

## MASTER THESIS

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“Pawns and Power: Evaluating Chess as a Cultural Movement in the Diplomatic History of Russia”

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### *Abstract*

Chess is a game with over 2000 years of cultural history. Starting in India as Chaturanga, the game has transformed into a sport played by young and old on an international scale. In its history though, chess has become more than just a game. As the game developed, specifically in Russia, it developed a dedicated community that came together not only through the lives of its top players, but through analysis, teaching, logic and reasoning. The culture that came to be created around chess has also come to describe the ways in which some states integrate the sport into their diplomatic efforts. Recent historical and cultural studies have only just begun to understand chess, its history and the role it plays in cultural diplomacy. This thesis explores the early history of chess in Russia from early Muscovy until today. This analysis demonstrates how over time chess evolved from a domestic cultural phenomenon to one that works on an international diplomatic level through the cultural diplomacy of the International Chess Federation. Understanding this historical and cultural narrative means that we are able to better comprehend the role that sports, and other cultural pursuits play in larger state geopolitical agendas. Additionally, this history offers a window into a sport whose history plays a key role in diplomatic efforts on and off the board.

Key words: Chess history, cultural diplomacy, Russia, international diplomacy, Soviet Union

### *Abstrakt*

Schach kann auf eine über 2000 Jahre alte Kulturgeschichte zurückblicken. Das Spiel, das seinen Ursprung in Indien als Chaturanga hat, entwickelte sich zu einer internationalen Sportart, die von Menschen aller Altersgruppen ausgeübt wird, und insbesondere in Russland zu einem sozialen Phänomen mit einer sehr starken Gemeinschaft herangewachsen ist. Diese Gemeinschaft umfasst nicht nur die Spieler:innen selbst, sondern auch Personen, die sich mit der Analyse, dem Unterricht und der Logik sowie der Argumentation rund um das Schachspiel beschäftigen. Weiters ist die damit einhergehende Kultur von großer Bedeutung, die sich durch die progressive Integration des sportlichen Aspekts in die diplomatischen Bemühungen einiger Staaten widerspiegelt. Allerdings ist die Erforschung der historischen und kulturellen Aspekte des Schachspiels, sowie seiner Geschichte und Rolle in der Kulturdiplomatie noch am Anfang. Die vorliegende Arbeit präsentiert eine historische Betrachtung über die Anfänge des Schachs, ausgehend von den Ursprüngen in Moskau bis in die Gegenwart. Die Analyse zeigt die Entwicklung des Schachspiels von einem einheimischen Kulturphänomen zu einer internationalen Sportart mit potenziell diplomatischem Einfluss. Durch das Verständnis dieser historischen und kulturellen Geschichte lässt sich die Rolle des Sports im Hinblick auf geopolitische Strategien von Nationen besser einordnen. Letztlich gewährt diese Historie Einsicht in einen Sport, dessen Geschichte eine wesentliche Rolle in den diplomatischen Bemühungen auf und neben dem Schachbrett einnimmt.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Schachgeschichte, Kulturdiplomatie, Russland, internationale Diplomatie, Sowjetunion

## ***Pledge***

*On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.*

– Emilia ‘Emily’ Loren Castelao <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to note here that my thesis might contain a high Turn It In plagiarism percentage. This is because I have been writing my thesis since I began my studies at the Diplomatic Academy and have submitted many of my chapters as my formal papers for my classes. My final thesis contains analysis from these papers, but ultimately brings together the previous, unpublished work I had already completed. I thoroughly cite myself throughout my thesis as well.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Settling Chess in Old Russia’s Aristocracy</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Chess as a Tool to Unite the Masses</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Chapter 3: A New Culture – The Soviet “School” of Chess</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Development of the International Chess Federation as an Institution for Cultural Diplomacy</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Conclusion: Chess Culture, the Historicization of its Discourse and Why Russia Participates in Chess Diplomacy</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>69</b>

*Что есть в мире, кроме шахмат*

– *В. Набоков*

*“What is there in the world but chess?”*

– *V. Nabokov*

## Introduction

When Dimitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin became a tandemocracy of joint leadership in 2008, many called the shuffling of places between the politicians “рокировка” in Russian, or castling, in English. Castling refers to the action in which the Rook and the King switch places in order to provide better protection for the King in the game of chess. Chess, though, is not just a symbolic metaphor attributed to the actions of the Russian government. Long before Medvedev and Putin came into power, the chess world and its culture had been a tool of the Russian state to subvert the consequences of their actions put onto them by Western powers. Beginning with Nikolai Krylenko—former People's Commissar for Justice of the USSR—chess was a tool funded and promoted by the state. Krylenko believed very heavily in the idea of “chess to the masses” and used it as a unifying force to promote and establish Soviet cultural dominance over the West.<sup>2</sup> The study of chess history is one that is done primarily informally by those in the chess community who have chess artifacts and memorabilia from the well documented sport. Nevertheless, this underrepresented topic holds a plethora of history that reflects not only the international nature of the sport, but how politics can seep into the popular culture of countries that participate. In my opinion, there is a large portion of history, specifically chess history, that has been overlooked by scholars.

### *Literature Review*

The doctoral thesis, “Storming Fortresses: A Political History of Chess in the Soviet Union, 1917-1948” was published by Michael A. Hudson in 2013 at the University of California Santa

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<sup>2</sup> Castelao, Emilia. ‘Pawns and Power’. Epoch Magazine, 1 December 2022. <https://www.epoch-magazine.com/post/pawns-and-power>.

Cruz.<sup>3</sup> This recent thesis is one of the only formal academic works on this history of chess published in academia. Hudson details the political history of Soviet chess from 1918- 1947 but lacks a cohesive argument throughout the thesis. With a large timeframe and inability to connect each chapter to a larger narrative, this thesis was a much-needed step forward in recognizing how important chess was to the political motives of early revolutionaries in the Soviet Union. Conversely, with the primary focus of this paper being on the revolution and its immediate aftermath, I hope to highlight the connection between chess' political history and the development of Soviet chess culture and chess as a national identity from a domestic political cause to an international, diplomatic one.

In Russian, there has been a bit more literature on the subject. An article from the Russian Journal of Education and Psychology was published in 2015 by E.A. Levin titled, *ФЕНОМЕН ПОЛИТИЗАЦИИ ШАХМАТНОГО СПОРТА В СССР* (The Phenomenon of the Politicization of Chess as a Sport in the USSR). This article explores how chess became politicized in the USSR, examining key events and historical eras in which the political elite of the nation participated in the game. Levin's goal was to chart the main stages of chess development in the USSR, gauge the extent of political interference in the sport, and define the game's role as a tool for managing both domestic and international political affairs.<sup>4</sup> One place where Levin really adds to the historical narrative is the connection of political events to the lives of chess players during the 1940s and 1950s. He wrote that, "political events [during this time] da a direct impact on the lives and destinies of chess athletes."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hudson, Michael Andrew. "Storming Fortresses: A Political History of Chess in The Soviet Union, 1917- 1948." eScholarship, University of California, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Левин, Евгений Алексеевич. "Феномен политизации шахматного спорта в СССР." *Russian Journal of Education and Psychology* 11 (55) (2015): 87-98.

<sup>5</sup> Левин, "Феномен политизации шахматного спорта в СССР," page 93. Original quote: "Неоднократно, в течение данного исторического периода, текущие политические события оказывали непосредственное влияние на жизни и судьбы спортсменов-шахматистов "



K. Vodopyanov and E. Pankov at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation wrote an article titled “‘Reds’ Play ‘White’: Diplomatic Aspects of the 1960-70s US-USSR Chess Standoff”.<sup>6</sup> Using information from historical archives, this research explores the intentions and deeds of US and Soviet diplomats during the Cold War. Specifically, the authors investigate the reasons for Soviet and American diplomats' participation in the issues that resulted from the 1972 World Chess championship based on the examination of declassified documents. They conclude that essentially the event was untimely and emphasize the “unwillingness of the US to exacerbate ideological tensions around the championship.”<sup>7</sup> They showcase that diplomatically chess events were viewed in the “macro context of the ideological confrontation” between the USSR and US.<sup>8</sup>

When thinking about the larger theoretical debate about the intersection of diplomatic practices and culture, we look to the article “Building the Russian World: Cultural Diplomacy of the Russian Language and Cultural Identity” by Anna Klyueva and Anna Mikhaylova.<sup>9</sup> In this article, the authors explore Russia's humanitarian cooperation programmes and delve into the themes of Russian diaspora and the politics surrounding culture and identity. Klyueva and Mikhaylova argue that Russia's cultural diplomacy strategy concentrates on its foreign-born

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<sup>6</sup> Водопьянов К. Г., Панков Е. С. «Красные» ходят «белыми»: дипломатические аспекты шах-матного противостояния СССР и США в 1960–1970-е гг. // Российский социально-гуманитарный журнал. 2023. № 3. URL: [www.evestnik-mgou.ru](http://www.evestnik-mgou.ru); Vodopyanov K. G., Pankov E. S. “Reds” play “white”: diplomatic aspects of the 1960–70s US–USSR chess standoff. In: Russian Social and Humanitarian Journal, 2023, no. 3. Available at: [www.evestnik-mgou.ru](http://www.evestnik-mgou.ru)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Klyueva, Anna, and Anna Mikhaylova. "Building the Russian world: Cultural diplomacy of the Russian language and cultural identity." *JOMEC Journal* 11 (2017): 127-143.

citizens and the Russian diaspora to establish and strengthen *Russkiy Mir* [Russian World] communities and use them as Russia's ambassadors overseas.<sup>10</sup>

Domenico Valenza also supports this narrative in their article “Russia’s cultural diplomacy in post-Soviet space: the making of ‘one people’”.<sup>11</sup> This essay argues that in order to comprehend Russia's foreign policy, a far closer examination of the co-constitutive relationship between identity and foreign policy is necessary. They cite that the current conversation centered around realism is not substantive enough to explain Russia’s assertiveness. According to Valenza, Russia's cultural diplomacy between 2008 and 2012 put out three opposing articulations of identity that were aimed at uniting the nation's multiethnicity, the Russian (Russkiy) ethnicity, and collective memory in order to conduct diplomacy.<sup>12</sup> This perspective sheds light on how cultural narratives intertwine with geopolitical strategies, shaping Russia's approach to international affairs through the prism of identity politics.

Tatiana Zonova argues that this model of diplomacy by Russia was formed by the Renaissance—which was marked by a trend of secularization— and founded the basis for Russia's diplomatic framework.<sup>13</sup> She states that “even under Soviet-imposed atheism, diplomacy was viewed as a tool for a new universalism, expressed in terms of 'proletarian internationalism'.”<sup>14</sup> Universalism is the ideals that are applicable globally to all cultures and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Valenza, Domenico. “Russia’s Cultural Diplomacy in Post-Soviet Space: The Making of ‘One People.’” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 64, no. 4 (2023): 399–430. doi:10.1080/15387216.2022.2025880.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Zonova, Tatiana. "Diplomatic Cultures: Comparing Russia and the West in Terms of a 'Modern Model of Diplomacy'", *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 2, 1 (2007): 1-23,

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/187119007X180458>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

society, often transcending national boundaries. Proletarian internationalism is a Marxist principle that promotes unity and collaboration among the worldwide proletariat, irrespective of country, with the aim of overthrowing capitalism and establishing a socialist society. Therefore, even amidst Soviet-imposed atheism, diplomacy was perceived as a means to advocate for a new form of universalism, articulated through the concept of 'proletarian internationalism,' emphasizing solidarity among the working class worldwide. This point of view is significant because it contradicts the European diplomatic experience, which places a strong focus on human rights, rationality, and a sound legal foundation.

When looking at the larger impact of cultural diplomacy, *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* edited by Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, the book highlights various articles that showcase ways that countries use cultural representation and trade to influence national identity, soft power, and international relations.<sup>15</sup> For example, their first chapter “VOKS: The third dimension of Soviet foreign policy” by Jean-Francois Fayet demonstrates how VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) was a crucial tool of Soviet foreign policy. As a vital "third dimension" to established diplomatic and commercial avenues, VOKS promoted Soviet influence overseas and allowed for cross-cultural interactions. Fayet illustrates how VOKS was a weapon for projecting Soviet ideology, fostering worldwide solidarity, and influencing opinions of the Soviet Union by examining the organization's operations, structures, and relationships with foreign institutions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gienow-Hecht, Jessica CE, and Mark C. Donfried, eds. *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*. Vol. 6. Berghahn Books, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Fayet J-F, ‘VOKS: The Third Dimension of Soviet Foreign Policy’, January 2013, 33–49.

