Soldiers in a Cultural War: The 1935 Moscow Chess Pieces

POLITICAL CHESS

There is a fascinating story of how designing a chess set was a means of cultural competition (though with a political background) between the Soviet State and their Western rivals. Many of the world's chess greats had the privilege of playing with this historically important set of chess pieces – Botvinnik, Euwe, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Fischer, to name a few.

By Chuck Grau

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Photos from Chuck Grau Collection.

One of the most iconic Soviet chess set designs is that of the pieces used in the 1935 Second Moscow International Tournament. Its iconic status derives from three sources. The first source is the historical context in which the set arose, namely international tournaments organized by the Soviet state to further its program of *Political Chess*. The second source is how the design juxtaposed traditional elements dating back to Ancient Rus, the Neoclassical Staunton form, with elements expressing Modernist conceptions of art, thereby generating a dialectical tension between old and new. This tension was a central characteristic of Soviet Constructivist art, which was ascendent in the early days of the Soviet Union. The final source of the design's vaunted status is its longevity, being used in major Soviet events over at least three decades and played with by a pantheon of World Champions from Max Euwe to Gary Kasparov. We will examine each of these sources by focusing on a specimen set from my collection, depicted in the following photo.

▶ Image 01
1935 Moscow Chess Pieces with Menchik Knights. Chuck Grau Collection, photo

The Historical Context

Soviet chess tsar Nikolay Krylenko organized the Second Moscow International Tournament to further the Soviet state's program of *Political Chess* [1] by providing a forum where top Soviet players could compete against leading Western players, to gauge the progress of Soviet player development, and with good results, to demonstrate the superiority of socialism to capitalism in an important arena of cultural competition.1 It was the third major international tournament organized by Soviet officials to promote their program of *Political Chess*, following the 1925 First Moscow International Tournament, and the 1934 Leningrad Masters Tournament. It immediately preceded the 1935 Third Moscow International Tournament.

Alexander Ilyin-Genevsky pioneered *Political Chess* in the 1920s and Krylenko firmly institutionalized it in the thirties. *Political Chess* first sought to increase the cultural level of the masses by teaching them chess and expanding clubs in workplaces, unions, youth organizations, and the armed forces, thereby drawing them into the political and social life of the Soviet Union. Genevsky served as a Red Army Commissar during the Revolution and was a master-level player and a chess organizer. He believed chess was a way to teach soldiers initiative and strategic thinking. Chess, he wrote, "sometimes to an even greater degree than sport, does develop boldness, inventiveness, willpower, and something more that sport cannot do, develop strategical ability in a person."[2] Genevsky believed chess could do the same for the working masses, arguing that "In this country where the workers have gained victory, chess cannot be apolitical as in capitalist countries."

Raising the cultural level of the masses in many ways meant providing the masses an activity to divert them from overconsuming alcohol. "In our country," wrote Krylenko, "where the cultural level is comparatively low, where up to now a typical pastime of the masses has been brewing liquor, drunkenness and brawling, chess is a powerful means of raising the general cultural level."[3] The expansion of chess playing would also improve the quality of chess play by identifying, nurturing, and advancing talent, which would thereby help the Soviets to compete with and defeat chess in the West. This was the second, and overarching goal of *Political Chess*. A third, darker objective of *Political Chess* was to favor those upper-level players who supported Stalin's regime at

A chess set can be more than just a game – it can be a window into the past and a source of inspiration for the future. The sets that have actually been played with hold an even greater value, as they have been touched and moved by the hands of history. Each mark, scratch, and dent can be a reminder of the battles fought on the board and the players who fought them. Owning one of these sets can feel like owning a piece of history, and each touch can bring back memories of the past.

the expense of those who did not.[4]

In his preface to the official tournament book of the 1935 Moscow International, Krylenko expounded on the political significance of the event.[5] "Objectively," he wrote, it "took place in conditions of a colossally expanding Soviet chess movement and essentially turned into a struggle at the chess board between the USSR and the capitalist countries." Since the First Moscow International of 1925, "the USSR has grown both politically and economically, and has become at once a leading industrial nation and a great international power." Recognizing this, the West, too, "inevitably analyzed" the results "from more than just a narrow sporting point of view." "The eternal historical question," Krylenko wrote, is "who is the greater?"

The 1933 match between Botvinnik and then Czech master Salo Flohr "demonstrated the equal strength of the two players" and Westerners Max Euwe and Hans Kmoch had suffered "an extremely painful defeat at the hands of Soviet masters" in the 1934 Leningrad tournament. Then the cause suffered a setback with Botvinnik's "unsuccessful appearance" at Hastings, but "this failure merely heightened interest in the tournament."

