

## KARPOV V. KORCHNOI

### Graham Taylor

'Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy' wrote Siegbert Tarasch. Had he been writing today, in the light of the Karpov-Korchnoi world championship match, he might have been forced into a revision something along the lines of: 'Chess, like the cold war, like the BBC, has the power to make everyone thoroughly miserable.'

For not only BBC News but even the BBC's weekly chess programme started off its coverage of the match in a typical cold war posture: they backed Korchnoi the 'Soviet dissident'. As Korchnoi's play had declined in the last year and expert chess opinion had unanimously predicted his defeat long before the match started this meant two months of televised gloom and doom.

Years ago the BBC would never have landed itself in such a dire predicament because it simply ignored chess. Once upon a time, back in the 1960s, chess matches could be played in peace and a champion could even walk down the road without a press adviser. Chessplayers inhabited a select cultural backwater unruffled by either frantic publicity or by decent prizes. Bobby Fischer, American superstar, changed all that. By demanding millions of dollars for beating Soviet players at the game which they had virtually monopolised since 1947, he transformed chess tournaments into financial bonanzas. Since Fischer, over the last decade, nearly a dozen Soviet grand-

masters — one of whom was Viktor Korchnoi — have 'defected to the West' in search of treasure trove. Chess, hitherto despised by the British media, suddenly became 'newsworthy'. The game had acquired two very acceptable features: self-made millionaires and cold war copy.

To arrive at a weekly chess programme, the BBC had to subject itself to some contortions. Back in the 1960s, for example, chess players were told that chess was not 'visual' enough for television. 'Laymen don't understand. We professionals in the media are not biased against chess because it is poor, unfashionable and dominated by the Soviet Union. It's a *technical* question. Such a slow, boring game can't be presented on television'. Instead, 1960s television devoted most of its sporting viewing to instant, thrill-a-minute . . . cricket.

The contortions continued in the first few programmes of the BBC's World Chess Championship series, which were almost entirely devoted to Korchnoi and which consisted of commentators surveying Korchnoi's lost positions with give-away lines such as 'there's not much hope. . . .'. A typical contortion: the BBC often uses the 'technical' argument against trade unionists on strike that 'inevitably' reporters gravitate towards the company spokesmen or the trade union officials because they are more accessible to interview, more personable and articulate. Yet, in this match, it was admitted that Anatoly Karpov was ever ready to



have been understandable but in chess, as there are only two players anyway, not mentioning one of them verges somewhere near the absolutely ridiculous. But that was not the only obstacle the BBC had encountered.

For a start, it had soon become clear that, unlike the Czechoslovak grandmaster Ludek Pachman in 1968, Korchnoi was not a 'political dissident' at all. Korchnoi's 'dissidence' amounts to little more than personal grievances against other Soviet players and, to the embarrassment of all concerned, against Ray Keene, his British second in the previous match with Karpov. Halfway through the match Korchnoi was fined for swearing: it turned out that the dissident's critique of Karpov amounted merely to: 'Stop squirming in your seat, you little creep.' Korchnoi's press adviser confirmed this personalised approach with the Machiavellian statement: 'We constantly make it plain that the main jailer of his (Korchnoi's) family is not the Soviet government but, personally, the champion of the world, Anatoly Karpov. We use this as psychological warfare.' This fits in with Korchnoi's autobiography, which offended many chessplayers by personally slurring such popular players as Mikhail Tal, and which revealed a political consciousness that was little more than snobbery. He criticised Karpov, for

example, because, instead of hailing from the cosmopolitan intelligentsia, he was 'working class and 150% Russian.'

The result of all this, together with Korchnoi's increasing involvement with the dubious Anand Marg religious sect, was that the BBC-2 programme reformed itself, in mid-air. It replied to the chess public's demand that it keep politics out of chess (the main complaint) by narrowing the 'dissidence' down to the plight of Korchnoi's family. Even here the ground was muddied. Korchnoi had left his family five years ago in the full knowledge that the strict Soviet emigration laws would prevent their joining him and had only recently made a determined effort to get them out.

Secondly, their treatment of Karpov was so upgraded that in the last programme it

amounted almost to adulation. The cold war angle was still upheld with further criticisms of the USSR — equivalent to tennis commentators interspersing an Evonne Goolagong Wimbledon final with attacks on the Australian government's treatment of aborigines — but Karpov now received dispensation from the general anathema.

Thirdly, at the end, some apology was made for the initial bias. The main thrust of this was that Korchnoi, like Fischer, was a 'remarkable individual'. Hartston claimed it was the same in tennis: McEnroe got more coverage than Bjorn Borg. The trouble with this is, that Botvinnik and Tal were also 'remarkable individuals' and were certainly not rubber-stamps for the Soviet government, yet their world championships were never covered by a BBC special programme.

Moreover, although McEnroe got more coverage than Borg on BBC news it is simply not true that in the specialised tennis programme McEnroe got so much more attention that protests from tennis fans deluged the BBC.

Thus it was that the BBC checkmated itself. Chessplayers rejected the role of pawns in a propaganda game. The slogan of 'Keep politics out of sport', often used against the Left, well and truly rebounded. Although the cold war edge was maintained to the bitter end (only some radical political change will alter that) it was proved once again that, if the case is a sound one, pressure from below can have considerable impact. Misery was spread but in the end the BBC sounded more miserable than anybody else.