

CHESS BARBS

by Jude Acers (U.S senior master)

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(This concludes the synopsis of little-known events in the life of Alekhine, culled from D. Richards "Alekhine: The Missing Years," condensed from CHESS, Feb. 1964.)

It seems likely that Alekhine travelled south to the Ukraine to escape the worst of the Civil War, in which he took no part. The whole of the Ukraine had been occupied by the Germans in April 1918, after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Germans set up a puppet government, which remained in control until they withdrew in November at the end of the First World War. After the German withdrawal the French landed in Odessa, but themselves withdrew in April 1919 to be replaced by the advancing Red Army.

At this time the Soviet authorities appear to have suspected Alekhine of working against them. S. O. Vainshtein, an important figure in the early days of Soviet chess, writes in his introduction to the Russian edition of Alekhine's *Auf dem Wege zur Weltmeisterschaft* (Leningrad, 1932): "During the Civil War he turned up on the horizon in Odessa, where a threat of execution hung over him, since he was accused of having connections with White-guard counter-intelligence."

Soon, however, Alekhine was back in Moscow, presumably cleared of any suspicion. According to Ilyin-Zhenevsky, who knew Alekhine well, he continued to work in the Moscow Criminal Investigation Department until 1920, but, if this is so, it could not have been a full-time post by the autumn of 1919, since then Alekhine took up work in the State film studio (!) in Moscow.

This curious episode from Alekhine's life during 1919 came to light fairly recently. A certain S. Shishko described how he had met Alekhine applying for a job in the State film studio, which opened in August 1919 (*Shakhmaty v SSSR*, 1955-56). Shishko relates how Alekhine told him that he intended to give up chess in order to devote himself entirely to the cinema as an actor.

By September, Shishko writes, he and Alekhine were working full-time in the studio, mornings in the office and evenings on the set. Toward the end of October, however, according to Shishko, Alekhine gradually lost interest in the film studio and began to spend much more time on chess, admitting that his chief ambition was to win the world champion-

ship.

In October 1919 Alekhine played in and again won the Moscow championship.

According to both Ilyin-Zhenevsky and Vainshtein, late in 1919 or early in 1920 Alekhine applied to be admitted to the Communist Party, and early in 1920 he seems to have begun work in the Communist International (Comintern), which had been founded in March 1919. In Ilyin-Zhenevsky's words: "With his superb mastery of foreign languages he worked in the Comintern as an interpreter and at the same time, as a Communist, he was appointed secretary of the cultural and education department. Work in the Comintern gripped and absorbed him. . . It is quite another matter that Alekhine's communism was somewhat superficial and did not grip him very deeply. . . Both by his social position (the son of a landowner) and by his upbringing and education (a lawyer) Alekhine was too far from the working class and its titanic struggle."

Ilyin-Zhenevsky goes on to say that Alekhine's chief interest was chess rather than politics: "The dream of somehow travelling abroad and there showing his genuinely outstanding chess talent perpetually dogged him. To realize this cherished dream he was ready to do anything. Here the instability of his political views told. The chess player in him overcame the man and the citizen."

In the spring of 1920, largely on the initiative of Ilyin-Zhenevsky (who then held an import-

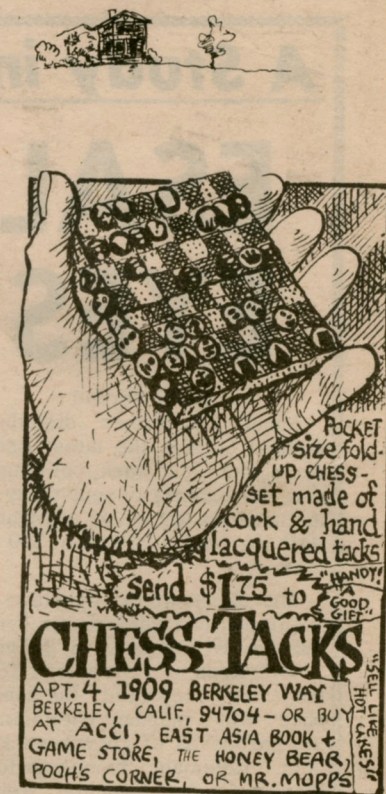
ant post in the General Reservists' Organization in Moscow) plans were laid for a so-called All-Russian Chess Olympiad, to be held in Moscow in the autumn. This tournament, which is now recognized as the first Soviet Championship, carried through with great difficulty because of the harsh conditions still prevailing in Moscow, was won by Alekhine with a score of 12 points out of a possible 15. The competitors had been given leave from their various jobs to play in the tournament, and after it was over Alekhine returned to his work in the Comintern.

During this tournament Alekhine spoke again of his intention of travelling abroad if possible. International grandmaster Pyotr Romanovsky, in an article about his meetings with Alekhine (*Shakhmaty v SSSR*, 1956, No. 3) records: "My last meetings with Alekhine took place during the first Soviet championship of October 1920. On the second day after my arrival from Petrograd I was living in the cadets' hostel (where many of the competitors were billeted). After dinner I was sitting in my room when suddenly Alekhine burst in on me. We had not seen each other for several years. He seemed taller and was excited, almost joyous. There followed questions, anecdotes and exchanges of impressions. Alekhine said that he was preparing to travel abroad to take part in international tournaments and to prepare for a match with Capablanca. "Lasker's song is sung; their match is not far off," he said."

Early in 1921 Alekhine married a foreign communist girl, a comintern delegate, and managed to persuade the authorities to give him a foreign mission. He travelled abroad with his wife and never set foot in Russia again."

POSTSCRIPT (from The Encyclopaedia of Chess by Anne Sunnucks): "Alexander Alekhine was born in Moscow on 19th October 1892. His father was Marshal of Nobility and a member of the Duma, and his mother was the daughter of a wealthy Moscow industrialist. Alekhine was taught to play chess by his mother and quickly developed a passion for the game. By the time he was 12 he was playing correspondence games, and by the time he was 15 he was entering for tournaments. His childhood hero was Tchigorin, and during the early part of his career his favourite openings were those which had been played by Tchigorin. . . .

"Alekhine's career, and particularly his escape from Germany in 1914, has been subject to considerable journalistic licence. A. F. Ilyin Genevsky in his booklet on the Capablanca v. Alekhine match, published in Leningrad in 1972, states that Alekhine was released by the Germans because of a weak heart. This would seem to be refuted by the following publications: The British Chess magazine Year Book 1914; *La Strategie* 1915 and *Deutsche Schachzeitung* 1915. Ilyin Genevsky suffered from brain damage during the war resulting in loss of memory, which throws even more doubt on his version.



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