Jan 9, 2017 | 15:38 by chess24 staff

Paul Keres V: The 1948 World Championship

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The death of Alexander Alekhine in 1946 left the chess world without a World Champion for the first time in 60 years. The question of what to do next was resolved with a five-player match-tournament held in The Hague and Moscow in 1948. On paimaper it was another chance for Paul Keres to fulfill his dream, but as Joosep Grent explains in his latest installment of the series on the Estonian genius, it wasn't to be. Four losses in a row to Mikhail Botvinnik meant the "Patriarch" of Soviet chess became the 6th World Champion.

The participants of The Hague-Moscow World Championship of 1948 (from left to right): Euwe, Smyslov, Keres, Botvinnik and Reshevsky | J.D. Noske, Anefo, Dutch National Archives

Once again you can play through many of the games mentioned in this and the previous articles, with modern computer analysis, using the selector below:

	White	Evaluation	Black
1	GM Euwe, Max	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Keres, Paul
2	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Smyslov, V.
3	GM Reshevsky, S.	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Keres, Paul
4	GM Botvinnik, M.	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Reshevsky, S.
5	GM Keres, Paul	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Botvinnik, M.
6	GM Keres, Paul	○ ½ - ½ ●	GM Euwe, Max

« ‹ … 1941-1947 1948-1952 1953-1959 … › »

The Hague-Moscow World Championship of 1948

by Joosep Grents

Alekhine was the first World Champion to die while still the title holder. FIDE thus faced a unique situation with no clear-cut solution: how to decide the new World Champion? The eventual decision was that a quadruple round-robin tournament would be held with six of the world's best players. The players chosen for the tournament were Euwe, Botvinnik, Keres, Flohr, Fine and Reshevsky, but Fine decided not to participate and the Soviet Union decided to replace Flohr with Smyslov. Heated negotiations between the Soviets and FIDE regarding the location of the tournament ended in a compromise, with the tournament held as a five-player quintuple round-robin whose first half was played in The Hague, while the second took place in Moscow.

The Soviets were eager to impress and do everything possible to ensure that a Soviet player would become World Champion. It has to be noted that Stalin had not been happy with Soviet 'underperformances' in non-chess related disciplines in 1948 and had called a meeting with his staff to address the issue. That was when Beria suggested that the NKVD and police take control over all Soviet sports, a proposal promptly agreed to by Stalin. This is especially relevant with regard to this tournament, as it would occur under the watchful eye of the NKVD Colonel-General Arkadii Apollonov, whom Averbakh described as "a typical apparatchik. People were afraid of him, and with good reason." The inclusion of the NKVD and Apollonov meant that the Soviet players would, throughout the tournament, be summoned for individual meetings with Soviet officials in order to 'discuss their progress.'

The Hague

Keres started off against Euwe, who prior to the start of the tournament had shared the general belief that the favourites in the cycle were Keres and Botvinnik. Euwe, considerably older than the rest of the field, went on to feel the burden of that disadvantage and started off on the wrong foot against Keres. Keres unleashed his tactical armoury and went on the attack:

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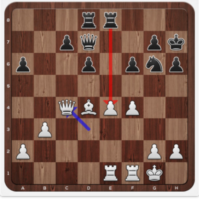

28…Rxe4! only temporarily won a pawn, but when Euwe landed a rook in the heart of White's position with 32…Rd3 he had an overwhelming position. Nothing about the game suggested Keres was holding anything back. On the contrary, it appeared that one of the favourites had started off in the fashion of his earlier successes.

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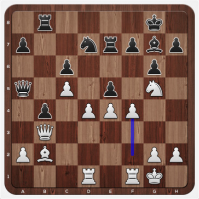
The first round of the tournament was captured on video

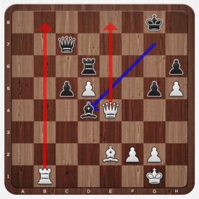
The next game saw Keres wipe *Smyslov off the board in a mere 27 moves* after starting a vicious attack with **19.Ng5!** and **20.f4!**



Botvinnik started with a second round win over Euwe after receiving a bye in the first round, but found himself overshadowed by Keres.

> We were extremely happy and returned to the hotel with Ragozin. "Important game," said Ragozin. But of course I knew how important it was! My win over Euwe was dimmed by the success of Keres. The effect of his two wins was so unsettling that even my second was irritated. But on the second day we carefully analysed these games of Keres and then came to a conclusion: "Keres played well, but not better than he usually did.

