



**BATTLE ON  
THE BOARD**

*Chess during World War II*

JUNE 25, 2015 - JANUARY 17, 2016

# BATTLE ON THE BOARD: *Chess during World War II*



Though chess is often perceived as a game of war, it also serves as a means of passing long hours, a reminder of home, or as an aid in recuperation for members of the military. *Battle on the Board: Chess during World War II* includes artifacts related to aid efforts and how the war changed the game. Chess often played a part in philanthropic efforts that aimed to assist members of the military, whether in the United States, on the front, held in prisoner of war camps, or convalescing in hospitals. Chess played just one role in the larger aid efforts undertaken by American citizens, who according to a 1946 report of the President's War Relief Committee, would ultimately donate over \$1 billion to war charities between 1939 and 1945.

In 1929, the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War established new regulations that aimed to ensure humane treatment of prisoners of war. These included rules about camp conditions, the rights of prisoners, and medical treatment. Among these articles was a stipulation that when possible, "belligerents shall encourage intellectual diversions and sports organized by POWs."

The International Committee of the Red Cross acted to enforce these regulations by inspecting POW camps to evaluate adherence to these standards, keeping records of the locations of POWs, and facilitating the exchange of letters and packages between POWs and their families. In an August 7, 1940, *New York Times* article, the Red Cross announced that relatives of POWs in European camps could send packages to them free

of charge. Concerned not only with the physical well being of captured troops, but also their mental and emotional needs, the Red Cross' original list of items that could be sent to POWs of European Axis powers included food, clothing, and toiletries as well as recreational items like books, footballs, playing cards, and chess and checkers sets. In 1942, the list of materials that could be mailed was greatly expanded, with baseball and softball equipment added to the list of permitted sporting goods.

Like other games and sports in POW camps, chess proved a means of fighting boredom and depression and provided a distraction from the fear and monotony of prison life. In November 1942, the *New York Times* reported that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited St. James's Palace, where the Red Cross' Prisoner of War Department assembled parcels for captive troops. Upon learning that the favorite gifts of British POWs were chess and mahjong sets, she purchased a number of packages to send to them. In some camps, POWs organized their own chess tournaments as a means of passing time. At Stalag III B, the June 25, 1943, issue of the camp's newsletter, titled *POW-WOW*, advertised a chess and checker tournament as a means of staving off becoming "Stalag-happy." While captive at Stalag Luft I, 1st Lt. Harold L. Weachter, a navigator in the U.S. Army Air Forces, carved his own chess set. He even composed a poem about the experience, lamenting that after spending so much time and care in creating the set, the Red Cross sent Christmas care parcels with numerous sets.

William Chittenden's Prisoner of War  
Chess Set and Tea Box  
1940  
Collection of the National Museum of the Marine Corps

Harold Weachter  
Prisoner of War Chess Set  
c 1944  
Collection of the National Museum of the United States Air Force



**Coca-Cola Game Set**  
c 1941-1945  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

**The Stuttgart USO Chess, Checkers, and TIC-TAC-TOE Pocket Set**  
c 1940-1944  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

**The American Red Cross Chess, Checkers, and TIC-TAC-TOE Pocket Set**  
c 1944  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame, Gift of Margaret Martin

**The Victory Kits Workroom Chess, Checkers, and TIC-TAC-TOE Pocket Set**  
c 1940-1944  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame



Efforts to aid in recreation for troops also extended to camps in the United States and the European and Pacific Theaters. In 1941, the United Services Organization (USO) was formed in response to a call by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The USO coordinated the recreation and aid efforts of six organizations: the Jewish Welfare Board, National Catholic Community Service, the National Travelers Aid Association, Salvation Army, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). As part of their aid work, many of these organizations made gift kits for outgoing soldiers and those in hospitals, some of which included simple pocket chess sets stamped with the groups' names.

Philanthropic efforts to create connections with civilian life were complemented by the activities of corporations of the era. The Druke Company, a renowned American manufacturer of games, began production of pocket games, including chess. These could easily be shipped to soldiers due to their small sizes. The Coca-Cola Company donated game sets to military camps in addition to their shipment of ten complete bottling plants to the European Theater.