David Richards's *Soviet Chess: Chess and Communism in the USSR* is one of the only other scholarly works in English about the development of chess in the Soviet Union and its importance to the political narrative of Communism.<sup>17</sup> While this book recounts the chess history of the Soviet Union, its research lacks the support of archival research. Additionally, the work covers such a wide timeframe that he is unable to expand on key moments. Therefore, this paper will supplement this work with additional perspectives that have been published since its release, as well as other primary sources.

Beyond these scholarly works, there have been personal books and memoirs published about the history of chess in the Soviet Union. Most notably is Andy Soltis's *Soviet Chess, 1917-1919*.<sup>18</sup> These works, however, are meant to be a collection of games not a focused history with in-depth analysis. Additionally, it is important to note that much of the anecdotal history is unsupported with no primary source citations being present anywhere throughout the book. Depending only on such books for historical insights may pose difficulties because they have not undergone thorough academic examination and their sources cannot be verified.

This thesis aims to fill the clear gap in the literature regarding chess and its importance in the cultural and political history of the Soviet Union and its impact Russian diplomatic priorities today. While many works like Hudson's "Storming Fortress" begin to detail the connections between chess and the political sphere, a focus on pre- and post-revolutionary chess in the developing Soviet Union will allow for a deep dive into how integral chess has been for the Soviet Union and Russia's diplomatic practices and transition from bourgeoisie sport to every

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<sup>17</sup> Richards, David. *Soviet Chess: Chess and Communism in the USSR*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.

<sup>18</sup> Soltis, Andy. *Soviet Chess, 1917-1919*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2000.

man's postwar pastime. By filling this gap, other research on cultural history in the Soviet Union can pinpoint and better understand how some practices that may not seem important to the naked eye could hold a significant amount of weight in a larger historical narrative. Additionally, with the significant increase in interest for chess, it is more important than ever to contribute quality academic research on its history.

### *Methodology*

This thesis will primarily be a critical history of chess and the development of a Soviet chess culture transformed into an instrument of diplomacy. By examining primary and secondary sources, historians methodically investigate, analyze, and interpret historical events, societies, and cultures to develop a fuller knowledge of the intricacies and dynamics that have influenced human experiences over time. The research design in this dissertation adopts a comparative historical analysis, utilizing a combination of archival research, oral history interviews, and a critical examination of secondary sources.<sup>19</sup> The archival research involved an extensive exploration of primary documents from amateur chess historians such as Willy Icklicki and Henrik Malm Lindberg.<sup>20</sup> This thesis references primarily chess players personal histories and journals, as well as official diplomatic records from various high level chess events in and outside of Russia. These sources have provided a nuanced understanding of the socio-political context and the important players under investigation. Furthermore, I employ a qualitative research design to integrate the cultural studies analysis discipline of this dissertation. This thesis utilizes two primary methods: media analysis and individual interviews. Primary data

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<sup>19</sup> For this thesis, I have considered autobiographies and chess analysis books from chess players such as Mikhail Botvinnik, Mikhail Chorigan, Alexander Alenkin and other chess players that are mentioned in this text. Additionally, I look at institutional documents from the International Chess Federation (FIDE) from the Tresoar Archives and I was thankful to receive an early copy of Henrik Malm Lindberg's book *FIDE-President Folke Rogard – the Lawyer Who Organized Modern Chess in the Shadow of the Cold War*. Henrik is an Associate Professor at the Department of Economic History, Uppsala University.

<sup>20</sup> Reference Willy Icklicki, Edward Winter, Max Euwe Center and Henrik Malm Lindberg

has been gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of media from news outlets, institutional statements, and social media. By adopting a reflexive and participatory stance, this methodology seeks to engage with the lived experiences of individuals and communities, providing insights into the construction and negotiation of identities, power relations, and cultural meanings.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, this thesis contains an oral history component that supplements the historical findings. Throughout this research, I conducted 12 interviews of those with prominent standing in the chess community to provide firsthand testimony about the connection between their identity, nationalism, and perspective on the International Chess Federation. This oral testimony aims to bring together an understanding of chess community today and how it forms an identity to both the national and international spheres. With the current events happening in Russia though, ethical considerations have been paramount throughout the research process, ensuring the responsible handling of sensitive information and the protection of participants' confidentiality. Therefore, the names of interviewees will remain confidential for their protection.

I utilize primary and secondary sources in both English and Russian. The main primary sources will include published memoirs, archival material, governmental declarations, and FIDE institutional documents. The main secondary sources will include academic books and articles. It is important to note that this dissertation relies heavily on the support of amateur chess historians and Russian grandmasters with access to extensive personal collections relating to chess in the Soviet Union. Most primary sources have been provided by the International Chess Federation's Historical Committee, who currently manage the largest network of personal

collections regarding chess memoirs and memorabilia. All additional sources were sourced from online archives.

### *Thesis Overview*

This thesis will construct and analyze the historical narrative, highlighting main figures and developments starting with chess in Russia. The structure of this will be divided into four chapters. Chapter one will focus on the beginnings of chess in Muscovy until 1918. Chapter two will follow the turning point of the militarization of chess in the 1920s until 1939, specifically considering the figures of Nikolai Kreylenko and Mikhail Botvinnik and their contributions to chess. Chapter three will begin to explore the sovietization of international chess from 1939 until 1966 and the development of a new chess culture that came to form the basis of which chess diplomacy became ingrained in Russian diplomatic history. Finally, chapter 4 will examine the development of the International Chess Federation (FIDE) as an institution for Russian cultural diplomacy.

After constructing and analyzing the historical narrative of the chess culture from Muscovy until Soviet Union, this thesis will refocus its connection to modern day chess culture and the work of the International Chess Federation as a cultural institution. This analysis will be divided into two sections. The first section will explore the journey of Arkady Dvorkovich from Deputy Prime Minister of Russia to President of the International Chess Federation and why his election was important in recognizing how national politics still plays an important role, not only in the International Chess Federation, but national federations as well.

The concluding chapter delves into how the historical roots of chess culture have permeated contemporary cultural discourse, illustrating the persistence of dominant forces even in times of societal isolation. It scrutinizes the chess world, uncovering the strategic use of cultural institutions to maintain dominance. By anchoring the analysis in the career trajectory of Arkady Dvorkovich, this thesis aims to demonstrate how chess has become a calculated tool for Russia, an example being the nature of Dvorkovitch's election by the Russian state. A comprehensive examination of FIDE's ties to Russian finances and oligarchs, coupled with an exploration of their international initiatives beyond the chessboard, reveals how Russia leverages FIDE and the history of chess culture to justify their dominance and to achieve diplomatic objectives that may be challenging through direct foreign policy channels, which is why Russia engages in chess diplomacy. The goal of this chapter is to provide a nuanced understanding of Russia's utilization of chess culture in mobilizing national identity and conducting diplomatic maneuvers—underscoring the importance of scrutinizing cultural avenues alongside explicit foreign policy initiatives.

While chess history may initially appear to focus on the history of a niche sport, it serves as a unique lens through which to explore the intricate intersections of diplomacy, cultural development, institutions, and historical narratives. By asking the question “Why does Russia engage in chess diplomacy?”, the paper highlights how chess, while commonly regarded as a just strategic board game, has made it a subtle yet powerful tool in the conduct of diplomacy. Through an analysis of its historical and cultural significance, this dissertation explores the multifaceted reasons behind Russia's consistent engagement in chess diplomacy. With this approach, this thesis argues that the Russian state's participation in chess operates as a multifaceted tool historically utilized for the purpose of power projection, the cultivation of



international relations, and the preservation of Russian identity on the global stage. Moreover, they continue to pursue these objectives through the International Chess Federation.

## Chapter 1: Establishing Chess in Early Russia's Aristocracy

Before modern times, chess was a popular hobby in pre-Soviet culture. Chess entered Russia in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century along the trade routes which linked Kievan Russia, a conglomerate of states in Eastern and Northern Europe, and the Baghdad Caliphate, the dominant Islamic Caliphate until 1517.<sup>21</sup> During this time, chess was in a different state than we know today. Popular chess developed around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in Spain. Before this time, pieces like the Queen had different characteristics and powers. Therefore, the chess we know today was popularized when chess culture was estranged from the church in Muscovy.<sup>22</sup> As chess developed over time in Russia, so did its position among popular culture and the political state.<sup>23</sup> As chess developed over time in Russia, so did its position among popular culture and the political state. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, chess had become not only a national pastime but also a symbol of intellectual prowess and a tool for political propaganda. This chapter will explore the establishment of chess amongst the early Russia's aristocracy allowing us to better understand where chess in Russia got its start and how it differs from its uses today.

The incorporation of chess into the cultural fabric of Kievan Russian society can be interpreted as a manifestation of the social intricacies prominent during that era. Chess in early Muscovy, and eventually what is known today as Russia, was widespread and well established. With its establishment though came its but was focused on a close-knit elite that saw chess through a lens of superiority. According to Hudson's argument, chess had a significant role in the cultural fabric of Kievan Russian society. He discusses the numerous literary allusions found in the

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<sup>21</sup> Linder, Isaak Maksovich. *Chess in Old Russia*. Zürich: M. Kühnle, 1979. trans. Martin P. Rice.

<sup>22</sup> Murray, H. J. R. *A History of Chess, 1913*; repr., Northampton, MA: Benjamin Press, 1986, page 51.

<sup>23</sup> Linder, Isaak Maksovich. *Chess in Old Russia*. Zürich: M. Kühnle, 1979. trans. Martin P. Rice., page 44.

byliny, which are heroic romances and epics from Kievan Russia.<sup>24</sup> These discoveries, together with the unearthing of chess figures and sets during Soviet-era archaeological excavations, provide evidence that chess was widely played in early Russia and was a shared activity among all nationalities, cultures, and classes in Kievan Russia.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 1: Page from Linder's *Chess in Old Russia* with Photos of a Chess Set built by Tula Arms Factory, 1782

As Russia transformed into an autocratic Tsardom, the transition reflects one where chess becomes a symbol for a strong nationalism and state strength. For example, in Figure 1 below we see chess figures captured in Isaak Maksovich Linder's book *Chess in Old Russia*. These chess figurines were built in 1782 by Tula Arms Factory, a weapons manufacturer founded in 1712 by Tsar Peter I of Russia.<sup>9</sup> Andreyan Sukhanov developed this chess set using steel as the primary material, adorned with gilded bronze and metal embellishments. This memorabilia

<sup>24</sup> Hudson, Michael Andrew. "Storming Fortresses: A Political History of Chess In The Soviet Union, 1917- 1948." eScholarship, University of California, 2013., page 16.

<sup>25</sup> Linder, Isaak Maksovich. *Chess in Old Russia*. Zürich: M. Kühnle, 1979. trans. Martin P. Rice.

demonstrates the aristocracy's attraction with chess as a current reflection of the position of the Russian state.

