

# Was Alekhine a Nazi?

Edward Winter

(1989)



In March 1941 a series of articles under the name of Alexander Alekhine appeared in

*Pariser Zeitung*, a newspaper published in the French capital by the occupying German forces. Entitled ‘Aryan and Jewish Chess’, the articles claimed that Jews had had a destructive effect on the development of the game. Three brief extracts will give the flavour:

- ‘Do the Jews, as a race, have a gift for chess? After 30 years’ chess experience I would like to answer this question in the following manner: yes, the Jews have an exceptional talent for exploiting chess, chess ideas and the practical possibilities that arise. But there has not been up to now a Jew who was a real chess artist.’
- ‘Just as with Nimzowitsch and his System, so was Réti given a warm welcome by the majority of Anglo-Jewish pseudo-intellectuals for his book *Die neuen Ideen im Schach*. ... And this cheap bluff, this shameless self-publicity, was swallowed without resistance by a chess world, poisoned by Jewish journalists, which echoed the jubilant cries of Jews and their friends; “Long live Réti, and long live hypermodern neoromantic chess”.’
- ‘Again in the 1937 return match with Euwe the collective chess Jewry was aroused. Most of the Jewish masters mentioned in this review attended as press reporters, trainer and seconds for Euwe. At the beginning of the second match I could no longer let myself be deceived: that is, I had to fight not Euwe, but the combined chess Jewry, and in the event my decisive victory (10:4) was a triumph against the Jewish conspiracy.’

Much of the material was subsequently reprinted, though with considerable textual variants, in *Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden* and *Deutsche Schachzeitung*. The magazine *CHESS* printed extensive English translations (of the *Deutsche Schachzeitung* version), as did Horowitz and Rothenberg’s 1963 book *The Personality of Chess*. However, it was not until 1986 that a complete English version of the original *Pariser Zeitung* articles became available (*Alekhine Nazi Articles*, an excellent privately printed booklet edited by Kenneth Whyld). In recent years there have also been two reproductions of the original German, by Wolfgang Kubel (1973) and Herbert Griesshammer (1983).

**Das Judenschach**

**ist ausgeschaltet**

**Mit der Niederlage Dr. Euwes, der sich**

**von einer jüdischen Clique vorspannen liess,**

**verlor es endgültig den Anschluss**

Nach der Gegenüberstellung der jüdisch-sichernden und der arisch-angreifenden Schachidee beschäftigt sich Dr. Aljechin in diesem dritten Aufsatz mit den arisch-jüdischen Weltmeisterschaftskämpfen und seinem persönlichen Einsatz gegen das jüdische Schach, der endlich mit dem Ausschalten des jüdischen Einflusses endete.

An extract from *Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden*

Condemnation of the articles came from many notable sources. The November 1945 *CHESS* (page 28) quoted from *De Waarheid* a denunciation of Alekhine by G.C.A. Oskam: 'His libellous articles have filled me with sorrow. They were written by a miserable collaborator, by a mean profiteer; they breathe lies and fraud, the necessary elements of racial hatred; they are dictated by the qualities present in the person of a double traitor ...' The same magazine published an anti-Alekhine letter from Ossip Bernstein which was not without over-the-fence gossip: 'I refrain from giving further disgusting details about his behaviour. It could be added that he adopted the Nazi salute "*Heil Hitler*" with outstretched arm.'

Alekhine's first disavowal of the articles appears to date from just after the liberation of Paris (and not from just after the end of the War, as sometimes alleged even today). The December 1944 *BCM* (pages 274-275) and the January 1945 *CHESS* (page 53) both reported Alekhine's statement in a published interview (*News Review*, 23 November 1944) that while in France 'he had to write two chess articles for the *Pariser Zeitung* before the Germans granted him his exit visa ... Articles which Alekhine claims were purely scientific were rewritten by the Germans,

published and made to treat chess from a racial viewpoint.’