And Botvinnik's assessment was correct. Indeed, despite the dazzling impression these victories created, Keres remained objective and identified many inaccuracies on his part. While the inaccuracies proved insignificant in the context of the first two games - they occurred in winning positions - the following games proved that the significance of inaccuracies is entirely dependent on the context in which they are made in. Reshevsky was able to develop an initiative against Keres out of the opening and mutual time-trouble culminated in Keres resigning after his *already bad position was completely wrecked by 39…Bd4??*



With **40.Qe8+!** and **41.Rb8!** Reshevsky set up a deadly battery on Keres' back rank.

Reshevsky then found himself in a similar situation against Botvinnik in the next round, again with an advantage, but on this occasion Botvinnik emerged victorious after Reshevsky made four unforced errors, *losing two pieces and the game in the process.*

Round 4 saw Keres paired with his nemesis for the first time. Despite having the white pieces, Keres was unable to develop an initiative out of the opening and the game became closed and positional. Botvinnik clearly seemed to be in charge, and later commented:

> Finally my game with Keres. He had begun the tournament in superb style with two wins, but I felt that this had no great significance. The wound which I had inflicted on him in Moscow could not fail to tell, I merely had to keep my spirits up. *(...)* The game was adjourned with me a pawn up. I had to find a forced win. I look for it, but cannot find it. I ask for help from Flohr. Salo does not let me down, and *found such a 'quiet' move that it all became clear.*

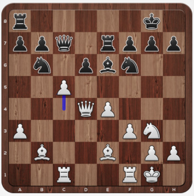
Keres thus followed his two 'Keresian' games with back-to-back losses and, more importantly, conceded a point to his main rival, who now boasted an impressive start of 3.5/4, leaving Keres trailing by 1.5 points. But there were 16 rounds still to go, and nothing had yet been decided, or so it seemed. Keres: "I hoped that my play would improve in the second round of games."

Things did seem to be improving as Keres first *drew with Euwe*, went on to beat Smyslov *in a very i*nteresting game and then *drew a short game with Reshevsky*. But then it was Botvinnik all over again. Upon being informed of the scheduling of the event, Botvinnik had noticed that one of the players would receive six days' rest. He remarked to his Soviet colleagues:

> I told *(Keres and Smyslov)*, most sincerely ... 'One of you will get six days of rest and lose like a child on the seventh day.'

After receiving an unusual six days of rest due to this scheduling anomaly, Keres played Botvinnik on the seventh day. Botvinnik noted that when Keres appeared for the game he seemed evidently shaken, nervous and "pale as death". Botvinnik claimed his prophecy as the reason for Keres' appearance, but a likelier reason was that Keres had been summoned for a 'discussion' by the Soviet officials prior to the game.

Keres opted for a Nimzo-Indian against Botvinnik, with the Nimzo one of his most successful openings as Black. Up until that point, the database indicates that he'd played it in 42 recorded games, winning 25, drawing 13 and losing only four. It's also worth noting that one of those losses was from 1933 against Schmidt, and one was in a correspondence game from 1937. However, it has been documented that in 1937 Keres gave his last correspondence games over to his friend Paul Tamm. All in all, we can speak of Keres as a Nimzo expert, but in the game against Botvinnik he found a way to lose *immediately out of the opening*! Botvinnik, of course, put it down to the 'prophecy': "...and at last poor Paul sat down to play me after his six day 'rest'. Of course he could not play, and by the seventeenth move it was settled."



After Botvinnik's 17.c5! he swung the queenside rook from c5 to g5 before sacrificing it on g7

From such a statement it's obvious that Botvinnik either believed Keres had exceptionally weak nerves, or knew more than he let on. After **23.Qe3** a forced mate sequence was evident. Keres had already spent virtually all of his time, and with the threat of checkmate looming, he continued staring at the board. The clock ticked down to thirty seconds, Keres then stopped the clock, signed the scoresheet and left without a handshake or a single word. Botvinnik laconically remarks: "It became clear that Paul could no longer hope to win the event."

That concluded the part of the tournament played in The Hague. Botvinnik emerged as the clear leader with 6.5/8 while Keres sat on 50% with 4/8.

The Contrast: Keres vs. Botvinnik

Botvinnik, a renowned psychological warrior, quickly attributed Keres' mistakes to his own prophecy about six days of rest and the damage inflicted upon Keres in 1947. A player of his stature and character is prone to seek the reasons for such wins in his own brilliance, while likely dismissing any other scenarios, but it's highly doubtful that Keres would commit serious errors in his pet opening merely out of fear of Botvinnik. After all, he went on to beat Botvinnik convincingly when there was no external pressure on him anymore, so you really have to seek the reasons for Keres' miserable score against Botvinnik in this tournament not from Botvinnik or his actions, but factors beyond the board. However, it's obvious that the contrast between the two players played a major role in engineering such a score.