In Sukhanov's chess pieces is an interest to connect ideas of grandeur within the Russian state with chess and its military, and the crown, as the set contains both symbolic and representational pieces. Whilst the pieces are elongated and maintain the classical characteristic of 18th century European chess figurines, it is also important to note how the king, queen, bishop, and pawns are artistically connected by a strong, stable base and a crown at the top. Conversely, the rooks and knights are representational. The rooks resemble boats, while the knights feature a centaur like half horse, half mermaid creature. The king, queen, bishops, and pawns being artistically connected symbolize this period where Tsar Peter looked to connect the crown, the church, and the commoners by implementing reforms that would aim to modernize



*Figure 2: Rook from Tsar Peter's Chess Set Production by Tula Arms Factory*

Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the rook and the knight are connected and were produced in this way to showcase the transformative work the Tsar did to establish the Imperial Russian Navy and capture ports at Azov and the Baltic Sea. The creation of this chess set by a Russian armaments firm founded by the Tsar illustrates a distinct correlation between chess, the nobility, and the use of the game to elevate the nation. Through the production of this chess set, observers can discern the Tsar's

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<sup>26</sup> Castelao, Emilia. 'Chess for the Masses: Soviet Chess and Its Transformation from Bourgeoisie Sport to Every Man's Postwar Pastime, 1917-1927'. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

intended aspirations for Russia. The elegant but boastful chess set is one that puts the Russian state on a pedestal, focusing only on its most important successes.<sup>27</sup>

### *Chess, the Tsars and the First 'Grandmasters'*

In 1909, amid the peak of the Russian monarchy and the dominance of a wealthy nobility, chess had become a pastime that was mostly controlled by the bourgeoisie. During this year, Russia witnessed the emergence of chess as an increasingly accessible and international game, as renowned players from many countries started to visit and compete in the country. One of the most notable examples was the St. Petersburg Tournament of 1909. This tournament was where future World Champion Alexander Alekhine made his first mark on the chess world. It also sparked the interest of the monarchy in investing in chess tournaments as a means of promoting the Russian state. This initiative came about due to the patronage of two important figures, Peter Alexandrovich Saburov and his son, Peter Petrovich Saburov.<sup>28</sup>

Peter Petrovich Saburov held the position of President at the St. Petersburg Chess Club. However, before his involvement in chess, he served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then worked in the office of the state chancellor. In 1905, Tsar Nicholas II granted him the prestigious title of Gentleman of the Chamber.<sup>29</sup> Given Peter Petrovich had a closeness with the Russian state, while also becoming a notable tournament organizer in the local chess community. In 1909, he successfully persuaded Tsar Nicolas II to provide rubles to the prize money with the aim of enticing superior players from foreign countries to participate. The Tsar's fascination

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<sup>27</sup> The Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.; Castelao, Emilia. 'Chess for the Masses: Soviet Chess and Its Transformation from Bourgeoisie Sport to Every Man's Postwar Pastime, 1917-1927'. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Simpson, J.Y. *The Saburov Memoirs or Bismarck & Russia*. Cambridge, 1929.

<sup>29</sup> *American Chess Bulletin*, November 1911. pages 246–247.

in chess allegedly resulted in the bestowment of one of the first "Grandmasters" titles at the 1914 St. Petersburg Tournament. Beyond this, the Tsar frequently made ₧1000 gifts to the prize funds of these tournaments.<sup>30</sup>

Not only was chess important to the wider aristocracy, but the sport was important transformed into a way the Tsar himself could use chess in creating a superior national identity to present to the international community. The focus on intellectual and cultural supremacy had great importance in Russia's foreign affairs in the early 20th century. Demonstrating this superiority was a way to establish domination in an international sphere where the state was considered both European and "Other". Therefore, the bestowing of the "Grandmaster" title can be perceived as an example of how the Tsar wished to create a sense of inclusion and assert that authority domestically. Furthermore, during the July Crisis of 1914, the Tsar needed to create an intensified sense of nationalism and with the imminent worldwide battle, this rendered such demonstrations of cultural supremacy much more crucial as a means of exerting soft power on the global arena.<sup>31</sup>

According to Frank Marshall, the U.S. Chess Champion of the time, Tsar Nicholas II awarded the title of Grandmaster to the five finalists of the tournament: Emanuel Lasker, Jose Capablanca, Alexander Alekhine, Siegvert Tarrasch, and Frank Marshall himself at the 1909 tournament.<sup>32</sup> While he claims this, there is no report or physical evidence to corroborate this story. This title of grandmaster, though, and the role of the Tsar in chess is something that is

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<sup>30</sup> "Storming Fortresses", page 27.

<sup>31</sup> Mombauer, Annika: July Crisis 1914 (Version 1.1), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2018-09-20. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11027/1.1](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11027/1.1).

<sup>32</sup> Marshall, F.J. *My Fifty Years of Chess*. Hardinge Simpole Publishing, 2002.  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=OclGPQAACAAJ>.

heavily reported on and debated. Emmanuel Lasker wrote in a summary of the 1909 tournament that the Tsar contributed a “magnificent vase of Imperial porcelain manufacture.”<sup>33</sup> Additionally, in an interview with *El Debate* in 1922, Russian champion Alexander Alekhine stated that, “I have played chess since the age of seven and when I was 14; I was named a [grand]master by the Tsar himself when I won the national tournament in St Petersburg.”<sup>34</sup> Alekhine was not 14 in 1914, but he was when he played in the first St. Petersburg Tournament in 1914 where he made his stunning debut.

Thinking about the larger instability in Russia at this time, it is natural to make the connection that the Tsar had a larger purpose for chess, especially since he has a prolonged involvement in the chess community, even if it was just a lingering presence. Top chess player and writer, Fred Reinfeld, referenced the following passage from an article by Robert Lewis Taylor in *The New Yorker* of 15 June 1940 stating that, “[A grandmaster] is a master who has either won, placed, or showed in a major tournament or been named a Grand Master by Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The Tsar, it seems, was a rather arbitrary chess fan who enjoyed watching matches, and when he saw a player, he liked the looks of, he just slapped the title on him.”<sup>35</sup> However, there is an ongoing disagreement regarding the attribution of the grandmaster title was in fact by Tsar Nicholas II. The rumor though raises questions about the level of involvement Tsar Nicholas II had in the chess community in Russia. It also highlights how, as an aristocrat, he believed he had the power to bestow the title of “grandmaster” on players, even though he had other important responsibilities as the leader of the Russian state.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lasker, Emanuel. *The International Chess Congress*, New York: Press of E. Lasker, 1910. page vi.

<sup>34</sup> Kalendovský J., and V. Fiala, *Complete Games of Alekhine*. Olomouc, 1996

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, Robert Lewis *The New Yorker*. 15 June 1940; *Chess Review*, October 1940. page 149

<sup>36</sup> Castelao, Emilia. ‘Chess for the Masses: Soviet Chess and Its Transformation from Bourgeoisie Sport to Every Man’s Postwar Pastime, 1917-1927’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

By establishing a connection between chess and the bourgeoisie, significant conclusions may be made regarding the role of chess in pre-revolutionary Russia. Due to the Tsar's active participation and generous contributions to chess, there is an evident correlation between chess and the nobility in Russia at this time. The Tsar's patronage of chess, demonstrated by providing financial assistance and granting titles, exemplifies wider endeavors to foster a perception of cultural and intellectual supremacy. Although chess was played by ordinary individuals on a daily basis, chess tournaments and elite players were the ones who have the financial resources to support such competitions. In addition, supporters such as Tsar Nicholas II frequently involved themselves in the chess community. During the 1914 tournament in St. Petersburg, Peter Petrovich Saburov and Emmanuel Lasker began discussions on the establishment of an international chess federation.<sup>37</sup> While the chess community thrived in Russia, it was mostly driven by the upper echelons of society rather than ordinary individuals. However, the revolutionary transformation that chess would undergo in 1918 would change this.<sup>38</sup>

This symbolic value had a broader influence outside the game since it played a role in establishing and strengthening the social hierarchy. The aristocracy's participation in chess tournaments highlights the interconnection between cultural practices and power dynamics, as well as their influence on the sociopolitical environment of pre-revolutionary Russia. The participation of Tsar Nicholas II in sponsoring chess tournaments, such as the 1914 St. Petersburg Tournament, when he reportedly bestowed the title of "grandmaster," was a deliberate move to associate Russia with modernity and intellectual prowess. The intricate

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<sup>37</sup> Winter, Edward. "The Saburovs," <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/saburovs.html>

<sup>38</sup> Castelao, Emilia. 'Chess for the Masses: Soviet Chess and Its Transformation from Bourgeoisie Sport to Every Man's Postwar Pastime, 1917-1927'. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.



design of the chess sets manufactured by the Tula Arms Factory, further solidified the link between the government, military accomplishments, and cultural refinement. The merging of chess with political and cultural symbols served to emphasize the aristocracy's aim of presenting Russia as a dominant intellectual force and a catalyst for modernization. As chess transforms over the next centuries, its roots in the aristocracy are going to be crucial in understanding how the game extends its impact to a wider society, transcending social classes and becoming an international representation of national pride and intellectual excellence.

## Chapter 2: Chess as a Tool to Unite the Masses

Chess' establishment in early Russia came amongst the aristocracy and was limited to being a reflection of the monarchy and state. As chess developed though, when the Revolution and establishment of the Soviet Union came about, the sport became one for the people. Chess became a tool for the unification of a Soviet identity and development of Soviet culture after the 1918 Revolution. For the early Bolshevik leaders, this growth was crucial since it created a sense of camaraderie among the people. Additionally, the masses rallied behind the not only the idea of chess as a demonstration of Soviet superiority and intellect, which reflected positively on the idea of communism, but they also rallied behind the ones who *played* chess. During this time, not only does the game gain immense domestic popularity through its integration into the military, but chess players themselves become a reflection of the Soviet state and their purpose extended beyond the sport. The growth of chess clubs and competitions led to the development of a culture that emphasized strategic thinking and intellectual involvement among the general population. Rather, these players became quasi-ambassadors for their nation which extended their duties beyond the board.

### *A Revolutionary Transition: Alexander Ilyin-Zhenevsky and Chess' Militarization*

Originally conceived as a tool for the upper class to further their interests, chess underwent a process of militarization, leading to its integration into the political endeavors of the working class. This originated with the introduction of chess into the military instruction of insurgent soldiers by Alexander Ilyin-Zhenevsky. Being a dedicated Bolshevik and a renowned chess player, he firmly believed that chess was an ideal instrument for imparting tactical and strategic

military understanding, as well as fostering rational thinking inside the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup>After being drafted into the First World War and surviving with a severe case of “shellshock”, he would never fully be integrated into active military command again. This did not hinder his devotion to the party though and led him to revolutionize what skills were taught at the military training academy.<sup>40</sup>

When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1920, Zhenevsky was appointed commissar of the Central Directorate of General Military Training and moved to Moscow. Zhenevsky, in his capacity as commissar, established the inaugural chess department as part of a plan named "Towards a New Army."<sup>41</sup> The objective of this project was to enhance the tactical, strategic, and patient abilities of military officials through the combination of chess training and military instruction. Zhenevsky states in his memoirs that, “Chess, sometimes even more than sport, develops boldness, inventiveness, will power, and something that sport cannot: strategic ability.”<sup>42</sup> Through this quote we see that Zhenevsky sought to make the military more well-rounded, which he believed would lead not only to military success but to the success of the party.<sup>43</sup>

Zhenevsky believed that involving chess within the official military curriculum, alongside the existing physical sports, would lead to a rise in total state backing if chess gained popularity. Zhenevsky achieved success in his pursuits. The introduction of formal governmental backing could encourage the expansion of chess in Moscow, as well as in rural districts, as all regional

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<sup>39</sup> Il'in-Zhenevskii, A. F. *Notes of a Soviet Master*. Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986, trans. Peter Svidler, page 1.

<sup>40</sup> Castelao, Emilia. ‘Chess for the Masses: Soviet Chess and Its Transformation from Bourgeoisie Sport to Every Man’s Postwar Pastime, 1917-1927’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> *Notes of a Soviet Master*, page 19

<sup>42</sup> *Notes of a Soviet Master*, pages 20–21.

<sup>43</sup> Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

directors would be required to start integrating chess into their training programs.<sup>44</sup> As Zhenevsky integrated chess more heavily into the everyday workings of universal military training and the upcoming Olympiad, he also began a chess column that emphasized the connection he saw between the military and chess. In 1920 in the Vsevoluch's paper *The New Army*, he wrote,

“ Chess has much in common with the art of war. It develops in a man all the abilities that are needed in a commander, such as: self-control, composure, calculation. Calculation in chess is almost the same as that in war. It is first necessary to strengthen one's position and find a weak point in the enemy's position that is easy to attack. Then, concentrate on his main force, to produce, if possible, a diversion to distract the enemy. Then, picking the right moment, strike with your main forces at the weak point in the enemy's position. This strategy produces the same victory in war as in chess.”<sup>45</sup>

His discussion of the correlation between chess and the military highlights the shared principles of logical reasoning and practical intelligence as essential qualities that should be included into a person's military training in order to achieve success. By assigning chess a utilitarian function that would ultimately yield outcomes for the Soviet military, he placed value upon chess and facilitated its integration into a developing and susceptible state structure.<sup>46</sup>

Culturally, chess began to become accessible to everyone. The game was no longer limited to the elite, but rather its importance was shifted towards being a domestic unifier. The state actively supported the game, viewing it to cultivate collective intellectual growth and

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<sup>44</sup> *Notes of a Soviet Master*, 24-25.

