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Translation Tames the Tiger

Bill Kelleher

Petrosian's Legacy by Tigran Petrosian, Compiled by Edward Shekman, Edited by Arnold Denker, 1990 Editions Erebouni, Softcover, 123pp., \$14.95

Many years ago I was given a collection of the best games of Tigran Petrosian, the 9th World Champion, annotated by GM A. O'Kelly de Galway. I must admit that I was not overly enthusiastic about this gift because Petrosian had (has!) the reputation of being a boring player. Admittedly he was hard to beat in a match, but he drew most of his games and, in addition, won very few tournaments. However when I began to go over Petrosian's games, I was very pleasantly surprised. They proved to be extremely rich in ideas and very interesting. I concluded that although Petrosian's play had some dreary stretches, his best games were of the highest quality.



More recently I purchased a copy of John Watson's excellent book, *Modern Chess Strategy*, in which he discusses Petrosian's contribution to modern theory. His was not a contribution to opening theory, but to the theory of the exchange sacrifice.



Watson gave several examples of ingenious exchange sacrifices by Petrosian. Usually when we think of sacrifice we think of attack. Interestingly, Petrosian would sacrifice the exchange to escape from inferior positions and secure a draw. Watson examples demonstrated how Petrosian broadened our idea of the exchange sacrifice. Moreover these examples demonstrated that Petrosian was playing interesting chess even when the result was not decisive.

Therefore, I was very interested to read *Petrosian's Legacy*. Petrosian wrote very little during his career, and never published a volume of his best games. This was a unique opportunity to get his own insights into his games, and into general chess problems as well.

Petrosian's Legacy is a translation of a book, which was originally published in the Soviet Union under the title *Chess Lessons*. It is a compilation of Petrosian's major articles on chess. These were gathered from a variety of sources. In addition to pieces that originally appeared in the periodicals *64* and *Chess in the USSR*, the compiler, Edward Shekman, has transcribed two of Petrosian's TV lectures.

The articles cover a broad range of topics from "Chess Technique" and "The positional exchange Sacrifice" to an "Opening for One's Taste or Why I Like to Play Bg5." A couple of the articles are mainly text, but most of them contain analysis of Petrosian's games, or instructive positions arising from these games.



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What distinguishes this collection from others is the depth and originality of the analysis. Consider the following position from an article on “Chess Technique”



Petrosian-Bannik Riga 1958. Petrosian encourages the reader to “Imagine yourself being ‘a kind of Capablanca.’ Here is the position, and someone has asked you what should White do...?” I decided to

take up the challenge, and studied the position for some time. It seemed to me that the outstanding feature of the position is the good Ne4 versus the bad Be7. Therefore the plan seems to be trade rooks on the open file perhaps also play Bxb6 and g4, and head for the good N versus bad B endgame. Let’s see what Petrosian says about the position. It is worth quoting at length:

“What is the starting point when we evaluate the position? White’s advantage, is first of all, based on the three Black pawns (e5, f6, g5) are fixed upon the dark squares. If an endgame Knight versus Bishop would occur, it is for this reason that the Black Bishop has the tendency of becoming “bad.”

However, we should turn our attention the pawns that are not posted upon the dark squares. And as we can see, there are three such pawns, plus the pawn a7,

which can eventually go to a6. These pawns can cooperate with the Bishop in creating defensive boundaries. It is my strong belief, that this position can but very hardly (sic) if possibly at all, be won.

“In other words, we can scarcely achieve success adopting ordinary methods and ordinary “mechanical” technique. We must have much deeper vision and play more sophisticatedly and keenly.”

Therefore Petrosian played the entirely counter-intuitive 18 Bc5! After which he states:

“This decision requires a subtle weighing of all 'pros' and 'cons.' It seems illogical as White voluntarily exchanges his 'good' Bishop against (sic) Black's 'bad' one. But you should take into consideration what has been said above.”

The game continued 18...Rxd1 19 Rxd1 Bxc5 20 Nxc5 Re8 21 Ne4 Re6. White's rook and Knight cooperate well, and he eventually won. This is a good demonstration of technique at the highest level. White takes into account *all* the factors in the position, and as a result of exact calculation is able to find a non-standard solution. It also contradicts the notion that technique is devoid of creativity. Of course in this tidbit I have not included Petrosian's extensive analysis, but I think it gives a good insight into his thinking.

There is also a long article at the conclusion of the book that discusses his candidates' match with Bobby Fischer in 1971. It provides an interesting glimpse into the pre-match negotiations, and also includes all the games. Oddly Petrosian has two articles that concern Fischer, but there are no articles on his great World Championship triumphs over Botvinnik in 1963, and Spassky in 1966.

The second article, "Information and Objectivity," discusses his pre-match preparation for Fischer. I found this even more interesting than the article on the match. It is a good illustration of the meticulous detail with which the Soviet players of that era prepared for their opponents. One example, Fischer–Matulovic, was particularly enlightening. This game was played in the Interzonal in Palma de Mallorca 1970, the year before the Fischer–Petrosian match. Although Fischer won the tournament by the colossal margin of 3½ points, he almost lost his game with the much weaker Matulovic even though he had the White pieces. In fact he had a lost position after just 12 moves.

The question for Petrosian was: How could a great player like Fischer get such a bad position so quickly? I remember that at the time a number of annotators commented on this game, but none of them was able to give an adequate explanation of Fischer's opening play.

The game began: **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5** (Highly unusual for Fischer who favored open Sicilians) **3...g6 4 c3 Nf6 5 Qe2 Bg7 6. e5?! Nd5 7 Qc4** (At the time this was known as a dubious way for

White to win a pawn.)



