

History

A.S. Gurvich **(30ii1897 – 18xi1962)**

ALAIN PALLIER

We rarely know what kind of hobbies chess players have. Chess is also rarely associated with billiards, but at least one of the finest specialists in chess study composing, Abraham Solomonovich Gurvich, was a virtuoso of the billiard cue.

He was born in Baku, today the capital of Azerbaijan, then part of the Russian Empire. From 1925 to 1929 he ran the chess column of local newspaper *Bakinski Rabotchi*. Some composition tourneys were organized (in the 1927/8 study tourney Leonid Kubbel and Sergei Kaminer shared prizes). Gurvich's first study was published in 1926. He composed a lot during the next five years, and was quickly rewarded with a number of high distinctions. Gurvich settled in Moscow in the late 1920s. By profession, he was a literary critic specializing in theatre (his spouse, Olga Levikina, was an actress). In the early 1930s he stopped composing and devoted his time to his profession. Two books of essays were published in 1936 and 1938: this shows that he was an influential voice in this field. He came back to studies just after WWII, but after only three years his 'career' was roughly broken off by his becoming involved in one of these tragic episodes that marked the history of the Soviet Union in the 20th century.

After WWII, Stalin's paranoia had to be fed with new elements. A first campaign (1946-8), known in Russian as *zhdanovshchina* or Zhdanov doctrine (after the name of Andrei Zhdanov) was directed against members of the intelligentsia, accused of formalism. That campaign had no nationalistic content, even if, in the post-war years, glorification of grand Russian nationalism was in the programme.

At the same time, at the international level Soviet Union played a key role in the birth of Israel, not for philo-semitism but just because this served its geopolitical interests. In order to weaken the British position in the Middle East, Stalin supported the Palestine partition in 1947. In 1948 when the Israel-Arab war broke out, the Soviet Union stood up for Israel against the Arabs. In 1949, when Stalin discovered that Israel was swinging to the western camp, he changed his mind. But, at the national level, the situation had been quite different since 1947: traditionally Zionism had been considered by the Soviet leadership as a bourgeois nationalism and had to be fought against. The Jewish Anti-fascist Committee (JAC), created in the Soviet Union during WWII for collecting funds, especially in the United States, had some plans for setting up a Jewish republic in the Crimea. This provided Stalin with a pretext for accusing the Jews of conspiracy. Since American Jews were supporting this plan they were working to separate the Crimea from the Soviet Union. And, of course, each Jew was an imperialist serving US interests ...

Therefore, several anti-Semitic campaigns were organized in the period 1948-1953, reaching their peak in 1953 when the so-called *doctor's plot* (prominent doctors, mainly Jews, were accused of being doctor-poisoners who intended to assassinate the Soviet leaders). Only Stalin's death in March 1953 stopped the judicial machinery and the Soviet authorities quickly recognized that the case had been fabricated. Persecutions had begun in January 1948 with the murder of Solomon Mikhoels, a Yiddish actor, and the director of the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee. Then fifteen intellec-

tuals including several Yiddish writers were arrested and accused of treason among other things. All 15 remained isolated for 3 years: their trial has held in July 1952 and thirteen were executed in the Lyubanka Prison during what is called the ‘Night of the Murdered Poets’ (one of the accused had already died in captivity; only one woman, Lina Stern, a biochemist, survived).

The year 1949 began with another attack: on January 29 *Pravda* published a long article entitled *About an anti-patriotic group of theatre critics*. The article violently pointed at five renowned critics (Gurvich, Yuzovskii, Warshavsky, Kholodov, Borshchagovskii, all Jews). Extracts from their articles were quoted in order to demonstrate that they were unable to understand Russian-Soviet authors. Gurvich was accused of “discrediting Soviet dramaturgy”. “What conception can A. Gurvich have about the national character of the Russian Soviet people?”, the author of the article asked. Gurvich’s assessment of a play written by Pogodin, a Soviet playwright, was described as “a slander against Soviet Russian people”, this terminology underlining that these “rootless cosmopolitans” were unable to understand the Russian national characteristics.

Despite the violence of that attack, all five critics survived. They had been quite lucky since it is estimated that the post-war anti Jewish campaigns claimed at least 110 victims. Gurvich wrote a letter in which he recognized his errors. It seems that he was not arrested, but he was dismissed from his position during some years.

