

# **The Golden Age of Yugoslav Chess**

(1919–1990)

**Legends and Masterpieces**

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**Milos Pavlovic**

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# Key to symbols

!	a good move	±	White has a serious advantage
?	a weak move	∓	Black has a serious advantage
!!	an excellent move	+−	White has a decisive advantage
??	a blunder	−+	Black has a decisive advantage
!?	an interesting move	→	with an attack
?!	a dubious move	↑	with initiative
□	only move	↔	with counterplay
=	equality	Δ	with the idea of
∞	unclear position	⊃	better is
≡	with compensation for the sacrificed material	N	novelty
±	White stands slightly better	+	check
∓	Black stands slightly better	#	mate

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# Introduction

## **Yugoslav Chess (1919–1990)**

First and foremost, I want to emphasize that this book is rather personal: my own view on Yugoslav chess rather than focusing exactly on historic details (which, of course, I tried to follow as they occurred). Another important aspect to note is that, in the games section, I wanted to show games against the best possible opponents, meaning World Champions or contenders to the throne. There are many interesting games against other admirable players, too, but I wanted to show the strength of Yugoslav players against the absolute best.

The history of Yugoslav chess between 1919 and 1990 is a remarkable story of cultural development, international success, and the rise of one of the world's great chess traditions. In my opinion, there is a special interest in chess in this area, and it can still be seen today. I can't really talk about it as a project, because chess was never that: not in, first, Yugoslavia, but also not in a 'Socialist' Yugoslavia, but it does have an interesting history in these parts and people certainly do appreciate this old game.

## **Kingdom of Yugoslavia(1919–1945)**

After World War I and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians (later Yugoslavia), chess began to be organized more formally. Local clubs sprang up in Belgrade, Ljubljana, Zagreb, and other cities, fostering a national chess culture. One of the most interesting clubs was a 'Chigorin' chess club, established by Russians who came to Yugoslavia to escape from Soviet Communism at the time. Somewhere, I saw that even the daughter of Chigorin herself was patron of that club. I can add here that to Yugoslavia came middle-class Russians, for instance: architects, engineers, teachers, and such, while aristocrats mostly went to France.

In 1929, the Yugoslav Chess Federation was founded, which unified chess activity across the country and enabled participation in international competitions.

During the inter-war period, players such as Kostic, Vidmar, and Pirc became well known, with grandmaster Vasja Pirc giving his name to the famous *Pirc Defense*. Pirc is interesting in that he was a student of Vidmar, and that is not a common case in Yugoslavia, because we can consider most grandmasters as self-made players, including Gligoric, Vidmar, Ljubojevic and others.

When we talk about championships, it is interesting to note that first Yugoslav Championship was organized rather late (in 1935) and won by Pirc. It is also very important to add another important name of that period whom we can consider as a young star at the time – Petar Trifunovic – who would later (after World War 2) together with Gligoric become a strong force in Yugoslav chess. Let's not forget also that such a big event as the Bled tournament, played in 1931, was organized as well and gathered a very strong field. Yugoslavia participated in early chess Olympiads in that period as well (from 1924 when the first unofficial Olympiad was played) and they achieved their best results in the 1926 and 1936 Olympiads, reaching third place.

## **Post War Expansion and the Golden Age (1945–1990s)**

After 1945, Yugoslavia quickly became one of the world's strongest chess nations. Somebody said that that period in culture in former Yugoslavia can be called the "Pericles time". With such names in literature as Nobel prize winner, Ivo Andric, and great writers such as Milorad Pavic, Milos Crnjanski, Danilo Kis (to name just a few) this is most definitely the correct assessment: surely if we draw a parallel we can say that for chess as well. The socialist government supported intellectual and sporting activities, and chess benefited enormously. It is important to understand that chess was not a project, but it was widely accepted as an important part of sport and culture. So many tournaments and other events have been organized. I think that in some of my other books I already emphasized that I started to play chess seriously after the famous 1977 Candidates match Spassky-Korchnoi was held in Belgrade. A fabulous event! The (in)famous Spassky-Fischer rematch from 1992 – the return of Booby Fisher – shocked the entire chess world. I personally think that some of those games were also played at the highest chess level. An important aspect of all this is that all those

manifestations have been widely followed by an audience who enjoyed chess immensely. Thousands of people gathered, for example, to follow that match in Belgrade in 1977, day after day after day.

