Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.


Although Soviet chess had been unapologetically political since 1924, the 1932 [All-Union Chess] Congress was by far the most frankly political conference to date. In his opening remarks, Krylenko\(^1\) spoke little about chess, but he harangued the delegates on the political significance of their work. Parroting Stalin’s line, Krylenko informed the Congress that, “presently ... we have attained and on the other it faces very big difficulties, which are in their essence the result of the violent resistance of the remnants of the exploiting classes.”\(^2\) Krylenko’s opening speech at the Congress also vigorously defended draconian laws punishing grain theft on the collective farms and truancy in the factories. “What,” he asked rhetorically, “can all this mean for a chess organization?”\(^3\) The answer was that chess propagandists must draw their cultural work into the general work of building socialism. Since socialism had not yet been build, and since the remnants of hostile classes were desperately fighting against the establishment of socialism, the cultural revolution must adapt to the changing political struggle. In this spirit, Krylenko suggested the slogan: “to broaden, broaden and once again broaden, and then to deepen, deepen and once again deepen our chess activity.”\(^4\)

If Soviet chess was precocious in submitting to central control and embracing a political agenda, it was also in the vanguard in instituting large-scale repression against its own. The initial scrutiny fell on an unlikely group: the problemists. Publication by Soviet problemists in bourgeois magazines had been one of the criticisms made by Social-Democrats in the Shakhintern in 1929 as they struggled against Soviet participation (see Chapter Nine). Although Krylenko ridiculed the German charge as trivial, he did not deny it, nor did he defend the Soviet problemists. He may have been unaware of the practice; problemists were a small, marginal, and insular group in the Soviet chess organization.

Since Levman was a problemist—a member of the Problemists’ Union of the All-Union Chess Section and occasional participant in problem competitions sponsored by the bourgeois press—the issue was especially tricky. At the Seventh All-Union Chess Congress in 1929, Levman engineered a compromise. The Problemists’ Union would leave the Chess Section and reformulate itself as an independent organization, taking on a new name: All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers. Now the Social-Democrats in the German Union could no longer use the issue to flail the Chess Section, and the problemists could send their compositions to competitions sponsored by bourgeois publications without fear of embarrassing Krylenko.\(^5\)

But less than a year later, in 1930, Krylenko suddenly and unexpectedly turned savagely on the problemists and their new

\(^1\)Nikolai Vasil’evich Krylenko (1885-1938)
\(^2\)“VSFK: plenum ob edinennogo sh/sh sektora VSFK SSSR i RSFSR,” list 3.
\(^3\)Ibid., list 4.
\(^4\)Ibid., list 5.
\(^5\)Ibid., list 22.
organization, the All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers. Krylenko’s chief complaint about the group was that it was illegal . . . because it was not affiliated with his Chess Section. The leader of this small, esoteric group, Lazar Borisovich Zalkind (1886-1945), a well-known problemist with an international reputation, was arrested. He was accused of complicity in a Menshevik plot: the case of the All-Union Bureau of the Mensheviks. Krylenko became personally involved with Zalkind’s case, and he handled the prosecution himself. In March 1931, Zalkind was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in the labor camps. The All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers was disbanded, replaced by the Central Composition Committee, which, of course, was attached directly to the Chess Section.

With the disgrace of Zalkind, a dark shadow fell over chess composition. In the summer of 1931, 64 ran a series of articles relating to the developing crisis with the problemists. They were censured for past offenses (unscrupulously submitting their compositions willy-nilly to Western publications), and they were put on notice that this practice would be severely punished. Nine foreign publications that carried chess compositions were designated by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) as acceptable outlets for Soviet compositions. But problemists desiring to submit works to these publications would now have to make application through the Composition Committee; they were specifically forbidden to deal directly with any foreign publications.

Problemists were also advised that bourgeois themes should be avoided in favor of revolutionary themes. This somewhat puzzling directive actually meant that compositions were required to have a close relationship to practical play; they were not to be fanciful. Composition was justified only when it served the ends of “normal” chess. The demand for practical chess composition was the doctrine of socialist realism applied to chess. “Formalism” (art-for-art’s-sake) in chess composition was officially condemned.

In practice this meant that one-, two- and three-move compositions were out of favor, (they tended to be the most fanciful), while long, complicated problems (properly called studies), requiring analysis of multiple variations with differing numbers of moves, were in favor. The most esoteric areas of composition—“helpmates,” “self-mates,” and “fairy chess,”9—were officially disgraced.10

The next issue of 64 had more bad news for problemists; it featured an editorial titled, “The Traitor Zalkind—Out of the Ranks of Soviet Problemists.” Signed by three prominent problemists (erstwhile colleagues of Zalkind), the article denounced the disgraced composer as a renegade and a traitor to the workers. Ominously, the authors volunteered that they, too, had deviated in the direction of formalism, and they vowed renewed vigilance to ensure that their future efforts, and those of their comrade composers, would avoid bourgeois themes and would be saturated with political content.11

The next year, at the 1932 All-Union Chess Congress, the delegates were unanimous in their condemnation of formalism in chess. Krylenko left no room for interpretation regarding the official position: “We must condemn once and for all the formula ‘chess for the sake of chess,’ like the formula ‘art for art’s sake.’”12 This seemed to be the last word in the controversy, but vestiges of formalism remained entrenched in chess composition.