But Gurvich himself had, twelve years before, been a kind of prosecutor, using similar terms against another writer. In an article of *Krasnaya Nov*, x1937 (reproduced in his collection of essays *V Poisakh Geroa*, 1938) Gurvich had written very harsh words against Andrei Platonov (1899-1951). Certainly Gurvich was not the first to criticize Platonov and he was not doing more than expressing the official point of view. But in the Soviet Union such criticisms had grave consequences. Pla-

tonov, who is today ranked among the best Russian prose-writers of the 20th century, had all his major writings banned from publication during the 1930s and lived a wretched existence. He himself was not arrested, but his son, aged 15, was sent to the Gulag in 1938, where he developed tuberculosis. The poet Semion Israelievich Lipkin, a friend of Platonov, later wrote that the 1949 matter was like a divine vengeance...



Aleksandr Fadeyev (1901-1956), then one of the most influent Soviet writers, chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers from 1946 to 1954, was one of Platonov’s persecutors and also one of the promoters of the campaign against the Jews. He was also personally responsible for Stalin’s angry reaction to Platonov when, editing *Vprok (For Future Use)*, a short story that was a satire about collectivization, he had underlined the passages that should have been excised. Unfortunately for Platonov, typographers didn’t understand the orders and they printed the full story and, worst, with the incriminated passages in bold

face type! When he read it, Stalin said: “this is a story by an agent of our enemies”. It is known that the same Fadeyev, who had a guilty conscience, gave Platonov’s wife money for her medical treatment. He also gave Gurvich money when the critic was prevented from working and had no income. Platonov died from tuberculosis in 1951 and Fadeyev eventually committed suicide in 1956 ...

Of course, it is not a great surprise that A.S. Gurvich didn’t publish any studies between 1948 and 1952. But in 1952 he made a winning return, with fine results (1st prize in the 1952 Dagestan Tourney and in the *Shakhmaty v SSSR* formal tourney the same year).

His style as a composer reflects his theory exposed in an essay, *Shahmatnaya Poeziya* (*Chess Poetry*), that was first published in the *Soviet Shakhmatnii Etyud* (1955) and was reprinted, with some additional material, in Gurvich’s collection of studies (1961). Paul Valois in *EG* 4 (April 1966) gave a clear and interesting survey of the argument that divided some of the greatest Soviet composers of this time. In his long essay (120 pages in the extended 1961 version), Gurvich criticized some studies by Kliatskin, Simkhovich and Korolkov, for breaking the rule of the strictest economy and for searching ‘sensationalism’ at the cost of ‘unaesthetism’. Korolkov’s answer in his 1958 collection was: Gurvich “makes a fetish of economy and [...] his compositions suffer as a result”. In 1964, two years after Gurvich’s death, Herbstman estimated that there were “a number of inconsistencies in Gurvich’s own practice”, and that his choice of the criticized studies was unfair and made for exaggerating their defects.

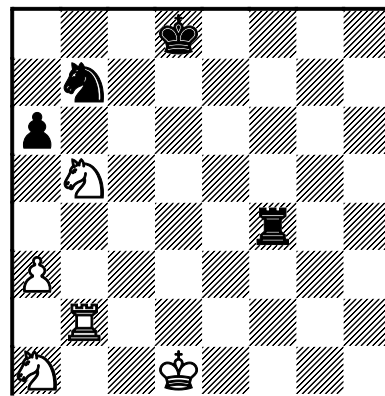
Anyway, Gurvich was at his best in the last years of his life. One third of his output (around 100 studies) was composed in the period 1959-62. He was runner up in the fourth Soviet championship of composition (for studies published during the 1952-1955 period, G.M. Kasparyan took the title). The 6th championship (1962) for studies published during the 1959-1961 period was won by him

ahead of G.M. Kasparyan. Unfortunately, he died the same year.

