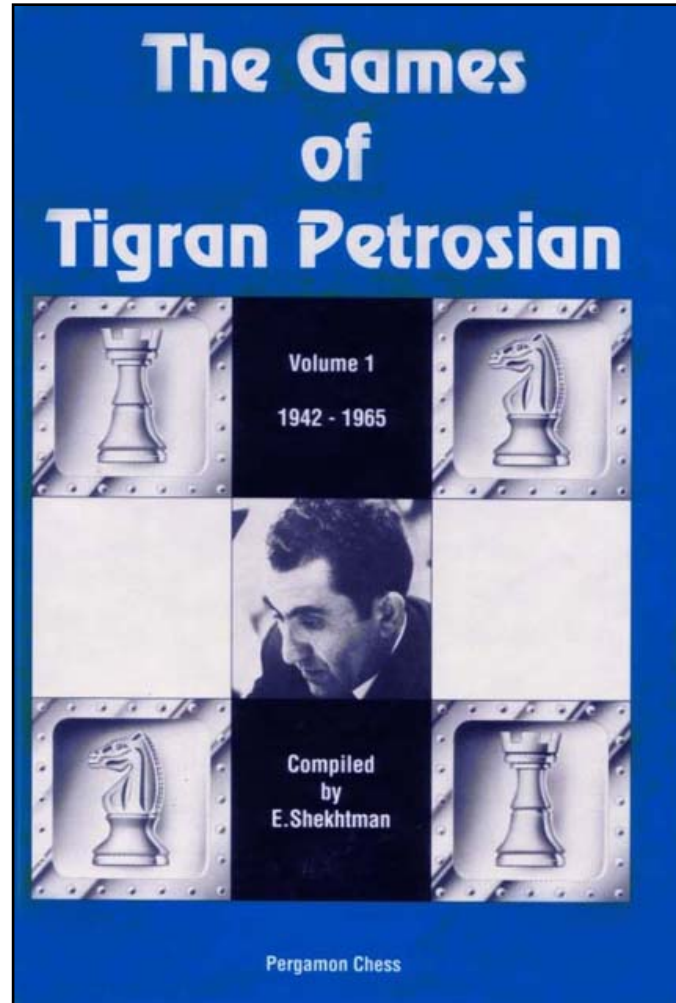


Petrosian's Games

Edward Winter

(1991)



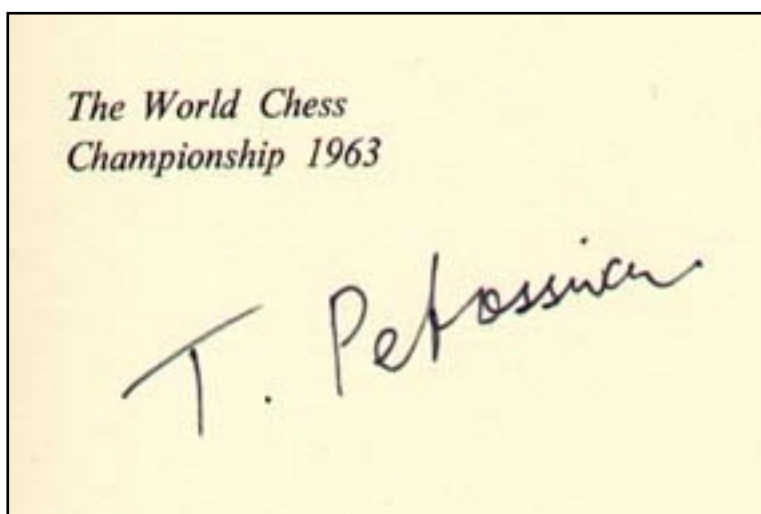
The Games of Tigran Petrosian, Volume I, 1942-1965, compiled by Eduard Shekhtman (Pergamon Press Ltd., Oxford, 1991)

Books featuring the 'complete games' of contemporary players seem to have gone out of fashion. In the decade up to 1980, Fischer's output was well covered by several publishers; Tal had a series of three volumes from Batsford, though the project broke off at 1973; Korchnoi's career was dealt with by the Oxford University Press; various comprehensive collections of Karpov's games appeared. Since then, publishers have indulged in what may euphemistically be termed belt-tightening, to the extent that even the games of Kasparov, notwithstanding his popular style of

play, have yet to be properly anthologized.

