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**TO WHAT EXTENT DID SOCIALISM INFLUENCE THE
DEVELOPMENT AND WIDESPREAD OF CHESS IN THE USSR UNTIL
ITS COLLAPSE IN 1992 ?**

Abstract

This essay is based on the research question “To what extent did socialism influence the development and widespread of chess in the USSR until its collapse in 1992?” While examining this particular question, firstly the context before the October Revolution will be analysed, when chess was a leisure activity of the wealthy upper class individuals as in Europe. Then, the period between the revolution and World War II will be investigated, in which chess was adopted by the Bolshevik government as a tool of increasing the culture of the public, and was introduced to large masses by state-sponsored campaigns. After that, the Cold War period will be investigated, in which chess was used as a socio-cultural weapon by the Soviet Government and turned into a symbol of the struggle for supremacy of the USSR and the Western Block.

After this investigations, the factors which led to the USSR hegemony in chess in the 20th century, which is still continuing in the 21th century by the former Soviet countries are clearly observed. Mainly, those are the state sponsored programmes and tournaments that aided the development and widespread of chess. Another reason is the chess becoming politicised in the USSR to be used as a tool of socialist propaganda and demonstrating the Soviet excellence to the world, which exceeded its limits in the Cold War period when it also became a matter of prestige and was taken more seriously than any other kind of sports. The last reason is the self motivation of the individuals for becoming professional chess players, which had numerous advantages, since chess was seen as a very prestigious profession in the USSR, and many opportunities were involved such as travelling abroad for international tournaments, which was not possible for regular citizens.

(294 words)

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the role of socialism in the Soviet chess hegemony in the twentieth century, until Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) collapse in 1992. But before getting deeper into the subject, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the word hegemony and why this subject should be considered as important.

Garry Kasparov, who is arguably the greatest chess player of all times and known by millions of people – many of whom have not even played one game of chess – is a Russian, who was born before USSR's collapse and was taught chess there. His main rival, Anatoly Karpov, with whom he dominated the chess world in 1980s and 1990s is also a Russian whose talent and abilities were cultivated in USSR. If we go back a little further, starting from 1927, all world chess champions were Soviet citizens, except the Dutch Max Euwe in 1936 and American Bobby Fischer in 1972.

Starting from 1952 –their first participation- USSR team won all of the chess olympiads, except in 1978, in which they came second after Hungary, which was by the way another socialist country. Even after the collapse of USSR in 1992, all of the chess olympiads are won by former Soviet countries. (Russia, 6 times; Armenia, thrice; Ukraine, twice).

As it can be seen from the given examples, there was a noticeable Soviet dominance in the 20th century in the area of chess. But why USSR, what was different in the USSR that led to its success at chess unlike any other country in the world. The answer is definitely not USSR being way bigger than all countries in Europe by means of population, which may seem like a possible explanation since bigger population increases the chance that there will be numerous talented people in the country. Such arguments are rejected by the 1945 USSR

vs USA radio match, in which the ten leading masters of the United States played the ten leading masters of the Soviet Union, two games each. USSR team crushed the opposition with an overwhelming score of 15½–4½. Forty six years after this event, in 1991; the top ten positions in the world ranking list was occupied by ten grandmasters, who were all Soviet citizens, indicating that Soviet dominance never diminished in the field of chess.

Another aspect of the subject that makes it worth to be analysed is that it was not solely about the game, but it was also about politics. Among many other things, nuclear technology, arms race, space technology and economy; chess was intentionally politicized by the Soviets and transformed into a field of clash between socialism and capitalism, and also a tool of propaganda to demonstrate the Soviet excellence. It was especially used in the Cold War era as a socio-cultural weapon. Therefore, chess itself is an effective instrument to observe the socialism vs capitalism clash; also the weaknesses and strong points of socialism, both before and after World War II. While this subject is analysed; firstly a brief history of chess in Russia before the Revolution will be introduced, then the period after the Revolution to World War II will be investigated, finally the Cold War period which eventually led to the collapse of USSR will be analysed.