After his invitation to the London, 1946 tournament was withdrawn because of his war record, Alekhine wrote a long open letter to the organizer, W. Hatton-Ward, which was widely published at the time. With regard to the articles, he stated:

‘Among the heap of monstrosities published by the *Pariser Zeitung* appeared insults against the members of the Committee which organized the 1937 match: and the Dutch Chess Federation even lodged a protest on this matter with Post. At that time I was absolutely powerless to do the one thing which would have clarified the situation, to declare that the articles had not been written by me ... For three years, until Paris was liberated, I had to keep silent. But from the first opportunity I tried in interviews to show up the facts in their true light. Of the articles which appeared in 1941 during my stay in Portugal and which I learnt about in the *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, nothing was actually written by me. I had submitted material dealing with the necessary reconstruction of the FIDE (the International Chess Federation) and a critique, written well before 1938, of the theories of Lasker and Steinitz. I was surprised when I received letters from Messrs Helms and Sturgis at the reaction which these articles – purely technical – had provoked in America and I replied to Mr Helms accordingly. Only when I knew what incomparably stupid lucubrations had been created in a spirit imbued with Nazi ideas did I realize what it was all about. But I was then a prisoner of the Nazis and our only hope of preservation was to keep silent. Those years ruined my health and my nerves and I am even surprised that I can still play chess.’

(The above is the *CHESS* translation. In the *BCM* Helms came out as ‘Helsus’ and ‘1939’ was given rather than 1938.)

Alekhine wrote a further denial on page xx of his last book, the posthumous *! Legado!*:

‘Once more I insist on repeating that which I have published on several occasions: that is, that the articles which were stupid and untrue from a chess point of view and which were printed signed with my name in a Paris newspaper in 1941 are a falsification. It is not the first time that unscrupulous newspapers have abused my name in order to publish inanities of that kind but in the present case what was published in *Pariser Zeitung* is what has caused me the most grief, not

only because of its content but also precisely because it is impossible for me to rectify it ... Colleagues know my sentiments and they know perfectly well how great is the esteem in which I hold their art and that I have too elevated a concept of chess to become entangled in the absurd statements poured out by the above-mentioned Parisian newspaper.'

Thus Alekhine's line of defence was not consistent. Sometimes he claimed to have written nothing, but on other occasions said that the anti-Jewish slant had been added by others. The latter possibility is unlikely; once the anti-Jewish slant is taken away there is hardly anything left.



Alexander Alekhine

Two widely-read reference books, Golombek's *The Encyclopedia of Chess* (London, 1977) and Hooper and Whyld's *The Oxford Companion to Chess* (Oxford, 1984), state that upon the death of Alekhine's widow in 1956 the articles were found in Alekhine's own handwriting. In both cases the authors subsequently gave their source for this information: Brian Reilly, then the Editor of the *BCM*, had told them

in 1956 that he had just seen the articles. However, this is denied by Reilly, whose eagerly-awaited biography of Alekhine will doubtless provide his account of the matter. [Brian Reilly died in 1991, and his work on Alekhine has not been published.] Another alleged sighting of the articles also has a curious twist. In the May 1986 *Europe Echecs* (pages 300-301) Jacques Le Monnier reported that before her death Grace Alekhine had passed a number of her late husband's notebooks to a friend (unnamed). In 1958 Le Monnier was given access to the material and found, word for word and in Alekhine's own handwriting, the text of the first anti-Semitic article, which had appeared in *Pariser Zeitung* of 18 March 1941. The word 'Jew' was almost invariably underlined, Le Monnier reported. This testimony seems watertight until one compares it with what Le Monnier wrote about the articles on page 24 of his 1973 book *75 parties d'Alekhine*: 'Alekhine stated several times that "not a word had been written by him". It will never be known whether Alekhine was behind these articles or whether they were "manipulated" by the editor of the *Pariser Zeitung*, a Czech player well known at the time in Parisian chess circles.' These are, to say the least, surprising words from someone who, a dozen or so years later, was to declare that he himself had seen one anti-Semitic article in Alekhine's own handwriting. (In passing it may also be wondered why Alekhine and his wife refrained from destroying such incriminating material as may have been in their possession after the fall of the Third Reich.)