Gurvich is known for his matchless mastery in composing studies with minor pieces, he was also an expert in model mates or in positional draws. Here are some studies that illustrate his talent :

P.1. A.S. Gurvich

1st prize *Shakhmaty v SSSR* 1955

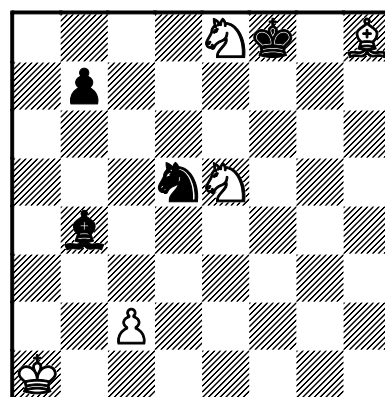


d1d8 0405.11 5/4 Win

1.Rd2+! Kc8 (Ke7 2.Re2+ and 3.Sc2)
2.Sa7+ Kb8 3.Sc6+ Kc7 4.Sc2 ! Kxc6
5.Sd4+ Kb6 6.Rb2+! Ka7 (Ka5; 7.Rb4)
7.Sc6+ Ka8 8.Rb6 Ra4 9.Kc1 (Kd2) Rxa3
10.Kb1!! (Kb2? Ra4; zz) **Ra4 11.Kb2 zz Ra5**
12.Sxa5 Sxa5 13.Rxa6+ wins. A very natural zz position is reached. Play is limpid, without complicated sidelines.

P.2. A.S. Gurvich

2nd/3rd prize *Alma-Atinskaya Pravda* 1959



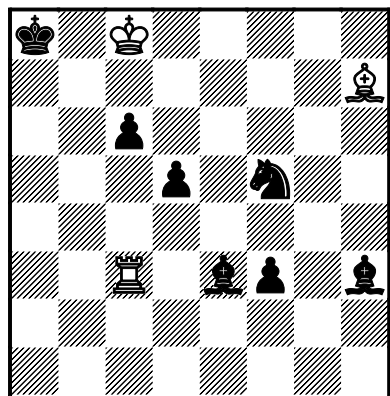
a1f8 0045.11 5/4 Win

1.Sf6 Bc3+ 2.Kb1! Bxe5 3.Sd7+ Kf7!
4.Sxe5+ (Bxe5? Ke6;) Kg8 5.c4 Sc3+ 6.Kc2
Se4 7.Kd3 Sc5+ 8.Kd4 Se6+! (Sb3+ 9.Kc3
 Kc5 10.Sg6! Kh7 11.Bd4 Se4+ 12.Kd3)
9.Kd5 Sf4+ 10.Ke4 Sh5 11.Sg6 Kh7 12.Sf4!

(Kf5? Sg2+;) **Sxf4 13.Kxf4** with a won pawn endgame after 13...Kxh8. The struggle between minor pieces, the king march and its duel with the black knight leaves a strong impression.

P.3. A.S. Gurvich

Etyudi 1961



c8a8 0173.03 3/7 draw

1.Ra3+ Ba7 2.Rxf3 Sd6+ (Se7+ 3.Kd8 Bg4 4.Rf4) 3.Kc7 Sb5+ (Se8+ 4.Kxc6 Bg4 5.Rf8 Bh5 6.Kxd5) 4.Kxc6 Sd4+ 5.Kc7 Sxf3 6.Bg8! Bb8+ 7.Kb6 Ba7+ 8.Kc7 draws.

References

The full text of the *Pravda* article, translated in English, is available on <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/kritikov-e.html>

Konstantin AZADOVSKII and Boris EGOROV, "From Anti-Westernism to Anti-Semitism", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 4:1, winter 2002, pp. 66-80. Article available on: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~hpcws/egorov.htm>

A.S. GURVICH, *Etyudy*, Moscow, Fizkultura y Sport 1961. This includes the essay *Shakhmatnaya Poeziya (Chess Poetry)*.

P.S. VALOIS : *EG* 4 april 1966, editorial.

Obituaries

Marco Campioli (Italy) informs us that **EG** subscriber **Gianluigi Marnoni** (born in Milan 6vi1941) died in Sassuolo 18i2011. He composed only a single study (HHdbIV#67778). And his countryman **Romolo Ravarini** (born 28vii1917 in Novara) died on 18iii2011 at Cameri, a little town near Novara. Four of his studies are in HHdbIV, three of which appeared in **EG**: 2690, 2846 and 5373.