

# A History of Chess

From Chaturanga to the Present Day



Yuri Averbakh

Foreword by Garry Kasparov

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Russell Enterprises, Inc.  
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Yuri Averbakh

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# A History of Chess

## Introduction

With the release of this unique publication, the Russian National Public Library for Science and Technology begins a book series on a fairly new topic – at least for us – chess.

Five years ago the Deputy Director of the Department of Innovations, International Grandmaster for Chess Composition Nikolai Kralin, initiated this project. In 2006 he proposed to establish the Chess Information Office, similar to the already existing Information Technology Office, but, of course, with its own features and innovations.

International chess grandmaster Yuri Averbakh, a famous authority in the chess world, was invited to head the Chess Information Office. Together with a couple of other like-minded colleagues, he undertook the organization of a fundamentally new department to our library. Although, perhaps, it should not be called “radically new,” since chess is known not just a sport, but also science, culture, even education, and the Russian National Public Library has always been a leader in these areas. Nevertheless, in a short period of time, it was necessary to establish the Chess Information Office as a library structure (sources, catalogs, accounting, etc.) and offer the types of activities that would take into account the specifics of chess and the new opportunities that could be implemented, such as lectures, contests, meeting with chess fans, website development, various activities in connection with our annual conference in Crimea and, of course, publications.

However, we wanted to apply Averbakh’s talent and his colleagues’ focus to benefit the whole community of readers and educators. So recently we decided to rename the Chess Information Office. The new name, the Center of Chess Culture and Information, in my opinion more accurately reflects the goals and objectives that this talented team is identifying and solving. One of the most significant projects was the release of this book – the first portent of the new publishing projects.

I used to be very much into chess once, fulfilled the first category norm, played in a tournament with Joseph Dorfman, a future well-known grandmaster and USSR champion. This is why I was especially pleased to read this book, truly invaluable for anyone interested in chess, as well as all curious people. I am very glad that this great book was published by the Russian National Public Library for Science and Technology, and sincerely wish that Yuri Lvovich publishes more books and implements many other projects in our library.

Yakov Shraiberg  
General Director of the Russian National Public  
Library for Science and Technology; Doctor of  
Engineering; Professor; First category chessplayer

## Foreword

### A Distinguished Educator

The more recent history of chess as a cultural phenomenon, which permeates all the spheres of social life, is obscured for young chessplayers by the current computer boom and dominant competitive factor. This quite different nature of chess as a part of human culture goes back centuries, and is especially clearly seen over the last 400-500 years, when the development of the game coincided with the rise of certain nations. Undoubtedly, the best chess masters of each epoch were closely associated with the values of the society in which they lived and worked; their chess styles and ideas reflected all the changes of their cultural, political and psychological background.

Today there are very few people representing these century-old traditions. One of the very few is the world's oldest grandmaster, Yuri Lvovich Averbakh, who has long been an important figure in world chess, the living incarnation of its inseparable connection with social and cultural life. The interests of this exceptionally erudite and multifaceted man always extended far beyond the chessboard.

Let me remind you that Averbakh was a very strong chessplayer, a participant in two interzonal tournaments (1952 and 1958) and the famous candidates tournament in Zürich (1953). His success in the national championships, including his win in 1954 and tying for 1st-3rd places in 1956 reflected the strength of his game. Nobody could become the USSR champion by chance! Probably, his achievements would have been higher had not such notables as Keres, Smyslov, Bronstein, Petrosian, Geller, Spassky, Tal, and Kortschnoi stormed the chess Olympus during his best years...

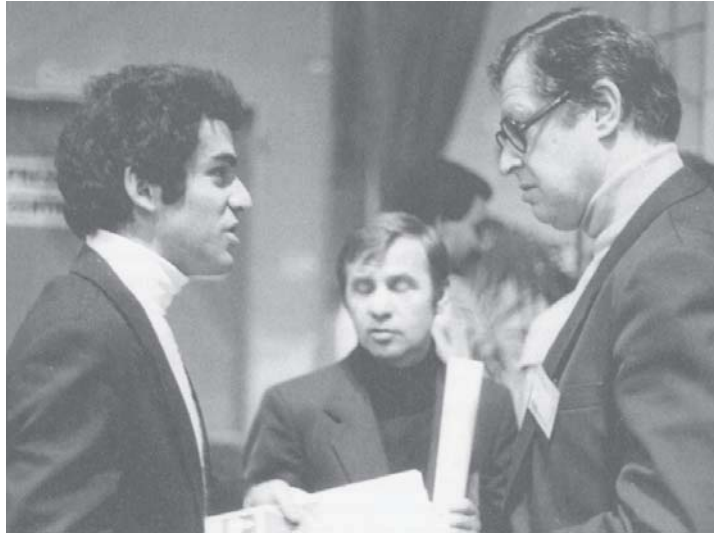
Yuri Lvovich gradually moved on to other types of chess activity. He became a coach, a journalist, a writer, a historian, and since 1962, he has headed the magazine *Shakhmaty v SSSR*. By that time Averbakh was already known as a leading theoretician in the endgame. His fundamental multi-volume work *Chess Endings* and the popular paperback *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* have taught generations of chessplayers. His approach to the endgame study, as well as the other aspects of chess, was always very thorough and scientific. As the result dozens of typical positions are inextricably linked with his name. Abroad he was even nicknamed "Mr. Endgame." I still remember how we were told in the Baku Pioneer Palace that, in the endgame, we must study Averbakh. His contribution to opening theory is also remarkable. He developed an original plan against the King's Indian Defense, appropriately called the Averbakh System.