Spassky:

> ...the title of World Champion implies its aspirants to have a complex character which has to include a clearly manifest killer instinct. Keres' contemporary, Botvinnik, fully possessed these characteristics. Botvinnik was a champion of preparation and total psychological warfare. Keres, however, always remained a sportsman and a gentleman in a fight.

The contrast between Keres and Botvinnik is one that was not merely seen on the board, but extended well beyond the board as well, and did not escape the attention of those closest to the two rivals.

Sosonko:

> Perhaps Maria Keres is right: the outstanding grandmaster's character was not rigid (or - corrupted!) enough to be not one of the best, but the best of them all. The one and the only.

> After all, could one ever imagine a Botvinnik who would be late to the first round, sitting to play with a tennis racket still under his arm; or one that attempts to finish a game of bridge in his hotel room, despite his clock ticking; or one that rushes with the analysis of the adjourned position in order to catch up and spend time with visiting compatriots from Tallinn? Because that is exactly what happened to Keres at the famous AVRO tournament, in his game against Alekhine, where he drew an elementary winning position.

Paul Keres with his children Peeter and Kadrin in 1950 | photo: J. Külmet, Estonian National Archives

Sosonko is right on the money here, for it is very difficult indeed to imagine such a Botvinnik. While Heuer believed drawing a won position against Alekhine at the AVRO tournament was merely down to inexperience, it's clear that Keres' character was instrumental in the draw. Botvinnik was a methodical, hard-working player for whom the above-mentioned behaviour would be unthinkable.

The contrast between the two players was further aggravated by Keres' own character, with Maria Keres describing her husband:

> He was most of all upset with people who were full of themselves. He was most upset with discourtesy. He did not really tolerate people who would use any means conceivable to achieve their ends. He always thought that one has to remain a gentleman.

If there was one player who clearly belonged to that category of ruthless players, it was Botvinnik. Maria Keres:

> While on the road from Moscow to The Hague, where they played for the World Championship title, Botvinnik ruled out any dealings with his opponents and their seconds. With his second he talked as if with a servant. His communication with his wife was only imperatives and he almost never left his compartment.

Botvinnik has become known for "total psychological warfare", as Kasparov put it, something you could never really talk about when speaking of Keres. Let's listen to the great man himself describe his approach:

> I believe that one of the most important attributes necessary during tournament play is objectivity and a critical approach both towards your own and your opponent's play. And here most of the players fall short. The usual human weakness of regarding your own moves as superior to those of your opponent always glows through in people's approach to the game. Even if the results don't support such a view, people still say, okay, I was wrong, but still... I was kind of right. Now, one of the most important attributes that a tournament player must cultivate in his approach to tournament play is to assess every problem he faces critically and objectively. After all, it's not a matter of who is in the right, but in the fact that every chess player must recognize that if he was not in the right, he must attempt to remedy these shortcomings, which ultimately prevented him from achieving a better result. But if a chess player does not wish to admit that he himself can be responsible for his setbacks, as opposed to hundreds of other distracting side effects, then you cannot hope for the future to bring any improvement.

Although this interview was given in his later years, it highlights Keres' character very well and further shows the contrast between the personalities of Botvinnik and Keres.

In chess terms, Euwe accounts for their clash in the 1948 tournament book:

> In his encounters with Keres, we also note a definite superiority on the part of Botvinnik, albeit of a different nature than against Smyslov. Whereas the games between Smyslov and Botvinnik that we have commented on above are invariably life-and-death struggles, the games between Botvinnik and Keres are usually rather on the boring side. One gets the impression that Botvinnik wants to keep a tight rein on his dangerous opponent by forcing a type of play on him that does not suit him.

Indeed, Botvinnik's psychological approach is obvious in his games against Keres, as he often simply plays for closed positions, waiting for Keres to "seek a win that isn't there," or essentially to beat himself. In his later years Botvinnik described his opponent:

> Paul was a very fine positional player, but he always aimed at romantic adventures. He was always aiming for attacks and sacrifices, which is why he chose the open game in the opening. He rarely played modern closed openings, which he considered boring.

A quick overview of the games between them suggests that Botvinnik took full advantage of this knowledge and indeed aimed to steer all their games into closed positional waters, thus attempting to avoid the strengths of Keres. Who could blame him?

