

La France et son apport dans le jeu d'échecs en Europe

Centenaire de la Fédération Française des Échecs

19 mars 1921 – 19 mars 2021

The significance of France for the development of chess in Europe

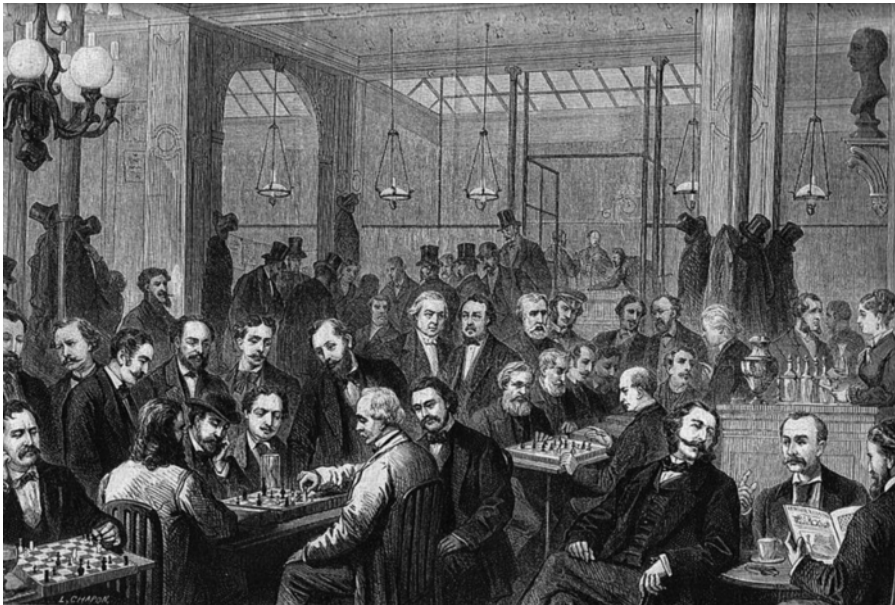
Bilingual conference proceedings – Actes de colloque bilingue

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Exzelsior Verlag
Berlin 2021

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VLASTIMIL FIALA

**Alexander Dmitrievich Petroff:
The Northern Philidor in Europe 1863**

I. Introduction

The main aim of this study is not to present a biography of Alexander Dmitrievich Petroff (or Pietrov, the correct spelling of his name according to his living relatives), who is widely acclaimed as the founder of the Russian Chess School and the author of one of the first chess books published in Russian (1824). Petroff (*1794¹–†1867) spent most of his life in Russia (1794–1840) and modern-day Poland (1840–1867), which was part of the Russian empire for most of the 19th century until the end of the First World War.

Rather, this study gives a rough account of his four-month European tour in 1863, his first and last European journey. Although it was not a typical chess tour, but a joint family vacation, it is still very interesting in terms of chess history as Petroff visited the leading European chess centres in Berlin, Vienna and Paris.

The life and chess career of this eminent Russian chess master has been subject to an early Russian biography² and has long been studied by the notable Soviet/Russian chess historian Isaak Linder. He is the author of several major biographical works dedicated to Petroff³. Unfortunately, most of these works, which include a huge number of articles published in Russian and Soviet magazines and chess columns in the more than 150 years since his death, are available only in Russian, making them linguistically inaccessible to Western chess readers. Up till now,

no author has tried to include this vast amount of information from dusty Russian magazines and chess columns and present it in a comprehensive biography with all its parts. In Linder's publications we find only a narrow selection of his games, and in the last biography of 2016 he included less than 40 games and positions of this great Russian chess master.

Before proceeding to a detailed description of his European tour in 1863, we present a brief overview of his famous chess activities. As can be seen, Petroff did not participate in any chess tournaments during his life, but he played several matches with leading Russian players and also a large number of casual games. According to one internet source, about 90 of Petroff's games have reportedly been preserved, but to date the author's research does not suggest as many (my database contains about 60 games). However, the author does not rule out that other Petroff games may appear in forgotten Russian or Polish chess sources. The present research is based on information mainly drawn from primary sources, such as Petroff's 1824 chess book⁴ and von Bilguer's *Handbuch des Schachspiels*⁵, contemporary chess magazines from Russia⁶, France⁷ and England⁸, as well as several chess columns and newspapers of the time⁹.

1 According to recent findings, an extract from the Metrical Book of the Church of the Assumption of Mary in Opočka, published in 64 – *Schachmatnoje Obosrenije*, No 1, 2014, indicates that the correct year of birth is 1799. For the time being, this seems doubtful because it does not fit with the other life data, so it is not adopted here. See [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Петров,_Александр_Дмитриевич_\(шахматист\);—éd.s](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Петров,_Александр_Дмитриевич_(шахматист);—éd.s).