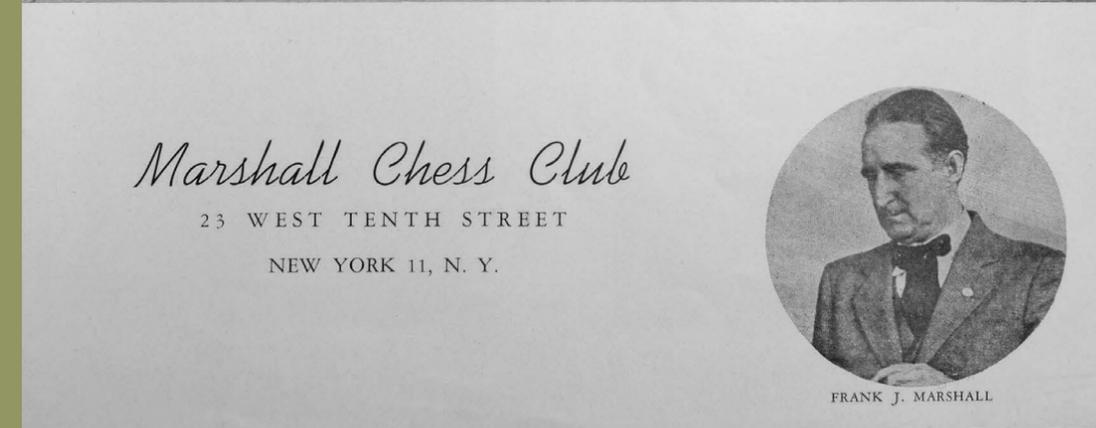
Unlike many federations in occupied territories abroad, the United States Chess Federation (USCF) was able to continue to conduct national chess championships through the course of the war. However, many of the nation's top chess talents also chose to turn energies to aid efforts on the homefront. Observing that the Red Cross provided chess sets at its recreation halls and hospitals and that members of many individual chess clubs across the country had initiated efforts to play chess with veterans in hospitals, the USCF partnered with the periodical *Chess Review* to found the organization Chess for the Wounded in 1945. They aimed to unite these disparate efforts through a national organization with five sections reflecting the regional structure of the Red Cross. Future U.S. Women's Chess Champion Mary Bain was the Southeast's Area Director, and the group's board

included future 1992 U.S. Chess Hall of Fame inductees Arnold Denker and Gisela Gresser. The activities of the new organization were reported in chess periodicals of the time as well as the USCF's annual yearbook.

The May 1945 issue of *Chess Review* announced the new organization with an article illustrating how the game assisted wounded veterans in their recovery. During the war, it had reported stories about chess tournaments organized by members of the military and chess-related aid efforts. Though many players assisted in the project, Gisela Gresser's work earned the attention of both the chess periodicals and national press. Gresser used her talents as the 1944 U.S. Women's Chess Champion to organize simultaneous exhibitions for the benefit of the Red Cross and the American Society for Russian Relief, Inc., which provided humanitarian aid to Soviet citizens affected by the war. She also taught chess in hospitals through the Red Cross and in the hall of the National Maritime Union as a volunteer for the United Seamen's Service.

While some aid efforts ended with the September 1945 conclusion of the war, many others that focused upon assisting wounded veterans and war refugees continued. Chess for the Wounded sustained its work through at least 1948, and some of its volunteers maintained or renewed their efforts after the outbreak of the Korean War. Their endeavors showed the human side of a game often associated with pure logic or competition, revealing how it could be used as a comfort in difficult times.

