemporary, American GM Reuben Fine, in *Chess Marches On* (1945). From this position,



play continued **25...Qa5** — *Botvinnik*: “Black offers the exchange of queens without a worsening of his pawn structure, which the opponent naturally declines.” **26 Qb8** — *Fine*: “Allowing a combination of

unparalleled beauty. He would have had fairly good chances in the ending after **26 Qxa5 Rxa5 27 Ba3**, despite the pawn minus.” **26...Nc6 27 Qe8** — *Fine*: “Forced.” **27...Re7** — *Fine*: “!”. — *Botvinnik*: “Here I realized Black’s position was not easy, but at heart I was hoping that my opponent would not deny himself the pleasure of concluding the game with a direct attack on the king.” **28 Qg6+** — *Fine*: “Better **28 Qf8**, though **28...Qd8** compels the exchange of queens.” — *Botvinnik*: “Smyslov played this without thinking, evidently assuming that after **28 Qf8 Qd8** the exchange of queens was inevitable, whereas after the move in the game White would retain a strong attack. This was a serious delusion, since after **28 Qf8 Qd8 29 Qxd8 Nxd8 30 g5** White’s offensive would have continued, and it would no longer be so easy for Black to transfer his knight to f5. In the game the white queen lures itself into a trap.” **28...Kg8 29 Ba3**—



*Fine*: “Smyslov had evidently relied on this move; in fact Black’s game now looks almost lost. The diversion 29 g5 fails after 29...Nxd4 and 30...e5.” —

*Botvinnik*: “How is it that White does not notice that his queen

does not have a single retreat square? Therefore 29 g5 was essential, after which a sharp situation would have arisen, for example: 29...Qc7 (29...Nxd4 30 Rxa4 Qxa4 31 cxd4 e5 32 Qf5) 30 gxh6 Bxc2 31 Kxc2 Rxa1 32 h7+ Kh8 33 h6 Qd7.” **29...e5** — *Fine*: “!!! The point. Botvinnik probably had this position in mind when he made his 25th move.” — *Botvinnik*: “A very significant omission. I saw the correct continuation 29...Qc7, but after 30 Rhf1 I, naturally, did not like the variation 30...Ne5 31 fxe5 Be8 32 Rf8+ Kxf8 33 Qh7. But the other knight sacrifice – 30...Nb4! – did not occur to me, although after 31 Bxb4 Be8 it is doubtful whether White could have saved the game.” **30 fxe5** — *Fine*: “On 30 Bxe7 Nxe7 White’s queen is lost! And if 30 Qf5 exd4.” — *Botvinnik*: “White returns the ‘compliment’. After 30 dxe5 he would have been by no means bound to lose. If the continuation had been the same as in the game, the retention of the f4 pawn would have guaranteed him good play.”

We could go on, but this sample is enough to show significant differences in the two commentaries. Note the contrast between the somewhat hyperbolic and superficial analysis of Fine, compared to the



undramatic but more objective, deeper approach of Botvinnik. Your reviewer is not the most qualified judge, but my computer-assisted analysis indicates that Botvinnik is almost always right here, in particular on the notes to Black's 29th, where Fine extravagantly praises 29...e5, but Botvinnik finds flaws. In only one instance does Botvinnik appear to err on the side of pessimism, in a line of the variation 29 g5: the reply 29...Nxd4 does indeed seem playable, because after 30 Rxa4 Qxa4 31 cxd4 Black need not play Botvinnik's 31...e5; instead he has 31...Qb4+!, which should win. Other than that, at every point where Botvinnik and Fine differ, Botvinnik appears to be correct. Fine missed some key points, and on the whole seems shallow, even negligent. No wonder the Soviets clobbered the Americans in the 1945 radio match. Returning to the game, it concluded **30...Nxd4 31 Bb4 Qd8 32 Qxa6 bxa6 33 cxd4 Rb7! 34 Rxa4 Qg5+ 35 Kd1 a5 36 Bf3 Rxb4 37 Bxd5+ Kf8 38 Rf1+ Ke8 39 Bc6+ Ke7 40 Rxb4 Qxg4+**, and Smyslov sealed **41 Kc1** but resigned without resuming play; **0-1**.

The self-critical attitude of the above analysis shows frequently throughout the book. Botvinnik mistrusted impulse and surface appearances, and he labored to expose error, especially his own, knowing that this is essential to improvement, even for a champion. An example is Botvinnik-Keres, USSR Championship 1951, where in this position