<sup>45</sup> Il'in-Zhenevskii, A. F. “Shakmaty” [Chess], *K novoi armii* [Moscow], April 1920, quoted in A. Narkevich, “Nash pervyi otdel” [Our First Column], *Shakmaty v SSSR*, May 1967, page 3, trans. Peter Svidler.

<sup>46</sup> Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

strengthen the principles of socialism. Chess clubs multiplied in both urban and rural regions, offering spaces for individuals of any age and background to engage in the game. The involvement of the population contributed to the development of a collective feeling of purpose and identity among Soviet people, as it aligned individual intellectual endeavors and with the overarching objectives of the state. The government orchestrated nationwide chess competitions and incentivized the involvement of workers, soldiers, and students, effectively assimilating the activity into the very essence of everyday existence. Consequently, chess gained popularity as both a leisure activity and a representation of the Soviet Union's intellectual superiority and collective togetherness, showcasing the government's dedication to education and social cohesion.<sup>47</sup>

The event that showcased how close chess had gotten with the new Soviet state was the decision by the political elite to include chess in the Russian Sports Olympiad, which was approved by the same organization that oversaw universal military training, the Vsevoluch.<sup>48</sup> Zhenevsky referred to the tournament as a "military mobilization of chess players" and emphasized the need to gather the most skilled players from around the empire to participate in Moscow.<sup>49</sup> He strongly urged the local authorities to make use of the resources of the Red Army and encourage the people to report the locations of players, in order to guarantee the presence of all the chess players requested by Zhenevsky.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Castelao, 'Chess for the Masses'. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Taimanov, M.E. and Bernard Cafferty. *The Soviet Championships*. London: Cadogan Chess, 1998. page 12.

<sup>49</sup> Il'in-Zhenevskii, A. F. *Notes of a Soviet Master*. Yorklyn, DE: Caissa Editions, 1986. page 23. trans. Peter Svidler.

<sup>50</sup> "Storming Fortresses", page 16.; Castelao, 'Chess for the Masses'. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

The pursuit of a national chess tournament amid a civil war is summed up beautifully by Petr Arsenievich Romanovskii who wrote in the beginning lines of his biography, “Am I really going to the All-Russian chess tournament? The country is in the fire of civil war, the invaders fiercely attack the young Soviet Republic.”<sup>51</sup> The state and Zhenevsky's enthusiasm for incorporating chess into the military environment not only indicates a strong interest in the sport inside the state structure, but also highlights the strategic use of chess as a tool to achieve state objectives. On the other hand, the event resulted in a significant outburst of discontent, with several players refusing to participate until the Vsevobuch fulfilled their demands.<sup>52</sup> The First Soviet Chess Championship, organized by Zhenevsky and Vsevobuch, aimed to showcase the military's unity by gathering top players from across the State who shared a common passion for the sport. Additionally, this event shed light on the state's weaknesses.<sup>53</sup>

Amidst the chaos and conflict of the civil, chess faced the challenge of maintaining its role as a unifying cultural force amid the abundant lack of resources. The Bolsheviks recognized that in order to properly engage and connect with a population that was ravaged by war, they needed to use a distinct approach to promote chess. With Zhenevsky's help chess competitions were arranged within military units and workers' groups, and propaganda emphasized the game as a method of strengthening one's mental resilience, which was seen as crucial for both troops and people dedicated to the socialist cause. Overall, though, there was a disconnect from the larger international chess community that would play a key role in maintaining chess' domestic longevity in the Soviet Union. It would take a keen passionate strategist to use chess' domestic success and transform it into an international one as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Romanovskii, P. A. “*Pervyi chempionat strany*” [The First National Championship], *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, October 1950, pages 290–291, trans. Peter Svidler.

<sup>52</sup> *Notes of a Soviet Master*, page 25.

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*Nikolai Krylenko, Mikhail Botvinnik and Chess for the Masses*

Chess gained significant popularity when it was adopted as a quasi-national and political symbol during the administration of Nikolai Krylenko, the former People's Commissar for Justice of the USSR. At the peak of his leadership, he strongly advocated for the incorporation of chess into the daily life of Soviets, spanning across all social classes from the working class to the political elite. Krylenko promised “chess to Krylenko promised “chess to the masses”, envisioning it as a means of bringing people together and making the Soviet Union an international cultural power.<sup>54</sup> Slogans such as “Chess is a powerful weapon of intellectual culture!”, “Take chess to the workers!”, “Chess must become a feature of every [workers’] club and every peasant reading room!” became common place in the government’s division for chess also known as the Chess Section.<sup>55</sup> Not only did Krylenko hope to unite the masses using chess, but he wanted Soviet players to be the best of the best. Under Krylenko’s reign, chess began to develop a political identity beyond the military and he advocated for showing the world the superiority of Soviet Chess masters.<sup>56</sup>

This political identity emerged as a result of state-funded chess tournaments and the elevation of chess players to celebrity status in the Soviet Union. The Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925, which was arranged by Krylenko, was among these events. First, to ensure widespread knowledge about the tournament, he recruited the workers clubs in Moscow and tasked them with assisting in getting the word out to prominent players about the

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<sup>54</sup> Castelao, Emilia. ‘Pawns and Power’. Epoch Magazine, 1 December 2022. <https://www.epoch-magazine.com/post/pawns-and-power>.

<sup>55</sup> Kogan, M. S. and I. L. Rabinovich. *Istoriia shakhmatnoi igry v Rossii* [History of Chess in Russia]. Leningrad: Rabochee izd-vo “Priboi”, 1927. page 41. trans. Peter Svidler.

<sup>56</sup> Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.; Castelao, ‘Pawns and Power’, 2022.

tournaments. The 1925 Moscow International Chess Tournament was written about in newspapers and other publications to raise awareness.<sup>57</sup> Not only did this integration allow chess to reach a wider audience, but it got a new demographic emotionally invested in not only the game, but the players themselves.

By writing about the participants, their strategies, and results during a tournament, many that followed chess started to assimilate the sport into their everyday lives, embedding the sport within the cultural fabric of society. The integration of chess into everyday lives not only raised the status of the game as a cultural representation of intellectual accomplishment, but also strengthened the Soviet belief in a system where success is based on individual merit and group advancement. The representation of chess champions as exemplary individuals in the public eye, as well, was used to spread government-endorsed values, demonstrating how individual commitment to intellectual endeavors could be in harmony with and contribute to the overall objectives of the communist government. Most importantly though, by making the everyday lives of chess players on display, it created a sense of inspiration and aspiration that those reading could also be a top chess player for the Soviet state. The *New York Times* reported that the tournament had consisted of “a game of kings, princes, cardinals, and statesmen, but henceforth the game of the masses,” referring to the match between rivals Emmanuel Lasker and Jose Capablanca that took place at the Moscow International Chess Tournament in 1925.<sup>58</sup> This spreading of the ideology developed by Nikolai Krylenko that chess was “for the masses” led to an unprecedented chess boom in the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Tarasov, E. M. *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve, 1925: biografii i kharakteristiki inostrannykh gostei* [Moscow International Chess Tournament Moscow, 1925: Biographies and Styles of Foreign Guests]. Moscow: Kolos, 1925, page 14. trans. Peter Svidler.

<sup>58</sup> “Chess Rivals Bury Hatchet,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1925.

<sup>59</sup> Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.; Castelao, ‘Pawns and Power’, 2022.



The Moscow International Tournament was so popular that Frank Marshall, an American chess player who participated in the tournament, recounts in his memoirs that they ultimately moved the demonstration boards being used to follow player movements outside so that the crowds of people who were unable to get tickets could follow the games.<sup>60</sup> Nikolai Krylenko details a similar atmosphere at the tournament writing that, “Everybody, even people who did not play chess, not to mention those who did, came to the . . . Second House of Soviets where the tournament took place. Even a militiaman while dispersing the crowd, told them: ‘Go home, there was a draw anyway.’”<sup>61</sup> There is even a silent film called *Shakhmatnaya goryachka* (*Chess Fever*) that memorialized the tournament with the film footage taken during this tournament.<sup>62</sup>

To bring chess to the masses, Krylenko had to promote chess inside the State and prove that there was widespread interest in playing the game. That is exactly what he did. The significant number of spectators not only indicated to higher Party authorities the popularity and profitability of chess, but also served as proof that individuals of all ages and levels of intelligence were deeply interested in the players and the outcome of their games. While the 1925 Moscow tournament a space where the Party launched a huge propaganda effort, it also received extreme criticism from the Soviet Union Workers’ Chess International (*Shakhintern*) for the misuse of the game for political purposes.<sup>63</sup> After the negative reception of the

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<sup>60</sup> Marshall, F.J. *My Fifty Years of Chess*, page 75.

<sup>61</sup> “V-i Vsesoiuznoi Shakhmatno-shashechyi S”ezd” [Vth All-Union Chess- Checkers Congress]. August, 1927, GARF, fond 7576, opis’ 21, delo 2, list 26.

<sup>62</sup> Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.; Castelao, ‘Pawns and Power’, 2022.

<sup>63</sup> “Storming Fortresses”, page 7.

tournament, Krylenko shifted his focus completely domestically.<sup>64</sup> This focus looked to integrate chess into every single aspect of Soviet life which meant that he had to fully integrate the belief that *anyone* could play chess presence” of Nikolai Krylenko in the “Soviet School of Chess”’ ultimate development and how chess had to be taught rigorously and precisely.<sup>65</sup>

The efforts of Nikolai Krylenko and Alexander Ilyin-Zhenevsky illustrate the successful growth of chess from a game exclusive to the nobility to a sport accessible to all individuals during the pre-revolutionary era. Influential leaders inside the Soviet Union started incorporating chess into the state's political agenda. Zhenevsky and Krylenko employed popularization techniques through chess events like the 1920 Olympiad and the Moscow International Chess Tournament of 1925 to influence the public's perception of the sport of chess. Both individuals exploited the principles of rationalism and realism to attract individuals from all around the state who desired to acquire knowledge about chess. In addition, the fact that the lives of chess players were well known to the public fostered a sense of social connectedness, enabling individuals to envision themselves as capable of achieving greatness in chess as well.<sup>66</sup>

Through a look of Zhenevsky's efforts to transform chess through its militarization and Krylenko's exploration of chess as a political identity, it becomes evident how chess transitioned from being limited to the upper class to Krylenko's vision of making it accessible to the general public. Krylenko's emphasis on linking chess with politics played a crucial role

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<sup>64</sup> Grigor'ev, I. D. “*Shakhmaty v SSSR*” [Chess in the USSR], in *Mezhdunarodnyi shakhmatnyi turnir v Moskve 1925 g.: sbornik partii* [International Chess Tournament in Moscow 1925: Collected Games]. Leningrad: Shakhmatnyilistok, 1927, pages 17–18. trans. Peter Svidler.

<sup>65</sup> Botvinnik, M. *Achieving the Aim*, 1978.; Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.; Castelao, ‘Pawns and Power’, 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Castelao, ‘Chess for the Masses’. Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

in shaping the international perception of Soviet Chess Culture. Through closely associating chess with the Soviet identity, the state successfully gained control over the worldwide chess community and established dominance. It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of chess as a cultural activity both before to and during the Revolution, since this understanding is key to comprehending its lasting impact on the diplomatic growth of the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup>

As the Soviet Union developed, it consistently employed cultural traditions as a means of establishing a national identity and fostering unity. Following World War II, the Soviet Union strategically employed the World Chess Championship and the recently restructured International Chess Federation (FIDE) as key tools to establish their dominance in diplomacy through soft power.<sup>68</sup> Utilizing cultural practices as an identity and strategic strategy in international politics may provide opportunities in a politically isolated society. However, this method may limit the Soviet state's capacity to diversify if the popularity of the sport declines in the future. In a sport like chess, where the audience is restricted to those who possess an intimate knowledge of the game and can envision it as a whole rather than move by move, the government would be unable to politically promote the game without providing simultaneous teaching. During World War II, chess became stagnate until Mikhail Botvinnik successfully combined the political movement of "chess for the masses" with the creation of the Soviet School of Chess. This had a transformative effect on the way chess was played internationally.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Castelao, *Pawns and Power*.

