

CHESS LIFE

February 2021 | USChess.org

Kids

HIDDEN CHECK

The mysterious relationship between chess and espionage

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
Infinity Endgames,
the Finale:
Rook versus Bishop



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Chess Life KIDS (USPS 023-567, ISSN:
1932-5894) is published in February, April,
June, August, October, and December of
every year by US Chess, 137 Obrien Drive,
Crossville, Tennessee 38555. Periodical
postage paid at Crossville, Tennessee, and
additional mailing offices.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes
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Tennessee 38557.

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Scholastic Membership (online version
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expiration, is just \$17 per year. Premium
Scholastic Membership (receives Chess
Life Kids by mail) is \$25 per year. \$13
of every premium membership goes
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This month: GM Irina Krush

In this issue

Menachem Wecker takes you inside the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., where he explores the mysterious connection between chess and espionage (spoiler alert: it's not what you see in the movies!). GM Alexander Ipatov adds rook versus bishop endgames to your arsenal in the third and final installment of his endgame series. And meet our 2020 U.S. Women's champion, GM Irina Krush, in this month's My First Move and Chess Adventures.

This month's cover features a dramatic game of "cat versus mouse," played out on a giant chess board. Cover art by Chandler Ellison.



I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE ...

By Menachem Wecker

Unlike most games, chess leaves everything in the open. It still has a mysterious history.

Pretend you are a spy, and you have to smuggle a top-secret document to a fellow secret agent. Where would you arrange to meet? How would you hand the hush-hush papers over to the other person without being caught?

If this were a movie or a television show, the scene would probably take place in an empty park at midnight. It would probably be raining, and the spies would wear hats and have the collars of their long overcoats pulled up to mask their faces. They might keep looking nervously over their shoulders to make sure no one was watching. An owl might hoot, making the characters — and us watching! — startle in fright.

This makes for good Hollywood drama, but real life is not usually so vivid. It might come as a surprise to you to learn that spies often make

information “drops” and even try to recruit other spies, out in the open at chess tournaments. As in a game of chess, sometimes the best way to win is to hide in plain sight.

More than 60 years ago, a Russian spy named Valentin Ivanov, who wore thick glasses and a bushy moustache, defeated all of his early opponents easily in a chess tournament at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Ivanov worked at the Soviet embassy, which made a good cover for his spying, and he was good enough at chess that he also cruised through the first two games of the final, writes historian Steven T. Usdin in his recent book *Bureau of Spies: The Secret Connections Between Espionage and Journalism in Washington*.

Mysteriously, Ivanov lost the last three games. Usdin thinks he would





Photos: above, a subversive Russian Army chess set; right, the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.

have won first prize without much difficulty if his bosses in Moscow had not told him to lose the last games on purpose. A spy is not supposed to call too much attention to himself so he does not get caught, the Russian officials probably reminded Ivanov.

If you have played the board game Stratego before, you know that there is a piece called the spy, which can capture the opponent's most powerful token, the one piece — provided it attacks first. Among bishops, rooks, pawns, and other chess pieces, there are no spies, of course. But as the story of the Russian spy at the Washington chess tournament shows, spying and chess overlap a lot. Experts say there are good reasons for that, because being a spy and playing chess require similar skills, like planning ahead and looking for patterns.



Let's begin with several examples, so it is clear that Ivanov was not the only example of the overlap between chess and spying.

In 1870, the British chess player Joseph Henry Blackburne, whose nickname was "Black Death" because of his big bushy (black) beard, was playing at a tournament in Baden-Baden, Germany. He would go on to tie for third place in the event, which,

apparently on his suggestion, was the first to use chess clocks. The tournament was also unusual insofar as the Franco-Prussian War broke out between France and Prussia amid the event, and fighting was so close that chess players could hear explosions.

One highly-regarded player had to leave the tournament to fight in the German army (on the Prussian side), and German authorities arrested Blackburne during the tournament and jailed him, releasing him the next day, for being a French spy. The chess player's carriage driver, and not the "Black Death" himself, turned out to be the French secret agent.

Another chess player, Joseph Eljas, from the northeastern European country Estonia, went to Leningrad, in the then-Soviet Union, in 1927 for a chess tournament. He disappeared, and friends learned later that the Soviet secret police, the Cheka, had arrested him and claimed that he was carrying secret codes. The notebooks the police claimed were codes were filled with chess problems.

A very similar thing had happened in 1918, when one Lorenz Hansen was accused of spying when his chess correspondence games by postcard were discovered, as the *American Chess Bulletin* reported that year.

And in 1952-53, Pal Benko spent almost a year-and-a-half in Hungarian imprisonment after he was caught trying to escape from East Berlin to the West, and police found his postal chess games, which they took to be secret code.



But the authorities who claimed that chess players, or those posing as such, were spies were not always wrong.



At Washington's International Spy Museum, there are several real-life chess-related spy objects and stories, and I talked about all of them with Alexis Albion, the museum's curator of special exhibits.

One of the most interesting stories relates to a place in England called Bletchley Park, where British intelligence officers hired chess players, among others, to break German codes during World War II. England didn't yet have a code-breaking department, so it had to build this team up from the ground, and it needed to do so fast to crack a German code called ENIGMA.

An "enigma" is a mysterious thing that is tough to understand, and this code was named well. It is complicated to explain, but essentially the Germans used devices where they would type out a short message and the machine would spit out a code that would look like gibberish to everyone who did not have a similar machine and know how to set

it that day. They changed the settings each day, and there were so many possible ways to swap letters — many, many millions — that you could not just sit with a pen and paper and guess.