The appearance of *The Games of Tigran Petrosian* is thus a surprise. Its aim is to provide all the games played by the late world champion (1929-1984), and this first volume, for which 1965 provides a rather unnatural break-off point, contains a more or less complete record of the early period. It begins with the sole informal game, a win against Flohr in a June 1942 simultaneous exhibition, and ends with two games against Korchnoi from the Moscow v Leningrad match of November 1965. The scale of the project is underlined by a comparison with the 1963 Wildhagen book on Petrosian, which went as far as the Curaçao Candidates' tournament of May-June 1962. Wildhagen contained 350 games, while Shekhtman gives 938 for the same period. The overall total in Volume I of Shekhtman's book is 1,089, and although the majority appear in bare-score form, many have notes. Indeed, almost every leading Soviet player is to be found among the annotators, and over 70 games have analysis by Petrosian himself. He wrote engagingly and instructively, concentrating on prose explanations rather than variations. Moreover, and this tends to be a useful indicator of a good book, the winner's moves are sometimes criticized. Those 70 or so games would, alone, constitute quite a book.

Many of Petrosian's articles and interviews are woven into the collection, which is further brought to life by eight pages of photographs. His reminiscences repeatedly stress the influence of Nimzowitsch, whose *Chess Praxis* was the first serious chess book which he studied. For Petrosian, that volume was 'not a



work of reference but a book kept under my pillow – a bedtime story for a chess child'. Nimzowitsch's aim was to teach positional chess, and Petrosian expresses the interesting view that 'the teaching of positional play is equivalent to the teaching of chess in general'. But of all the articles, perhaps the most remarkable is a ten-page account by Petrosian, published here for the first time, of the 1963 match against Botvinnik which brought him the world title. He is typically generous about his opponent: 'Botvinnik, like no-one else, is able to arrive for the start of an event in the highest state of preparedness and from the very first moves to play at full strength.'

The book has been produced with painstaking care, although opponents' first names

and the exact dates of games might have been incorporated. (In the past it was common practice for precise dates to be given in primary sources, whereas nowadays, curiously, this is a compliment generally reserved for world championship games.) An extensive spot-check of game-scores revealed no printing errors at all, and the quality of the English also provides a refreshing contrast to many chess books churned out nowadays. The work has been translated and edited by Kenneth P. Neat, the highly respected translator of some 50 Russian titles.



Among other books on Petrosian, English-language readers have long been familiar with those by Clarke (Bell, 1964), O'Kelly de Galway (Pergamon, 1965) and Vasiliev (Batsford/RHM, 1974). In 1990 two further titles appeared. *Petrosian the Powerful* by Andrew Soltis and Ken Smith (Chess Digest) presented 30 games with entertaining annotations but was poorly structured, having no games at all from the years 1967-1981. *Petrosian's Legacy* (Editions Erebouni) was a compilation, also by Eduard Shekhtman, of Petrosian's writings. Despite some overlap with the new Pergamon book, few will regret acquiring both.

Much has been written about Petrosian's amenability to an early handshake and his inexplicable (Botvinnik's word) playing style, which never made him a favourite

with those columnists or anthologists chiefly interested in printing 25 or 30 moves of glitter. Diversity of styles at world championship level is proof of the richness and profundity of chess, but Petrosian was perhaps the first reigning world champion whom ordinary players felt free to patronize, as though it was unforgivable for him not to play like Tal. His tournament results were seldom outstanding, and the 'Petrosian Problem' had a lengthy airing in the pages of *CHESS* in 1967-68, with the late Wolfgang Heidenfeld, a formidable debater, leading the prosecution's case against 'a king of shreds and patches'. Petrosian was not indifferent to criticism, even admitting that when a Soviet article on the 1956 Candidates' event ignored him despite his equal third place, 'I began seriously wondering whether I shouldn't give up chess'. Although he could be sublimely uncompetitive, it is worth recalling that he was the only one of the seven world champions between Alekhine and Karpov to win outright two consecutive title matches. Ultimately what counts, even more than sporting results, is the character and depth of a player's talent and the quality of his best games, and in this respect Petrosian's peers have been notably more appreciative than the chess commonalty. After failing to dethrone him in 1966, Spassky described Petrosian as 'first and foremost a stupendous tactician'. Kasparov has reported, referring to a post mortem session in 1981, that 'I found that Petrosian's positional judgement was considerably deeper than my own'.

The Games of Tigran Petrosian takes us up to the half-way mark in Petrosian's six-year reign as world champion, a second volume being planned for the final two decades of his life. More vicissitudes were in store, but Petrosian's imperturbability at the board seems to have been matched by equanimity about his overall career. On page 216 of this fine book he records: 'Looking back, I rarely recall vexations and disappointments. Compared with the joys which chess has generously given me, they are mere trifles.'

Afterword: This book review first appeared on page 36 of *CHESS*, October 1991. The second volume, referred to in the final paragraph above and covering the years 1966-1983, was published by Pergamon Press shortly afterwards. Later in the 1990s, 'complete games' collections for prominent masters returned to fashion.

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