

*History*

## A Soviet composer in the west

**ALAIN PALLIER**

Joseph Stalin, accompanied by Andrei Zhdanov and Anastas Mikoyan, two prominent figures of the Communist Party, attended in January 1936 in Moscow a performance of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, an opera composed by a promising young talent from Leningrad, Dmitri Shostakovich. The work had been created thirteen months earlier in Leningrad and had been a smash hit there.

Stalin left the performance in a fury before the fourth act and very soon. *Pravda* published an (unsigned) editorial entitled *Chaos instead of Music* that condemned Shostakovich's work in harsh terms (it has been said that Stalin himself wrote the article) with *formalism* and *naturalism* as the main criticisms.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Art* defines as formalistic a work "in which the formal qualities such as line, shape, and colour are regarded as self-sufficient for its appreciation, and all other considerations such as representational, ethical, or social aspects are treated as secondary or redundant". In art, Stalin wanted works that could be easily understood by the masses: Shostakovich's work was brilliant, virtuoso, and modern ("coarse, primitive and vulgar" for Stalin!). The Georgian dictator also wanted works with a "moral" message that had to be in line with official doctrine: in communist thought naturalism was a kind of synonym for licentiousness or even pornography (it has been reported that Prokofiev, later himself condemned by Zhdanov for formalism, had been shocked by some daring scenes in which Shostakovich was taking too much liberties with traditional morals).

The *Pravda* editorial was the first of a series of signals announcing a campaign against

"formalism". A ballet, *The Bright Stream*, whose music was written by Shostakovich, met with the same fate as the opera: a second editorial in *Pravda* (February 1936) condemned the choreographer Lopukhov and Shostakovich as "slick and high-handed" fakes who had insulted Russian farmers by representing them as "sugary peasants from a pre-revolutionary chocolate box".

In March of the same year, Lev Spokoiny, editor-in-chief of *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, and the rising star of Russian chess Mikhaïl Botvinnik wrote an article which was published in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* 3/1936 and was entitled "Chaos in chess composition": of course, the word for "chaos" (sometimes translated in English as *confusion* or *muddle*), in Russian directly referred to the *Pravda* article. Considering that "the basis of chess is practical play", Botvinnik and Spokoiny wrote: "It is time to declare a merciless war on formalism in the chess problem as was done for the art front". Helpmates, selfmates and fairies were condemned, even modern two-movers. Mikhail Barulin, a leading problemist and two-mover specialist, who was then the editor of the composition pages in *64*, and who acted as an indefatigable propagandist of the chess problem, tried to answer. He wrote a courageous response in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* 7/1936, "Chaos in thinking", in which he exposed his ideas. He died in the Gulag in 1943 at the age of 46.

It was not the first time in the USSR that the chess composing community had been subject to a special attention by the political power: Krylenko's attack against the "menchevik" Lazar Borisovich Zalkind was remembered by every chess composer. Chess,

as were all other forms of expression, was under close surveillance. Between 1936 and 1954, only a handful of soviet composers sent their compositions abroad for publication in the “bourgeois” foreign press. A.J. Roycroft related in his Kasparyan obituary (*EG* 120, April 1996) that, from the late 1920s, “chess composers were forbidden to send their work abroad unless the destination outlet was officially authorized by the chess section and the VOKS (All Union Society for Relations with foreign countries)”. The *British Chess Magazine* was among these (have a look at Kubbel’s or Kasparyan’s collections, for instance: you’ll find some rare studies published abroad between 1936 and the beginning of WWII, in *La Stratégie*, *Schackvärlden*, *Revista Romana de Sah* or in the *British Chess Magazine*; after 1945 it was no different, even if some Soviet composers published some of their works in Czechoslovakia before 1948, when the country still was a democracy).

Some Soviet composers, who had not well understood the 1936 signals, went beyond the white (red?) line and were punished: several problems by Rostislav Alexandrov (whose tragic fate was related by Yaakov Rossumakho in *EG*167) and two other problemists were published in Germany in 1936 and 1937 as reported by Yuri Averbakh in his article *From the story of chess composition*: “At the same time it was discovered that *Die Schwalbe*, a German problem magazine, had published original problems from three Soviet composers: R. Alexandrov, A. Rotinjan and R. Kofman. The first two were expelled from our chess organization. Kofman, who had sent his problems two years before, was just disqualified for half a year. And Ispolburo issued a special decree – future problems and studies must be sent abroad to foreign magazines only through the editorial office of the newspaper 64”.