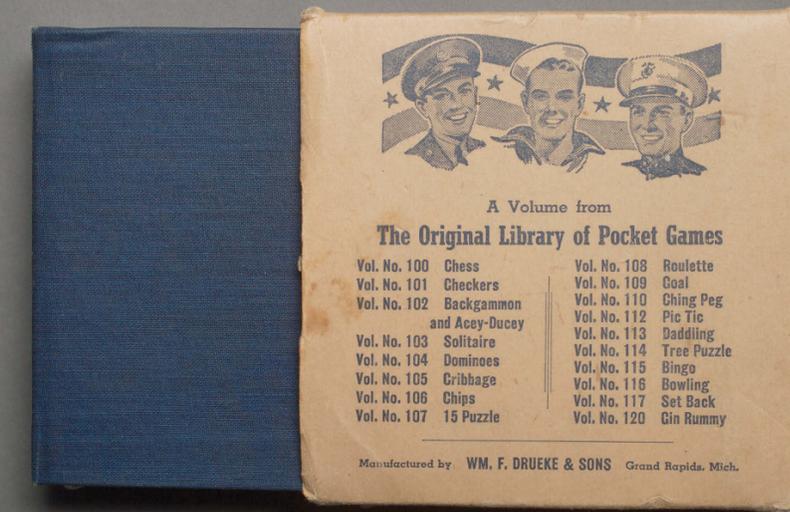
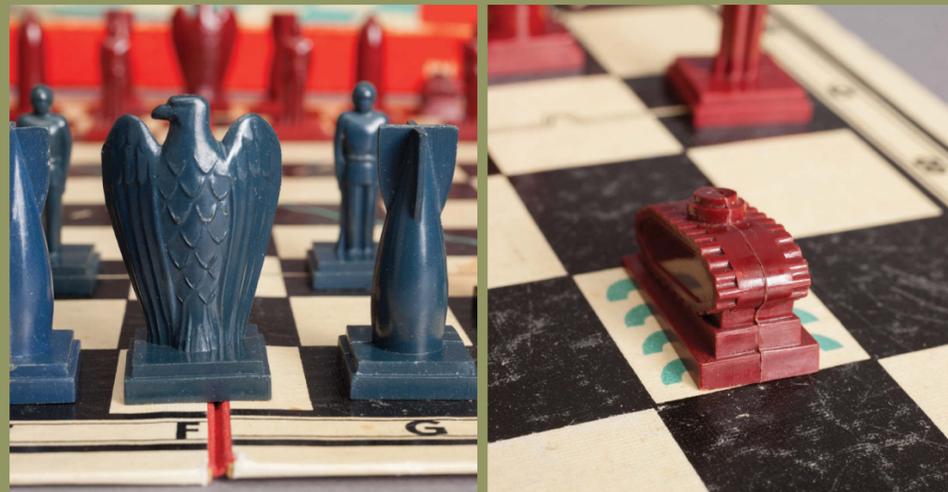
—Emily Allred, Assistant Curator



Above:  
**Advertisement for the Marshall Chess Club**  
c 1940  
John G. White Chess Collection at the Cleveland Public Library

Opposite:  
David Parker  
**Royal Air Force Pilots Playing Chess Whilst on Standby**  
March 20, 1940  
Image Courtesy of Getty Images

Toni Frisell  
**Officers in 332nd Fighter Group Playing Chess in Officers' Club at Air Base in Southern Italy**  
1945  
Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Spotter Cards  
1942-1945  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

Schach-Dame und Mühle  
1940-1945  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

Tak-Tik Wehr-schach  
1937-1938  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

Army-Issued Pocket-Sized "Roll Up" Checkers Set  
c 1941-1945  
In Memory of Frank H. Braunlich Jr.

Jeep Board by Geo. S. Carrington Co.  
c 1941-1945  
Private Collection

Wm. F. Druke & Sons Pocket Chess Game  
1939-1945  
Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame



David Warther Stevens  
**World War II Themed Chess Set**  
 Late 20th century  
 Collection of Dr. George and Vivian Dean

## *World War II and the Rise of Soviet Chess*

Few events have impacted the chess world as dramatically as World War II. The years 1939 to 1945 witnessed a substantial decline in the number of important competitions, including the World Chess Championship and Chess Olympiad, both of which were suspended. Many prominent players were killed, while others were forced to flee their homelands and settle elsewhere, profoundly altering the balance of chess strength around the world. Although the general public often views chess as a “war game,” its practitioners are rarely seen as real life warriors. However, during World War II, chess players served with honor and distinction in a variety of roles, from combat soldiers to intelligence officers. Others took prominent roles in relief efforts. The losses of talented players as well as the immigration of European players and cultivation of talent in the Soviet Union contributed to a vastly changed landscape after the war, when the U.S.S.R. rose to prominence in international competitions and newly arrived immigrants invigorated chess in the Americas.

The chess world felt the effects of the war soon after its outbreak. The 1939 Chess Olympiad and the Women’s World Chess Championship in Buenos Aires began on August 24, 1939, and the finals commenced on September 1, the day World War II started. The English team, which included Conel Hugh O’Donel Alexander, Harry Golombek, and Stuart Milner-Barry, immediately withdrew from the event and headed home. These three went on to play critical roles in breaking the German “Enigma” code, one of the key events that led to the Nazis’ defeat.

