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Chess Players during World War II



VERA MENCHIK

Great Britain (1906-1944)

Born in Russia, Vera Menchik immigrated with her family to England in 1921 at the age of 15. Two years later she joined the Hastings Chess Club, where she met the great Hungarian player Géza Maróczy, then living in England. One of the top players of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Maróczy became Menchik's coach, helping hone her talent, which she showcased in the first-ever Women's World Chess Championship, held in London in 1927. Menchik won this competition and would go on to win six more Women's World Chess Championship tournaments in the 1930s without the loss of a single game.

Menchik's success in women's tournaments led her to compete against the world's top male players, something not previously attempted. Her participation in mixed events was not without controversy. The Austrian player Albert Becker was so appalled at Menchik's invitation to the Carlsbad 1929 tournament that he proposed that any player losing to her be granted "membership" into the Vera Menchik Club. He promptly became the first member! Membership in the "Club" grew quickly and would eventually include future World Chess Champion Max Euwe (whom she defeated twice in the early 1930s) and Samuel Reshevsky.

Menchik's contributions to chess were not confined solely to playing. She was one of the first women to write for chess journals, contributing regularly to the *British Chess Magazine* and the English publication Chess. Menchik also played an important role in popularizing chess in England in the 1930s and early 1940s by lecturing and giving simultaneous exhibitions.

The 1939 Women's World Chess Championship, held alongside the Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires, saw Menchik emerge victorious with a score of 18 out of 19, two points ahead of the field. This would be the last such event for a decade. Unfortunately, when the next event was held in Moscow in the winter of 1949/1950, Menchik was not among the competitors. She, her mother, and younger sister died on June 27, 1944, during a Nazi bombing.

Vera Menchik was a trailblazer, several decades ahead of her time. Only with the arrival of Nona Gaprindashvili in the early 1960s would a female player of comparable playing strength emerge.

CONEL HUGH O'DONEL (C.H.O'D.) ALEXANDER

Great Britain (1909-1974)

Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander (also referred to as "Hugh" or "C.H.O'D.") distinguished himself as a talented chess player during his college years. He competed in the Chess Olympiads four times during the 1930s and became British Chess Champion in 1938. While competing in his fourth Olympiad, which was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, World War II broke out. Alexander returned to Great Britain with the rest of the country's Olympiad team. He and two of his teammates, Harry Golombek and Stuart Milner-Barry, would go on to work as codebreakers for the British government at Bletchley Park, also called Station X.

Station X codebreakers were selected due to their exceptional ability in logical processes, such as chess and mathematics, two activities at which Alexander excelled. The 2014 film *The Imitation Game* gives an account of the cryptanalysts' attempts to decode the Nazis' messages and features Alexander as a central character.

Alexander continued to work for the British government after World War II, heading its cryptanalysis division for over twenty years. This limited his international chess opportunities as Alexander's security clearance did not allow him to play in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The Olympiads in Moscow (1956) and Leipzig (1960) were two of the more important events he had to decline.

Despite these restrictions, Alexander repeated as British champion in 1956 and represented his country in the 1954 and 1958 Olympiads. He defeated Mikhail Botvinnik in a 1946 radio match held between the Soviet Union and Great Britain, but arguably his greatest result was Hastings 1953/54, where he tied for first and defeated the Soviet representatives David Bronstein and Alexander Tolush.

An international master at both correspondence and over the board chess, Alexander was also an outstanding writer on the game, authoring close to a dozen works. His volume on Alekhine's best games, covering the last years of the World Champion's life, was well-received as was his book on the 1972 Fischer-Spassky match.

HARRY GOLOMBEK

Great Britain (1911-1995)

Harry Golombek competed in the 1939 Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires with Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander and Stuart Milner-Barry. Not long after the outbreak of World War II Gordon Welchman of Cambridge University recruited the three teammates to help decipher the Nazi codes, in particular that of the Enigma machine. The three were stationed throughout the war at Bletchley Park.