### Chapter 3: A New Culture – The Soviet “School” of Chess



*Figure 3: Samuel Reshevsky (left) vs Mikhail Botvinnik (right), USSR vs USA (1955), Moscow.*

“In June of 1941, Soviet Grandmaster Mikhail Botvinnik fled to the city of Perm Krai, Russia in the midst of a surprise attack by Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union. Due to Germany’s unexpected invasion, Botvinnik would be unable to travel and play the 1941 World Chess Championship match against Alexander Alekhine, a former Russian superstar who had sought refuge and citizenship in France. As the war raged on, Secretary of the Regional Party Committee said to Botvinnik as a means of consolation about the news, “there will come a time when you will once again be useful to the Soviets as a chess player.” World War II took the lives of many incredible chess players, but when the war came to an end and the Soviet Union began to re-enter into the international chess community, the culture of chess transformed.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Castelao, *Pawns and Power*.

### *The Soviet "School" of Chess*

This new style of play demonstrated by the Soviets was termed the "Soviet School of Chess" and marked a significant turning point for the Soviet Union's influence in chess and beyond. There has been no formal definition constructed for the term "The Soviet School of Chess." Therefore, this thesis will frame the idea through the following definition: The term "Soviet School of Chess" denotes the systematic and all-encompassing approach to chess that emerged in the Soviet Union post-1930. This approach was characterized by government support, a player's contribution to chess' theoretical development, and a deeply ingrained cultural emphasis on the game, which was promoted through dedicated publications, a chance at an elevated social standing, and participation in highly competitive tournaments. However, it should be noted that chess was not included as a mandatory subject in the educational system of the Soviet Union.

In the Soviet Union, the "Soviet School of Chess" was never a real school, but rather, a cultural practice of how chess was to be played and analyzed by Soviet players. Mikhail Chigorin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Chess player, was the primary source of inspiration for the Soviet School of Chess.<sup>70</sup> In his time in the chess world, Chigorin integrated a new style of play into the chess world. Chigorin emphasized the need to consider all the specific characteristics of the game's position and conduct a dynamic evaluation of each position and its potential combinations. He wanted to bring creativity to chess.<sup>71</sup> This contrasted with the preceding era's "Romantic" approach, which focused on swift, tactical actions rather than long-term strategic planning. Before Chigorin, the majority of chess players prioritize winning in a stylish manner above just winning.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., page 16.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

It was not until Soviet Chess star, Mikhail Botvinnik (1911-1995), that this “Soviet School of Chess” was solidified and players from across the Soviet Union began to adopt this style. Botvinnik's chess playing style represented the analytical and systematic approach that became distinctive of the Soviet school of chess, which significantly contrasted with the more personal and intuitive methods of many Western players. Botvinnik prioritized thorough preparation, comprehension of positional play, and careful analysis after each game. His games were defined by meticulous strategic planning and a deep comprehension of intricate positions, showcasing the Soviet focus on methodical and rigorous analysis of the game.<sup>72</sup>



*Figure 4: Grandmaster Peter Svidler attending training by Grandmaster Garry Kasparov.  
Photo provided by Boris Dolmatovsky and Peter Svidler.*

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<sup>72</sup> *The Soviet Chess School*, page 122.

This style of play was developed and largely transmitted from parents to their children or through the publication of essays and books by older Soviet chess professionals.<sup>73</sup> Garry Kasparov recounts in an interview with Bill Kristol that, “My father said that I would study chess because he thought my mind was a perfect match for the logic of the game.”<sup>74</sup> The extensive popularity of chess in the Soviet Union is noteworthy as it demonstrates the profound assimilation of the game into the cultural and ideological framework of Soviet society.

Under Nikolai Krylenko's leadership, chess was intended to be seamlessly integrated into the everyday lives of Soviet citizens; although this vision was never fully realized through formal educational initiative, a robust, grassroots culture emerged through established chess clubs, rigorous tournaments and established masters passing down their knowledge to the selected state talent, giving rise to the celebrated Soviet school of chess. One great example of this was the school of Mikhail Botvinnik, that is shrouded in mystery to this day. The Russian Chess Federation reports that, “For many years Botvinnik governed a chess school which trained Anatoly Karpov, Garry Kasparov, Vladimir Kramnik...and other celebrated chess players. Botvinnik devised his own method of preparing for tournaments and training, and he conferred it onto his mentees.”<sup>75</sup> This pattern of identifying and mentoring talent to then send them abroad is something that is routine for the Soviet state.

Another one of the defining characteristics of this school of chess was its rapid tempo of play, which outside of gameplay, placed a particular focus on rigorous training and study of the

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<sup>73</sup> *Garry Kasparov on Chess and Politics in Soviet Russia*, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZvCOaMPQ2I>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Федерация шахмат России. ‘МИХАИЛ БОТВИННИК’. Accessed 21 May 2024.

[https://ruchess.ru:443/en/persons\\_of\\_day/mikhail\\_botvinnik/](https://ruchess.ru:443/en/persons_of_day/mikhail_botvinnik/).

game. Once identified as a talented chess player, you were taken under the wing of an already established chess master, trained and then sent out to represent the state. This gave the opportunity to those who showed talent to dedicate their entire life to chess. This practice started can be seen.

This development of the “Soviet School of Chess” highlights how chess surpassed its role as a simple instructional instrument to become a representation of intellectual ability and strategic reasoning, which were highly valued in Soviet ideology. The lack of its integration into the school system after Stalin’s death in 1953 tells us that the Soviet state did not care about using chess as a tool to cultivate the minds of the people. In contrast to our understanding of the Soviet state's involvement in chess, chess served only as a means to identify exceptional talent and send to international tournaments to demonstrate the Soviet Union's superiority. Additionally, the players presence would assist with a wider strategy of utilizing cultural accomplishments to establish ideological supremacy on an international scale.

Garry Kasparov is a perfect example. In 1976, at age 13, Kasparov won his first title: The Soviet Junior Champion U18. Winning this title showcased the massive talent that existed within Kasparov, and immediately after, he was sent to France to compete in the U16 World Junior Championship.<sup>76</sup> He notes in his interview that out of his family and immediate circle of friends, he was the only one to have visited a capitalist country or even traveled outside of the Soviet Union. He states that, “before the trip, I had to have a meeting with the local committee of the Communist Party because they had to give permission [for me to attend this

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<sup>76</sup> *Garry Kasparov on Chess and Politics in Soviet Russia*, 2016



chess tournament].”<sup>77</sup> This tells us that top chess talent was closely monitored by the state and used by the state to fulfill their agenda.

*The Cold War and Soviet Dominance On and Off the Board*

“While in-person chess matches and celebrity players receded to the background during the war, chess as a cultural unifier did not. In 1943, the U.S.S.R Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries began publishing the “Soviet Chess Chronicles”, a journal dedicated to chess culture that would be published in English, French and German until 1946. Before the war, a small column in the “Soviet Culture Bulletin” was dedicated to chess culture, but after World War II the new “Soviet Chess Chronicles” would be fully dedicated to recounting the games of rising Soviet Chess talents, as well as comment on the state of chess in the USSR. This publication became a prime example of how the Soviet Union began unifying their image of Soviet dominance in the chess world with overall cultural and political superiority.”<sup>78</sup>

A special double Issue of the publication In September and October, focused on this rivalry with its report on the USSR v USA Radio Match held in September 1945 remotely from New York and Moscow. In the issue David Bronstein and Alexander Konstantinopolsky, two prominent Soviet players, extensively analyzed and reported on the matches. Their analysis, alongside commentary from participating players within the match, presented a captivating argument for Soviet dominance over the Americans within the realm of chess.<sup>79</sup> American chess players inadvertently supported that image too. Reuben Fine, US Grandmaster, allegedly stated that, “the Russians play chess considerably better than we.”

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Castelao, *Pawns and Power*.

<sup>79</sup> Castelao, *Pawns and Power*.

The use of chess to shape the preferences and perception of the Soviet Union by high level political officials on both fronts continued into the height of the Cold War. A year after the defeat of the US in their 1945 radio match, the Soviet Union invited the American team back to play a live rematch in Moscow. Travel to the Soviet Union was limited at this time, but according to his family, Maurice Wertheim—President of the Manhattan Chess Club—convinced the U.S. State Department to allow the travel on the basis that it would manifest a better relationship between the US and USSR. The first round of the tournament successfully took place in Moscow, but the second half of the match, which was supposed to take place in New York, never happened.

It was after these matches that the Soviet Union began to heavily utilize the World Chess Championship, and the newly reformed International Chess Federation (FIDE, pronounced fee-day) within their primary strategy for soft power dominance in diplomacy. Soviet politicians began again to attend high level chess events and to lean heavily into the idea that the excellence of their performance in chess was the best marketing strategy for Soviet culture in an increasingly US-centric, democratic international landscape. The picture below is just one example of how top-level US chess players came face to face with high-level Soviet politicians. The Soviet Union continued to organize matches where their up-and-coming players could prove their superiority over the game. Beginning with Mikhail Botvinnik in 1948, a long line of chess players from the Soviet Union held the title of World Chess Champion until 1972, proving their strategy extremely successful. Soviet domination in the world of chess became inseparable with the USSR's political identity.



Figure 5: **(first row from left to right)** Mikhail Pervukhin (*First Vice-Premier of the Soviet Union, from 1955 to 1957*), Georgy Malenkov (*former Premier of the Soviet Union*), Larry Evans (*American Grandmaster and Journalist*), Nikolai Bulganin (*Premier of the Soviet Union*), Samuel Reshevsky (*American Chess Player*), Nikita Khrushchev (*First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*), Donald Byrne (*American Chess Player*) attending the US ambassador to Moscow's reception.

### *Bobby Fischer and 1972*

Bobby Fischer accused five Soviet players of collusion in a 1962 *Sports Illustrated* article. Fischer's underdog status and rise to popularity in the US coincided with an increase in the public's interest in the game of chess more generally. Chess became a way for people, especially in the US, to understand contemporary geopolitics and indirectly participate. Fischer's accusations shed light on Soviet dominance in the sport during the Cuban Missile Crisis and echoed widespread fears that America was falling behind the Soviet Union in terms of nuclear capabilities, the space race, etc. It was this match that the US had to directly acknowledge the importance of the cultural dominance the USSR had taken up in the chess world and face the indirect political implications the World Championship match had.



*Figure 6: Bobby Fischer playing in the 1972 World Chess Championships. Reykjavik, Iceland.*

Using chess culture and world renown players, the USSR was able to inadvertently spread the ideals of the Soviet Union and remain connected to the larger international community during a time of severe divisions between the East and West. Chess culture as a soft power strategy did not collapse along with the Soviet Union though. The Soviet Union tied their identity to chess because it allowed them to use it as a political tool to further their priority of dominating the soft power space in diplomacy. Today, it is still that tool for Russia. It is important to emphasize, though, that this story is not about the US versus USSR, but rather, how the analysis of subcultures – like chess – allow us to understand how political officials use national identity and culture in ways to conduct diplomacy when the world isn't looking too closely.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Castelao, Emilia. ‘Pawns and Power’. Epoch Magazine, 1 December 2022. <https://www.epoch-magazine.com/post/pawns-and-power>.

The Soviet "School" of Chess represented a significant turning point for chess and from previous playing styles, which highlighted a demanding and analytical approach that came to represent the projection of intellectual superiority of the Soviet Union. This chapter has demonstrated how chess, while under the influence of the Soviet Union, went beyond its usual role. It became a vehicle for cultural diplomacy and a way to showcase Soviet dominance on the international scene. Important players such as Botvinnik and Chigorin played a crucial role in this shift, by establishing a methodical but creative approach to chess that became closely associated with the overwhelming dominance of the Soviet Union. The Soviet state's allocation of resources towards chess, even without officially incorporating it into the school system, exemplifies the use of cultural pursuits for political and ideological purposes, which solidified the USSR's reputation as a dominant force in the realm of chess.