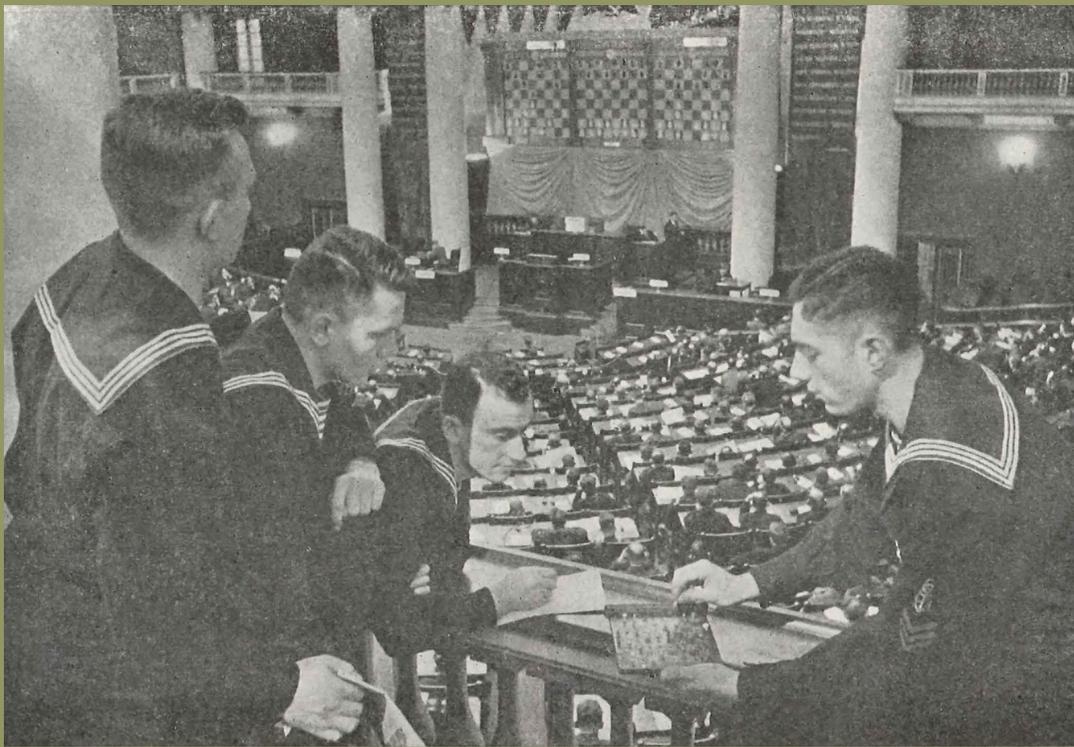
Many other players in the 1939 Buenos Aires competitions, especially those of Jewish origin, chose not to return to Europe. This included the entire German

team, Miguel Najdorf of Poland, and Gideon Ståhlberg of Sweden, among others. Soon Buenos Aires was bustling with chess activity, which continued throughout the war. New arrivals Najdorf and Erich Eliskases led Argentina to a golden period during the 1950s and early 1960s, when they won five team medals in Olympiads.

While chess in Argentina thrived, Poland suffered tragic losses. Najdorf and the other Jewish members of the Polish Olympiad team avoided the fates of many of their compatriots whom the Germans killed. The noted master problemist, organizer, and sponsor Dawid Przepiórka was executed by the Nazis, who also destroyed his magnificent and irreplaceable library. Nazi bombing raids also obliterated the British National Chess Centre in London including the valuable records housed within.

Though the wartime deaths from natural causes of dominant late 19th- and early 20th-century players José Raúl Capablanca, Emanuel Lasker, and Frank Marshall represented the end of an era, other players died tragically early. Vera Menchik, the first official Women’s World Chess Champion, was killed along with her sister and mother in a V-1 rocket bombing raid, which destroyed their South London home in the summer of 1944. Her death was a terrible blow to the developing field of women’s chess.