The 1935 Moscow International Tournament "had to settle the question once and for all: was Botvinnik's failure accidental, or had the entire Soviet Union fallen behind the capitalist countries with their international chess forces." These factors turned that tournament "into a major political event, causing great excitement amongst the broad masses of [Soviet] society and the chess circles of Western Europe."

The field comprised twenty players, twelve from the Soviet Union and eight foreigners, including former World Champions Lasker and Capablanca, and then-Czech Salo Flohr, widely considered to be a top challenger to the world championship. World Champion Alekhine, who had emigrated from the Soviet Union shortly after winning its first championship, was not invited because he had been declared a renegade. Botvinnik and Flohr tied for first place of the single round robin, followed by Lasker (then living in England having fled Nazi Germany) in third place and Capablanca (Cuba) in fourth. Spielmann, from Austria, finished fifth. The next highest Soviet finish was enjoyed by Kan, in sixth place.

Krylenko went to great lengths to spin the results as a major Soviet victory even though four of the top five finishers represented capitalist powers. Krylenko had his work set out for him, but he did not shirk from the task. "The USSR, in the person of Mikhail Botvinnik, defeated bourgeois chess culture," he explained, "as his only rival, finishing in first place with him, Flohr, did not actually win this first place, but received it as a kind of gift from the Soviet masters Kan and Bogatyrchuk, who beat Botvinnik and thus allowed Flohr to draw equal with his rival." He rationalized Botvinnik's defeats away as "sporting honesty," which "does not permit them to go a single iota against their conscience during the fight, not even out of a false understanding of patriotism." The same, he lamented, "cannot be said of all the bourgeois masters-participants" who "more than once gave cause for doubt that they were playing at full strength..." Krylenko then minimized the achievements of the Western players. "True, bourgeois Europe may point to the fact that the runners-up were all foreigners: Lasker, Capablanca, Spielmann," he wrote. But "these were ex-world champions Lasker and Capablanca," and Spielmann won his place in the very last rounds, while Levenfish was confidently catching up with him." Anyway, he reasoned, it was still too early to expect Soviet masters to occupy all the top places, but that day would come soon enough.

The Moscow 1935 Chess Set

What, then, were the chess pieces with which this struggle between socialist and capitalist chess cultures was fought? Fortunately, there is a strong photographic record that has enabled us to clearly identify the set, and a fair number of surviving sets have made their way into private collections, including my own. None of these sets, including mine, can trace its provenance directly to the 1935 tournament. Rather, collectors identify them as 1935 Moscow sets by their similarity to the sets seen in photos of the event. Here is such a set from my collection.

▲ Image 02
1935 Moscow Pieces. Chuck Grau Collection, photo.

The style of these pieces differs noticeably from that of traditional English Staunton in several respects. Generally, their structure has been simplified and incorporates geometric forms not found in the original Staunton sets. The king is not topped with a cross, but a secular bone finial in the shape of a truncated, upside-down cone. While the bishop's miter includes a cut, the shape is more conical than the typical Staunton bishop. The crenelations in the queen's crown and the rook's turret follow Staunton conventions, though those on the rooks are very narrow and shallow. Later evolutions of the design eliminated the miter cuts and crenelations entirely. Unlike traditional Staunton pieces, which have an easily distinguishable base/stem/pedestal structure reminiscent of neoclassical columns, these stems flow up conically from the outside circumference of the base and ascend in a curve, which trumpets out to form the pedestal, upon which the piece signifiers and their connectors rest.[6] This base to stem to pedestal curve was to become a basic element of Soviet chess set design. The royals and clerics retain the double collars of the connector between piece signifier and pedestal familiar to traditional Staunton pieces. The knight is

simply cut and carved, echoing the lines of the fifteenth century Novgorod knight displayed in Linder's works, rather than the Elgin Marbles.[7] They lack the S-shaped back of English Staunton knights, their ears face forward, rather than backwards, as in the English knights, and their torsos are more simply carved, eliminating the musculature of the English knights.[8] While the 1935 knights retain mane carvings, they have been simplified by limiting them to only the left side of the torso.