Of course, it is important to mention other famous events such as the Interzonal where Fischer first appeared on the world scene; later Candidates matches; famous tournaments such as Bugojno, Niksic, the Vidmar memorial, the Kostic memorial and so many others. Gary Kasparov made his international debut in Banja Luka, winning it no less, and was very much appreciated in Yugoslavia – even his friendly match with Andersson was organized in Belgrade.

Highlights of this period include:

- ☒ The 1950 Dubrovnik Chess Olympiad, still remembered for its beautiful chess set and excellent organization. I will give here the Yugoslav line-up that won that Olympiad: Gligoric, Pirc, Trifunovic, Rabar, Vidmar jr., and Puc.
- ☒ Regular toptthree finishes in Chess Olympiads, behind only the Soviet Union or sometimes ahead of all other nations. It is important to say that, unfortunately, Soviet chess was extraordinarily strong and only Bobby Fischer managed to break that dominance when he defeated Spassky in their famous 1972 match in Reykjavik.
- ☒ **A generation of superb players**, including:
  - ☞ Svetozar Gligorić, one of the greatest Yugoslav players of all time, a worldclass grandmaster known for his opening innovations and sportsmanship. At that time there was no rating system such as we have today, but ‘Gliga’ told me that Bronstein considered him to be in the top three players in the world in the late 50s.
  - ☞ Other important names include Petar Trifunović a remarkable player who was also close to qualifying for the Candidates in 1948; Milan Matulović, and Borislav Ivkov, among the very few who managed to reach the Candidates; **Aleksandar Matanovic**, founder of Chess Informant. Then we have the younger generation such as **Dragoljub Velimirovic**, whose fierce play and great opening knowledge is legendary.
- ☒ Yugoslavia frequently hosted **elite tournaments**, such as Bled, Zagreb, and Belgrade, but also in many other cities, attracting the strongest Soviet and Western players even during the Cold War.

## Chess Culture and Literature

Yugoslavia developed a rich chesspublishing tradition, known for highquality analysis and accessible writing. The Yugoslav *Informator* (*Šahovski Informator*), founded in 1966, became one of the most influential chess publications in the world, introducing coding symbols and systematic analysis still used today. There are other famous books, and Yugoslavia published a lot of chess books written not only by grandmasters but also by journalists, such as Dimitrije Bjelica who was exclusively a chess journalist. One of my favorite books, titled “*Chess is chess*”, was written by grandmaster Matanovic and contained a fantastic overview on that generation of chess players. Also, the *Kingdom of Yugoslavia* chess magazine “*Sahovski Glasnik*” was established and was run by another great name, Vladimir Vukovic, who is known for his masterpiece “*Art of attack*”. The magazine continued to run in later Socialist Yugoslavia and was an important part of chess culture at that time. Another great book, which many used to learn their first steps in chess, is Dragoslav Andric book – “*Chess game of millions*” – then Gligoric’s book on the match in Reykjavik – “*Match of the Century*” –to name just a few.

## Socialist Yugoslavia (1945s–1990)

Between 1945 and the late 1980s, Yugoslavia remained a global chess powerhouse. It produced so many strong grandmasters and influential players in Europe. Chess players from Yugoslavia were gladly seen and accepted in both East and West equally.

- ☒ Gligorić continued to be a central figure, while new talents emerged in the 70s such as Ljubomir Ljubojević who climbed quickly to become a world-class player and was at one moment among the top three best players in the world. His remarkable tactical talent was, and still is, well-known.
- ☒ Yugoslav tournaments remained prestigious, regularly featuring world champions and top contenders.
- ☒ The national team stayed strong, often reaching high placings in team competitions. Yugoslavia didn’t manage to repeat that famous first place from Dubrovnik, but was still among the top three finishers, often also in European Championships as well.

Compared to the period from 1919 to 1941, we can say that chess education expanded in the later era, with many clubs and widespread newspaper coverage. Famous newspapers, such as “*Politika*”, had a chess column for a long time – Gligoric told many times of how he learned chess from that column – but also, later, many other newspapers hosted a column as well.