The World Chess Championship also changed as a result of the war. The great 1938 AVRO tournament, won by Paul Keres on tiebreak, was supposed to produce a challenger to play a title match with World Chess Champion Alexander Alekhine, however an Alekhine-Keres match never materialized. A naturalized Frenchman living in Paris with his American-born wife, Alekhine found himself in a difficult situation during the war, and the Nazis used him for propaganda purposes. His 1946 death in Portugal transformed the World Championship from a private affair with conditions set by the reigning champion to an event organized by the World Chess



Above:  
**Scene at a Chess Tournament in the USSR, in the hall of the Uritzy Palace in Leningrad. Published in USA vs USSR Radio Match Program.**  
 1945  
 Collection of John Donaldson



Left:  
**USA vs USSR Radio Match**  
 1945  
 Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame

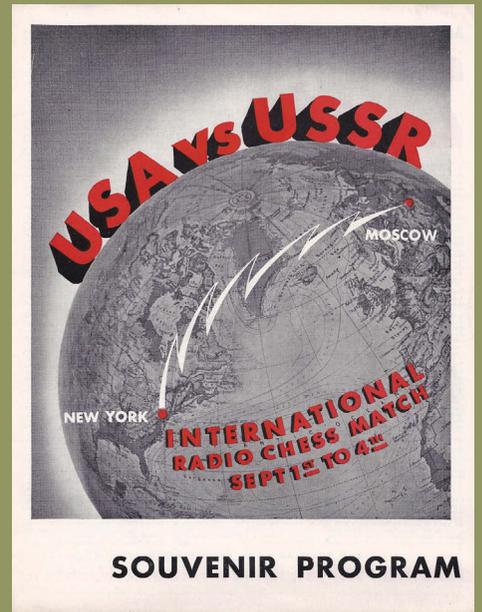
Opposite:  
**USA vs USSR Radio Match Program**  
 1945  
 Collection of John Donaldson

Federation (*Fédération Internationale des Échecs* or FIDE). Due to the deaths of Alekhine and Menchik, the first World and Women's World Chess Championships held after the war did not include reigning world champions, allowing for the achievements of a new group of players who had honed their skills in the Soviet Union during the duration of the war.

During World War II, authorities in the Soviet Union considered chess to be a morale booster and consequently organized important tournaments even after the June 1941 German invasion of their homeland. These included Kuibyshev (Samara) 1942, Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg) 1943, and the 13th and 14th U.S.S.R. Championships. The Soviet masters' constant practice served them well during a radio match against the United States in early September of 1945, the first important competition held after the war. The match result stunned the chess world as the Americans, who had dominated the 1930s Chess Olympiads but played little serious chess during the war, were crushed by their Soviet counterparts, 15 ½ - 4 ½. This was the beginning of a changing of the guard. Botvinnik would soon become world champion (1948), starting a reign of Soviet champions that would continue until 1972. Soviet Olympiad teams won every Olympiad they in which they competed from 1952 to 1990, except Buenos Aires 1978.

Nevertheless, the U.S.S.R. experienced difficulties due to its huge losses of life during World War II, especially among males in their late teens and early twenties. The low number of boys born during and immediately after the war effected the development of junior talent, and there was a huge gap between Boris Spassky winning the World Junior Championship in 1955, and Anatoly Karpov taking the title in 1969. Soviet representatives in the World Student Team Championship also struggled during this period.

American players faced a formidable challenge after the war—how to compete as amateurs against the professional players of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, like



Argentina, the United States experienced a major influx of new talent due to the war, including future U.S. Women's Chess Champion Nancy Roos from Belgium. Particularly significant was the large number of Latvians who immigrated to the United States after their country was taken over by the Soviet Union. Edmar Mednis and Charles Kalme were the most significant names but Alexander Liepnieks, Viktors Pupols, Erik and Andrew Karklins, Valdemars Zemitis, and Elmars Zemgalis also contributed greatly to American chess, often in areas of the country that previously had little chess activity.

This rise of Soviet chess after World War II had a tremendous impact on the chess world as the U.S.S.R. would dominate individual and team competitions for most of the next half century. The only 20th-century event to eclipse the impact of World War II on the game was the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991.

—IM John Donaldson, 2015



## BATTLE ON THE BOARD: *Chess during World War II*

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*Above: Issues of Chess Review, 1943-1945*

*Collection of the World Chess Hall of Fame,  
Gifts of John Donaldson*

*Photography by Michael DeFilippo*