In the 1970s and 80s, for a good fifteen years, he hosted the weekly TV show *Chess School*, which had no equivalent in the world. In houses across the country

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you could hear a funny song (a parody of another program) with the following lines: “It’s just one step from the great to the ridiculous: *Chess School* is hosted by Averbakh.”

In addition, Yuri Lvovich held prominent positions in the national and international chess federations. He is a respected arbiter, and was the chief arbiter, in particular for my matches with Karpov (1984/85), Short (1993), and Kramnik (2000), as well as the world Olympiad (1994) and the FIDE world championship (2001). It is hard to recall a major chess event that survived without his participation.



*Garry Kasparov and Yuri Averbakh. The USSR Cup, Kislovodsk 1982.*

Perhaps no other prominent chessplayer of the 20th century had such a rich creative life. This amazing versatility makes Averbakh so unique in the history of modern chess. There was no player with such encyclopedic knowledge of the chess game after the Second World War

Averbakh’s name is also especially memorable to me because he was the very first grandmaster that I defeated. It was in the clock simul during the national tournament between the Pioneer Palaces (1974). Admittedly, I got lucky: the game was adjourned when I had an extra pawn, and the adjudicator awarded me the victory, even though winning would not easy and I doubt that I, then not yet 11-years old, would have been able to defeat Averbakh himself. Then at the USSR team cup in 1982 I was able to beat Yuri Lvovich in a complicated endgame with a rook, a bishop and five pawns against a rook, a knight and four pawns (all the pawns were connected), and I was very proud of this victory over a renowned endgame expert.

It is therefore no wonder that such an encyclopedic mind has always had a desire not just to understand the roots of the certain historical events (he is the author of the fascinating book *In Search of Truth*), but also to solve the mysteries of chess

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and connect the development of chess to the evolution of humanity as a whole. This is, of course, is an extremely difficult task and no one could do it until now. But who if not Averbakh was the best equipped to undertake such an enormous project! Maybe not everything in this groundbreaking book is indisputable, but it, no doubt, fits well with the life and work of Yuri Averbakh, the outstanding chess educator of today.

Garry Kasparov  
Moscow  
August 2010



## A History of Chess

### **From the Author**

Chess is an ancient game. It is about fifteen hundred years old. Chess originated in India, and its advent was caused by necessity: the rulers and the higher castes of the Indian society had to learn how to fight a war, because at the beginning of our millennium hordes of nomads from Central Asia surged from the northwest into India.

There are many legends about how chess (in Hindi – Chaturanga) was invented. Most of them are folk tales and are far from reality. Of course, chess was not invented at once and by one person. As a complex war game in which victory belongs to the mind, chess developed as a result of a long evolutionary process. Unfortunately, there are no archaeological findings to confirm this mostly logical hypothesis.

After India, chess infiltrated Iran, and the Persian high society started to play. Chess not only taught how to fight, but also how to stay in control. It is no wonder that the following words are attributed to Ardashir I, the founder of the Sassanid Empire: “It is strange for me to see a Padishah who does not know how to play chess. How will he run the kingdom?” In Iran, chess became a tool for raising the young princes.

In the 7th century, Arabs conquered Iran and became acquainted with chess. In the world of Islam, chess had to endure a brutal struggle for survival. Some imams tried to ban the game because the Quran forbade the use of images of humans and animals. As a result, the game pieces were changed to abstract shapes. They were made from clay and were inexpensive, which undoubtedly contributed to its spreading among the common people.

Over the next two centuries, chess gradually settled in the vast territories of the Arab Caliphate and became highly developed. It can be argued that, even in that distant time, there were masters and even grandmasters of shatranj (that’s how the chess of the time was called in Arabic).

From the Caliphate chess came to Europe. This happened in the 9th century. Two centuries later, archaeological finds showed that chess was played almost everywhere in Europe. At first it was a part of the knights’ training, but then spread among commoners.

In Russia the earliest chess finds have been traced to the 10th century. It is believed that they came to Russia from the East, via the trade routes, through Khorezm and Khazaria.

Gradually, moving from one country to another, encountering different civilizations and different cultures, chess evolved from a game of kings into the queen of



*Do you think Nefertiti is playing chess? No, this is the ancient Egyptian game Senet (the board is 3x10) that existed thousands of years before chess was invented.*

games, becoming more than just a game that attracted millions of people. Chess itself became a cultural domain, a useful tool for raising a younger generation, a means of intellectual development. Now these qualities of chess are recognized around the world.

Chess attracts people with various talents, personalities, and mentalities. For some, it is a way to satisfy their penchant for games; for others – food for thought; for the third type, a creativity outlet; for the fourth – relaxation, a distraction from other activities; and for the fifth – a sport, competition. In short, in chess everyone can find something. That is why chess has become an area of human creative activity, organically combining the elements of sports, arts, and science.

Contemporary chess literature is a whole domain of knowledge consisting of the old manuscripts and incunabula, textbooks for all levels and the openings books,

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encyclopedias and reference books, collections of games, endgames, problems, combinations, short stories, plays and even novels and movie scripts about chess and chessplayers, and much, much more.

Arguably more books have been written about chess than all the other games combined, but relatively little has been written about the history of chess. First of all, the topic is difficult; it requires thorough knowledge, and secondly, there are still many unknown areas there. Therefore, a variety of hypotheses exist concerning the origin of chess.

In this book, I have presented only one of them, which, in my opinion, is the closest one to the truth. Whether or not I have been able to convincingly prove this, the readers will have to judge for themselves.

Yuri Averbakh  
Moscow  
December 2010