

Alexander Alekhine



The fourth World Champion's restored tombstone at the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris.

The Lone King

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Andrei Filatov, businessman and main sponsor of the Anand-Gelfand World Championship match in the Moscow Tretyakov Gallery, has a fascination for Alexander Alekhine. When the grave of the fourth World Champion was badly damaged in 1999, it was he who had the tomb restored to its old glory. Moreover, Filatov has indicated that he would like to stage a tournament to the memory of Alekhine in the Louvre. What do we really know about Alexander Alekhine, that troubled genius and master of romantic combinations?

Andrei Filatov and his good friend, Israeli GM **Ilya Smirin**, share their thoughts on the first Russian World Champion.

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Three days before the end of the 20th century, on December 28th, 1999, a sudden hurricane struck the suburbs of Paris. Sweeping through the Montparnasse Cemetery, it seemed to unleash particular fury on one tombstone, leaving a chessboard, a cross and an inscription in golden letters scattered on its cover: 'Alexander Alekhine – Russian and French chess genius'...

Above the inscription is Alekhine's bas-relief, made from white marble.



Alexander Alekhine, the man who loved cats. 'Extremely pragmatic, withdrawn and rational, and largely friendless in real life.'

Alexander Alekhine, the fourth World Chess Champion, a Russian who had spent half his life in France, winner of the legendary 1927 match in Buenos Aires against Capablanca, died undefeated. His life is a distillation of the entire 20th century, with its revolutions, world wars, upheavals and contradictions. Yet Alekhine remains enigmatic and impenetrable in everything except his great chess games.

This is what Max Euwe, who defeated Alekhine in 1935 – only to give back the crown to him two years later – said about Alekhine: 'For Alekhine, chess was his life and the World Champion's title was its goal and justification.'

The twists and turns of Alekhine's biography are as startling as his chess combinations. Born into a well-to-do noble Russian family, he was the son of a State Duma member and Marshal of the Nobility in Voronezh Gubernia and grandson of the wealthy indus-

trialist Prokhorov, who owned Tryokhgornaya Manufaktura. Alekhine had a brilliant education. He went to a prestigious grammar school and graduated from the Imperial Law School. From childhood on, he spoke several languages, including French, which many Russian aristocrats spoke in their homes. We know that he exasperated other grammar school students by his outstanding intellectual skills and individualism – he knew everything, never did any homework, was completely indifferent to social life and totally steeped in chess.

By 1914, the 22-year-old Alekhine was already a famous 'maestro' who had taken third place at the international tournament in St Petersburg, behind Emanuel Lasker and Jose Raul Capablanca. Soon after this, the First World War broke out. Alekhine was not drafted into the Army for health reasons, but he went as a volunteer to the Galician front and commanded

a Red Cross unit during the famous 'Brusilov breakthrough'. He carried the wounded from the battlefield, was shell-shocked twice and earned two St George medals, a Red Cross Badge of Distinction and an Order of Saint Stanislaus with swords. How many great chess players can you name who saw military action?

Alekhine was imprisoned on several occasions, serving time in a German prison after the start of the First World War (as a suspected Russian Army officer after winning a tournament in Germany) and in the NKVD (Soviet secret police) prison. The latter arrest happened in Odessa in 1919 after the revolution had deprived him of his wealth, his noble title and everything else except chess.

Perhaps chess protected him from a sense of apocalypse: Alekhine played for money at the famous Robin chess café in Odessa. Outside, violence raged. The city was constantly chang-

ing hands, there were shootings, pogroms and looting. But inside the café, chess lovers huddled over chessboards, an intellectual 'feast during a plague'. The official version is that Alekhine was arrested by Cheka officers at the café and brought to a prison basement on Ekaterininskaya Square. As he was the son of a nobleman, the maestro was sentenced to death by firing squad. But even among Bolshevik leaders there were chess enthusiasts who appreciated his genius. One of these enthusiasts was Ukrainian Prime Minister Christian Rakovsky. Alekhine owes his salvation to Odessa chess player Yakov Vilner, who made a personal call to Rakovsky.

Alekhine himself did not like talking about that episode in his life and preferred to keep silent. But after being released he quickly learnt to survive in Soviet Russia. He moved to Moscow and became an investigator with the Moscow police, then a translator with the Comintern (after all he was fluent in English, French and German). There, Alekhine met his future wife, Annalisa Ruegg, a 42-year-old journalist and Social Democrat from Switzerland. Their marriage would be short-lived and his son would grow up fatherless, but the maestro's taste in women remained unchanged and he would marry four times. He invariably married women much older than himself who would take good care of him.