7...Nc7! (In the tournament book Robert Wade commented that “One imagines that Fischer has prepared a counter against the accepted procedure of 7...Qb6 8 d4 d6 9 exd6 exd6 10 Qxd5 Qxb5 11 Qxd6 in

which Black was regarded as having more than sufficient compensation for the pawn.”) **8 Bxc6 dxc6 9 Qxc5 Qd3 10 Qe3 Bc4 11 Qxd3 Bxd3 12 Kd1.** Here Petrosian says, “It is hard to find another game where Fischer, with White, was in such a pitiful position after just 12 moves.”

So what did Fischer have in mind? Had he actually refuted the main line, or was he bluffing. Petrosian cautions us that it would be naïve to think that Fischer did not have a concrete plan. Consider the above diagram from the book refutation. Petrosian goes on to say:

“We discussed this problem with Igor Zaitsev (now a grandmaster), who, happily did not suffer from routine thinking characteristic of many strong grandmasters. Really it was not easy to discover that in the main, line after the 9th move, White should not use his Queen as just a pawn-eater. Rather he should play the simple 10 Qe2 +.

“At a glance, this move may seem absurd, too. The White Queen wanders here and there having no proper business. But if we turn back from abstract theories to reality (“White plays so-Black plays so”) we can discover that this check is poisonous, and Black is faced with uneasy (sic) problems. Trying to establish a bar along the K-file loses a piece: 10 . . . Be6 11 c4 or 10 . . . Ne7 11. d5. Thus Black must accept that he is deprived of castling –an unpleasant fact under the circumstances.”

Thus the mystery was solved. Unfortunately it did not help Petrosian in his match, but it does throw light on his methods of preparation. Most of us, when we think of preparation, (if we think about preparation at all!) think only about opening preparation. Petrosian was also interested in *how* Fischer thought about chess. As he says in the article:

"A more sophisticated method (of preparation) seems to be, entering the laboratory of you your opponents-to-be, trying to penetrate into his (sic) hidden thoughts to understand his motives for choosing one or another opening line."

Again let me reiterate; the individual pieces in this book are truly excellent. However this is not a book without problems. These problems can roughly be put into two groups: organization and translation.

Let's first discuss the organizational problems.

Except for some mention in the compiler's preface, there is not always an indication in the book of where or when the individual articles first appeared. For instance on page 51 we have the article "In Home Analysis and at the Board." The sub-heading duly tells us that it originally appeared in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* NO. 10-1971. However in the very next article "The Problem of the Uncomfortable Opponent" page 57, there is no mention of where and when it appeared.

On page 79 in an article entitled "The Petrosian Variation" (of the King's Indian), Petrosian informs us that "One of the most important methods of playing White in the King's Indian Defense has become, in the last two decades, development of QB to g5." For now let's ignore the awkward translation. Anyone who reads this will be hard pressed to know which two decades he is referring, because we are not informed when or where the article first appeared.

Poor labeling or no labeling plagues the entire book. In her acknowledgement at the beginning of the book, Petrosian's wife, Rona, thanks GM Eduard Gufeld for his "article on my late husband." However, the reader will look in vain for Gufeld's name in the table of contents. At first I thought that perhaps Gufeld's article only appeared in the Russian version of the book, and was left out of the English translation. Then, on page 65, I began reading the article "We Were Good Friends," and realized that this was the elusive contribution by Gufeld. Of course he is not identified as such in the heading. However he is identified as the author in a small note at the end of the previous article that

initially escaped my attention.

A more serious problem is the overall quality of the translation. No translator is named in the book. Perhaps this was intentional. As the reader has already seen from the excerpts quoted above, the text is marred by numerous examples of awkward or erroneous translation. Here is a further sampling. On page 93 we are told that “This article is no generalized definition of beauty in chess...” On page 9 we are warned about the “huge ambush of chess openings.” On page 5 the player of the Black pieces is criticized “for sitting on with developing his king side and getting on with development.” On page 114 Petrosian tells us that “Since years I have my own opinion of Fischer’s play.” Pages 112-13 reveal that “All this can cause a complex, similar to that which troupes have sitting in the trenches after heavy shelling waiting for the final attack.” Troupes? Perhaps this was a live chess game with actors.

Additionally there are problems with the articles, ‘a’, ‘and’ and ‘the’. These are not used in Russian, and it takes a meticulous translator to insert them properly into the English translation. This is not the case here. Often there are articles when there shouldn’t be and *vice versa*. Another small annoyance is the occasional use of the word *quality* to refer to the sacrifice of the exchange. This is a literal translation of the Russian word for the exchange sacrifice, but sounds strange to the English-speaking reader.

Compounding the problem of a poor translation, are a number of typos and small errors. For

instance in his preface, Kasparov tells us that his first international tournament was in 1949! Page 65 informs us that “White is being terribly crashed.” And on page 72 we read that “Every chess player has memorable games which are especially precious for him.”

One final gripe: the title of the English version of the book, *Petrosian’s Legacy* by Tigran Petrosian has an awkward ring to it. Perhaps a subtitle of *The Chess Writing of Tigran Petrosian* would have been better.

Does all this mean that the reader should not go out and purchase this book? As always, this is an individual decision. The book is moderately priced at \$14.95, which could be a consideration for the budget conscious. More importantly, I want to stress again that the actual content of the book is excellent. Petrosian has not been well served by those who want to preserve his legacy. However if you want to gain the insights of a truly great player, and are not too fussy about the translation, then this is the book for you.



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