## Women in chess

It is very important to talk about women chess in Yugoslavia, and we have to mention some important figures that marked that time as well. The most famous one is **Milunka Lazarevic**, who almost reached a match for the World title but, instead of making a draw in the last round in Sukhumi 1964, which would have guaranteed her first place and a match, she went for a win and lost. She then had to endure a play-off with two others but failed to win it. She was a romantic chess player and was adored by chess players not only in Yugoslavia.

Another great name is **Verica Nedeljkovic** who managed to reach 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the 1959 Candidates in Plovdiv. It is important, too, not to forget the first Yugoslav women’s champion (lesser-known, but also a very good player) **Lidija Timofejeva**. She won the national title in 1939 and later again in 1947, 1948, and 1949. Remarkable results. Also, the new generation that started to become very strong when Yugoslavia itself was crumbling: **Alisa Maric**, who lost a Candidates final match, and **Natasa Bojkovic**, who was among top women players and Women’s World Junior champion. One more important point to mention is that a women’s tournament held each year in Belgrade on 8<sup>th</sup> March is one of the oldest and longest-standing traditional tournaments.

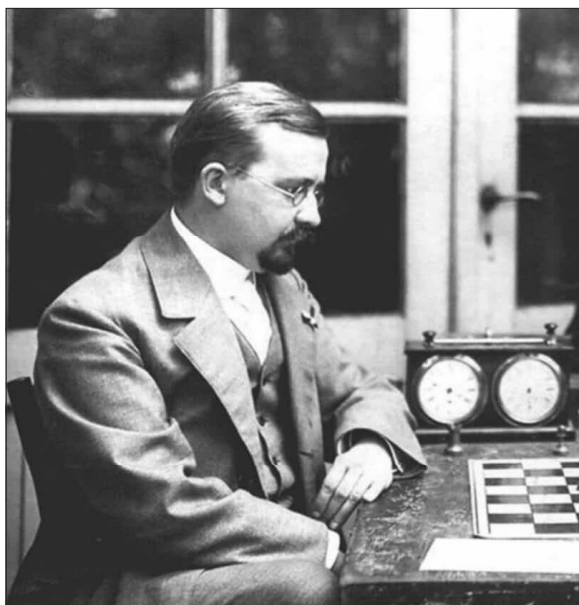
By 1990, just before the country dissolved, Yugoslavia had firmly established itself as one of the most influential chess nations of the 20th century—an environment that produced champions, tournaments, publications, and a recognizable style known for fighting spirit and deep opening preparation.

One of the last achievements when we talk about that country was **Predrag Nikolic**, who qualified to the 1990 Candidates from the Interzonal in Manila. In the same event, in the final round, Ljubojevic was confronted with another young star of that time, Damljanovic. Both needed a win in order to qualify for the Candidates matches, but after a big fight the game ended in a draw.

I apologize to the many whom I didn't mention, or whose games I didn't comment on: there are so many more things about Yugoslav chess that remain to be said that basically more books on this topic are needed!

# Milan Vidmar

Vidmar certainly belonged to the chess elite in the early twentieth century. He was an engineer, not a professional player, but he competed in various high-class events and represented Yugoslavia in two Olympiads – in Prague 1931 and Warsaw 1935 – both times on board one. His second place in the San Sebastian tournament in 1911 and fourth place in New York 1927 are big results considering the competition. At the Hastings tournament in 1925/26 he tied for first with Alekhine. In this particular event, which was exceedingly strong, he finished third ahead of many legendary names, such as Rubinstein, Bogoljubov, Reti, and Tartakower. After he passed away, Yugoslavia organized a very strong and prestigious event every year to honour him. As far as I know, we can also consider him as the trainer of Vasja Pirc, another strong and influential player from Yugoslavia.








*Dr. Milan Vidmar*

## Vidmar, Milan - Tartakower, Saviely

Duch Defense A85

London International Masters, London 1922

1.d4 e6 2.c4 f5 3.e3 f6 4.c3 b4  
5.d2 o-o 6.f3 e7 7.d3 d6

Another plan is to keep the pawn on d7 for a while, e.g.: 7...b6 8.o-o b7  
9.a3 xc3 10.xc3 e4 11.e1 with

complications. We have reached some combination of the Nimzo-Indian and Dutch defences.

8.c2