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Pawns In A Greater Game: The Buenos Aires Chess Olympiad, August - September 1939



Synopsis

Chess has sometimes been at the centre of world politics as it was in the case of Bobby Fischer defeating Boris Spassky in 1972, and six years later when Anatoly Karpov defeated Russian dissident Viktor Korchnoi. Both matches were seen at the time, and also in hindsight, as battles between the Free World and the Communist Bloc, but neither can compare to the events at the 8th Chess Olympiad and the Women's Chess Championship, held in Buenos Aires in August-September 1939. Most of the chess players in 1939 came from countries which would be hugely changed by war: Germany, Poland, Bohemia-Moravia (Czechoslovakia), France, Britain, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Palestine. And there were few players whose lives were not totally affected by the conflict. In 1939, the Americans refused to turn up because they did not regard the money offered as adequate; an I.R.A. bomb scare nearly caused a British player to miss his train; the wife of one player was involved in a major literary controversy which was rocking Guatemala; and the voyage to Buenos Aires helped influence a novella by Stefan Zweig. The tournament began on the day that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, with the final round starting on the day Germany invaded Poland. By that time three of the English team had left, anxious to get across the Atlantic before the U-boats started attacks. And the day before the last round, with the final matches to decide whether the Germans or the Poles would win the Olympiad, the Soviet Union invaded Poland. By this time, the weaker teams had found themselves relegated to a second league, competing for a cup which turned out not to exist. The tensions around the start of World War II were replicated in Buenos Aires, with many of the chess players choosing to remain in South America rather than return to Europe being engulfed by war. Three English players became code-breakers at Bletchley Park, and of the other players, one died in a Buenos Aires lunatic asylum, one was murdered in the Holocaust, one served in the Wehrmacht, and another perished in a Soviet gulag; with the winner of the Women's Championship was killed in a V-1 attack on London. Using archival resources from around the world, and visits to Argentina and Uruguay, this book is the first to detail the machinations of the Buenos Aires Chess Olympiad which reflected, in so many ways, the political situation in 1939.

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Customer Reviews

I want to congratulate Roland Brockman on his excellent review !! His comments are right on. The book will be of interest to any historian (chess, or otherwise), and those who enjoy biographical sketches. The author often gets into some trivial details, but all is heavily researched and easy reading. The best summation is Roland's : "So what if Corfield is forever going off on tangents; they are mostly interesting tangents!"

Review by Roland Brockman
The 1939 Buenos Aires Olympiad occupies a unique place in chess history because it was overshadowed by events in Europe; war breaking out towards the end of the tournament. This had a profound effect on most of the players, several of whom were left stranded in Argentina after the event had concluded. Justin Corfield has written a lengthy historical narrative based around but by no means limited to this pivotal event. A good selection of 70 annotated games is included but obviously you would have to go elsewhere for a comprehensive account of the games. This is very much a history book and a rich feast it is. The ins and outs of the event are discussed in extraordinary detail. For example we are given an account of the voyages that the players took across the Atlantic to reach the tournament, including their visa applications, problems with their luggage and so on. One doubts that any tournament in history has received such detailed treatment. Those who thrive on chess anecdotes will almost certainly find some they didn't know. For example I was completely unaware that Capablanca was involved in a touch move incident in his game with Grau. The circumstances were not dissimilar to the Kasparov, Polgar incident of Linares 1994, though in Capa's case the resolution seems much more satisfactory. Along with his extensive coverage of the tournament, Corfield discusses the grim events unfolding in Europe. In fact there is a huge amount of biographical and historical information in the book; Corfield casts his net very wide indeed. For example in chapter 2, a summary of the evolving political landscape in

Czechoslovakia in the 1930's is certainly relevant to the book's scope but in addition we are given a potted history of the region starting from 1346! This is typical of the book as a whole. For example in chapter 15 we are given an account of a major literary controversy in Guatemala which involved the wife of one of the Olympiad players. This is more observation than criticism. So what if Corfield is forever going off on tangents; they are mostly interesting tangents! One standout feature of the book is the quite astonishing number of photographs accompanying almost every page. The chess related pictures go way beyond the usual portrait gallery we are used to in tournament books. Here we have chess related stamps, original scoresheets, book and magazine covers, even entries of players names in telephone directories. There are also a great many contemporary non chess photos some of which admittedly have a rather tenuous link with the narrative. I doubt for example that many chess history books would feature a photograph of Enoch Powell! I found the photograph collection quite fascinating, giving the book a great visual appeal. My one reservation of the book is that Mr. Corfield is evidently not a competitive chess player himself and unfortunately this is obvious on a great many occasions. For example one could hardly describe the move 3...dxe4 in the Caro Kann defence as 'aggressive'; p. 274. And Alexander did not try the Alekhine's defence against Tartakover (p.161); he had the white pieces! Particularly annoying is that Corfield uses the terms 'match' and 'game' interchangeably, yet they are not the same thing. In chess parlance a 'match' is a series of games. For example at the Olympiad a match between two nations consisted of 4 games. Thus Lasker had been fighting off offers of a world championship match with Capablanca prior to 1921; not a 'game' (p.35). Also the World championship match between Capablanca and Alekhine in 1927 consisted of 34 games; it was not a 'series of matches' (p.36). These inaccuracies provide a frequent jarring note for any player reading this book. There are also frequent problems with emphasis. For example chapter 4 features an extensive biography of Alekhine including much detail on various simultaneous exhibits, yet his two World Championship matches with Bogoljubow (1929 & 1934) do not rate a mention. These quibbles aside this is a substantial work of 327 pages along with extensive appendices which include photographs and short biographical details of all players. It is a well produced labour of love which anybody who has an interest in chess history will find a fascinating read.

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