Before The Revolution

Many chess historians believe that chess was invented in North West India during the 6th century AD.¹ Then it moved from India into Persia in the late 500s, where it was learnt by the Arabs and renamed as “shatranj” when they conquered Persia. Shatranj reached Western Europe by three pathways; to Spain with the Moor invasion in the 8th century, to Sicily by the Islamic conquerors, and through Byzantine Empire to east.

¹ Divinsky 85.

The spread of chess to Russia (earlier Kingdom of Rus) happened through the Caspian-Volga trade route in the 9th century. The game was carried by the Byzantine Christians and Vikings, through the Balkans and the Baltic sea respectively.² About 1000, all Europe was introduced to chess.

The modern rules of chess were invented in the Renaissance Italy, after which the movement of some pieces were changed. This new form of chess was carried from the West to Muscovy through the trade routes that were established in the reign of Grand Duke Ivan III in the 16th century. There were periodic attempts to suppress chess in Russia, mainly because of the Orthodox Church associating – mistaking – the game with a form of gambling; eventually heresy. However, these efforts never resulted in a long lasting abandoning of the game.³

The term “game of the kings” which is widely used as a synonym for chess is not just a romantic figure of speech that was created by the devotees of the game, but rather a true statement about the history of the game. Considering the feudal Europe in the medieval era, people who played chess were aristocrats and nobles. This tradition which lasted for centuries was broken by the rise of bourgeoisie in the late 18th century, but still; chess was an intellectual pastime for the members of the upper class.⁴ Until the 20th century, chess did not go further than the coffee-house culture, especially in France, where it was played in nearly every café, including the famous café de la Régence in Paris, which was used as a rendez-

² Hooper & Whyld 173.

³ Johnson 4

⁴ Schulte, Brigid. "For Chess Guys, Lake Forest Is Their Castle; Seasoned Players Teach Skills of Game and Life." The Washington Post. Washington Post Newsweek Interactive Co. 2003. *HighBeam Research*. 11 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.

vous point by many famous people including Voltaire, Rousseaus and also Napoleon.⁵ It is also where Marx and Engels first met.⁶

It was the 19th century that became the turning point of chess in Europe. The popularity of the game was increased by the increase in chess clubs, publication of chess books, chess columns in newspapers and international tournaments –first in 1851, London-⁷.⁸ But the popularity only increased among the upper class and intellectuals, therefore it was still seen as a sophisticated leisure activity, but by no means a serious pursuit or a profession.⁹ Many leading chess masters were involved with other professions to earn their livings, Adolf Anderssen was a schoolmaster, Siegbert Tarrasch a doctor, Emanuel Lasker was both a mathematician and a philosopher and so on.

The same situation also applied to Russia. There were only a few chess masters, and as in Europe, chess was the courtly pastime of the leisured upper class and intelligentsia.¹⁰ The chess revolved around St Petersburg, which hosted three important international tournaments, in 1895, 1909 and 1914.¹¹ Looking at the chess in the 19th century Russia, which was not any better –if not worse- than any country in the world and regarding the fact that the fellow countries with which they formed the USSR were even worse and unseen in the international scene, the dominance of Soviets in chess that became very clear and obvious forty years later seems rather unprecedented. However, the course of chess significantly changed in a very short period of time after the October Revolution, which is what this essay is based on.

⁵ The French School of Chess (18th/19th cent.) <<http://www.mark-weeks.com/aboutcom/aa05h27.htm>>

⁶ Christiansen, Rupert. "After Bonaparte, the barricades Rupert Christiansen praises a history that brings order to the bewildering political scene of post-Napoleonic France." The Sunday Telegraph London. Telegraph Group Limited. 2001. *HighBeam Research*. 11 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.