## Chapter 4: The Development of the International Chess Federation as an Institution for Cultural Diplomacy

As the USSR became extremely influential in the domestic realm of chess, so did their presence in the international realm of chess. This dominance in international competition was not unusual for the state given the *Zhdanov doctrine*, in which Andrei Zhdanov harshly criticized what he called Western bourgeois culture and advocated for an offensive against the decaying and inferior West. This doctrine meant that the Soviet Union must prevail in all areas of international competition, otherwise, the Soviet competitors would not take part, which remained in effect until Joseph Stalin's death in 1953.<sup>81</sup> What was unusual for the Soviet Union during this time was their interest in joining the international institution of chess, despite the doctrine and Stalin being against large Western institutions.<sup>82</sup> The International Chess Federation was the first international sports institutions the Soviet Union joined, followed by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and then the International Olympic Committee.<sup>83</sup>

During the early Cold War years, while the Soviet Union was a dominant force in the World Chess Championship cycle, but they showed a lack of interest in being in leadership roles in the organizational structure of the newly establish International Chess Federation (FIDE).<sup>84</sup> Rather they believed more persuasion and influence lied in actually being the best at the sport.

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<sup>81</sup> Green, Jonathon, and Nicholas J. Karolides. *Encyclopedia of Censorship*. Infobase Publishing, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Evangelista, Matthew. "Stalin's Revenge: Institutional Barriers to Internationalization in the Soviet Union." Chapter. In *Internationalization and Domestic Politics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane and Helen V. Milner, 159–85. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>83</sup> The Soviet Union joined FIDE in July of 1947, then FIFA in September of 1947, the International Gymnastics Federation in 1949, the International Olympic Committee in 1951, International Tennis Federation in 1956, .

<sup>84</sup> Malm Lindberg, Henrik. *FIDE-President Folke Rogard – The Lawyer Who Organized Modern Chess in the Shadow of the Cold War*, 2024.

As Garry Kasparov recounts, “International victories and titles won by Soviet athletes were supposed to prove “yet again” the advantages of socialism over capitalism .... A world chess champion was nothing short of a political post.”<sup>85</sup> This approach emphasized their aim of leveraging their incredible chess players to demonstrate on an international stage what they believed was national supremacy.<sup>86</sup>

Towards the end of the Cold War in though, another shift came along with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and establishment of the Russian Federation. This shift is marked by Russia’s newfound interest in having significant control over the International Chess Federation. Since 1995, the President of FIDE has been elected from the Russian Federation, and most recently the FIDE Congress elected to eliminate term limits for the current, Russian, FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovitch. Additionally, the Kremlin has been notably vocal about its support for maintaining this status quo. In a ceremony held at the Central Chess House, named after Mikhail Botvinnik, former President of the Russian Chess Federation Andrey Filatov expressed confidence that “around 190 countries will participate in the FIDE Congress, and they will vote for our candidate (Arkady Dvorkovich), they will vote for Russia.” This remark was made shortly after Russia's disputed invasion of Ukraine, which led to the world chess community imposing sanctions on the Russian Chess Federation and players such as Sergey Karjakin who publicly endorsed the attack.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Riordan, Jim. “Rewriting Soviet Sports History.” *Journal of Sport History* 20, no. 3 (1993): 247–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43609911>.

<sup>86</sup> Castelao, Emilia. ‘Рокировка: Arkady Dvorkovich and The International Chess Federation’s Dedication to Russian Foreign Policy’, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Castelao, ‘Рокировка’, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

Russia's shift to dominance within the FIDE organization and the broader chess community has deep roots and links directly to the historical dominance the sport has had for the state both domestically and internationally. Chess in Russia has long been more than just a game; it has been a symbol of intelligence and national pride. As explored in previous chapters, chess and Russia have an extensive relationship dating back to early Muscovy. The Soviet authorities strategically used chess as a means of exerting soft power, actively promoting the game domestically and internationally to showcase their intellectual superiority. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has gained significant interest in FIDE by strategically appointing key figures and exerting financial influence. The continued participation in aiming for supremacy highlights the state's long-lasting dedication to utilizing chess as a tool for cultural and political sway, guaranteeing that Russia maintains its leading position in the worldwide chess community.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the organization gives us fascinating insights into how an international sports institution transforms into an institution for cultural diplomacy.

The infiltration of FIDE by the Soviet Union and later Russia began showing signs in 1982 when Florencio Campomanes was elected to the presidency. It was widely rumored that he received support from the KGB in exchange for his election.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, the KGB was alleged to have shown favoritism towards Anatoly Karpov in the 1984 World Championship match against Garry Kasparov.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, when he decided to cancel the match, many were angered, citing Soviet intervention as the primary cause. Since then, the FIDE presidency has largely remained under Russian control. From 1995 to 2018, FIDE was led by Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the former President of the Republic of Kalmykia within the Russian Federation.

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<sup>88</sup> Castela, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Felshtinsky, Yuri, Boris Gulko, and Vladimir Popov. *The KGB Plays Chess: The Soviet Secret Police and the Fight for the World Chess Crown*. SCB Distributors, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Winter, Edward. *The Termination*. Chess History. 1988.  
<https://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/termination.html>



In 2018, Arkady Dvorkovich, former Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, assumed leadership of FIDE.<sup>91</sup> This is not something that is necessarily cause for concern, but rather it raises questions about how the individual within an international institution is contributing to a state's foreign policy initiatives, if they are at all.

*Arkady Dvorkovich: From Deputy Prime Minister to FIDE President*

Arkady Vladimirovich Dvorkovich served in the Russian government from 1994 until 2018. He first held the position of an executive at the Economic Expert Group of the Ministry of Finance of Russia, and subsequently advanced to the role of an adviser to the Minister of Economic Development. Later, he was promoted to the position of Deputy Minister of Economic Development. His career reached its highest point when he assumed the position of Assistant to President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008. He then advanced to the position of Deputy Prime Minister after Medvedev and Vladimir Putin exchanged positions in 2012.<sup>92</sup> From 1994 to 2018, Dvorkovich seemed to be well trusted and well-liked by those in the Russian government, making his decent from Deputy Prime Minister to FIDE President all the more puzzling.<sup>93</sup>

The reasons behind Dvorkovich's demotion remain speculative. Some suggest a fallout with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, while others believe he disagreed with certain economic

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<sup>91</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> BBC News. 'Arkady Dvorkovich: Russian Politician Crowned World Chess Head', 2 October 2018, sec. Europe. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45718853>.

<sup>93</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

policies of the Russian government. Another theory posits that Dvorkovich sought a less intense role to spend more time with his family while still serving Russian interests.<sup>94</sup>

Dvorkovich's decision to accept the FIDE presidency, despite its diminished importance compared to his previous positions, indicates a possible calculated move to preserve his political status. His decision may have been influenced by his father's background as an international chess arbiter. Furthermore, Dvorkovich's continued affiliations with Russian political and economic sectors suggest that his was asked to fill a position within FIDE aligns with wider Russian objectives.<sup>95</sup>



*Figure 7: Vladimir Putin (left) and Arkady Dvorkovitch (right)*

Since becoming FIDE President, Dvorkovich has continued to support the Russian government indirectly. Besides his role at FIDE, he served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Russian Railway company and led the Russian Skolkovo Foundation from 2018 to 2022.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, he headed the Russian Skolkovo foundation from 2018-2022, at the same time as

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<sup>94</sup> Given my work with the International Chess Federation, I am very lucky to have become close with many Russian grandmasters. Therefore, a lot of what I claim here is based on hearsay from inside of the Russian Chess Federation and not reportable fact. In order to protect the identities of my friends I will not cite them here as sources.

<sup>95</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

being President of FIDE.<sup>97</sup> The Skolkovo Foundation, which backs numerous companies with ties to the Russian military and Ministry of Defense, underscores Dvorkovich's enduring connection to state structures. For instance, Skolkovo supported Intelligent Security Systems, which provided AI-based surveillance for the Ministry of Defense, and a drone logistics program for the Department of Defense.<sup>98</sup> This work followed a decree by President Putin which exempted Dvorkovich from participating in the President's Council for Science and Education, as cited in Figure 8.<sup>99</sup>

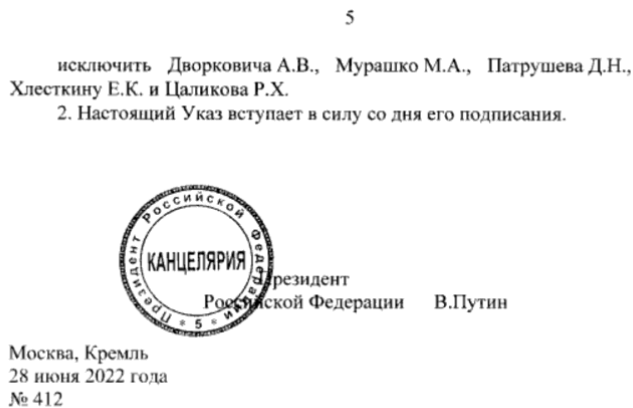


Figure 8: Decree from Vladimir Putin.

Dvorkovich's close relationship with the Kremlin is further evidenced by his collaboration with the Board of Trustees of the Russian Chess Federation, chaired by Dmitry Sergeevich Peskov, President Putin's Press Secretary.

Peskov has openly supported Dvorkovich and FIDE's decisions, including the controversial move to transfer the Russian Chess Federation to the Asian Federation to allow Russian players to participate in more tournaments. This decision, framed by Dvorkovich as a "mutual decision of the entire world chess family," was criticized by the international chess community as a means to bypass sanctions related to the Ukraine conflict."<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> 'Dvorkovich Steps down as Skolkovo Foundation Chairman'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/76981/>.

<sup>98</sup> 'ИСС-СОФТ | Участник Проекта «Сколково»'. Accessed 27 March 2023. [https://navigator.sk.ru/orn/1120775](https://navigator.sk.ru/orn/1120775;).; 'МИРА | Участник Проекта «Сколково»'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://navigator.sk.ru/orn/1123139>

<sup>99</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Спорт, РИА Новости. 'Песков Ответил На Вопрос о Переходе Российских Спортивных Федераций в Азию'. РИА Новости Спорт, 20230228T1721. <https://rsport.ria.ru/20230228/peskov-1854910323.html>.;

Russia's dominance in FIDE can be seen as an exercise in cultural hegemony, but also the continuation of using the history and cultural movement of chess to influence international perceptions. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony suggests that the ruling class maintains control through cultural institutions, perpetuating their dominance.<sup>101</sup> In this context, Russia's control over FIDE exemplifies how sports and cultural institutions can serve as instruments of political power. This strategic influence allows Russia to shape international perceptions and narratives to its advantage.<sup>102</sup>

While Peskov and Dvorkovich appear to be aligned, the rest of the international chess community disagrees, asserting that in this current moment in international relations, Russian players should be barred from major chess tournaments due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.<sup>103</sup> Arkady, despite his demotion, has continued to serve the Russian state and Vladimir Putin through chess. His position as head of the International Chess Federation, while seemingly unimportant, actually holds great significance for Russia and its government and is not something that is ignored by the Russian state.

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ТАСС. 'Дворкович Считает Переход ФШР в Азию Возможностью Для Россиян Свободно Играть На Турнирах'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://tass.ru/sport/17161729>.

<sup>101</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities." *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 567–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1860957>.

<sup>102</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine - Ukrainian Parliament [@ua\_parliament]. 'Ukrainian Olympic Sports Federation Sign Joint Appeal to the IOC on Possible Admission of Russian and Belarusian Athletes to International Competitions The Committee of Youth and Sports More Info: [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0jc6tddezpp5bJCXMMMkUxuMGLFviKvzwgAmWJJToVgyH75vR9qFzwyMEf77E8uCl&id=100089703132729](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0jc6tddezpp5bJCXMMMkUxuMGLFviKvzwgAmWJJToVgyH75vR9qFzwyMEf77E8uCl&id=100089703132729) <https://t.co/ZOImg3aLHd>'. Tweet. *Twitter*, 10 March 2023. [https://twitter.com/ua\\_parliament/status/1634127642667499520](https://twitter.com/ua_parliament/status/1634127642667499520).