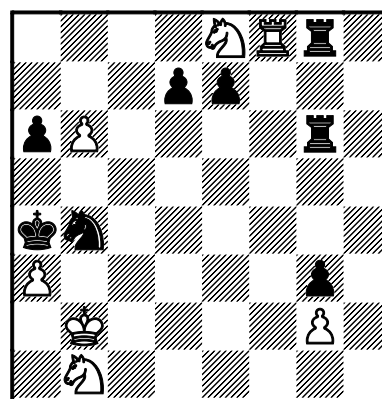
As far as informal tournaments were concerned the situation was no different: for instance, the De Barbieri Memorial announced in 1946 had 16 participants, and none from the USSR. The Hinds JT, also announced in 1946, attracted

composers from Finland, Sweden, Spain, France and Romania. Soviet composers didn’t take part in an informal study contest in the West before the tourney organised in Argentina by the Club Argentino de Ajedrez (Boda de Oros) in 1954-55 (A.P. Kazantsev, G.M. Kasparyan, B.A Sakharov, for instance, took part but Soviet composers were unsuccessful on that occasion, with the exception of the prolific Ukrainian pair, F.S. Bondarenko & A.P. Kakovin, who got 8th prize.

Nevertheless, a single Soviet composer was disobedient just after WWII. Announcements of composing tournaments were very rare in 1945. In the November issue of *British Chess Magazine*, T.R. Dawson wrote: “The *B.C.F.* 52th tourney, recently announced by the B.C.P.S. is for endings: White to play and win. Entries ... up to February 28th, 1946. Judge: M.W. Paris”. Later, Mr. Paris was replaced by Dawson himself, who worked quickly, since his award is dated March 30th, 1946. He had to judge 24 entries, of which 14 featured in the preliminary award. Four studies were eliminated later for various reasons, leaving 10 rewarded studies. A Soviet composer, Aleksandr Petrovich Gulyaev (1908-1998), was awarded the first prize:

### P.11. A.P.Gulyaev

1st Prize B.C.F. Tourney 1945-1946



b2a4 0705.34 7/8 Win

The study is crystal-clear, the solution is self-explanatory:

**1.b7!** (1.Rf5? d5, or 1.Sc3+ Ka5 2.b7 Sc6 and there is no win) **Sc6 2.Rf5!** e5 **3.Rxe5 Sxe5 4.b8Q Rb6+ 5.Qxb6 Sc4+ 6.Ka2 Sxb6**

**7.Sc3+! Ka5 8.Sd6! Rb8 9.Ka1!** and White wins.

The squeeze in final position is remarkable.

Who was A.P. Gulyaev? Generally, we know little about the life of chess composers but, in this case Gulyaev was a strong personality and fortunately a mini-biography was written about his life by A.A. Gulyaev (his son, I presume) which gives us many interesting details about the man and the milestones of his professional career. Until the end of his long life, he was a leading specialist in physical metallurgy (Doctor of Engineering, Professor) working on heat resistant tool steels. In 1942, he headed the Department of Metal Science in the Muscovite Aircraft Institute, an important post in those war years. In April 1945, A.P. Gulyaev was sent to Berlin: he had to evaluate the technical equipment taken from the German Army. He spent 6 months in the German capital and returned to Moscow in October. But then he learned that he was dismissed. Why? The reason is that his father had left the Soviet Union in 1929. After WWII, he was persuaded to returning like many other emigrants: when he arrived in his home in the Soviet Union he was quickly sent to a concentration camp, where he died. His father's fate strongly influenced A.P. Gulyaev.

Fortunately, A.P. Gulyaev's disgrace was only temporary. The mini-biography relates that "a few months later he was accepted as the chief of the metal science department of the Moscow Evening Institute for Basic Engineering". The encyclopaedic 1990 Russian dictionary also indicates that, from 1945 to 1950, Gulyaev was the President of the Chess Commission of Composition. AJR defines him as "an example of that rare and colourful phenomenon of the Soviet era, the survivor maverick".

