Chess Spies

by Bill Wall

In August 1939, the British Government Code and Cypher School (GSSC) moved to Bletchley Park (B.P.) in Buckinghamshire, and became known as the Golf Club and Chess Society. The Bletchley Park grounds were fenced in and huts were completed for cryptographers to work in. The guards were told their purpose was to keep the inmates of this purported lunatic asylum from wandering away. Bletchley Park was chosen because it was halfway between Cambridge and Oxford, the two universities that would serve as the primary sources of cryptoanalytic trainees.

The GCSS was directed by Commander Alastair Denniston, who was convinced of the inevitability of war with Germany. His mission was to decode the German ENIGMA messages. The team created the world's first electronic computer, which was kept secret until the 1970s. Denniston believed that chess players had an aptitude for cryptanalysis and tried to recruit chess players and mathematicians.

Sir Philip Stuart Milner-Berry (1906-1995) was a strong international chess player and was hired to be a code breaker when World War II broke out. Milner-Berry was the first to be recruited by Bletchley Park. He then recruited Hugh Alexander and Harry Golombek. Milner-Berry was head of Hut 6, a section responsible for deciphering messages which had been encrypted using the German enigma machine. Milner-Berry expressed the intensity of code-breaking in terms of chess. It was rather like playing a tournament game (sometimes several games) every day for five and a half years.

One of the members of the Golf Club and Chess Society was Jack Good (1916-2009). He was considered a mathematical genius and the Cambridgeshire chess champion. He was later the technical and scientific advisor for Stanley Kubrick for the film 2001: A Space Odyssey. Good was recruited by Hugh Alexander, the reigning British chess champion (British champion in 1938 and 1956), to work at Bletchley Park. Good found himself working for Alan Turing deciphering German naval codes. Good and Turing also worked together in Manchester on the first ever computer controlled by an internally stored program.

Harry Golombek, another top British chess player, was hired to work at Bletchley Park as a code breaker. Golombek, Alexander, and Miler-Berry all abandoned the 1939 Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires to return to Britain and became code breakers.

Another chess player hired to work at Bletchley Park was James McRae Aitken, 10-time Scottish chess champion. He worked in Hut 6.

Another chess player at Bletchley included Donald Michie, who later became involved in artificial intelligence and chess computers.

Shaun Wylie was another strong chess player and mathematician that worked at Bletchley Park.

In view of the chess talent at Bletchley Park, newcomers were advised not to play chess for money with any of the staff.

In December 1944, the Bletchley Chess Society played a chess match with Oxford University and won the match 8-4. C.H.O′D Alexander played board 1 and Harry Golombek played board 2.

In the United States, Reuben Fine, one of America′s top chess players, worked for the Navy plotting out possible enemy submarine (U boats) routes.

During World War II, one of the top Swedish code breakers was Ake Lundqvist (1913-2000), a strong chess player.. He later became a correspondence chess grandmaster and was Swedish correspondence champion in 1945. He played in three world correspondence championships, placing as high as 3rd place.

During World War II intercepted communiqu′s called the Venona files were used to find a pattern of espionage and betrayal in the United States. One of the agents who was later arrested in 1944 was a chess player who/s cover name was Chess Knight. He was a KGB officer in Mexico City.

After the war, Cold War spies in Germany sent postcards back to MI5 containing coded messages written in cryptic text base around a series of postal chess games. Gordon Thomas, historian for MI5 and MI6, said that chess moves were a common way of communicating during the Cold War. He also said the Russians in particular favored using chess as a method of communicating. It was their great national pastime and information would often be disguised as chess moves.

In a KGB handbook, a section described how to use chess moves when communicating. For example, one move could ascertain what was happening and another could give instructions. Agents would be trained to understand chess moves.

In Washington, D.C. during the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet embassy had a resident chess master on staff that was later identified as a KGB agent.

In the 1970s, V.D. Baturinsky, head of the Soviet delegation for Karpov in his world championship matches, was a KGB colonel.

In the 1970s, preventing dissident Soviet chess players from winning matches and tournaments was a priority of KGB foreign operations.

In 1972, the Soviets accused the CIA of bugging Boris Spassky's chair during the Fischer-Spassky world chess championship match in Iceland. Both chairs were later x-rayed and no electronic bugs were found.

After Bobby Fischer won the world chess championship in 1972, he stated that he feared assassination by the KGB, which was one of the reasons why he refused to play chess after his match with Boris Spassky.

In 1979, Grandmaster Lev Alburt defected from the USSR. Speaking at Harvard's Russian Research Center, Alburt said some Soviet grandmasters were used as KGB infiltrators.

In 2008, Roustan Kamsky, father of Gata Kamsky, wrote an article on how the KGB influenced the world of chess and politics thru advertising and the press.

In 2009, a book was published in Russia called *The KGB Plays Chess*. The authors are a Russian-American historian, a former KGB lieutenant colonel, Viktor Korchnoi, and Boris Gulko. The book describes the interferences of the Russian KGB in the course of world chess.

In 2009, a number of postcards surfaced, all addressed to Graham Mitchell, He was the deputy director general of the British MI5 during the 1950s. The postcards discussed chess games, but they contained code. The postcards came from an undercover agent from Frankfurt. The chess notations were ciphers with secret information. (source: "Chess and Espionage," *Chess.com*, July 1, 2018)

The KGB always monitored and controlled the movements of Soviet chess players, especially when they travelled abroad. Chess players were ideal candidates for intelligence work – they were highly intelligent, traveled extensively, and could blend into academic and intellectual circles without suspicion. (source: "Chess and Espionage: The Cold War's Intellectual Battlefield," *Chess.com*, Aug 15, 2024)