Moscow

With Botvinnik leading the wolf pack after The Hague, and Reshevsky his closest rival, the East-West confrontation heated up and the Soviet officials grew wary of the situation. It should be no surprise, therefore, that upon his arrival in Moscow Botvinnik was summoned to a meeting with high-level Soviet officials, including both Apollonov and Comrade Zhdanov, who were quick to let Botvinnik know of their concerns:

> We wanted to talk to you about the match-tournament. Don't you think that the American Reshevsky will become World Champion?

The paranoid Botvinnik believed that this question was motivated by Bondarevsky (Keres' second) who had given a talk in Leningrad in which he had apparently pointed out that Botvinnik might have more points than Reshevsky at this point, but ultimately Reshevsky has more talent. Botvinnik was quick to claim the opposite:

> "Reshevsky might become World Champion", I said and paused here; all became still. Zhdanov stopped walking about. "But this would indicate that nowadays there are no strong players in the world".

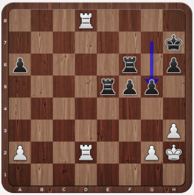
He then followed up by explaining that Reshevsky was, "an original player, but limited in his understanding of chess and insufficiently universal." Botvinnik also made the point that Reshevsky was a time-trouble addict and unable to apportion his time properly - a chronic weakness of his game. The officials were content with Botvinnik's confidence and such an explanation. The meeting concluded with Zhdanov's, "Very well. We wish YOU victory."

ГРОССМЕЙСТЕР СССР М.М.БОТВИННИК
ГРОССМЕЙСТЕР СССР В.В.СМЫСЛОВ
ГРОССМЕЙСТЕР СССР П.П.КЕРЕС
ГААГА 1 МАРТА - МОСКВА, 15 МАЯ 1948 г.
УЧАСТНИКИ МАТЧ—ТУРНИРА
НА ЗВАНИЕ ЧЕМПИОНА МИРА ПО ШАХМАТАМ
СТУДИЯ

The Soviet World Championship Challengers Botvinnik, Smyslov and Keres | photo: *Estonian Sports Museum*, ESM F 203:461/B 1832

Keres meanwhile played Euwe in the first game in Moscow and won with the black pieces *in a mere 25 moves* and drew against Smyslov in the next round. Botvinnik started by beating Euwe and Smyslov but then faced his first loss as Reshevsky went on to beat Botvinnik despite being in time trouble. Not Botvinnik's finest hour. Things seemed on the up for the American who was now closer to Botvinnik than before and faced Keres in the next round. A win would have allowed him to come back into contention with Botvinnik, but although Reshevsky achieved an extra pawn in the adjourned position, it didn't look like being enough to win. However, Reshevsky wouldn't settle for that evaluation, decided to push for a win and allowed *Keres to punish that mistaken plan in style*, stealing a full point from the American.

Keres now stood equal with Reshevsky on 6.5 points in shared second place, having scored 2.5/3 in the third round of games. Botvinnik was on 8 but now faced Keres, meaning the Estonian would move within half a point of Botvinnik with a win. What followed was *a game riddled with mistakes uncharacteristic of Keres*. The game was adjourned on move 42, and as Euwe notes in his annotations of the game, "Black is better, of course, because of his extra pawn, but this should not be enough for a win."



Botvinnik has just played 42...g5

Keres' **43.g4** doesn't seem to deserve the criticism Euwe gave it, but a series of later inaccuracures led to Keres resigning on move 72 and dropping to third place. He already trailed Botvinnik by 2.5 points and had no realistic prospects of catching him.

Heuer:

> What followed now clearly demonstrates that Keres was not himself at this tournament. Of course, it also shows the distressingly heavy pressure taking its toll on the self-control of even the calmest of men. Keres: "Instead of accepting the inevitable and attempting to secure second place, I opted to force matters in an attempt to catch Botvinnik. And the results were clear soon after."

Misery followed in the next round of games, as after Keres collected a seemingly *regular win over the underperforming Euwe* he then went on to lose three games in a row to *Smyslov*, *Reshevsky* and *Botvinnik*.

Significance of the insignificant

With Botvinnik having secured his World Championship title with rounds to spare, the last round of games was of little significance. And with all pressure gone, Keres again won against Euwe and drew his games with Reshevsky and Smyslov. Between him and shared third place with Reshevsky lay the now World Champion Botvinnik. In a pressure-free situation for both players the clearly motivated Keres went on *to destroy Botvinnik*. Some say that Botvinnik lost on purpose to push down Reshevsky in the standings, but Sosonko deems it unlikely and quotes an entry in Botvinnik's diary: “If there is no advantage by 20 move, offer a draw. If refused, attempt to win! Look out, Keres!” Sosonko notes that Botvinnik always made similar entries before his games with Keres, adding a mysterious phrase, “Don't forget who you're playing with!”