His attempts to fit into Soviet reality did not mean that his chess career had stopped. He scored a brilliant victory in the first all-Russian Olympiad, which in retrospect was rightly regarded as the first Soviet championship.

Nobody knows how his life would have shaped up if he hadn't been denounced to the Cheka in 1920, accused of being a member of the counterintelligence, with links to Anton Denikin, one of the leaders of the White movement. The charge was retracted, but Alekhine, without waiting for the next arrest, left Soviet Rus-

sia, crossing the border into Latvia. He would never return.

Abroad, he went on to win tournaments quite brilliantly at Triberg, Budapest and The Hague in 1921. A year later, Alekhine finished second behind Capablanca in the London tournament. Before long, Paris would become his second home, just as it did for the majority of Russian émigrés. For a long time, he would remain a high-profile figure in the Russian émigré community, although he made overtures to Soviet Russia more than once.

Alekhine was one of the first chess professionals. It was not very common at the time to earn a living by playing chess. Not that chess was his only area of expertise. In 1925, he decided to devote time to writing a doctoral dissertation on the 'penitentiary system in China'. All these twists and turns in his life should not take away from his most important achievement, the titanic battle for the World Championship against the great Jose Raul Capablanca, known as the 'Human Chess Machine'. Capablanca did not lose a single game between 1916 and 1924. To overcome the great and invincible Cuban, Alekhine strove mightily to perfect his style, significantly improving his endgame and his skill in handling so-called 'simple' positions.

He was not only up against it in terms of chess; the challenger had to pay the \$10,000 cost of the match, a staggering sum for the time. Alekhine raised money by playing blindfold simultaneous displays for a huge audience. In 1924, he played 26 games simultaneously and topped this mark by one the following year. In the words of Capablanca, 'It seems that Alekhine had the most remarkable chess memory of any person that ever lived.' He staged simultaneous displays from an

aeroplane and played games with live actors playing the chess pieces on a huge board.

But all this was not enough. Alekhine befriended the Argentine Ambassador to France, Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear, who was a chess enthusiast. This friendship stood him in good stead in 1927, when the former ambassador became President of Argentina and shelled out money for the historic match in Buenos Aires. The match was to be played until one of the players scored six wins. Many experts were sure that the Russian would not be able to win a single game. At

34 games, it was the longest World Championship match in the history of chess until the first Karpov-Kasparov match in 1984-85, which lasted 48 games and remained unfinished.

Shortly after the match began, Alekhine developed an inflammation of the periosteum.

He asked the doctor to extract several teeth. The pain subsided and Alekhine continued to play. The 'Human Chess Machine' was defeated in the marathon match by the genius of combinations, a romantic endowed with incredible energy and demonstrating a breathtakingly beautiful game. The score was $+6 -3 =25$. After Capablanca had conceded the 34th game, Alekhine was carried through the streets of Buenos Aires. Congratulatory telegrams came to the Argentinean capital from all over the world.

The new chess king was given a hero's welcome in Paris. The Russian community in Paris was jubilant. The writer Alexander Kuprin devoted an essay called 'Chess' to Alekhine: 'It was great to be king, reigning not by hereditary law and not due to a fickle plebiscite but solely thanks to the sharpness of his brain.'

His triumph over Capablanca had some rather unexpected conse-

'A great tactician over the chessboard, Alekhine often painted himself into a corner in real life.'

quences. A great tactician over the chessboard, Alekhine often painted himself into a corner in real life. A banquet at the Russian Club in Paris was held to celebrate his victory. The following day, some émigré newspapers quoted Alekhine as having said that he would like to see ‘... the myth about the invincibility of the Bolsheviks dispelled like the myth about the invincibility of Capablanca.’

Alekhine made no comments on the reports. But the Soviets reacted swiftly and furiously: ‘After Alekhine’s speech at the Russian Club, our relations with citizen Alekhine are over: he is our enemy and from now on we should see him only as an enemy,’ wrote A. Krylenko in *Shakhmatny Listok*.

Alekhine received another blow, this time below the belt, when the same magazine printed statements by his brother Alexei: ‘I condemn every anti-Soviet speech from whomever it may come, even, as in this case, if it is from my brother.’ Alekhine loved his brother and sister, and he knew from firsthand experience how the Bolsheviks extracted such statements. Any hopes that he might have entertained about returning to Russia vanished, and all his links with his home country were severed.