The debate flared up again in early 1936, this time in the pages of the other official journal, Shakhmaty v SSSR. An article co-authored by Botvinnik and the journal’s editor, Leontii Feliksovich Spokoinyi (1900-1936), announced a crusade against formalism.

9In help-mates, both sides cooperate to mate black in a specified number of moves. Self-mates differ in that white must find moves that compel black to mate the white king. Fairy chess involves problems using imaginary pieces with unusual moves and powers.

10A. Guliaev, “Trevozhnyi signal” [Disturbing Signal], 64. Shakhmaty v rabochem klube, June 30, 1931, 181-183.


12Souvarine, Stalin, 575.
in chess composition, paralleling a concurrent campaign against formalism in the arts. The article argued that since the basis of political chess was practical application, composition played only a subordinate role, and it was only useful insofar as it helped to develop practical play. In the same way that chess was subordinate to the task of building socialism, existing only to serve the needs of the workers, composition was subordinate to practical chess, existing only to serve the needs of chess players. Composition for its own sake, however, had no utility and therefore could not justify its existence. Thus, any composition that did not serve competitive chess was branded as formalism, and formalism in chess composition was a grievous and unacceptable ideological error. Any composition not grounded in practical play was from this point onward “defined in two words –formalistic trickery.”

Further, Barulin found no objective reason to favor competition over composition. Chess itself was not and could not be a science, and therefore such arguments about objectivity were moot. Science was dependent on immutable laws derived from nature. The laws of chess were arbitrary and based on nothing–entirely abstract. All chess, therefore, was guilty of the imagined offense of formalism. But in an attempt to cover his ideological bases, Barulin concluded by arguing that composition was, in its own right, a powerful tool for elevating the masses. Forcing composition into a subservient role to competition interfered with composition’s ability to make its own, small contribution to building socialism.

If Barulin’s plan was to initiate reasonable discourse, he was quickly disillusioned. The official response, again co-authored by Botvinnik and Spokoinyi, was immediate and harsh. Barulin was forcefully reminded that the practice of art for its own sake had already been denounced in all areas of Soviet culture, and chess had been in the vanguard of that movement. Therefore, Barulin’s use of the discredited concept of art-for-art’s-sake to mount a defense of formalism in chess composition was nothing short of a provocation. Furthermore, if Barulin really believed that composition was self-contained enough to somehow enjoy immunity from serving the purposes of the Soviet state, then “so much the worse for comrade Barulin and other like-minded composers, who are good for nothing.”

14Ibid., 72.
15Ibid.
17Ibid., 200.
Krylenko and the Chess Section.\textsuperscript{19} They did not have to wait long. Support came—officially and unconditionally—in early 1937.

A meeting of the executive committee of the Chess Section was called in January 1937 to address the controversy. After debate, a special resolution regarding chess composition was passed. It was resolved that chess composition was not a separate art form as Barulin claimed, but rather a component of competitive chess. As such, composition must contribute to the chess movement, which was based on competition, the chosen expression of the masses. Chess composition, therefore, must align itself with chess realism. There was no room for ambiguity in the final resolution: “Trickery, devoid of ideology, and disregard for the needs of the chess masses should be done away with once and for all.”\textsuperscript{20}

The latter stage of the struggle against deviation in chess composition was framed, of course, by the Great Terror. The infamously broad Article 58 of the Soviet penal code, enacted in 1927, set the stage. It was intended to enhance and systematize the repression and prosecution of suspected counter-revolutionaries by broadly defining counter-revolutionary activity. Article 58 was subsequently revised several times, updated by sub-articles that multiplied and clarified proscribed offenses. When Kirov, the popular Leningrad Party boss was mysteriously murdered in 1934, his death was the pretext for Stalin’s escalation repression of Party dissidents, referred to as the Great Terror. The Terror peaked in the second half of the 1930s, at the same time that the struggle against deviation in composition was reaching a climax.

Arvid Ivanovich Kubbel (1889-1938) was a Soviet problemist with an international reputation. In 1937 he became a victim of Article 58. A specialist in self-mates and help-mates, he became increasingly frustrated with his inability to have his compositions published. Finally, he chose the incredibly reckless path of sending his compositions directly to the German chess magazine, \textit{Die Schwalbe}, bypassing the Chess Section’s Central Composition Committee (see above). Arrested in 1937, he was sentenced to ten years at labor without right to correspondence; he died on route to a Siberian prison camp.\textsuperscript{21}

Mikhail Nikolaevich Platov (1883-1938) was the co-author (with his brother) of a composition published in 1910 that was probably the most famous composition in Soviet Russia, reproduced numerous times before 1937 in the Soviet press. The reason for its fame was not the first prize it won in a Riga contest. Rather, the problem caught the eye of Lenin when it was republished in a German paper. In a letter to his brother, Lenin commented on the problem (see Chapter Three), which he described as a “beautiful bit of work.”\textsuperscript{22}