⁷ Wall, Bill. "19th Century Chess" – 11Dec 2010 <<http://www.chess.com/article/view/19th-century-chess>>

⁸ Chess in the Early 19th Century: Chess Becomes Organized. <http://www.mark-weeks.com/aboutcom/aa06b11.htm>

⁹ Johnson, 8

¹⁰ Johnson, 10

¹¹ Wall, Bill. "19th Century Chess"

After The Revolution

It was October 1917 when Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown and replaced by the socialist government headed by Vladimir Ulyanov –better known as Lenin -. As a socialist state that was managed by central planning conducted by the government, the first things that were promoted when they came to power was the education and literacy campaigns, which were perhaps the most significant achievements of the USSR, considering that 55% illiteracy was fully annihilated in less than 40 years by the state-planned campaigns; such as the one between 1923-1927 called “Down with Illetarcy of Society” with the motto “Literacy is the path to communism”.¹² The literacy and education campaigns were seen as the basis of achieving the modernization and industrilization that were the main targets, and also improving the society’s living standards.

Although chess was in perfect harmony with such campaigns, at first it was denounced in Russia, for it being a bourgeois pastime.¹³ The famous chess cafés Dominik and Reiter in Petersburg, Pechkin in Moscow and the Warsaw in Kiev were closed, chess equipment were destroyed and even some chess players that were subscribed to those cafés were killed.¹⁴

It was Alexander Ilyin-Genevsky, with whose personal effort was chess reinstated in that environment surrounded by fanatics that were firmly against the game, because of its association with bourgeois culture. Born in 1894, Genevsky was himself a chess player, who was expelled from school at the age of 17 and was sent to Geneva, the name of which he

¹² Literacy and Education in the Early Soviet Union
<http://library.by/portalus/modules/english_russia/readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1190296667&archive=&start_from=&ucat=22> 13 December 2010

¹³ Wall, Bill. Russian Chess History. <<http://www.chess.com/article/view/russian-chess-history>> 13 December 2010

¹⁴ Johnson, 24

added to his own.¹⁵ He determined that chess could be perfectly integrated to the education and literacy campaigns to aid the social development. He was recruited by Nikolai Podvoisky, the head of the General Reservists' Organization which served as a military training organization, but also ran sports and other activities. While working there, Genevsky persuaded Podvoisky to be allowed to use state resources to support chess, putting forward the argument that "chess develops in a man boldness, presence of mind, composure, a strong will and something which sport cannot, a sense of strategy"¹⁶ He was able to persuade his chief, and was assigned 100,000 roubles for organizing the first USSR Championship in August 1924¹⁰, namely the All-Union Chess Olympiad.¹⁷ This was the first time that the state financed –or more appropriately, sponsored- such an organization. He also pioneered the first chess column in USSR, in the General Reservists' Organization's newspaper "To the New Army". Additionally, he was the one who decided the destiny of chess in the future by saying "Chess cannot be apolitical as in capitalist countries". He was the initiator of the movement that forbade the view "chess for chess' sake" as art for art's sake, which was perhaps one of the biggest reasons why chess had become such an important matter, especially in the cold war period.

Saying that what Genevsky had in mind was to dominate the chess world and turn a game that has been the focus of interest of intellectuals into a tool of socialist propaganda and a matter of prestige would be nothing less than an exaggeration. His main idea was definitely using chess as a cheap way of providing masses of people with culture, education and character training.¹⁸ However, for his successor in the chess movement and everyone else that

¹⁵ Hooper & Whyld, 181

¹⁶ "The Soviet chess machine: another empire crumbles." *The Economist* (US). Economist Newspaper Ltd. 1991. *HighBeam Research*. 13 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.

¹⁷ Johnson, 26

¹⁸ Soviet Chess Machine.

came after him, chess was intentionally politicised even further to demonstrate the Soviet excellence and mental superiority to the whole world.