Alekhine went on to score brilliant victories at tournaments: first place in San Remo (1930, 14 out of 15) and Bled (a full 5½ points ahead of his nearest rival, a record that has yet to be broken). Out of the 10 international tournaments the champion played before the end of 1933, he won eight and shared first place in the remaining two. There was a striking contrast between his behaviour in ordinary life and the style and temperament he displayed over the chessboard. Extremely pragmatic, withdrawn and rational, and largely friendless in real life, over the chessboard he was a tiger and a master of attack and effective combinations.

An interesting turn in his career occurred when he lost and then regained his world title. In late 1934, Alekhine accepted a challenge from

Max Euwe and in 1935 shockingly lost the match. He had something of a breakdown, he drank a lot and perhaps felt lonely, as his brother Alexei and sister Varvara had stayed in Soviet Russia and there was little hope of seeing them again. Besides, the Soviet propaganda machine was doing its job and there was a split in the émigré community. For many, life in emigration meant poverty, while Bolshevik power seemed to be there to stay. The great composer Sergei Prokofiev – whom Alekhine not only met in St Petersburg and Paris, but also played chess against – made constant visits to the USSR with concert tours and in 1936 decided to stay there. During the match against Euwe, the newspaper *Izvestia* published a telegram from Alekhine: ‘Not only as a chess worker of many years, but as a person who has realized the immense significance of what the USSR has achieved in all areas of cultural life, I extend my sincere greetings to the chess players of the USSR on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the October Revolution. Alekhine.’

The letter triggered a storm of indignation. Émigré newspapers wrote that Alekhine had ‘defected to the Soviets after being beaten.’ But they had grossly misjudged him. Two years later in a return match, Alekhine confidently regained the chess crown. At the same time, he continued to lay down

the groundwork for a possible visit to Russia.

In 1936, he twice appealed to the editorial office of the chess magazine 64:

‘27.VII.1936. I would be profoundly glad, by cooperating with your magazine after so many years, to contribute my mite to the development of chess in the USSR. I take this opportunity to send my greetings to the new steely Russia. A. Alekhine.’

And the second letter:

‘London, 1.IX.1936. In connection with your question about my possible collaboration with your magazine, I deem it my duty to make the following statement.

1. It would be a great joy for me to again contribute as much as I can to the development of chess in the USSR.

2. I hope that my past mistakes, which I have now fully understood, will not be an insuperable obstacle to such collaboration.

‘My regret over these mistakes is all the greater because in recent years my indifferent attitude to the gigantic Soviet achievements has been replaced with one of admiration. I repeat, it would bring me the greatest satisfaction to prove this attitude by deeds. A. Alekhine.’

These messages, in addition to his wish to be back in his homeland, reveal a clear awareness that it was in



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In the 1937 rematch Alekhine regained the world title. The old champion Max Euwe honoured the new champion with an impressive laurel wreath.

the USSR that chess, to which he had devoted all his life, was developing better than anywhere else. At the time his colleagues, outstanding Western grandmasters, regularly visited Moscow to take part in tournaments. Ex-World Champion Lasker took refuge in the Soviet capital from the 'brown plague' that was engulfing Europe. Alekhine clearly wanted to play in Moscow. Besides, many prominent émigrés were returning at that time. Kuprin returned, and soon died. The tragic return of the great Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva and the trouble-free return of Sergei Prokofiev provide a tell-tale background. Many of those who returned home were immediately arrested and shot. But who knew the truth at the time?

Finally, in 1939, a contract was signed for a World Championship match between Alekhine and the top Soviet chess player at the time, the 'iron' Mikhail Botvinnik. The match was fixed up by Stalin personally. But it was not to be, as the Second World War broke out. The Nazi invasion of Poland occurred when Alekhine was leading the French team at the chess Olympiad in Argentina. Alekhine's reaction was commendable: he called for a boycott of the German team in the press and over the radio. As a result, technical draws were registered in three matches of the German team without play. Later, after Hitler attacked France, he did something that was startling for his age and status: he went to the front, this time around to defend the freedom of France. But for Alekhine,

a Russian nobleman, this was a natural way to behave: it was a matter of honour to serve one's homeland and the country that gave him shelter. The quick end of hostilities between Germany and France marked the end of Alekhine's military service.