2 Kogan, M. S. A. D. *Petrov i ego sovremenniki*. Moscow 1938.

3 Linder, I. A. D. *Petrov, pervyj russkij shakmatnyj master*. Moscow 1955; Linder, I. *Pervyje russkie mastera*. Moscow 1979; Linder, I./Linder, V. *Shakmatnaja Odissea Aleksandra Petrova*. Moscow, 2016.

4 Petroff, A. D. Шахматная игра, приведённая в систематический порядок, с присовокуплением игор Филидора и примечание на оные. St. Petersburg 1824.

5 Bilguer, P. R. von. *Handbuch des Schachspiels*. Berlin-Leipzig, 1843, 1852, 1858 etc.

6 *Shakmatnyj Listok*, St. Petersburg, 1859–63, 1876–81.

7 *La Nouvelle Régence*, Paris, 1861–1867; *La Stratégie*, Paris, 1861–1900.

8 *The Chess Player's Magazine*, London, 1863–1867.

9 *Sankt-Petersburgskie Vedomosti*, St. Petersburg 1856 (Jänisch); *Vsemirnaya Illustracya*, St. Petersburg 1869–1890 (Shumov, Chigorin); *The Illustrated London News*, London 1841–1863 (Staunton); *The Era*, London 1855–1863 (Löwenthal); *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, Warsaw 1860–67 (Kleczyński).

II. The Chess Career of Alexander Dmitrievich Petroff

Petroff's chess career started in St. Petersburg. In 1809, he defeated the city's leading players Kopev (+4 -2 =1) and Baranov (+4 -2 =0) and became the best Russian player at the age of 15. In 1821, when the first chess club in St. Petersburg met in *Pogodin's house*, he also beat Tundutov (+2 -1 =0). In 1824, Petroff published his chess treatises ('Шахматная игра, приведенная в систематический порядок, с присовокуплением игор Филидора и примечание на оные.') in St. Petersburg. He also led correspondence games with Warsaw (1836) and Derpt (1838–1839).

After his arrival to Warsaw as a high representative of the Tsarist State in 1840, Petroff played more than 200 games with the strongest local player, Alexander Hoffmann. In the following years, hundreds of games were also played with other Warsaw chess players: Piotrowski, Szymański, Siewieluński, Hieronim Czarnowski, Szymon Winawer. They met every Sunday at Petroff's house in Warsaw. During this period, Petroff also won a match against Carl Ferdinand Jänisch in 1844 (+2 -1 =0), the author of the famous *Analyse nouvelle* of 1842/1843¹⁰, and a match against Dmitry Sigizmundovich Stern (+2 -0 =0) in 1849.

When Petroff spent time back St. Petersburg, he would also accept matches against the strongest player of his home town. These included matches from April 1853 against the Urusov brothers (+3 -0 =1 against Sergej Semenovich; +1 -0 =1 against Dmitrij Semenovich) and a longer match against the former in 1859 (+13 -7 =1). Petroff also beat Shumov (+4 -2 =0) in St. Petersburg as well as Golitsin in 1863 (+1 -0 =1). In the same year, two more Russian matches were recorded against Mikhailov (+2 -0 =0) and Achsharumov (+1 -0 =1). His impressive

match results can be rounded off with his win over Hardmuth in the Austrian town Ischl 1863 (+3 -1 =0) and Salter in the French city Dieppe (+5 -0 =1), which brings us now to his Europe Tour.

III. Petroff's European Tour of 1863

Although throughout his life Petroff maintained a lively contact by correspondence with leading European chess players and editors (*Le Palamède*, *The Chess Player's Chronicle*, *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, etc.), he did not cross the borders of the Russian empire until 1863. In 1851, the foreign chess press speculated about his possible participation in the first international chess tournament organised by Howard Staunton, but official duties prevented him from travelling for several weeks to London.

It was not until 1863 that Petroff decided to take his first foreign trip with his three daughters. Petroff visited the main European cities of Dresden, Berlin, Prague, Vienna and Paris, and the tourist centres of Bad Ischl, Dieppe, Spa and Versailles. However, the main goal of his European trip was not chess exhibitions or matches with leading European players, but recreation and relaxation in the bosom of his beloved family. Petroff had an unpleasant and traumatic experience when, as a high-ranking tsarist official in Warsaw, he found himself in captivity with his wife during the Polish uprising in the spring of 1863. As speculated by the leading Russian historian Isaak Linder, Petroff's trouble-free release from captivity raised questions in tsarist circles about his pro-Polish attitude and his loyalty to the Russian state administration. According to Linder, when the tsarist authorities decided to deal hard with the Polish uprising, Petroff, who allegedly did not

10 Jaenisch, C. F. *Analyse nouvelle des ouvertures de Jeu des Echecs*. Vol. 1. Dresden, 1842; Jaenisch, C. F. *Analyse nouvelle des ouvertures de Jeu des Echecs*. Vol. 2. St. Petersburg, 1843.

want to be associated with these oppressions, travelled abroad with his daughters¹¹.