The successor was Nikolai Vasilyevich Krylenko, who was born in 1885. Infamous because of his involvement with the illegal communist movement in the tsarist area, Krylenko had serious troubles with the authorities; arrested, imprisoned even exiled numerous times.¹⁹ Having earned the trust of Lenin in the unsuccessful 1905 revolution, Krylenko was appointed Commissar of War right after the 1917 revolution. Later, he became the head of the Commissariat of Justice –equivalent of ministry of justice- and the presucutor of revolutionary tribunals in 1931.²⁰

His involvement with the chess world started in 1924, when he was appointed as the chairman of the chess section of All-Union Committee on physical culture.²¹ In the same year, he stated his ideas about the route of chess in Soviet Union with a letter that he sent to the All-Union Congress. Parallel to Genevsky's ideas, he was also declaring that chess should be adopted by the government as an instrument of increasing the culture.²² The Congress was also where the well-known slogans of the socialist chess movement originated: "Take chess to the workers!" "Chess is a powerful weapon of intellectual culture!" "Chess must become the feature of every club and every peasant reading room!"^{23 24}

Krylenko also founded a new chess magazine with the title 64, which he used as a ground to impose the socialist vision of chess to people as the editor.²⁵ Referring to Stalin's five year plan that was announced in 1928, he said that it was necessary to create a five year

¹⁹ Nikolai Krylenko: The Father of Soviet Chess

<<http://www.chessville.com/misc/History/PastPawns/NikolaiKrylenko.html>> 13December 2010

²⁰ Johnson, 31

²¹ Russian Chess History. Bill Wall

²² Johnson, 32

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Soviet Chess Machine

²⁵ Johnson, 33

plan for chess and create a mass of chess players. The text of the original five year plan also included statements about chess and chess players, suggesting that the role of the chess players was to be active in the “cultural front” of the fight for improving socialism and their efforts were seen necessary in achieving the goals of the first five year plan.²⁶ Despite such heavy and intense effort to politicise the game, it took time for the people to adopt the game as a political weapon, and the ones that were playing only for the joy of the game were sternly criticised, the pure chess that was isolated from political or ideological agendas was not valued at all. An example for that is the anonymous Soviet propogandist’s observations of a trade-union chess club:

*"Such a mixed group of individuals, united by nothing except chess, naturally led to a situation where the club concentrated on competitions and championships, while the industrial and political tasks facing chess players received no attention."*²⁷

A similar, yet more stricter complaint appeared in 1931 Chess Congress, in which Krylenko warned the people who thought that politics should be seperated from general cultural work and from daily lives (referring to chess), by stating that they were taking up a political position against the government and named them as class enemies.²⁸

In 1925, Krylenko used funds from the New Economy Policy (abbreviated NEP) to organize the internetal tournament that was held in the same year in Moscow. For the first time in history, a state had sponsored a chess tournament.²⁹ The Soviet Government funded over 50,000 roubles for providing prizes, paying the expenses of the players who attended from various countries, and providing gratification money for eminent stars.³⁰ Another important contribution that he made to the chess movement was making chess a part of Soviet

²⁶ Soviet Chess Machine

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Johnson, 35

²⁹ Russian Chess History. Bill Wall.

³⁰ Sport: In Russia. TIME. Monday, Nov.16, 1925

education system; from the beginning to the end, chess was an integral part of the core-curriculum.³¹

Starting with the first attempt of Ilyin Genevsky and later on Krylenko, chess was clearly adopted by the Soviet Union to be promoted as a form of mental training and a way of replacing the typical pastime of the masses, which had been brewing liquor and brawling –in Krylenko’s words-³² with a cultural activity. However, because of the persistent efforts to politicise the game, the course of chess became totally different; it turned into a symbol of class conflict and the clash of capitalist and socialist world; also a tool for proving the legitimacy and even superiority of the newly formed state to the world. The article that appeared on the chess magazine *Shakmatny Listok* (chess leaflet) in 1925 plainly reflects the situation.