Unlike Alexander, who continued to work for British intelligence after World War II, Golombek became a full-time chess professional primarily supporting himself through writing. He was the chess correspondent for the *London Times* for over 40 years and wrote for the *Observer* from 1955 to 1979. Golombek was the editor of the *British Chess Magazine* from 1938-1940 and served as its overseas editor during the 1960 and 1970s. He wrote many well-received books including best game collections on José Raúl Capablanca and Richard Réti, which went through several editions.

Golombek, whose parents were born in Russia, was fluent in Russian. He used this skill as both a translator of Soviet chess literature and as an arbiter at many important competitions including the 1963 World Chess Championship match between Mikhail Botvinnik and Tigran Petrosian.

A three-time British champion (1947, 1949 and 1955), Golombek represented England nine times in Chess Olympiads. He received the International Master title in 1950 and was given the title of Grandmaster Emeritus in 1985.

SONJA GRAF

Germany, Argentina, United States (1908-1965)

Sonja (Susanne or Susann) Graf learned chess from her father at an early age. In her teens and early twenties, she frequented cafes where she gained valuable experience playing casual games. During this “apprenticeship” in her native Munich, she picked up pointers from 2008 World Chess Hall of Fame inductee Siegbert Tarrasch, but nothing comparable to the systematic coaching that Vera Menchik received from Géza Maróczy.

Graf quickly rose to become the second strongest female player in the world in the early 1930s and played two matches with Menchik. The first in 1934 in Amsterdam ended 3-1 in Menchik’s favor and the second in Semmering, Austria, in 1937 finished 11.5-4.5, again in Menchik’s favor. The closest Graf came to winning the Women’s World Chess Championship was the 1939 event, held alongside the concurrent Chess Olympiad. Graf was second behind Menchik, with the margin of victory in the 19-round event coming down to just one game, before their individual encounter. Sonja recounted her tragic loss from a completely winning position in a September 19, 1964, article in *The New Yorker*, stating, “against Menchik, when she was world champion, I had a won game, but I found the three stupidest moves you could think of and lost.”

An ardent enemy of the Nazi regime since the early 1930s, Sonja played in Buenos Aires under “Liberty,” the international flag, after being removed from the German list of representatives. She chose to remain in Argentina during World War II. While living there, she wrote two books about her life in chess, *Así juega una mujer (This Is How a Woman Plays)* published in 1941 and *Yo Soy Susann (I Am Susann)*, which came out in 1946.

Graf moved to the United States in 1947 after marrying Vernon Stevenson. The couple settled in California and henceforth she went by Graf-Stevenson. She tied with Gisela Gresser in the 1957 U.S. Women's Chess Championship and won outright in 1964, a year before her death.

REUBEN FINE

United States (1914-1993)

Reuben Fine was one of the initial inductees to the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame in 1986, notable for his writing on the game as well as his play. Born in New York City, Fine started playing chess at age 8. He won the U.S. Chess Open for the first of seven times at age 17, but never claimed the title of U.S. Champion. His performance in individual events and Chess Olympiads between 1936 and 1938 was outstanding. On the eve of World War II, he was one of the very best players in the world, possibly the strongest as evidenced by his tie for first in the 1938 A.V.R.O. tournament.

During the war Fine used his analytical skills to aid the U.S. Navy in predicting the location of German U-boats. Fluent in several languages including French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Yiddish, and German, he also did translation work.

The death of Alexander Alekhine in 1946 left the title of World Chess Champion vacant. In 1948 the governing body of chess, International Chess Federation (*Fédération Internationale des Échecs* or FIDE), organized a tournament to determine the new title holder. Fine was among the six players selected to participate in the event to be held jointly in Moscow and The Hague, but declined. Different reasons have

been offered for his refusal. At the time of the event, Fine's explanation was that he was studying for his PhD in psychology with important exams coming up that demanded undivided attention. Many years later he offered an alternative explanation—that he didn't want to play in a tournament in which collusion between Soviet players was such a strong possibility.