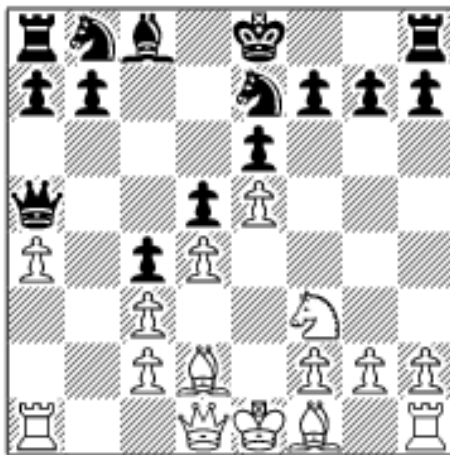


Botvinnik writes “**31 Bd3** There now begins the next stage of the game, full of mistakes by White. He should have prevented ...b7-b5 by **31 Ra2 Ra8**, and then played **h2-h4, f4-f5, Be3** and **g3-g4**, threatening **g4-g5** with

a clear advantage. **31...b5! 32 axb5 axb5 33 cxb5 c4** This so obvious move came as a complete surprise to me. By temporarily giving up a pawn, Black siezes the initiative.” Botvinnik continues to point out his own mistakes for the next several moves; only an error by Keres at move 49 allowed him to draw the game. Not for nothing was the Russian version of this book titled *Analytical and Critical Works*.

During the 1940s Botvinnik delved deep into opening theory. Through his own research, often assisted by his colleague Ragozin, he developed some important strategic concepts in certain lines, particularly in the Winawer French. A prime example is Tolush-Botvinnik, USSR Championship 1945: **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 Bxc3+ 6 bxc3 Ne7 7 Nf3 Qa5 8 Bd2 c4 9 a4**





Botvinnik has virtually severed White's queenside from his kingside, the c1 square being their only point of communication. With **9...Nd7 10 Be2 Nb6 11 0-0 Nxa4**

Botvinnik won

White's a-pawn. (A similar approach was seen in the Smyslov game above.) At a later point in the Tolush game,

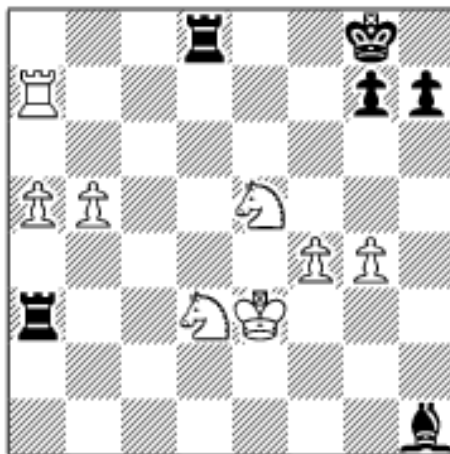


Botvinnik demonstrated what would be a frequent theme among Soviet masters, the positional Exchange sacrifice: **21...Rxd6!**, which in this case freed Black's position and eliminated any

chance of active counterplay by White. Black won in 40 moves. Unsurprisingly, the French Defense, in which Botvinnik excelled, is frequently seen in the book (17 games), though most common is another Botvinnik specialty, the Slav (18), followed by the Sicilian and Nimzo-Indian (13 each). Various closed, queenside openings predominate; least common are double king-pawn lines, with only eight examples.

Besides theoretical preparation, other Botvinnik

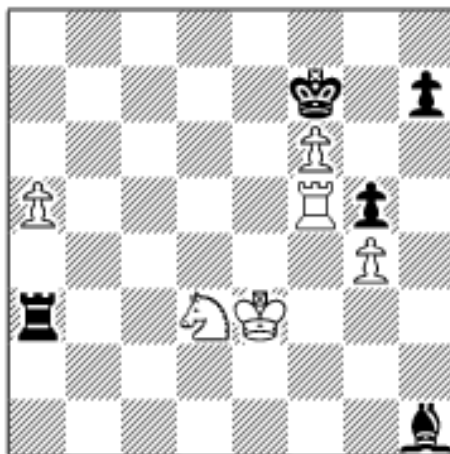
strengths were persistence in adversity, deep endgame knowledge, and skill in endgame analysis. All are in evidence in Szabó-Botvinnik, Budapest 1952, where after adjournment Botvinnik found himself in difficulties:



**43...g5!** One of the few times Botvinnik allows himself some positive punctuation. He writes “It seems incredible that such a move can save Black. After all, White obtains yet another passed pawn.

However, more

significant is the fact that the position of the knight at e5 becomes less secure.” **44 f5 Rd5 45 Re7 Rxb5 46 f6 Rxe5+** “Not only was mate threatened, but also the forced promotion of the f-pawn.” **47 Rxe5 Kf7 48 Rf5.**



“I reached this position in my [adjournment] analysis. Black has made some definite achievements. All his pieces have become active, White no longer has connected passed pawns, and I thought that the draw was

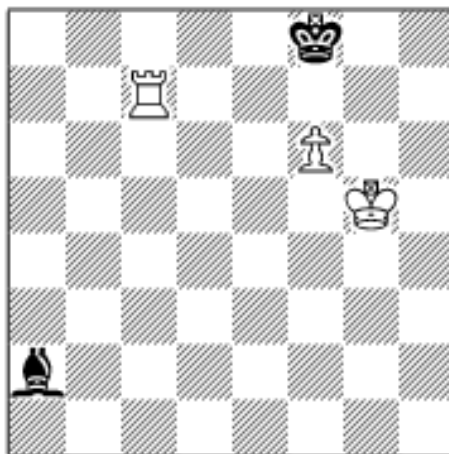
already made. But during the game my mood deteriorated. How was I to defend against the threat of **49 Kd2** followed by **Ne5+**? And here Caissa ... smiled on me.” **48...Bb7! 49 Kd2 Bc8!** “The g4

pawn is the main target.” **50 Ne5+ Kf8 51 Rxc5**



**51...Rxa5!!** “This unexpected exchange sacrifice settles everything. White loses the last pawn which could have become a queen.” **52 Nd7+ Bxd7 53 Rxa5 Bxg4 54 Ke3 Be6 55 Kf4 Bc4 56 Ra7 h5**