*“In certain circumstances, the participation of working class chess players in bourgeois tourneys would be politically advantageous, in as much as it would unite working people around the idea of class solidarity and of opposition, as a class, to the bourgeoisie. The chess section therefore, deems it possible for the proletarian chess organisation to take part in international matches so as, through victories over bourgeois masters, to enhance self-respect among the proletarian masses and faith in their strength and youthful talents. (Shakmanty listok, 7 October 1925, p.3)*³³

By the end of 1920s, chess, involved with the education system and literacy policies, had penetrated into every part of the USSR and was seen as a way of proving the superiority of the Soviet minds. The proletariats who had been destroying the chess equipment ten years

³¹ Nikolai Krylenko: The Father of Soviet Chess.

³² Ibid.

³³ Riordan, James. Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR p.353

before then were now manufacturing their own “revolutionary chess sets”, which featured a working man as the king and a peasant woman as the queen; with the pawns bearing the badge of a political society for underaged socialists.³⁴ However, the Soviet Union was a closed society and the world was not thoroughly informed about any of the incidents that were happening unless the government itself made it heard; and the cultivated Soviet masters weren’t participating in international tournaments occasionally. Also USSR rejected to be a member of the international chess federation, hence it is not possible to speak of a hegemony until the end of World War II.

Although there was not any kind of international dominance before the cold war, another aspect of this research is chess becoming widespread in the Soviet Union. That, however can be observed very clearly. In 1923, the number of registered chess players in the USSR was 1000, which increased to 24000 in one year. Four years later, the number noticeably increased to 140 000, and in 1929 150 000. In the following six years, it had boosted to 500 000, which became a million of registered chess players in 1950s³⁵. In 1963, the number of registered players was 3 millions, which was only 6,000 in the USA as emphasized in the “TIME” magazine in May 31, 1963.³⁶ Eventually, it increased to some five millions, which indicates that the planned chess movement successfully produced 5 million chess players who were to some extent professional tournament players, since registered means “licensed”. Thinking of those who were not interested in competing in a professional manner but were taught chess and were able to play, the number is rather untold. Also, about chess being widespread in Soviet Union, the respected Dutch grandmaster Hans Ree once

³⁴ RUSSIA: Chessmen. TIME. Monday, Jan. 11, 1926

³⁵ Soviet Chess Machine.

³⁶ Chess: The Newest Idol. TIME. Friday, May.31, 1963

stated humorously “When I am in the USSR, I have the feeling that every tram conductor plays chess better than I do.”³⁷

Although the numbers are truly significant, the climax of the Soviet chess movement was in the Cold War period, in which the “Soviet chess school” and its success was accepted worldwide.

The Cold War Period

Although there is not a consensus about the time when the Cold War first began – some historians argue that it started with the Bolshevik Revolution and ended in 1992- in this essay, the period that started right after the end of World War II and ended after USSR’s collapse is referred.

The Cold War is known to be a period of most intense conflicts between socialist and capitalist world. Despite the fact that no gunfires were being heard, Eastern and Western blocks were consistently battling in political, economic and socio-cultural fields. In such an era in which the relations between the sides continually deteriorated, the competition, tension and hostile intentions were in extensive proportions and both sides struggled for global supremacy, the politics involved with chess, which was a field of socio-cultural battle in this multi-fielded war, became even more significant.

Although Soviet chess was not widely known in the other countries, the winner of the big international tournament in Moscow (1925) Efim Bogoljubov was a Soviet citizen, who came first ahead of the two celebrated masters, the reigning world champion Jose Raoul Capablanca and the former world champion Emmanuel Lasker. This was therefore an important indicator that the Soviet chess movement was giving good results, but was not enough for a worldwide acceptance of the Soviet dominance.

³⁷ Sosonko 70

The first remarkable success that was achieved in the Cold War was the 1945 USA vs USSR radio match, (named that way because the moves were transmitted via radio) which was won by USSR with a crushing 15½–4½. Although this match had shown the development of the Soviet chess and was quite successful, USSR was not able to compete in the World Championship Cycle that started after the reigning world champion Alekhine's death as they had been refusing to join the international chess federation, FIDE (Fédération Internationale des Échecs) for a long time. Without occupying the world championship it was not possible to speak of a worldwide dominance.