In that particular game, Botvinnik offered Keres a draw already in the opening, but Keres refused. Sosonko:

> When Botvinnik repeated his proposal a few moves later, Keres responded so flagrantly that Botvinnik blushed.

Uznicker:

> Keres had responded to Botvinnik's offer with an obscenity in Russian. Botvinnik blushed. Keres later admitted “Possibly this wasn't too classy on my part.” While he was able to speak Russian, he did not understand everything, and thus sometimes still used vulgarities. I think Keres didn't exactly understand what he was saying.

Keres thus finished the tournament on 10.5/20 with the highest number of decisive games (15).

Player	Botvinnik	Smyslov	Keres	Reshevsky	Euwe	Points
Mikhail Botvinnik (USSR)		½ ½ 1 ½ ½	1 1 1 1 0	1 ½ 0 1 1	1 ½ 1 ½ ½	14
Vasily Smyslov (USSR)	½ ½ 0 ½ ½		0 0 ½ 1 ½	½ ½ 1 ½ ½	1 1 0 1 1	11
Paul Keres (USSR)	0 0 0 0 1	1 1 ½ 0 ½		0 ½ 1 0 ½	1 ½ 1 1 1	10½
Samuel Reshevsky (USA)	0 ½ 1 0 0	½ ½ 0 ½ ½	1 ½ 0 1 ½		1 ½ ½ 1 1	10½
Max Euwe (NED)	0 ½ 0 ½ ½	0 0 1 0 0	0 ½ 0 0 0	0 ½ ½ 0 0		4

His individual score against Botvinnik was particularly distressing (1 win, 4 losses) and has sparked discussion on the subject of whether he was coerced to throw games against Botvinnik, allowing his rival to become World Champion. You can imagine how Reshevsky felt, playing catch-up with Botvinnik but seeing him crush Keres round after round without the latter putting up any sort of active fight. Every game with Keres then became almost a must-win game for Reshevsky. Add to that the fact that Keres managed to beat Botvinnik easily in a game which no longer carried any significance for the overall result and it's no wonder that, “the Russians have fixed the world of chess” type allegations soon emerged like mushrooms after a rainy day.

I plan to address the issue of possible coercion of Keres in a separate chess24 article, since it was too lengthy to be included here.

Aftermath of the World Championship

Losses to Botvinnik and the overall result of the championship tournament must have had a profound effect on Keres, for his pre-1948 successes were replaced with a series of disappointing results that commentators and analysts of the time attributed to the search for a new, a more positional style. First it was the USSR Championship of 1948, which took place at the end of the year. Keres started off with five draws and then went on to lose three out of six to become one of the tail-enders. A push in the final rounds boosted him to 9th place out of 19 contestants. The only bright side of the result was his *victory against the overall winner Bronstein*.

Keres then proceeded to write his first tournament book “Maailmameistri-turniir. Haag-Moskva 1948”. He makes little mention of anything that sheds light on his result against Botvinnik, but while the book is light on off-the-board incident, that's amply compensated for by the sheer volume of analysis.

Ivanchuk isn't the only great non-World Champion to play some checkers... | photo: *Estonian Sports Museum*, ESM F 221:202/B 2375

In the USSR Championship of 1949 the pre-war Keres seemed to have found his way back to the board, as he sprinted to 7/10, despite losing a game to Bronstein in the process. But what followed were a number of losses that cost him the tournament. In the 11th round Keres lost to Furman before beating Sokolsky, then lost again to Taimanov in the 14th round but bounced back with a win over Ragozin before losing yet again to Ljublinsky. He then drew his three remaining games.

Despite his overall 8th place in the tournament, what is of significance in the tournament was Keres' response to losses. Throughout the event he was able to bounce back from a loss with a win in the next round. Only after losing the game to Ljublinski, and thus losing any hope of a higher-place finish, did he go on to draw the remaining games. Bronstein won the tournament, though this time he shared first place with Smyslov.