“Black has no need at all of this pawn.” **57 Kg5 h4 58 Kxh4 Bb3 59 Kg5 Bc4 60 Rc7 Ba2**



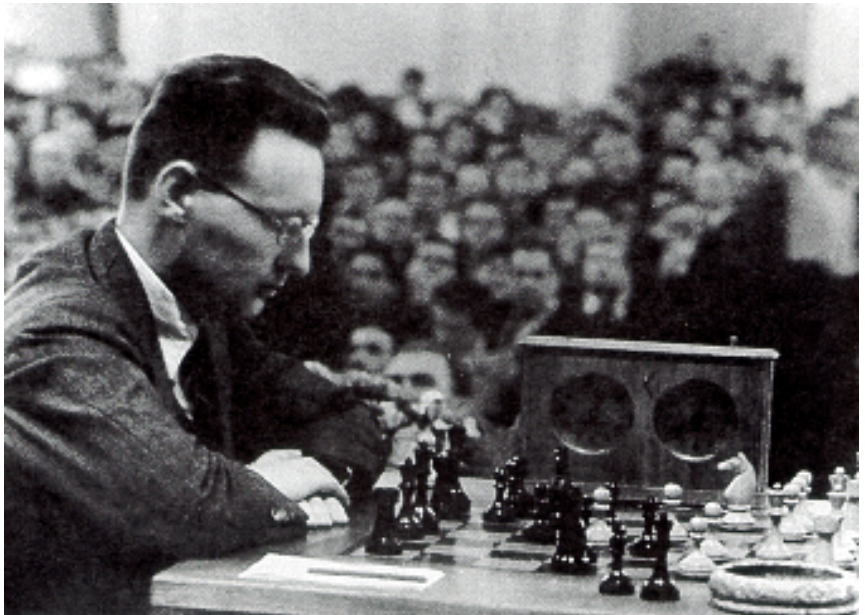
“A theoretically drawn position has been reached, one which had been published in many books on the endgame.” Your reviewer will admit he did not know that, and would bet that

most of his readers did not either, which helps explain why none of us has become world champion. Szabó took some convincing, but eventually a draw was agreed at move 78. A powerful illustration of the value of chess erudition combined with adamant resistance.

As can be seen, Botvinnik’s annotations are aimed at advanced players; he assumes at least a basic command of tactical and strategic fundamentals, and often he expects a fairly

sophisticated level of knowledge. Therefore players rated below, say, Elo 1600, perhaps even higher, may find him hard to grasp. Also his style is very matter-of-fact and to-the-point; those who prefer their annotations cute and cuddly would be better off with Paul Motwani. However, those not deterred by Botvinnik's serious tone and relative dryness will find a richness of strategic understanding and tactical acumen, reflecting his extensive research, strong work ethic, and unsparing self-examination. Studied seriously, his games and annotations teach how to probe the depths of a position, and how to find one's own weaknesses.

Flaws in the book are very few. Its physical aspects, like many such east European productions, are less than best in terms of paper, print, and binding, though on the whole they are still acceptable. Editor Ken Neat provides a 3½-page appendix listing 29 analytical errors he found by computer analysis. However, considering that the 143 games involve about 10,000 moves, not to mention sub-variations, Botvinnik's rate of error seems remarkably low. Some minor translation glitches show now and then, e.g. "it was unlikely that I would be able to overtake my young rival" (p. 326), or "This was assisted, I would say, by the even intense atmosphere of the match" (p. 335), but overall Mr. Neat has done well. On balance the flaws are quite negligible. The price is higher than average, but then the book is much bigger than average, nearly 500 pages, none of it fluff or filler.



*Photo: Moscow 1944. The 13<sup>th</sup> USSR  
Championship*

Getting into historical detail, I was somewhat surprised that Botvinnik himself did not know the story behind Bronstein's famous blunder (57 Kc2??) in the 6th game of their 1951 match. More generally, some may be disappointed that historical narrative is not a bigger feature of this book. A few of Botvinnik's opponents are briefly sketched, but the emphasis is always on the games themselves. Those who, like this reviewer, are interested in the covert, political aspects of chess under communism, will find little here.

This should not be a surprise. A game collection is not the place where Botvinnik, writing before the dissolution of the USSR, is going to reveal any major secrets of Soviet chess. Rather than be faulted for what it could not be, *Botvinnik's Best Games* should be accepted on its own terms, as a collection of important, instructive, hard-fought, impressive and often beautiful chess games by a great player at his peak, annotated with deep

insight and exemplary objectivity.

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