In order to achieve the planned success and being able to compete in the world championship cycle and also the olympics, USSR joined FIDE in 1947.³⁸ One year later, the world championship was won by Michail Botvinnik, who was the most favourite player of the government amongst others for him being a very profound socialist and a perfect example of a Soviet citizen. Starting from 1948, -excluding the three year gap between 1972-1975- Soviets were never beaten and were continually world champions. With every new victory over the capitalist world, the burden on the chess player's shoulders and the pressure exerted by the government continually increased, since the authorities did not want to back down in one of the few areas in which they were unquestionably superior.

While the Soviets were trying to protect their privileged position, there were two incidents when the matter of prestige became more significant than any other time. The first two were the matches between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer in 1972, and the matches between Anatoly Karpov and Victor Korchnoi.

The first one was seen as the climax of the socialism vs capitalism clash, since Bobby Fischer managed to undermine the strongest point of the Soviet Union. However, because of

³⁸ Zurich 1953: Possible Conspiracies and Contraversies. <http://blog.chess.com/Blunderprone/zurich-1953-possible-conspiracies-and-controversies> 16 December 2010

an unknown reason, he resigned from chess for a long time and did not consider to defend his title after he became the world champion, so in 1975 Soviets came to power again with Anatoly Karpov.

The second one was also important, since Vicor Korchnoi was an emigré and was deeply anti-socialist. It again became a matter of prestige to defend the title against a Russian that defected from the USSR and made lots of anti-socialist statements. This game was taken more seriously than ever by the USSR government, and at the end they were able to win against the renounced emigré.

The matches between Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov also show traces of the same pattern, namely the clash between socialism and capitalism; Kasparov being the defendant of the latter. However, it was a match between two Soviet stars, rather than a match between eastern and western block, so it will not be mentioned deeply even it if might be considered as a socio-cultural triumph of capitalism over socialism.

As it can be seen, the intensity of rivalry in chess continually increased until the collapse of USSR, and chess was the most noticeable area of sociocultural clash of socialism and capitalism.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, the reasons why Russia and the other former USSR countries became noticeably superior and dominant in the area of chess is investigated. As mentioned above, these were particularly the state planned programmes of encouraging chess among the public along with the education and literacy campaigns and increasing the cultural level at the meantime; and also the cold war period in which the game was turned into a sociocultural weapon to dictate their superiority.

Another reason why the chess became that widespread in the USSR was the self-motivation of the people. There were numerous advantages of being a professional chess player in the Soviet Union, mainly the possibility of traveling abroad for tournaments all over the world, which is a golden opportunity in such a closed society, referred as “Iron Curtain”. In addition, successful chess players were awarded with gifts that were not available for regular people; Michael Tal was awarded with a Volga car when he became the world champion, which was the best car in the USSR and could not be owned but dreamed by ordinary citizens.³⁹

It is also argued that chess was considered as the only way of self-expression that was isolated from any kind of interferences, such as cencores or bans. Considering the fact that other kinds of art were strictly interfered and were adjusted to the purpose of exalting the revolution and socialism –even Eisenstein’s “Ivan the Terrible” was banned by Stalin due to the image of Ivan created by Eisenstein not being as heroic as it should have been- chess was the only field in which the freethought could be processed without being interfered by others.

Having acquired their dominance in chess, it was not unprecedented that Soviets used chess as a sociocultural weapon in the cold war, since everything was turned into a field of rivalry. It was also that rivalry which became an opportunity for chess to turn into a more popular sport in the world than ever, especially in 1972, in which two sides of the cold war were competing for triumph in action –which was not a familiar thing in cold war- and the game drawn the attention of the whole world.

Along with their construction of chess culture and superiority in chess, the mentioned events and programmes also aided the game to develop, as the Soviet grandmasters made extensive and exhaustive analysis in order to reach their superior position; and therefore they

³⁹ Sosonko, 23

contributed a great deal to the theory of the game. It is obvious that socialism couldn't make it, argued that if it will ever be successful; but it is unquestionable that socialism was the very thing that made chess the game that it is now.

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