

Alekhine Renaissance

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Alexander Alekhine

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- *A. Alekhine: Agony of a Chess Genius*
Frank X. Mur (Jefferson, 1989)

by Pablo Morán, edited and translated by

- *Alekhine in the Americas* by John Donaldson, Nikolay Minev and Yasser Seirawan (Seattle, 1992)
- *The Games of Alekhine* by Rogelio Caparrós and Peter Lahde (Brentwood, 1992)
- *Complete Games of Alekhine, Volume One* by Jan Kalendovský and Vlastimil Fiala (Olomouc, 1992)
- *Das Schachgenie Aljechin* by Isaak Linder and Wladimir Linder (Berlin, 1992).

Alexander Alekhine is remembered as one of the more prolific world champions in the literary realm. He wrote some 18 chess books, nearly all dealing either with individual events in which he participated or with specific phases of his career. Many later writers were thus able to produce Alekhine 'best game' compilations on the basis of material effortlessly gleaned from the master's books, and until recently there has been little attempt to go beyond this nucleus of familiar, not to say stale, material. But now, with 1992 marking the centenary of his birth, a number of authors have been striving – and indeed competing – to uncover further games and to research the nooks of Alekhine's life.

Among the key difficulties facing them are the intensity of his activity in numerous countries and the paucity of solid information, i.e. documentation, about certain aspects of his life (notably his Russian/Soviet period, up to the beginning of the 1920s). Chroniclers must also be prepared to tackle such issues as Alekhine's unlovely character traits and the sheer scale of his tragedy. No other world chess champion started life with more or finished it with less.

Frank and equitable treatment of personal matters was a characteristic of *Agonía de un Genio* by Pablo Morán, originally published in Madrid, 1972 by Aguilera. A revised and expanded English-language edition appeared in 1989 (*Alekhine: Agony of a Chess Genius*, edited and translated by Frank X. Mur). The book provides detailed coverage of Alekhine's various visits to Spain and Portugal, notably during the Second World War, as well as offering light reading on topics such as 'The Nazism of Alekhine', 'Alekhine the Man', and 'Alekhine and Women'. Above all, countless forgotten games are presented, most with annotations, though information about sources is lacking.

Insufficient use is made of Alekhine material that came to light between 1972 and 1989, and although the handsome English version is certainly much superior to the Spanish original, a further edition could doubtless be made better still. On the other hand, and to keep matters in perspective, it should be noted that *Agony of a Chess Genius* is vastly superior to nine-tenths of what passes for chess literature nowadays.

Geographical limits also determined the scope of *Alekhine in the Americas* by John Donaldson, Nikolay Minev and Yasser Seirawan. The format is similar to the magazine *Inside Chess*, with much material (about 140 games, many annotated, plus contemporary comment) crammed into 47 pages. Despite a few rough edges, such as the lack of any indexing and some printing errors (e.g. an incorrect birthdate for Alekhine on page 1, corrected in a quote on page 2), the work has been edited well and reads smoothly. Like Morán's book, it concentrates on Alekhine's informal games, many of which appeared in the *American Chess Bulletin* but nowhere else.

'The authors of this work are not chess historians', declares the introduction (page 1), yet within the book's self-imposed limits they demonstrate more scholarship than do many pretenders to that title. Their valuable re-examination of some of Alekhine's games and annotations in the light of 1990s praxis serves to highlight a fundamental problem in chess literature: the divide between masters and historians. The shrewd historian will realize that his lack of over-the-board mastery disbars him from the annotation of games and other similar practical tasks, and he will bear in mind the chess adage that 'a weakness is not a weakness if it is unexposed and cannot be exploited'. Likewise, few masters possess adequate knowledge or research material to write usefully about chess history, though the *Inside Chess* team has shown that there are exceptions. How unfortunate that the two categories, historian and master, so seldom join forces.

When forces are joined by persons who belong to neither category, the result is liable to be a book like *The Games of Alekhine* by Rogelio Caparrós and Peter Lahde. Part One has 953 tournament games, Part Two 214 match games, and Part Three 410 offhand games (a very small number, in a section which also fails to identify the types of events involved). Throughout the volume the games are presented without exact dates, precise sources, annotations, or information about possible score discrepancies, etc., and even the moves themselves are incorrect in many cases.

None of this deters the book from claiming on page 385 that 'Since the publication of his book *The Games of Capablanca*, in 1991, Caparrós fixed his mind in completing the only other great book missing in the chess literature: the Games of Alexander Alekhine' (quoted verbatim). It is regrettable that he did not fix his mind in correcting the countless grammatical/idiomatic solecisms and typographical errors (plus another wrong birth-date for Alekhine, this time on the back cover). The hallmarks of the presentation of games and results are inconsistency and loose thinking, and the lack of historical judgement is further shown by naive name-dropping (as when, on page 93, the bare score of Alekhine's widely published game against Dake is grandly headed 'Contributed by GM Arthur Dake').