Such inconsistencies will be welcomed by defenders of Alekhine, many of whom have suggested that, being forced, for his own and his wife's safety, to write anti-Semitic material, the then world champion deliberately made it ridiculous and inaccurate. The original *Pariser Zeitung* publication contained many elementary misspellings of proper names ('Marschall', 'Andersen', 'Pilsburry', etc.). There is a reference to the match between La Bourdonnais and 'Macdonald' (instead of McDonnell) and to a 'Polish Jew' named 'Kienezitzky'. (Kieseritzky is meant, although he was apparently neither Polish nor Jewish.) Some mistakes were corrected in the *Deutsche Schachzeitung* reprint, as were factual errors like the suggestion in *Pariser Zeitung* that Schlechter was a Jew. But the theory that Alekhine tried to signal his insincerity is mere guesswork which is not even supported by any claim to that effect from Alekhine himself. The wrong spellings might just as easily be put down to a *Pariser Zeitung* typesetter's difficulty in reading Alekhine's idiosyncratic handwriting.

Fresh documentation has recently come to light which considerably strengthens the case against Alekhine. Pablo Morán has discovered two Madrid publications dated 3 September 1941 which contain interviews given by Alekhine just before his departure for the Munich, 1941 tournament. *El Alcázar* reported:

'He [Alekhine] added that in the German magazine *Deutsche Schachzeitung* and the German daily *Pariser Zeitung*, currently

published in Paris, he had been the first to deal with chess from the racial point of view. In these articles, he said, he wrote that Aryan chess was aggressive chess, that he considered defence solely to be the consequence of earlier error, and that, on the other hand, the Semitic concept admitted the idea of pure defence, believing it legitimate to win this way.'

Alekhine told Valentín González of *Informaciones* about his intention to give lectures 'about the evolution of chess thought in recent times and the reasons for this evolution. There would also be a study of the Aryan and Jewish kinds of chess.' Moreover, Alekhine was quoted as saying that he was not in favour in the United States and England 'as a result of some articles I wrote in the German press and some games I played in Paris during the last winter – against 40 opponents – for the German Army and Winter Relief.' When asked which players he most admired Alekhine's published reply was: '... I must stress the greatest glory of Capablanca, which was to eliminate the Jew Lasker from the world chess throne.'

The Nazi articles affair is one of chess history's most notorious scandals and intriguing mysteries. Although, as things stand, it is difficult to construct much of a defence for Alekhine, only the discovery of the articles in his own handwriting will settle the matter beyond all doubt.

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## Afterword

The above article first appeared on pages 68-70 of the 2/1989 *New in Chess*. On page 6 of the 4/1989 issue Jacques Le Monnier made a brief reply. It consisted of a fuller extract from the *Europe Echecs* article in which he had said that he had seen an article in Alekhine's own handwriting, as well as the following remark:

'I would not change a word. Alekhine's notebooks are private documents and French law is categorical in this respect. They will enter in the public domain 60 years after the author's death, i.e. in 2006. After this date historians and researchers may consult them, provided that Alekhine's heirs and the owners of the notebooks agree.'

In C.N. 1920 we quoted this and commented: 'It is a pity that Mr Le Monnier did not answer our straightforward point: if in 1958 he saw an article in Alekhine's own hand, why, some 15 years later, did he write that 'it will never be known whether Alekhine was behind these articles ...'?

C.N.s 3605, 3606 and 3617 reverted to the Alekhine affair, and the third of these items mentioned that French copyright law changed in the 1990s, with the result that the notebooks would not enter the public domain until 1 January 2017.

Complete English translations of Alekhine's articles in *El Alcázar* and *Informaciones* were given in C.N. 1455 and were subsequently reproduced on pages 277-282 of *A Chess Omnibus*. On a matter of detail, Mr Christian Sánchez (Rosario, Argentina) kindly pointed out to us in April 2005 that in the penultimate line on page 279 'Sunday' should read 'Saturday'. Below, in conclusion, is an excerpt from *El Alcázar* showing Alekhine with his interviewer:

**Habla el doctor Alekhine**

El doctor Alekhine ha tenido la gentileza de concedernos una entrevista en el hall del hotel Ritz, y su charla amable y matizada de gran amenidad ha abarcado muchos temas ajedrecísticos por demás interesantes.

Refiriéndose al Torneo en que va a participar, nos dijo que contará con 16 jugadores de diferentes países: húngaros, suecos, holandeses, suizos, etc. Los nombres de los inscritos no los conocía, pero dijo que había leído que el suizo Grob participaría, así como



**Alekhine habla con nuestro compañero Lastanao.**



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