His European journey is described quite accurately in his letter to Viktor Mikhailovich Mikhailov, editor of the then only Russian chess magazine, *Shakhmatny Listok*, shortly after his return to Warsaw in late October 1863. It is clear from the text of this letter that Petroff had not planned to be away for so long, since he originally wanted to return to Russia in September 1863. One reason for his long absence could have been that the Russian Philidor, in addition to relaxation, constantly sought out chess clubs and rivals during his trip abroad.

1. Dresden, Berlin

The Petroff family first arrived in Dresden, where they spent a whole week. According to Petroff, despite his efforts he was unable to find a chess club or play a game with a local chess player. Then the family moved to Berlin, where he visited the famous chess *Café Belvedere*. It is not clear how long Petroff stayed with his daughters in Berlin, but he mentions that he played three games in *Café Belvedere* (+2 –1 =0). He explains his only defeat very prosaically: ‘The strong Bavarian beer made me feel dizzy and I lost my bishop.’



FIGURE 1 *Café Belvedere* in Berlin.

2. Prague and Vienna

Petroff then describes his visit to Vienna, but in his letter he also mentions his stay in Prague. As there was no reason to return from Vienna to Prague, when the Czech capital was on a direct connection between Berlin and Vienna, the logic of the itinerary suggests that he was probably first in Prague and then in Vienna. When describing his visit to Prague, Petroff is rather ungenerous in briefly remarking that there are no clubs or chess players in the city. As for chess clubs in Prague, the Russian master was certainly right in this respect, because chess was played mainly in cafés and restaurants in all the other European capitals. The first chess club was founded in Prague only in 1867 in the Hotel ‘U české koruny’ (At the ‘Czech Crown’). The first known games played by Czech chess players in Prague can be traced back to the first half of the 1860s (1864).

Nevertheless, Prague left a strong mark on world chess history when it was the birthplace of important chess players in the first and second halves of the 19th century. Eduard Löwe, born in Prague in 1794, later moved to London and at the end of 1847 he managed to beat the then renowned world master Howard Staunton in a short match with a score of +4 –2 =1 (but here, to be fair, we must mention that Staunton gave him odds of pawn and two moves). Prague and the Czech nation were made even more famous by another chess player, Wilhelm Steinitz. The first official world champion was born in the Jewish quarter of Prague in 1836. Steinitz must have acquired a solid chess background in Prague, because when in the late 1850s he began studying in Vienna, he was already a relatively advanced player.

However, when we return to Prague in the early 1860s, chess players met mainly in the *Slavonic Café*, where the leading figure was Antonín König, a pupil of the Academy of Painting, who was considered the founder

¹¹ Linder/Linder 2016 (note 2), p. 143.



FIGURE 2 Charles Bridge and Castle in Prague (1880).

of the famous Czech Chess Problem School. Among the practical players from the first half of the 1860s, we can mention Antonín Kvíčala, Emil Rott, Karel Kober, and later Jan Dobruský, Karel Makovský and others.

According to Petroff himself, the family spent only three days in Vienna. They stayed in the famous Kaiserin Elisabeth Hotel, which dates back to 1348 and hosted rare guests in its past, such as Prince Karl of Bavaria, Prince L. Hohenlohe, and, in the same year as Petroff and his family visited the hotel, also Richard Wagner. Apparently the local reception advised him to visit a nearby café where chess was played.

The very next day, at 11.00 a.m., Petroff entered the café and found there a German analysing on a chessboard a game printed in the *Schachzeitung*. ‘I sat down at a table,’ Petroff says, ‘and found myself examining the Muzio Gambit. I remarked that Paulsen had found a good defence and that Black should win. It was

not possible to communicate with him fluently because I did not speak German, but fortunately another educated German arrived who spoke French’. Petroff then describes the scene as follows:

The player studying *Schachzeitung* remarked that Paulsen’s defence was not good. I had a different opinion. He suggested playing a game, I don’t remember, probably for a half-guilder bet. I defended myself and almost lost, but I won the second and third games. In the following days we played several games, usually until four o’clock and then after dinner from six till ten. I won six games, lost two, and one or two were draws.

We played quickly, not thinking over our moves for more than two or three minutes. There were a lot of spectators. They found out that I played well and that I belonged to a circle of strong players. My opponent, with whom I played, gave chess lessons there and was considered a strong player by them, but I do not know his name. He was about the same chess level as the recently deceased

Hoffman. I don't know why they thought I was an Englishman and asked me if I was not Löwenthal. I replied that I was a Russian from Warsaw. "Are you really Petroff?" They were very happy to meet me and asked me to return to Vienna in the winter. There was no time left for more games, because we stayed in Vienna for only three days, toured the city, strolled along the promenade with our daughters and visited the theatre.