Platov was arrested in October 1937. The exact charges were not publically specified; there was no trial. He was sentenced under Article 58 to ten years in a labor camp. Platov, however, survived only a few months in the camp, dying in early 1938.\textsuperscript{23}

Sergei Mikhailovich Kaminer (1908-1937?) was a problemist who once accomplished an almost unheard of feat: he defeated Botvinnik in three consecutive games. Botvinnik was thirteen at the time; Kaminer was sixteen. There were no hard feelings, and the two boys became good friends.\textsuperscript{24}

Thirteen years later, during Botvinnik’s 1937 match with Levenfish in Moscow (see Chapter Eleven), Botvinnik had a distraught visitor in his room at the National Hotel: his old friend, Kaminer, now a well-known problemist. Kaminer specialized in helpmates, which the Botvinnik and the Chess Section had condemned as formalism. Kaminer, fearing imminent arrest, thrust into Botvinnik’s hands his notebooks full of finished and unfinished compositions. When Botvinnik balked at the unexpected and unwelcome gesture, Kaminer hurriedly explained that he feared that the notebooks, his life’s work, would be lost if Botvinnik refused them. Kaminer was arrested a few days later and subsequently swallowed up by the gulag. Botvinnik claimed to have sent the notebooks to Kaminer’s relatives, but the books,

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} “Plenum Ispolniyuro Vsesoiznoi Shakhskektii” [Plenum of the Central Committee All-Union Chess Section], \textit{Shakhmaty v SSSR}, March 1937, 69.
\textsuperscript{21} Grodzenskii, \textit{Lubianskii gambit}, 90-91.
\textsuperscript{23} Grodzenskii, \textit{Lubianskii gambit}, 101-103.
\textsuperscript{24} M. M. Botvinnik, \textit{K dostizheniiu tseli} [Achieving the Aim] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardia, 1978), 11-12.
like their author, have disappeared.²⁵

Pavel Efimovich Neunyvako (1897-1940) was a hero of the Civil War. He learned chess during his service in the Red Army, but he was more attracted to composition than competition. He published a number of his studies in the 1920s, while simultaneously rising in the Ukrainian Party organization. He became chairman of the All-Ukrainian Chess Section in 1933, and when the controversies over formalism in composition flared, he used his position to defend Ukrainian problemists. Neunyvako was arrested in 1938 and exiled to Alma-Ata, where he continued to compose. He was rearrested and shot in 1940.²⁶

Mikhail Barulin, the author of the response to Botvinnik and Spokoinyi (see above), was a problemist who had found a comfortable niche in the Soviet chess organization. After the arrest of L. Zalkind and the dissolution of the All-Union Association of Chess Problem and Study Lovers (see above), Barulin became the executive secretary of the new Central Composition Committee. When the Chess Section, which now firmly controlled chess composition, established the title of “Master of Sport of Chess Composition,” Barulin was its first recipient. He was subsequently honored with the post of problems editor for both of the official journals, ⁶⁴ and Shakhmaty v SSSR.²⁷

In 1936, when Botvinnik and Spokoinyi published the article in Shakhmaty v SSSR that launched the attack on formalism in chess composition, Barulin rashly jumped to the defense of his fellow problemists (see above), and Botvinnik and Spokoinyi answered with threats against Barulin. Probably this episode sealed Barulin’s fate, although he was not immediately arrested.

Barulin’s home was the meeting place for a chess composition circle. According to Barulin’s daughter, one of the members of that circle was arrested in early 1941, and he reportedly told his interrogators that the circle was often the occasion for anti-Soviet jokes. One by one the other members of the circle were taken, until only Barulin remained. He was finally arrested in November 1941, but refused to sign a confession or denounce other problemists. He died in prison in 1943.²⁸

Significantly, Botvinnik never disavowed the 1936 Shakhmaty v SSSR article (see above) that signaled the subsequent purge of the problemists, not even later when it would have been safe to do so. Instead, Botvinnik always justified himself, claiming that Spokoinyi had written the ideological parts of the article, while he (Botvinnik) had been only responsible for the sections dealing specifically with chess.²⁹ However the two components (ideology and chess) were so closely intertwined in the article as to render this claim dubious. Further, Botvinnik also claimed: “the article’s criticism about composition now [in 1986] seems to me quite principled and reasonable.”³⁰

[...]

We are grateful to Dr. Michael Hudson for allowing us to reproduce here this excerpt from his impressive PhD dissertation, a few months after the totally unjustified and discriminatory exclusion of the Fairies and Retros sections from the so-called “FIDE Olympic Tournament in composing 2016”. See details at http://tinyurl.com/pbt5ekh (MatPlus Forum) (Ed.)

²⁶Ibid., 125-127.
²⁷S. Grodzenskii, “Ne podpisav nichego” [Signing Nothing], 64-Shakhmatanoe obozrenie, November 1989, 24.
²⁸Ibid., 26.
³⁰Ibid., 306.