Fine was a prolific writer on the game enjoying both critical and commercial success. Among his best sellers were *Basic Chess Endings* (1941), *Chess the Easy Way* (1942), *The Ideas Behind the Chess Openings* (1943) and *Lessons from My Games* (1958).

[SIR] STUART MILNER-BARRY

Great Britain (1906-1995)

Stuart Milner-Barry may be remembered more for his contributions in helping break the German Enigma code during World War II than for his tactical inventiveness in the game of chess. The latter accomplishments include opening lines in the French and Nimzo-Indian defenses, which bear his name.

Milner-Barry was friends with Hugh (C.H.O'D.) Alexander long before they joined forces at Bletchley Park, the British codebreaking headquarters. The two were British school boy champions (1923 and 1924 respectively) before meeting at Cambridge University. Later, after graduating, they were two of England's strongest players in the 1930s and were representing their country at the 1939 Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires when war broke out.

Over time, Alexander proved to be the superior chess player. However, both made honorable contributions for Britain's Special Intelligence during the war. Although Milner-Barry did not fully understand some of the codebreaking strategies and mechanisms used by his coworker, Alan Turing, he proved his worthiness with his knowledge of the German language as related in a chapter he contributed to *Code Breakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park* (1993). This book also mentions that Milner-Barry personally delivered a letter requesting money additional funding from Alan Turing directly to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Once the war was over and his work at Bletchley Park complete, Milner-Barry continued to work for the British government, taking a position in the Treasury Department where he eventually rose to the post of Under-Secretary. He was made an Officer of the British Empire in 1946 for his work at Bletchley, earned The Most Honourable Order of the Bath in 1962 for his work at the Treasury, and in 1975 he was created a Knight Commander of the (Royal) Victorian Order.

DAWID PRZEPIÓRKA

Poland (1880-1940)

Dawid Przepiórka was a renaissance man of Polish chess. A child prodigy who taught himself how to play at age seven, the Warsaw-born Przepiórka was an active but not particularly successful participant in European tournaments in the decade prior to World War I. He reached his peak as a player later in life, winning the Polish Chess Championship in 1926 at 45. The same year he won a strong tournament in Munich ahead of Rudolf Spielman and Efim Bogoljubow.

Two other high points of his career were the gold and silver medals he won as a member of the Polish Olympiad team at Hamburg 1930 and Prague 1931. Przepiórka played on board three in both events behind Akiva Rubinstein and Savielly Tartakower.

Przepiórka was not only a player, organizer and patron. Poland, which had been newly reestablished as an independent nation following World War I, experienced a golden era between 1925 and 1939. Przepiórka played a major role in its chess affairs, serving as the deputy chairman of Poland's chess federation. He was also the head of the organizing committee and as a sponsor for the 1935 Warsaw Chess Olympiad.

Przepiórka was an active chess problemist and endgame composer whose work was widely published. *Mistrz Przepiórka* (Warsaw 2013) includes over 160 of his compositions. Besides being an expert in this field, Przepiórka was also a great collector of chess literature, and at the start of World War II had one of the largest libraries in the world.

A strong opponent of the Nazi's attempt to involve themselves in world chess affairs, Przepiórka did not represent Poland in the 1936 unofficial Olympiad held in Munich, Germany. He also did not participate in any other events in Germany, a country where he had frequently competed between 1905 and 1930.

The last year of Przepiórka's life is not well documented. His good friend and fellow chess composer Marian Wróbel published an article in 1955 in which he recalled that a makeshift chess club had been organized in a private dwelling in Warsaw during World War II and that the Germans made a raid sometime in January 1940, arresting about 10 players. After a week or so, the non-Jewish persons were released; however, Przepiórka, according to Wróbel's statement, was executed in April 1940. It is believed this occurred near Palmiry, a village outside of Warsaw, where so many members of the Polish intelligentsia were murdered by the Nazis between 1939 and 1941.