In occupied Paris, he had to work as a chess writer in the newspaper *Pariser Zeitung*, which would later play a nasty role in his life. Seeking to secure himself and his family, Alekhine applied to leave France, but the application was turned down. It soon became clear on what terms Alekhine and his wife could live under occupation: the occupiers wanted the champion to continue playing in tournaments in German territories. The German authorities 'commissioned' several chess articles to him. In 1941, the *Pariser Zeitung* ran a series of articles 'Arian and Jewish Chess', under the banner heading 'A Psychological Study by the World Chess Champion Dr Alekhine based on Chess Experience and Proving that the Jews Lack Conceptual Power and Daring'. These anti-Semitic articles were never forgiven. In 1943, Alekhine was allowed to leave France. Spain and Portugal gave him what he thought would be temporary refuge.

After the war, Alekhine was subjected to ostracism and accused of collaboration with the Nazis following an

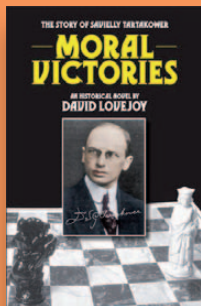
ultimatum presented by the American Chess Federation. In late 1945, he was invited to tournaments in London and Hastings, but the invitations were promptly rescinded: Max Euwe and American chess players threatened to boycott the tournament if Alekhine took part. The maestro wrote an open letter pleading that he had written nothing of the kind and that his three-year silence and the fact that he took part in tournaments organized by Nazis was merely an attempt to survive and save his American-Jewish wife Grace Wishar, who was practically a hostage to his loyalty: 'played chess in Germany and in German-occupied countries only because this was... the price I paid for my wife's freedom.'

'These articles that appeared in 1941 during my stay in Portugal, and which I first read in Germany, reprinted in *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, had hardly any words written by myself.

'My dedication to the art of chess, the respect I have always shown for the talent of my colleagues, in short, all my pre-war professional life should have made it clear to people that the intentions in *Pariser Zeitung* were all false.

'I am sorry that I am unable to come to London to personally confirm the above. A. Alekhine, Madrid, 6 December 1945'

'These messages reveal a clear awareness that it was in the USSR that chess was developing better than anywhere else.'



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Glory days. Alexander Alekhine (first row, middle chair) surrounded by the participants and officials of the Bradley Beach tournament in 1929. The World Champion took first place with eight wins and only one draw.

(According to the Oxford Companion to Chess, the manuscript of the articles, in Alekhine's handwriting, were found among his wife's effects in 1956 –ed.).

However, after the war, nobody would listen to him. The articles were indeed disgusting and at the time few people cared whether he had actually written them and whether saving the life of an elderly Jewish lady was worth it. A committee was set up under Max Euwe and there were suggestions that Alekhine would be stripped of his titles and subjected to a boycott, and that he should not be invited to any more tournaments or allowed to publish articles.

But the USSR was in no hurry to declare a boycott. He now pinned his hopes on his former home country. Public opinion in the Soviet Union gradually changed from 'Alekhine is our enemy' to 'Alekhine is our first champion'. In 1946, the long-awaited match against Botvinnik, postponed

because of the Second World War, was finally set to take place. It was to be held in London. By that time, Alekhine was no longer his old powerful self. But he clearly wanted that duel. It was a glimmer of hope in his mirthless post-war life. He who had been applauded by the whole world was now a pauper. He did not even have money to buy food and cigarettes. Poverty, the stigma of being a Nazi collaborator, and all of a sudden a chance to come back to big-time chess. FIDE officially approved the match on 23 March 1946. On the morning of 25 March, Alekhine was found dead in his hotel room in Estoril, Portugal. The elderly maestro was found sitting in a chair at a table with chess pieces. Even death came as another unexpected trap. To this day, there is nothing to prove that it was a natural death, which is how the newspapers reported it. In any case, the chess king remained undefeated.

Alexander Alekhine was a loner, a withdrawn and tormented person who perhaps fully trusted only his Siamese cat Chess, which sometimes sniffed the board before the games. Psychological dramas, political detective novels or historical opera could be written about Alexander Alexandrovich. He was difficult to fit into the Procrustean bed of common cliché, for he was both fearless and pusillanimous, cynical and sincere, very concentrated and absent-minded, a hard-edged chess fighter and an opportunist at the same time. As Leo Tolstoy said about the fate of artists, poets and creators: 'The poet takes away the best in his life and puts it in his works.' Alexander Alekhine's true life and fate are in his games, no matter how hard we try to sort out the contradictions of his life. A great chess genius of Russia and France who defended both countries in the battlefield and over the chessboard has left a priceless legacy. ■