Since Dvorkovich's election in 2018, Russia has surpassed any other country in the number of major official FIDE events hosted, including the World Chess Championship and the Candidates Tournament. This concentration of events in Russia demonstrates how the nation leverages international sports organizations to maintain cultural influence and project soft power on the global stage. The following list reflects how the most important events in chess are held in Russia or Russian-friendly states:

- Women's World Chess Championship held in Khanty-Mansiysk in 2018 and Vladivostok in 2020
- World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championship held in Saint Petersburg in 2018 and Moscow in 2019
- Candidates Tournament held in Yekaterinburg in 2020 and 2021
- Women's Candidates Tournament held in Kazan in 2019
- Chess World Cup held in Khanty-Mansiysk in 2019 and Sochi in 2021
- Women's Chess World Cup held in Sochi in 2021
- FIDE Grand Prix held in Moscow in 2019
- FIDE Women's Grand Prix held in Moscow in 2019

Dvorkovich asserts that he is apolitical and focuses solely on chess initiatives. In many instances in his role as President of FIDE though, he is asked about the political decisions of the government. One notable example is when he was asked in an interview with Georgian TV if "twenty percent of the territory of Georgia is occupied by Russia."<sup>104</sup> However, since his election in 2018, Dvorkovich's efforts have primarily centered on maintaining FIDE's close ties

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<sup>104</sup> Peter Heine Nielsen [@PHChess]. 'Dvorkovich Was a High Ranked Adviser to Russia's President Medvedev, When Russia Invaded Georgia in 2008.' Tweet. *Twitter*, 9 March 2023. <https://twitter.com/PHChess/status/1633838318604685312>.

to Russia and creating opportunities for international chess to rely significantly on Russian institutions, oligarchs, and funding. This strategic positioning reflects the perspective that sports organizations can be instrumentalized for national interests, serving as vehicles for soft power. Consequently, Dvorkovich's leadership in FIDE illustrates how cultural and sporting bodies can reinforce geopolitical agendas and sustain the influence of state actors in the global arena.<sup>105</sup>

### *Funding FIDE: Russian Money in Chess*

The most significant backlash faced by the International Chess Federation and Arkady Dvorkovich pertains to the conspicuous use of Russian money at major international chess events. Recently, FIDE hosted the first Chess Olympiad for People with Disabilities. Notably, there were no Ukrainian players at this event, and Russian and Belarusian players participated under a FIDE team. The event was funded by Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), whose majority owner is Gazprom Neft and Gazprom, a Russian majority state-owned multinational energy corporation headquartered in St. Petersburg. This situation underscores the broader critique within cultural studies that international sports can serve as platforms for geopolitical influence, where funding sources and participation rules reflect and perpetuate existing power dynamics.<sup>106</sup>

In 2021 Gazprom became a general partner for the international chess federation, Dvorkovich stating:

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<sup>105</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>106</sup> Inc, Reuters. 'No One Can Bypass EU Sanctions against Russia through Serbia, Vucic Says | SaltWire'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/news/no-one-can-bypass-eu-sanctions-against-russia-through-serbia-vucic-says-100801811/>.

“FIDE and Gazprom have a long-standing partnership with several key international tournaments held through our cooperation. Starting this year, Gazprom has become FIDE's General Partner, and this is undoubtedly the key to the global success of chess. Today we proudly observe chess regaining its huge popularity all over the world. The support by global companies such as Gazprom is, first of all, a significant contribution to unlocking the intellectual potential of the entire mankind.”<sup>107</sup>

Before Gazprom became an official partner of FIDE, the list of FIDE partners (which has been subsequently taken down from the FIDE website since the invasion of Ukraine) included several prominent Russian corporations and entities.<sup>108</sup> This list of partners included:<sup>109</sup>

- Nornickel – the Russian nickel and palladium mining and smelting company
- Phosagro – a Russian chemical holding company
- KIAP (Korelskiy, Ischuk, Astafiev and Partners) – a Russian law firm
- Rosatom – a Russian state atomic energy corporation
- Aeroflot – the Russian airline
- TASS – the Russian news agency

This deletion of the partners' list from the official website highlights the increasing sensitivity and scrutiny regarding the sources of funding and the geopolitical implications for international sports organizations. Additionally, there is an ever-growing conversation centered around

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<sup>107</sup> ‘Gazprom Becomes FIDE’s General Partner for the Period 2021-2023’. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.fide.com/news/1043>.

<sup>108</sup> Castelao, ‘Рокировка’, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Image captures of these sponsors on FIDE’s website can be accessed using archive.org. For example, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210205161611/https://www.fide.com/partners> you are able to see Phosagro and Nornnickel listed as FIDE partners.

entanglement of sports, politics, and economics and how global events can be influenced and shaped by national interests and state-backed enterprises.<sup>110</sup>

Despite the international draw and appeal of chess, the International Chess Federation has, over the past five years, increasingly fostered relationships with predominantly Russian companies. Additionally, FIDE has shown little interest in expanding beyond its Russian beneficiaries or condemning them amidst the war in Ukraine. In May of 2022, CNN released a report detailing how Russian oligarchs have provided substantial financial support to institutions like FIDE.<sup>111</sup> One of the oligarchs highlighted is Vladimir Potanin, Russia's wealthiest businessman. Potanin has a well-known interest in chess and is sponsoring Ian Nepomniachtchi at the 2023 World Chess Championship, in addition to being the primary broadcast sponsor of the World Chess Championships. Beyond his sponsorship of Nepomniachtchi, Potanin recently met with Putin along with other oligarchs to discuss the sanctions on Russia and their impact on their business ventures.<sup>112</sup> This conflict of interest showcases the ways in which financial backing from influential figures can intertwine sports with broader political and economic agendas. Potanin's involvement in chess sponsorship illustrates how sports can serve as a platform for projecting soft power and navigating international sanctions in a time when Russia is isolated from the rest of the world, further embedding FIDE within the geopolitical landscape.<sup>113</sup>

When Dvorkovich began his presidency in 2018, Russian oligarchs became increasingly prominent at chess events they sponsored. At the 2018 World Chess Championship match

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<sup>110</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Chapman, Majlie de Puy Kamp, Isabelle. "'It's Shameful': Russian-Linked Billionaires Have given Enormous Sums of Money to the West's Leading Educational and Cultural Institutions'. CNN, 11 May 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/11/us/russian-oligarchs-philanthropy-ukraine-war-invs/index.html>.

<sup>112</sup> 'Telegram: Contact @faridaily24'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://t.me/faridaily24/822>.

<sup>113</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.



between Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana, Andrei Guryev, former head of PhosAgro, notably presented Carlsen with his championship trophy.<sup>114</sup> Not only is there evidence that the International Chess Federation relies heavily on Russian industry itself for sponsorship, but Russian oligarchs feel safe presenting themselves as the force driving international chess forward. While the presentation of a trophy may seem like an insignificant event, their presence at these events is not. The close connection between the chess governing body and Russian oligarchs highlights the interdependence of economic interests in chess, where wealthy oligarchs exert control over the direction and reputation of international chess competitions.<sup>115</sup>

Beyond oligarchs, Dvorkovich, known for his close ties with the Russian Chess Federation, holds a position on its board alongside influential figures such as Andrey Akimov (Chairman of the Board of JSC Gazprombank), Andrey Guryev (CEO of PJSC PhosAgro), Alexander Dyukov (General Director of OJSC Gazprom Neft), Sergey Shoigu (Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation), and several others.<sup>116</sup> Virtually every member of the Board of Trustees has served as a sponsor for an official FIDE event, particularly those held in Russia. Instead of diversifying sponsorship sources to broaden the reach of international chess, especially considering the expanding online chess scene, the focus remains on utilizing the sport as a means to assert Russia's status as a global power. This pattern underscores the intersection of sporting and geopolitical interests, where the utilization of chess events as platforms for projecting national prowess reflects broader strategic narratives within international sports

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<sup>114</sup> PhosAgro. 'PhosAgro CEO Andrey Guryev Presents World Chess Championship Trophy to Norwegian Grandmaster Magnus Carlsen'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/phosagro-ceo-andrey-guryev-presents-world-chess-championship-trophy-to-norwegian-grandmaster-magnus-carlsen-301443267.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>116</sup> Федерация шахмат России. 'Попечительский Совет'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://ruchess.ru:443/federation/board/>.

governance. Using large FIDE events have demonstrated that money in Russia is still valuable and that big events can take place in Russia despite the ongoing political divisions.<sup>117</sup>

### *Russian Diplomatic Interests and FIDE Initiatives Beyond the Board*

Russia and Putin's political involvement in the International Chess Federation predates Dvorkovich's presidency. In a meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Kremlin on July 11, Putin purportedly urged Netanyahu to persuade the Israeli Chess Federation to endorse Dvorkovich, allegedly promising that Israel would host the subsequent World Championship match.<sup>118</sup> This action directly violated the principles set forth by the International Olympic Committee, which FIDE has adopted, prohibiting the interference of external governments in the affairs of international sports organizations. Additionally, Putin's intervention in Dvorkovich's campaign underscores his vested interest in the operations of FIDE. It is conceivable that, irrespective of any discord between Dvorkovich and Medvedev, Putin must hold a favorable view of Dvorkovich to exert such significant influence over Arkady's election.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Chess News. 'The Russian Diplomatic Effort to Influence the FIDE Election', 11 August 2018. <https://en.chessbase.com/post/the-russian-diplomatic-effort-to-influence-in-fide-election>.

<sup>119</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

Looking diplomatically, Russian embassies were very active in the 2018 FIDE elections. In a letter addressed to the President of the Uruguayan Chess Federation, the Russian embassy in Montevideo advocated for Dvorkovich, urging support for their candidate. The letter detailed Dvorkovich's familial connection to chess and emphasized his perceived potential to rejuvenate FIDE with his "new, fresh face." Following his election victory, Dvorkovich made significant



Montevideo, " / " de agosto de 2018

Señor M.I. Bernardo Roselli Mailhe  
Federación Uruguaya de Ajedrez  
Presidente  
Presente

Estimado Señor Presidente,

Tengo el honor de dirigirme a Usted en la ocasión de informar que la Federación de Rusia tiene la intención de presentar la candidatura del Señor Arkady Dvorkovich en calidad de Presidente de la Federación Internacional de Ajedrez (FIDE) en las elecciones el próximo 3 de noviembre en la ciudad georgiana de Batumi.

Arkady Dvorkovich es bien conocido en los círculos de ajedrez. Su padre Vladimir Dvorkovich fue árbitro internacional de ajedrez y presidió el Colegio de Árbitros de la Federación Rusa de Ajedrez; se celebra un torneo tradicional en su honor.

Arkady Dvorkovich es un candidato nuevo que llevará un equipo fresco lo que es aún más importante en el momento que la FIDE se encuentra en una situación difícil que requiere cambios. En 2007 Arkady Dvorkovich se hizo el

*Figure 9: Letter from the Russian embassy in Montevideo to the President of the Uruguayan Chess Federation.*

staffing changes, appointing several new individuals to key positions, all of whom are Russian. The Assistant to the FIDE President, the Legal Advisor and the Financial Advisor are all Russian. Victor Bologan who also campaigned for Dvorkovich was given a job as Executive Director at FIDE. His appointment to the position was announced on the Facebook page of Igor Dodon, the Pro-Kremlin President of Moldova, whilst he was under house arrest due to corruption charges.<sup>120</sup> These

developments underscore the extensive involvement of Russian interests in shaping the leadership and staffing of FIDE.<sup>121</sup>

Dvorkovich's initial diplomatic engagement as FIDE President involved a visit to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. During this encounter, discussions revolved around the

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Castela, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

potential hosting of the 45th World Chess Olympiad in Belarus.<sup>122</sup> As time passed, by observing Arkady Dvorkovich's travel schedule for his work at FIDE, there develops a connection between Dvorkovich's trips and the goals of Russian foreign policy. For example, in October of 2022, Dvorkovich met the President of Azerbaijan right before Putin announced that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan were invited to Russia for the next trilateral summit.<sup>123</sup>

On February 11<sup>th</sup> the Associated Press reported that the Sudan military finished their review of the Russian Red Sea Base deal. This deal will allow Russia to build a navy base on the Red Sea as they hope to expand their military presence around the globe.<sup>124</sup> A month later, Dvorkovich paid a visit to Sudan where he was welcomed by H.E. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, Vice-president of the Republic of Sudan. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, Dvorkovich visited Saudi Arabia on the occasion of the Riyadh Calendar Chess Championship 2023.<sup>125</sup> This visit comes at a time when Syria and Saudi Arabia are amid reestablishing their ties with Russia.<sup>126</sup>

The President of FIDE serves as an important representative of the international chess community, wielding significant influence in global sporting and cultural spheres. When the President's travels align closely with Russian foreign policy goals, it not only strengthens ties between FIDE and key geopolitical actors but also amplifies Russia's soft power projection

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<sup>122</sup> 'Lukashenko Meets with Arkady Dvorkovich | Belarus News | Belarusian News | Belarus Today | News in Belarus | Minsk News | BELTA', 29 January 2019. <https://eng.belta.by/video/getRecord/563/>.