Then came the Candidates of 1950 in Budapest. After the first half of the tournament Keres was second, but the conclusion of the second half saw him finish in fourth place. The Keres of 1950 is a completely different animal compared to the Keres of 1948. In total, Keres won three games (Kotov, Stahlberg, Szabo), lost two games (to the winner Bronstein and 6th place Kotov) and drew his remaining 13 games. That's a clear contrast to his previous World Championship tournament, for while in 1948 Keres had the highest amount of decisive games (15/20), in Budapest Keres finished with the highest amount of draws (13/18). After those results, many critics and commentators cited a "crisis" in his career, reasoning that it was a result of his dabbling with positional chess instead of staying true to his guns, that is, sharp tactical play. Was that the case, as suggested by the critics of the time? Keres had his own explanation:

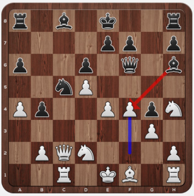
> Every chess player will have their periods of ups and downs and this is completely natural. It would appear that after the Chigorin Memorial of 1947, I had suffered bad form which seemed to extend to the following tournaments. In the XVI Soviet Championship nothing seemed to come together for me... It was only after extreme effort in the final rounds that I was able to somewhat fix my result, and do so with some good play... I was able to play better in the next, XVII Championship... There was already a glimmer of hope that I had overcome this period of crisis. However, the rest of the tournament revealed that it was not yet the case. I played inconsistently, and my wins were alternated with losses...
>
> My next big tournament was the Candidates Tournament. I had again prepared well and I felt that I was in good form. The tournament began favourably for me. Intense competition continued in the second round of games... But then I had to accept a loss from Kotov in an extremely complicated game, and after having missed my winning chances in a sacrificial game against Flohr, it became clear that catching Boleslavsky was no longer possible. Due to that, I played the rest of my games joylessly and after losing my penultimate round game to Bronstein, finished fourth. However, in this tournament I already played a little better than in previous tournaments of this period, and could thus hope to regain my previous good form.

Keres' biographer, Valter Heuer, disagrees with all the critics and commentators and believes that there was actually no attempted change of style:

> They say: style is your personality. We've repeatedly already spoken of his objectivity and correctness. It's understandable, therefore, that as a mature player he'll increasingly seek accuracy at the board. When a game becomes calm, he won't seek to blow the game up but will instead look for "the best moves" - and there's no sign of "artificially engineered rationality" here. However, when the position called for it, he wasn't afraid of unleashing his "colourful style".
>
> The commentators were likely side-tracked by their attempt to explain the failures of Keres as scientifically and convincingly as possible. It's likely that such an approach failed to take into account the simple fact that in the games of this period the percentage of mistakes was considerably higher than ever before, and in fact than it would ever be again. It's impossible to pinpoint the germ from which these mistakes grew with absolute certainty, but we can assume that he was infected by the World Championship tournament. Enduring such a ruthless blow takes time, and no doubt it left him scarred for life.

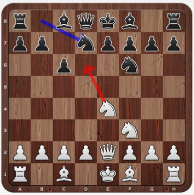
Back on track

After that series of disappointing results, Keres suddenly found himself in top form and went on to win four tournaments in a row. First off, a tournament victory at the Dr. Przepiorka Memorial tournament held at Szczawno Zdroj, in Poland. This tournament for once featured the Keres everyone knew and loved. *Grynfeld - Keres*:



15...Bxf4! and the position that arises some moves later is full of excitement. Grynfeld capitulated on move 29.

Curiously, this tournament provided one of perhaps the shortest decisive games ever played at this level, as Keres needed just *6 moves to mate the oblivious IM Edward Arlamowski*.



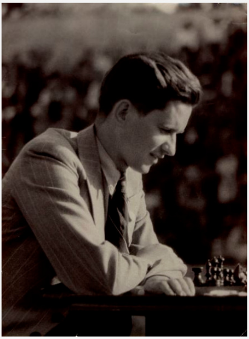
6.Nd6# probably wasn't how Arlamowski imagined his game vs. the great Keres going

After that game Keres had a day off, which he spent playing tennis under the intense sun, and as a result came to play the next game horribly sunburnt. He *lost to local hero Andrzej Pytlakowski*. Despite that, Keres triumphed with an overall 14.5/19, ahead of Szabo, Barcza, Taimanov and Geller, among others.

Then came the XVIII Soviet Championship. Keres:

> I traveled to the Championship with increased confidence. However, the start of the tournament gave me no hope for anything good. After three hesitant draws, I was able to beat Geller... After that I played a weakly against Alatortsev and lost, then saved a losing position against Suetin and achieved the same result with an extra pawn against Tolush. The situation did not look good, but after these games my play was suddenly off the leash. Something similar to what had happened in the middle of the Semmering tournament began to unfold: every plan I made came to materialize the way I intended. It's hard to explain, even to myself, the reasons for the appearance of such ups and downs in my play - these occurred quite often, and even at the strongest of tournaments.