JACQUELINE PIATIGORSKY

United States (1911-2012)

Born in Paris, France, Jacqueline Piatigorsky would later transform chess in the United States through her efforts as a player, philanthropist, and tournament organizer. She and her family emigrated from France to the United States in 1939 after the Nazi invasion of France. Piatigorsky and her husband were both Jewish and feared the consequences of a Nazi invasion of France. The two moved to the United States and lived in New York and Pennsylvania before ultimately settling in Los Angeles, California.

There Piatigorsky became part of a community of Los Angeles-area chess players, which included a number of other European immigrants like future U.S. Women's Chess Champions Sonja Graf and Nancy Roos. Notable for her own achievements as a player, Piatigorsky made even greater contributions to chess through her philanthropy and tournament organization. She learned chess at a young age and her passion for the game fueled her philanthropic efforts. She organized major tournaments in the United States, including the 1963 and 1966 Piatigorsky Cups, which featured the best players from around the world. Until the 2014 Sinquefeld Cup, these competitions were the strongest held on American soil. Through the Piatigorsky Foundation, she supported rising American chess players, allowing them to better compete against international competition.

HUMPHREY BOGART

United States (1899-1957)

Actor Humphrey Bogart's father taught him to play chess in his adolescence. At the time, his family was visiting their vacation home in Canandaigua Lake, and chess became a well-loved recreational activity for Bogart. During the Great Depression, the Bogart family's finances took a turn for the worse, and young Bogart earned money for the family by betting on his own chess games. He played chess throughout New York City, hustling opponents in Manhattan and on Coney Island.

In 1934, Humphrey Bogart earned his first small role in the film *Midnight*, but his budding career soon faltered after his first movies received negative reviews. He then returned to chess as a means of supporting himself, before later acting successes established him as one of the best-known actors of the mid-twentieth century. Bogart played chess on the set of films such as *the Passage to Marseille*, and he suggested that chess scenes be added to *Casablanca*. Future United States Chess Hall of Fame inductee Herman Steiner gave chess lessons to Bogart and other movie stars.

During the 1940s, Bogart used his celebrity status to encourage support of chess and the war effort. Along with a few other movie stars, Bogart sponsored the Pan American Chess Congress in 1945 and acted as its Master of Ceremonies. Bogart served as a member of the Board of Directors of the United States Chess Federation (USCF). During World War II, he promoted war bonds, encouraging American citizens to loan their money to the military budget. While filming *Casablanca*, Bogart played chess against a U.S. Army soldier. As the soldier traveled for combat, he and Bogart continued to play chess by mail. Bogart took on several other correspondence chess opponents in the military as well.

GISELA GRESSER

United States (1906-2000)

Born in Detroit, Michigan, Gisela Gresser was one of the first American-born women to make an impact on the chess world. In the 1940s, she earned the Master title, became a Woman International Master in 1950, and in 1992 she was inducted into the U. S. Chess Hall of Fame. A fellow passenger introduced Gresser to chess while she was on board a ship, traveling with her husband. For the rest of the trip, she studied the game, the flame that ignited her passion for chess. She taught herself with the aid of the instruction materials given to her by the traveler. She eventually called on Arthur Bisguier for further coaching and instruction. She played against her fellow New Yorker, Robert (Bobby) Fischer, and had advised his mother toward encouraging his pursuit of excellence in chess.

While Gresser was one of the best American woman chess players of the twentieth century, she also used her talents to support the war effort during World War II. Innovative and hardworking, Gisela Gresser staged simultaneous exhibition matches for the benefit of the Red Cross, served on the committee for Chess for the Wounded, and made visits to military hospitals, boosting morale by teaching chess to wounded veterans.