Two knight variants are evident in the photographic record of the 1935 Moscow event. (*See image 3*) One is seen in this photo of Vera Menchik from that tournament. (*See image 4*) Two knights appear in this photo: Menchik's king's knight is on d7, and her queen's knight is on b8. The ears of Menchik's d7 knight organically continue the arc of the back I refer to knights in this configuration as "Menchik" knights. The b8 knight's eyes appear to be on the sides of the horse's head, with the brows angled sharply to the snout. Here are the Menchik knights from my 1935 Moscow set. (*See image 3*)

The second knight design is found in a photograph of Capablanca playing at the 1935 event. (*See images 5 and 6*)

While the Capablanca knight's torso shares the general shape of the Menchik knight, it has a very different ear configuration. Whereas the Menchik knight's ears continue the flow of the neck in a continuing arc, those of the Capablanca knight protrude at an angle from the arc of the neck. It also seems to have a shorter snout than the Menchik knights. As is even clearer in Figure 8, the eyes are facing forward under brows that run almost perpendicular to the axis of the snout. (*See image 7*)

Image 3
1935 Moscow Chess Pieces. Chuck Grau Collection, photo.

Image 4
Vera Menchik, Moscow 1935. Photographer unknown. Higher-resolution photo courtesy of Sergey Kovalenko.

Image 5
Menchik knights. Chuck Grau Collection, photo.

Capablanca at the 1935 Second Moscow International Tournament. Photographer unknown.

Image 6

Image 7
Capablanca knight. Photographer unknown.

Image 8
Capablanca knight, Chuck Grau Collection, photo.

Little is known of who made these 1935 tournament sets. Two sets with red-colored "White" seem to have been made in a Leningrad artel by the name of "Prometheus." One of these set's boxes is stamped with a 1936 date. The Olympic versions of the set from the 1950s appear to have been made in Valdai, between Leningrad and Moscow.

What can be said of the origins of the set's design is inferential, as original design documents are not known to have survived. The simplified style of the 1935 pieces facilitated cheaper mass production of chess equipment for use by the hundreds of thousands of players *Political Chess* sought to draw to the game.[9] Incorporating geometric forms in the style of Modernism and Constructivism, both central to the theory and practice of early Soviet art, the 1935 design broke with the realism and neoclassical forms associated with the rise of industrial capitalism and "respectable Victorian society" expressed in the Staunton.[10]

The design's treatment of religious symbolism, a pillar of the Staunton design, merits elaboration. To be sure, the removal of crosses from kings and miter cuts from bishops expressed the Soviets' underlying antipathy to religion and their efforts to repress it,[11] but two other historical factors reinforced the Soviets' aversion to the use of religious symbols in chess pieces. One is the Eastern roots of chess in Kievian Russia, where the first chess pieces bore a heavy Muslim influence in name and their geometric, abstract design, reflecting Islam's aversion to the use of human forms.[12] These Eastern influences persisted centuries longer than they did in the West, as the modernized game did not reach Russia until the rule of Peter the Great, circa 1760.[13] The second is the hostility of Orthodox Christianity towards chess.[14] Even many Tsarist designs avoided crosses and miter cuts, perhaps because more secular designs accommodated the Church and defused its opposition to the game.

Interestingly, however, the 1935 Moscow pieces retained bishop miter cuts. Perhaps this reflected the pieces' intended use in international tournaments, and an interest in keeping the pieces sufficiently familiar to foreign players participating in Soviet-sponsored international events. This may have been a factor in the Soviets' retention of other elements of Staunton design as well, such as the relative proportions of the respective pieces.[15] The incorporation of some elements of traditional Staunton design, while rejecting others, perhaps formed what philosopher Walter Benjamin called a *dialectical image* in which *now* (modernist/simplified/geometrical/secular/socialist) confronts *then* (neoclassical/complex/realistic/religious/capitalist).[16] Art historian Christine Kaier has analyzed early Soviet Constructivist graphic art in these terms. It seems a fitting description, perhaps, in a state espousing an ideology rooted in dialectical materialism and pursuing a program of massive social and economic change, often brutally.

Because Botvinnik and Flohr tied for first place in the 1935 Moscow International, the style of the pieces used there have come to be known as *Botvinnik-Flohr II*, or *BFII*, to distinguish them from the different style of pieces used in the Botvinnik-Flohr Match of 1933.

Image 7
Close-up of the previous photo highlighting the Menchik Knights.