As a composer, APG was a problemist first (his first studies, composed during the 20's, show problem themes) and he showed greater interest in studies in the second part of his chess career after 1961, when he adopted the Grin pseudonym. So, in 1945, if he was not

one of the greatest names in the study field, he was already a famous composer.

Was participation of Soviet composers tacitly authorized in this peculiar (and short) period between the end of WWII and the beginning of the cold war (the famous Fulton speech by Churchill in which he said: "*From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the continent*", is dated March 5th 1946)? Probably not. Why was Aleksandr Petrovich Gulayev the only one from the USSR to take part? I don't know if there is an answer to this question. Karen Sumbatyan, who knew him, told me that Gulyaev was not someone easy to intimidate. Well, his biography shows that this period was especially difficult for him. Did he send his study as an act of defiance?

One hypothesis is that, during his 6-month stay in Berlin, Gulyaev was told that the B.C.F was organising a study tourney. And maybe he was able to send his entry from Berlin? Was he blamed for this? Curiously, his first prize was not selected in the 1955 Soviet anthology of studies...

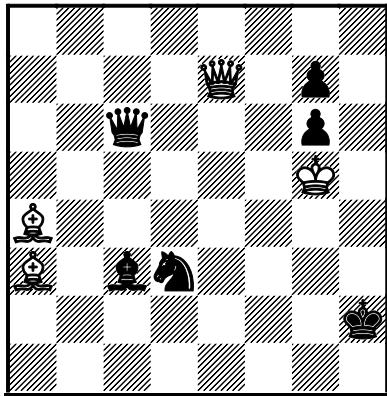
Another oddity was that neither of the Rinck studies which received a second prize (ex æquo with a study by the French composer Vitaly Halberstadt) were original works ... A note in the award points out that the first of the two was "disqualified for previous publication in the *Basler Nachrichten* of June 1928". But the second study also was composed in the late twenties and had been published in *L'Echiquier*, July 1929. This was not discovered at the time. A curious case of auto-plagiarism by this reputed composer ... How could such an experienced (and well-organized) master of composition as Henri Rinck make such a blunder? Again, there is no answer...

As always, the Halberstadt opus is a fine piece of work: it illustrates the 'taboo theme'.

**1.Bd6+!** (1.Bxc6 Bf6+ was supposed to draw, but Wouter Mees cooked this in *EBUR* no.1 iv1991: 2.Qxf6 gxf6+ 3.Kxg6 with a 0023.00 win) **Se5!** **2.Bxe5+** (2.Bxc6? Bd2+ 3.Kh4 Be1+ with perpetual check. Or 2.Qxe5+? Bxe5 3.Bxe5+ Kh3 4.Bxc6 stale-

**P.12. V.Halberstadt**

2nd prize B.C.F Tourney 1945-1946



g5h2 4053.02 4/6 Win

mate) **Bxe5 3.Qxe5+ Kh3 4.Qe3+!** (4.Bxc6? stalemate) **Kh2 5.Qf4+! Kg1! 6.Qd4+! K~ 7.Bxc6** (at last) and White wins.

A last word about Gulyaev. His mini-biography also tells us that “in 1929 he met and married a soloist of the ballet troupe of the Moscow Bolshoy Theater, *O.A. Barysheva-Sharpant’e*, with whom he lived for 64 years. The marriage influenced his life greatly, especially in the 1930s; he became acquainted with many outstanding cultural people and visited every performance at the Bolshoy Theater”. Did A.P. Gulyaev see *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* in the first days of 1936 before it was banned? Probably. But did he enjoy it? Another work by Shostakovich, *The Bright Stream*, played at the Bolshoi theatre, was also banned the same year. Did Olga Aleksandrovna act in it? It is a small world!

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**Mat Plus Forum**, [www.matplus.net](http://www.matplus.net). A discussion in the general section of the forum, entitled “Composition in the USSR” (the quickest way to find it is to google “Botvinnik + Spokoyny”. Vladimir Tyapkin has scanned the articles “*Chaos in chess composition*” and “*Chaos in thinking*” from *Shakhmaty v SSSR*.

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