3. Bad Ischl

From Vienna, the Petroff family moved to the Austrian spa resort of Bad Ischl, where they spent three weeks in a beautiful setting with a lake and nearby mountains.

While Petroff's daughters were fully engaged in spa treatments and local cultural life, Petroff was looking for an opportunity to play chess. He stated in his letter:

I played chess every day at a local patisserie and casino. One German was shocked to lose 12 games to me. There were much stronger chess players in the Casino. They played consultation games against me. I lost one game, but won four and one ended in a draw. A man by the name of Hardmuth, a photographer from Paris, who allegedly played with a number of great Parisian chess players and who sometimes had successful days, but subsequently gave up chess, played especially very well. I played several games with him, I won two and two ended in a draw.

4. Paris

The Petroff family left Bad Ischl sometime in late August, and their next destination was Paris. The travellers arrived there around 11.00 p.m., but, as Petroff wrote, 'I immediately went to *La Régence*, as there was a strong desire to see the chess center'. Petroff then continued:

When I entered the cafe, there was not a single living soul, only a picture of Philidor hanging on the wall. The next day, when the *Café de la Régence* opened, I was back. I found only Journoud, the editor of a Parisian chess magazine. I met him; a kind, benevolent and obliging man; I really liked him. I learned from him that Morphy was in Paris, but he did not want to play as he was busy with others matters, that Rivière, Laroche, Kolisch, Turgenev and almost all the other great players had gone to the seaside, and that little chess was played here, not as in the time of La Bourdonnais. I played one game with Journoud.



FIGURE 3 The *Café de la Régence* in 1922.

This was one of the few recorded games played by Petroff during his European tour and it has been reprinted in virtually all European, British and American chess magazines and columns¹²:

**Alexander Dmitriev Petroff –
Paul Journoud**
Paris 1863

*Annotation by H. Staunton in
Illustrated London News, November 7, 1863*

1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. ♖f3 g5 4. h4 g4 5. ♗e5 ♗f6

We prefer this line of defence to the older and more popular one based on 5. ... h5; but the latter, it is fair to say, has many advocates, whose opinions are entitled to respect.

6. ♙c4 d5 7. exd5 ♙d6 8. d4 ♗h5

This move is an all-important element in the present mode of defending the Allgaier-Gambit.

¹² *La Nouvelle Régence*, July 1863, p. 199–200; *Illustrierte Zeitung*, Wien, 19 December 1863; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, December 5, 1863; *New York Clipper*, July 22, 1865; Notes by H. Staunton In: *Illustrated London News*, November 7, 1863; *Bell's Life in London*, 19 November 1864.

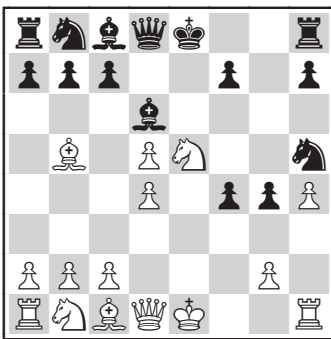


FIGURE 4 The Café de la Régence in 1906, postcard.

© Collection Etienne Cornil.

9. ♖b5+

Mr. Jaenisch recommends the opening player to move his King to f2 square; but, in reply to that step, Black, it has been shown, may preserve his advantage by playing 9. ... f5.



9. ... ♜f8

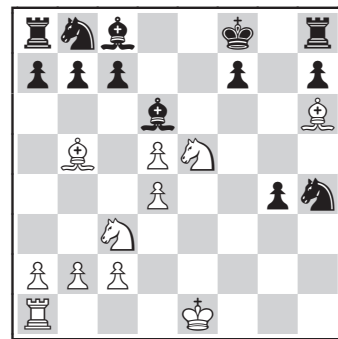
So strong are Black's advanced Pawns, that he may almost afford, in our opinion, to play 9. ... c6, and sacrifice his Queen's rook for the adverse Bishop at this juncture.

10. ♜c3 ♜g3 11. ♙x4 ♜xh1 12. ♚d2 ♚xh4+

13. g3 ♜xg3 14. ♚f2 ♜f5

This is better play than checking with the Queen at h1, as the student will soon discover on examining the situation.

15. ♚xh4 ♜xh4 16. ♙h6+



16. ... ♜g8

If he had played the King to e7, White, it is clear, would have won the Knight by checking at g5.

17. ♜e4 ♙e7

His only safe move. If he had played 17. ... ♙xe5, M. Journoud suggests the following as a probable