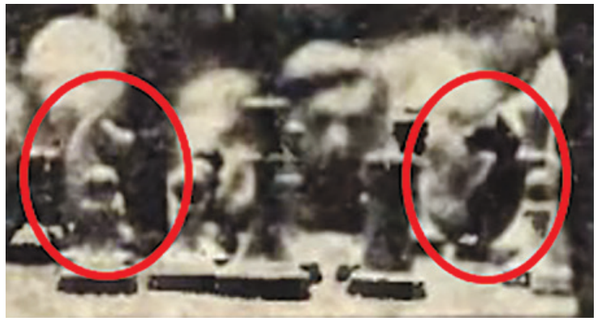
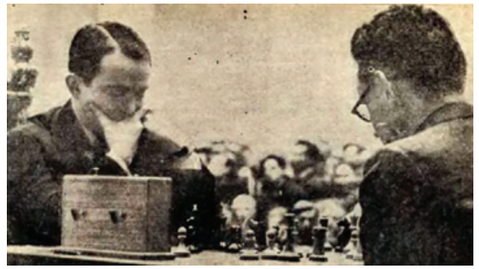


Image 8
Flohr and Botvinnik play at the 1935 Second Moscow International. Source: Krylenko & Rabinovich Eds., Moscow 1935 Second International Tournament 177 (Caissa edition 1997).



The set Botvinnik and Flohr played with in the 1935 Moscow International contest seems to have included Menchik knights. In as much as the design takes its name from these two giants of the chessboard and their first-place tie at this historic event, perhaps they are the ultimate expression of the set used in that tournament. Here is a famous photo of them playing their game at that event.(*See image 7 and 8*)

Longevity of the Design

The 1935 Moscow design first appeared in the 1934 Leningrad Masters Tournament, where Krylenko brought in foreigners Max Euwe and Hans Kmoch to test the mettle of emerging Soviet masters. Euwe was the first in a long line of World Champions to play with such pieces in one variant or another. Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky and Fischer all played with them. They were the pieces used in multiple Soviet Championships in the late 1930s and 1940s. Participants in the 1956 Moscow Olympiad played with the final version of this venerable design.

The Moscow 1935 chess set was an iconic workhorse of the Soviet program of *Political Chess*, frontline troops in its cultural war against the West. Even its design, which juxtaposed traditional and Modernist elements, reflected this struggle. ■

[1] On *Political Chess, see generally* Michael Hudson, Storming Fortresses: A Political History of Chess in the Soviet Union 1917-1948 (PhD. Dis., Univ. Cal. Santa Cruz 2013). Portions of this column have been adopted from my website sovietchesssets.com and *Icons of the Soviet Chess Board: Botvinnik-Flohr II Chess Pieces* 30, The Chess Collector Magazine 6 (No. 3, 2021).
[2] Alexander Ilyin-Genevsky, Notes of a Soviet Master 22 (Bernard Cafferty Trans. 1986).
[3] *Quoted in* David J. Richards, Soviet Chess: Communism and Chess in the U.S.S.R. 40 (1965).
[4] *See, generally* Sergey Voronkov, Masterpieces and Dramas of the Soviet Championships, Vols. I-III (2020, 2021, 2023).
[5] Moscow 1936 International Chess Tournament 7-8 (Grigory Levenfish, ed., Caissa Ed. 1998) (Jimmy Adams & Sarah Hurst Trans.).
[6] My terminology derives from Mike Darlow, Turned Chessmen 96-112 (2004).
[7] Isaac Linder, The Art of Chess Pieces 218-219 (Eng. Ed. 1994); I. Linder, Chess in Old Russia 95, 135 (Eng. Ed. 1979).
[8] Special thanks to Berlin artist and collector Porat Jacobson for sharing his views on knight and piece structures.
[9] David Shenk, The Immortal Game 191-192 (2006).
[10] Gareth Williams, Master Pieces 58-61 (2000).
[11] Shenk, *supra* at 192.
[12] Linder, The Art of Chess Pieces, *supra* at 170-186; I. Linder, Chess in Old Russia, *supra* at 47-56, 63-76; Yuri Averbakh, A History of Chess 36 (Eng. Ed. 2012); Williams, *supra* at 18.
[13] Hudson, *supra* at 24.
[14] Linder, The Art of Chess Pieces, *supra* at 34-36; Averbakh, *supra* at 57; Hudson, *supra* at 19. Thanks to historian and collector Phil Pajakowski for reminding me of the Orthodox disdain for chess.
[15] *See, e.g.,* the discussion of Daniel Weil's views on pediments and columns in W. Wiles, *State of the Art*, Masterworks: Rare and Beautiful Chess Sets of the World 202-205 (D. McClain, ed. 2017).
[16] Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles, *Walter Benjamin*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2020, Ed., Edward Zalta, Ed.), *https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/benjamin/* (accessed 9 October 2023); C. Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism 143-145 [considering the Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko's commercial graphics of the 1920s as *dialectical images*.]