What would you do if you had to find the best people to break a code that seemed impossible to overcome? If you answered that you would hire people who are good at chess and other kinds of puzzles, that is exactly what England did.

“It’s people whose brains work in that way,” Albion said. “They’re thinking several steps ahead. They’re thinking strategically. They’re playing around with ideas. I think chess fits in really well with that kind of skill set. That is really important in the intelligence world.”

One of Albion’s favorite parts about Bletchley Park was a crossword puzzle that officials published widely. “They said, ‘You know. Have a go at this. If you can do this, you might be somebody we’re interested in,’” Albion said. The Spy Museum owns one of those crossword puzzles that British intelligence sent out to recruit code-breakers.

The mathematician Alan Turing — who in 1948, decades before Deep Blue, co-created with David Champernowne the first chess computer program called Turochamp — was one of the people at Bletchley Park who helped crack the German code.

He was known to take walks with a hot drink around the neighborhood to relax. When he finished drinking, Turing, who was a character, would throw his mug into a nearby pond. A friend told Albion that if one drained the body of water, one could find many of those mugs. “I started thinking, ‘We should do that. We can get one of those for the museum,’” she said.



One of the coolest chess objects at the Spy Museum is a set that the British intelligence agency MI9 used to hide money, maps, and a compass to send to its spies who were captured during World War II. If the sets had the name of the company Jaques of London, founded in 1795 and still operating today, the captured spies knew to break open the back of the set to find the secret items.

The chess set at the Spy Museum, which hid a compass (to help direct spies), money, and maps, comes from the collection of Phil Froom, an author, collector, and former British military intelligence officer. He came across the “loaded” chess set when he met with someone to research his book, and the person had been unsure why his dad, who had been part of MI9, kept a chess set when he was not a chess player.

Froom got the idea that the set might have things hidden inside it, and he took it to a veterinarian practice near his home in the United Kingdom to get it x-rayed. It turned out that it was what Froom thought it was, and he had to pay the other person a lot of money to buy it.

For visitors who see that set at the Spy Museum in Washington, Froom hopes that they will be excited by the “cat versus mouse” efforts of the British Escape Agency to smuggle its captured agents out to freedom.

“More likely, their comparison will be more 007 James Bond than MI9 World War II,” Froom said. But he added that there is very good evidence that the kinds of gadgets in James Bond films — maybe a pen that is a gun, or the like — were based on real things that MI9 made. Ian Fleming, who wrote the James Bond books, was the head of British naval intelligence during World War II and was an MI9 “customer,” Froom said. “He certainly knew about the gadgets.”

“Later, when the Bond movies came along, Dennis Llewelyn — the [actor] who played ‘Q’ in many Bond movies, himself a World War II prisoner of

war held at the infamous Colditz Castle — met with one of the MI9 quartermasters,” Froom said. “They discussed the gadgets, and gradually more and more appeared in the Bond movies.”



When Albion, the curator at the Spy Museum, thinks about how chess and spying overlap, she says that chess is such a big deal in Russia. Russia and the United States spied on one another for so many years during the Cold War, so chess and spying are likely to intersect.

“The Russians pride themselves on chess. My sister-in-law is Russian, and as soon as my nephew could hold a pencil, he had to take chess lessons. It is part of your education,” she said. “It is part of your analytical, logical thinking of being an educated person.”

But as mentioned above, being a real-life spy, or as is more often the case these days, an analyst, is different from the way it is portrayed in Hollywood. “It is not like in the movies. We hear stories about having to do surveillance for hours on end,” Albion said. It is really not all car chases and that kind of thing.” Playing chess, which is a mental sport, can help one overcome boredom, and perhaps even see patterns in the monotony (repetition).

A key, Albion said, is focusing on the details. “If you mess something up, you do not just lose a game. You actually might be missing something incredibly important,” she said. Intelligence analysts train themselves to avoid falling into mental traps, as chess players might do as well. “You need to really understand the way your brain works and not let yourself be fooled by it,” Albion said.

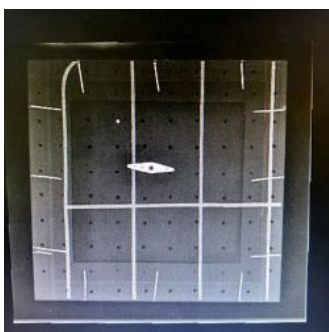
CRACKING THE CODE

A secret branch of the British government, the M19, helped soldiers escape if they were captured. Chess played a surprising role in this delicate and dangerous mission.



STEP 1:

Author, collector, and former British intelligence officer Phil Froom discovered this special M19 Jaques of London chess set while doing research for his book. But here's another mystery: Something is amiss in this photo. Can you figure out what's wrong? Hint: Our spies were clearly misoriented.



STEP 2:

With permission from the owner, Froom took the unusual set to a nearby veterinarian to have it x-rayed. The x-ray revealed a small propeller-shaped object that Froom recognized as a "swinger" compass used to aid prisoners in escaping.



STEP 4:

Success! The chess set contained three rare mulberry paper M19 escape maps, emergency money (Third Reich 50 and 20 Reichsmark banknotes), and the swinger compass.



STEP 3:

The next step was to break into the chess set without damaging it. A nervous craftsman from the still-operating Jaques of London spent almost an hour carefully peeling off the green cloth backing to uncover the hidden compartment.

PHOTOS: PHIL FROOM