While it is true that *The Games of Alekhine* furnishes the largest quantity of the Franco-Russian master's games so far gathered within a single volume, other prospective authors had already accumulated hundreds more. In particular, many readily available tournament games have been overlooked by the Chess Scribe book, as have simultaneous specimens of decidedly better quality than the 19 'lost' games scraggily annexed to the end of the book, following a last-minute donation. *The Games of Alekhine* may have filled a gap in chess literature, but it has filled it poorly and temporarily.

A more ambitious project, with a correspondingly more venturesome title, has come from Czechoslovakia: *Complete Games of Alekhine* by Jan Kalendovský and Vlastimil Fiala. To date, the first of four volumes has appeared, covering the years 1892-1921. In addition to 334 games, mostly unannotated but some with notes by Alekhine, there is a huge amount of biographical material, and the research is as prodigious as the presentation is shambolic. Typographical errors superabound, especially in the game annotations ('Black could decisived the game by beatiful combination in his favour' – page 29), despite three Americans being credited for correcting the translation.

The industry of Kalendovský and Fiala is to be respected, but Volume One is an amorphous potpourri which propels the reader backwards and forwards through a maze of parts and

subchapters. There is a surprisingly large number of factual errors (such as a crosstable on page 66, where most of the totals do not add up). The lamentable typesetting and editing undermine the undeniable scholarship (e.g. the extensive use of Russian and Soviet sources to provide the most detailed portrayal yet of Alekhine's early years). One welcome point, though, is that much of the information is substantiated in footnotes. All too often authors offer 'information' (in the broadest sense of the term) without any indication of their sources. Whether intentionally or not, this practice inevitably leaves the reader powerless to distinguish between fact and fable.

Footnotes are not a feature of *Das Schachgenie*

Aljechin by Isaak and Wladimir Linder, a run-of-the-mill book all too similar to the father-and-son team's monographs on Capablanca (1988) and Lasker (1991) from the same publisher. It goes down the beaten track competently enough, neither better nor worse than would be expected from the brief, perfunctory bibliography on the last page. But what were the authors trying to achieve with any of the three books, given that they scarcely add to common knowledge? In the Alekhine volume, most of the standard games, habitual facts, and customary photographs are on parade yet again, and virtually the only novelty is that Alekhine's play during the Second World War is, for some reason, more or less ignored.

Alekhine's reputation has suffered greatly at the hands of general purpose chess writers whose fondness for exaggerations and meretricious colour has led them to focus on his personal weaknesses, real or imagined. (To use four euphemisms, Alekhine has frequently been accused of being uncandid, dissolute, intemperate and racially partisan.) None of the above books makes any systematic attempt to analyse Alekhine the person or Alekhine the player, and it remains to be seen whether future authors can, in addition to providing reliable factual information, unravel some of the manifold paradoxes and contradictions.

For example, Alekhine dishonestly 'improved' some game-scores for immortality yet could write annotations that were merciless in exposing previously undetected errors in his own play. He produced a tournament book (of New York, 1927) which was shamefully biased against Capablanca, yet he managed to remain reasonably objective in another one (Nottingham, 1936) written when relations between the two masters were infinitely worse. Alekhine is frequently described as 'immoral', yet until the 1930s chess literature seldom contained an uncomplimentary word about him. Even his playing style is the subject of widely varying assessments by qualified commentators. Was it sound? Was it hypermodern? Was he relatively weak in endings?

Answers may be offered by other books on Alekhine being prepared now: the remaining volumes of the Kalendovský/Fiala project, more from *Inside Chess* and a work L. Skinner/R. Verhoeven. Whatever, it must be hoped that these books will show fewer signs of the disorderliness and haste that characterize some of the recent works discussed above. So far there has been teeming activity and comparatively little to show for it. But why the rush? After all, even the calendar-conscious can look towards a new publication target that should allow plenty of time for research, fact-checking, and proofreading: 1996 will be the 50th anniversary of Alekhine's death.

Afterword : In 1993 J. Donaldson, N. Minev and Y. Seirawan brought out *Alekhine in Europe and Asia*. Two further books on Alekhine by J. Kalendovský and V. Fiala were published in 1996 and 1998 (covering 1921-24 and 1925-27 respectively). For a review of the 1998 volume by L.

Skinner and R. Verhoeven see [The Games of Alekhine](#).

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