Keres took the lead midway through the tournament and despite sharing it on some occasions his last round victory over Averbakh gave him the overall score of 11.5/18 and with it the Soviet Championship title for the second time in his career. The result was slightly undercut by the fact that both Bronstein and Botvinnik were absent, but they featured in the line-up of the next XIX Soviet Championship, alongside Smyslov, Keres, Geller, Taimanov, Petrosian, Averbakh, Flohr, Bondarevsky and others, making it the strongest Soviet Championship to date.



Keres as Soviet Champion in 1951 | photo: Gunnar Vaidla, *Estonian Sports Museum*, ESM F 188:61/D 105

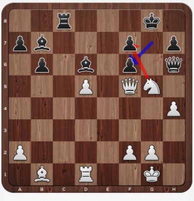
Keres started with a convincing win against Terpugov, *offering the latter a queen sacrifice in the process*, but then lost his second round game to Kopilov. In rounds three and four, he claimed two victories, *against Geller* and Aronin, and then drew with Bondarevsky. A loss to Kotov, a draw with Averbakh and a win over Moiseev meant that Keres trailed the leaders Botvinnik, Geller and Smyslov by half a point, as Botvinnik's loss to Smyslov allowed the latter to catch him in the lead.

After drawing a game with Flohr, Keres then faced his nemesis, Botvinnik. The latter took his usual line of play against Keres and *closed the position*, with the players agreeing to a draw on move 58. Keres progressed with wins against Lipnitsky, Novotelnov and drew against Bronstein and Petrosian to catch up with the leaders Geller, Botvinnik and Smyslov.

Round 14. Smyslov faced Keres while Botvinnik battled against Geller. Keres played a calm game and *beat Smyslov in a fine positional battle* while Botvinnik was stunned by Geller, as the latter demolished the World Champion with the black pieces. This lifted Keres and Geller half a point into the lead with two rounds to go. In the penultimate round, Keres faced Petrosian and was completely outplayed in the opening. However, with the position seemingly lost... Ragozin:

> Petrosian is winning! "A 22-year old will become the new Soviet Champion!" echoed over the playing hall. Despite being in a wretched position, Keres does not lose his usual calmness. Using the inaccuracies of his opponent, he saves an endgame a pawn down. Psychologically speaking, this was his greatest victory of the tournament.

As Geller loses to Bronstein in the same round, Keres emerges as the sole leader with just one game to go. Despite needing only a draw, Keres doesn't play for a draw: Taimanov *finds himself under attack* and is forced to capitulate on move 38.



27.Nxf7! was the crucial move of Keres' winning attack - Black's undefended pieces dropped like flies

Keres thus defends his Soviet Championship title and wins the tournament for a third time.

19th USSR Championship and Zonal, Moscow 1951
November 11 - December 14

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1.	Keres, Paul	x	1	½	1	½	½	½	1	1	½	0	½	0	1	1	1	1	1	12 - 5
2.	Geller, Efim	0	x	½	0	1	½	0	1	1	0	1	½	1	1	1	1	1	1	11½- 5½
3.	Petrosian, Tigran	½	½	x	1	½	½	½	1	0	½	0	1	1	1	1	½	1	1	11½- 5½
4.	Smyslov, Vassily	0	1	0	x	1	0	1	1	½	1	1	½	½	1	1	½	0	1	11 - 6
5.	Botvinnik, Mikhail	½	0	½	0	x	½	1	½	1	½	0	½	½	½	1	1	1	1	10 - 7
6.	Averbakh, Yuri	½	½	½	1	½	x	0	0	1	½	½	1	½	½	0	½	1	1	9½- 7½
7.	Bronstein, David	½	1	½	0	0	1	x	1	0	½	1	½	0	½	½	½	1	1	9½- 7½
8.	Taimanov, Mark	0	0	0	0	½	1	0	x	½	½	1	1	½	½	1	1	1	1	9½- 7½
9.	Aronin, Lev	0	0	1	½	0	0	1	½	x	1	1	0	½	½	1	½	1	½	9 - 8
10.	Flohr, Salo	½	1	½	0	½	½	½	½	0	x	½	½	1	½	½	1	0	1	9 - 8
11.	Kopylov, Nikolai	1	0	1	0	1	½	0	0	0	½	x	1	0	1	1	0	1	½	8½- 8½
12.	Bondarevsky, Igor	½	½	0	½	½	0	½	0	1	½	0	x	½	½	0	1	1	1	8 - 9
13.	Kotov, Alexander	1	0	0	½	½	½	1	½	½	0	1	½	x	½	0	½	1	0	8 - 9
14.	Simagin, Vladimir	0	0	0	0	½	½	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	x	½	1	1	1	7½- 9½
15.	Lipnitsky, Isaac	0	0	0	0	0	1	½	0	0	½	0	1	1	½	x	½	½	1	6½-10½
16.	Moiseev, Oleg	0	0	½	½	0	½	½	0	½	0	1	0	½	0	½	x	1	1	6½-10½
17.	Novotelnov, Nikolai	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	½	0	x	½	3 -14
18.	Terpugov, Evgeny	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	½	0	½	0	1	0	0	0	½	x	2½-14½