<sup>123</sup> 'Armenia Says It Intends to Sign Peace Deal with Azerbaijan by End of 2022'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/armenia-says-it-intends-to-sign-peace-deal-with-azerbaijan-by-end-of-2022/2721610>.; Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>124</sup> AP NEWS. 'Sudan Military Finishes Review of Russian Red Sea Base Deal', 11 February 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-sudan-government-moscow-803738fba4d8f91455f0121067c118dd>.

<sup>125</sup> 'FIDE President Visits Saudi Arabia'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.fide.com/news/2285>.

<sup>126</sup> Amon, Summer Said, Benoit Faucon and Michael. 'Saudi Arabia, Syria Close to Resuming Ties in Russia-Brokered Talks'. WSJ. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-syria-close-to-resuming-ties-in-russia-brokered-talks-a340b817>.; Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

through the medium of chess. This intersection of FIDE leadership with Russian diplomatic initiatives underscores the role of cultural diplomacy in advancing broader national interests, showcasing how sports can serve as a vehicle for fostering international relations and shaping global perceptions.<sup>127</sup>

Many of Dvorkovich's visits coincide with countries associated closely with announcements made by Russia regarding foreign policy initiatives. Additionally, these meetings predominantly occur with countries and chess federations known for their vocal alignment with Russia. These visits came also during the time when FIDE needed to decide on the constitutionality of the Russian Chess Federation moving from the European Chess Federation to the Asian Chess Federation.<sup>128</sup> The switch from Europe to Asia will allow Russian players, who are currently ineligible to play in Europe under the Russian flag, to play in more tournaments and more freely in Asia. As the federation makes the switch, it was important to have close relationships to other federations in the Middle East and Asia, some of whom they needed support from in order to ensure the switch would be approved and successful at the next meeting of the FIDE Congress. Not only that, but as Russia shifts its foreign policy initiatives towards Asia, the newly integrated Russian Chess Federation will now have the opportunity to use chess as a means of conducting diplomacy towards the East, rather than the West.<sup>129</sup>

In addition to his strategically timed visits to countries aligned with Russia, Dvorkovich faced calls to resign as FIDE President following allegations of disseminating ideas of "Nazism,"

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<sup>127</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

<sup>128</sup> 'FIDE Resolution on the Russian Federation Joining the ACF'. Accessed 27 March 2023. <https://www.fide.com/news/2247>.

<sup>129</sup> Castelao, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

reportedly propagated by Kremlin propaganda. These accusations not only raised concerns about Dvorkovich's leadership within FIDE but also underscored the broader implications of political narratives infiltrating international sporting institutions. He stated,

“I, like all post-war children, was brought up on patriotism . . . and on hatred of Nazism. I am sincerely proud of the courage of our soldiers, who at all times defended their homeland and freedom.”<sup>130</sup>

Dvorkovich's comment strongly echoes the justifications Moscow has employed to rationalize the Russian incursion into Ukraine. While he was one of the only Russian officials to “condemn” the war in Ukraine stating merely that “[his] thoughts are with Ukrainian civilians,” his rhetoric falls closely in line with that of the Kremlin.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, given the international outcry from the chess community regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I speculate that the ambiguous statement was issued to ensure the continued functioning of FIDE amid the ongoing conflict, as it is an important asset that gives Russia the ability to conduct diplomacy in an unexpected way.<sup>132</sup>

This is not to say that the International Chess Federation is not doing important work for the chess community, nor is every single person in the organization one with underlying motives. One notable program that FIDE manages is Chess for Freedom, which focuses specifically on

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<sup>130</sup> Ball, Tom. ‘World Chess Chief Pushes Russian Propaganda on Ukraine’, 27 March 2023. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/head-of-world-chess-federation-pushes-russias-nazism-in-ukraine-propaganda-hn5753ggr>.

<sup>131</sup> Reuters. ‘Chess Body Chief Dvorkovich, Ex-Kremlin Official, Condemns Wars -Mother Jones’. *Reuters*, 14 March 2022, sec. Sports. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/chess-body-chief-dvorkovich-ex-kremlin-official-condemns-wars-mother-jones-2022-03-14/>.

<sup>132</sup> Castelao, ‘Рокировка’, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023.

integrating chess into prison programs to help with rehabilitation.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, it is important to clarify that Russia's presence within the International Chess Federation, is not a reflection of the Russian chess community as a whole. Rather, the intention with this knowledge is to showcase how integrate chess has become with diplomatic pursuits and how it could affect the overall integrity of the sport.

The actions of the International Chess Federation under the leadership of Arkady Dvorkovich align conspicuously with those of the Russian state. The organization is overseen by individuals with direct connections to Russia, and it actively engages with countries and officials known for their alignment with Putin's administration. This alignment is further accentuated by the International Chess Federation's close relationships with Russian institutions, oligarchs, and financial support. These trends indicate that FIDE uses its global platform to promote the interests not only of chess, but of the Russian state and establish supremacy in the global chess arena, especially when global attention may be focused elsewhere. In this context, the International Chess Federation's transformation of o shows how the institution has become less focused on chess and more in alignment with cultural diplomatic interests. This not only underscores the organization's role as a vehicle for advancing Russia's geopolitical agenda but also highlights the enduring legacy of chess as a potent instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy on the global stage from early Muscovy until now, which has a significant historical foundation and cultural history in the state.

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<sup>133</sup> 'Chess For Freedom – Chess For Freedom Project'. Accessed 5 June 2024. <https://chessforfreedom.fide.com/>.

## **Conclusion: Chess Culture, the Historicization of its Discourse and Why Russia**

### **Participates in Chess Diplomacy**

The complex relationship between the International Chess Federation (FIDE) and Russian interests, led by Arkady Dvorkovich, has significant significance within the wider cultural and historical context of Soviet and Russian chess history. Even before the Soviet Union, the culture of chess in Russia had an understanding of the significance of chess as a representation of intellectual ability and national honor. It intentionally encouraged the game inside its own borders and on the global stage to demonstrate its supremacy against Western capitalist ideas. The ideological context of the Cold War, exemplified by the Zhdanov doctrine's demand for Soviet supremacy in all areas of global rivalry, motivated the USSR's early entry into international chess institutions, despite its previous reluctance to join big Western organizations.

In the early years of the Cold War, the Soviet Union used its dominance in chess to establish its ideological superiority on the world arena. Instead of taking leadership positions in FIDE, they focused on achieving real triumphs that highlighted the superiority of socialism over capitalism. Nevertheless, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia emerged as a prominent power inside FIDE, employing strategic methods to solidify its authority over the organization. The increasing dominance of Russian leadership in FIDE, shown by individuals such as Dvorkovich, demonstrates Russia's longstanding practice of using chess as a means of cultural diplomacy and geopolitical influence.



The infiltration of FIDE by Soviet and subsequently Russian interests, as indicated by strategic appointments and financial support, is a deliberate endeavor to maintain Russia's historical supremacy within the worldwide chess community. The strong correlation between FIDE and Russian foreign policy goals, as demonstrated by Dvorkovich's diplomatic interactions with nations aligned with Russia, highlights the interconnectedness of sports diplomacy with geopolitical strategizing. These events demonstrate how FIDE acts as a channel for promoting Russia's influence and pursuing its national objectives worldwide, utilizing the historical dominance of Soviet chess to uphold cultural dominance in the present day.

Moreover, the overlapping involvement of Russian oligarchs, state-sponsored corporations, and FIDE highlights the alignment of economic interests with geopolitical strategies, in which chess tournaments are utilized as means to showcase national influence and maneuver around international sanctions and how an international sports institution can be transformed into an institution for cultural diplomacy. The extensive impact of Russian financial resources within FIDE, along with deliberate personnel choices and diplomatic gestures, highlights the various ways in which sports administration intersects with wider political and economic processes. The complex dynamics among government officials, wealthy individuals, and global sports bodies highlight the deep network of power dynamics within the worldwide chess community.

*Chess Culture, the Historicization of its Discourse and Why Russia Participates in Chess*

*Diplomacy*

Historically a leisure activity for the upper class, chess became profoundly embedded in the cultural heritage of Kievan Rus and subsequently Muscovy, representing intellectual and

cultural supremacy. By the 20th century, chess had evolved into a popular activity inside a nation and a means of promoting political messages, showcasing Russia's intellectual ambitions and geopolitical storytelling. Today, FIDE's influence extends beyond competitive play; it shapes how chess is perceived in diplomatic contexts.

Russia's involvement in chess diplomacy is a manifestation of the nation's profound attachment to the game and its deliberate use as a means for conducting foreign affairs. Looking at why Russia engages in chess diplomacy through a cultural and historical lens shows us not only the rich culture and history it possesses, but how Russia uses this to historicize the discourse around chess. Through this research we see the development of a new culture – the Soviet School of Chess– and the way the game became a part of its diplomatic culture as well. This is important because it tells us how we should understand the way Russia and the Soviet Union approached diplomacy in the past, but today as well.

The historicization of the discourse surrounding chess is similar to the way the Vladimir Putin today historicizes his actions in Russia. Putin's Russian foreign policy is deeply grounded in a historical basis. During the commemoration of Peter the Great's 350th birthday, Putin spoke extensively on his ambitious vision for Russia's imperial future. He stated that, “The lands taken from Sweden during the Great Northern War were historically Russian and Peter was merely returning them to their rightful owners.”<sup>134</sup> Putin wrote a 7000-word article outlining the "historical unity" between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>135</sup> The historical relationship between the

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<sup>134</sup> Dickinson, Peter. ‘Putin Admits Ukraine Invasion Is an Imperial War to “Return” Russian Land’. *Atlantic Council* (blog), 10 June 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-admits-ukraine-invasion-is-an-imperial-war-to-return-russian-land/>.

<sup>135</sup> Russia, Team of the Official Website of the President of. ‘Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”’. President of Russia, 15 July 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

Soviet Union and chess is also present in Putin's upbringing in Soviet Russia. Hence, when we observe Putin or other Russian state officials actively engaging with the routine operations of the International Chess Federation, we must scrutinize the objectives behind these interventions.

Russia's extensive engagement in the International Chess Federation coupled with its rich history in chess demonstrates the presence of diplomatic strategies that are overlooked by the wider international community. Although Danish Grandmaster Peter Heine Nielsen, an influential figure in the chess world, consistently speaks out against the close ties between FIDE and Russia, the mainstream media mostly ignores this important issue. No action taken by Russia should be fully overlooked. To gain a comprehensive comprehension of Russia and Putin's approach to foreign policy, it is imperative to direct our attention towards institutions that may appear insignificant both from the present day and historically.

Currently, Russia still uses chess diplomacy as a means to increase its influence and promote international collaboration. Russia's hosting of prominent chess competitions and its active support for international chess projects not only serves to develop the game, but also establishes the country as a prominent cultural leader within the global community. The deliberate use of chess diplomacy highlights the lasting importance of chess in Russian society and its capacity to facilitate cultural interchange and global discourse. Russia use chess to establish connections with other countries, foster mutual comprehension, and exhibit its extensive cultural legacy on an international platform.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Castelaο, 'Рокировка', Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, 2023

In the context of the current literature, not many have examined the intricate lives of the players themselves and how they directly or indirectly became a pawn themselves. This thesis only scratches the surface of what we need to understand about not only the game, how it spread and its relationship with political authorities. For diplomatic history in general, there is a need to dive deeper into our understanding of the individual and how we measure their impact on diplomatic efforts. Furthermore, analyzing the personal narratives and incentives of individual participants might uncover the detailed ways through which they navigated through the political environments of their day. By doing so, we may get a deeper and more comprehensive comprehension of the interplay between chess, politics, and diplomacy.

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