Keres wins his 3rd USSR Championship | source: *Graeme Cree*

Keres then followed his two Soviet Championship triumphs with tournament victory in Budapest, winning the event in the last round by *defeating Gedeon Barcza*, leaving Botvinnik, Geller, Smyslov and Petrosian in his wake.

Those results propelled him to first board of the Soviet Olympiad team, pushing the World Champion Botvinnik to board two! Botvinnik found this decision preposterous and refused to participate, once more just going to show the strength of the Soviet chess machine. What other team could afford the luxury of pushing a reigning World Champion onto board two due to having stronger options available! Despite Keres playing modestly and scoring 6.5/12 it was the fact that the Soviets could afford immense strength on the lower boards that enabled them *to win the 1952 Olympiad*, and for that matter every consequent Olympiad for the next 22 years.

Keres had achieved formidable momentum and despite the slight hiccup of his first board performance at the Olympiad, he continued striving for his long held dream of playing for the World Championship title. With the Zürich Candidates Tournament of 1953 looming on the horizon, the dream was still alive. But mind you, in 1953 he had already reached the age of 37, meaning that time was not really on his side anymore.

About the author

Joosep Grents

Joosep is an Estonian chess enthusiast who learned chess at the age of five and began attending the Paul Keres Chess Club two years later. He recently graduated with a degree in History from Charles University in Prague, with his BA thesis set to be published by the university press.

See also:

- *Paul Keres I: Prince without a Crown (1916-36)*
- *Paul Keres II: A new chess superstar (1936-37)*
- *Paul Keres III: Avro 1938: Rightful challenger*
- *Paul Keres IV: The War Years*

Comments 23

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tschukki

!? B i

Post

Hemingway

Aug 19, 2017 | 13:12

Going over Keres (English version) of the 1948 game you have to KNOW that someone 'suggested' to him that Comrade Botvinnik was to win the tournament. Keres comments and moves 11,.. c5:d4?; Nb7-b6? "It is surprising that Black places his knight on b6, where it is very badly placed and subsequently does not let Black coordinate his pieces." 15.., Re8-e7? "It is amazing how many weak moves Black is able to make in such a short time span." 16.., Qd8-c7?? "With this move Black crowns his series of mistakes and loses the game within a few moves. 18.., Qc7-f4? After the text move Black loses by force.

AND he had no more time,... Had used it all up finding a way to lose a game.

What is interesting about this game,... is that it resembles most of mine and probably most of the us all on this website. The amateur makes such moves and disengaging his pieces from the centre, the amateur does not protect his King, the amatuer places his Queen on B8 (move 19.., Qf4-b8) and the amatuer plays without a plan.

Keres did not play chess like an amateur. But if a friend of Stalin had called you to a meeting to discuss how Botvinnik should win the tournament, and your family (wife and two daughters), were in the Soviet Union, and it is three years after the war I imagine all of us would do what Keres did,...

If Keres had a weakness, it was NOT his nerves, but his Noble and Selfless Character. Had he been born in England or had been able to escape to Sweeden with his family,... Chess History would have been completely different.

0 *reply* *report*

pdvossen

Mar 11, 2017 | 16:15

I had to read this series again. Such great commentary, and you feel like you are right there in the games. Truly enjoyed it all.

0 *reply* *report*

King_Size

Jan 26, 2017 | 08:09

Excellent article once again by Joosep Grents. The images and diagarams are a pleasure and delight. I look forward to the next one.

0 *reply* *report*

tedlawyer

Jan 13, 2017 | 22:14

I've really enjoyed the whole Paul Keres series. It is informative, fascinating and full of surprises. I also enjoyed Paul Keres chess games as I always have since I discovered his games.

0 *reply* *report*