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A Cascade of Claptrap

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Grand Strategy: 60 Games by Boris Spassky (2nd edition), by Jan van Reek, self-published 2002, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 176pp., \$19.95.

“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp / Or what’s a heaven for?” — Robert Browning, Andrea del Sarto, 1855

“In chess, Lasker, Botvinnik and Nunn are mentioned as scientists, although they never made an intellectual achievement of lasting value, like I did.” — Jan van Reek, circa 2002

“... whole chapters of grandiose verbosity, apropos to nothing ...” — Howard Staunton, 1858

An otherwise forgettable 1971 Dustin Hoffman film is memorable for its title: *Who Is Harry Kellerman and Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?*. Its relevance to our topic here is that we must ask: who is Jan van Reek, and why has he written this terrible book?

According to his web-site Van Reek is a Dutchman, born 1945, residing in or near Maastricht. A player of about 2300 strength, and a noted composer of endgame studies, he writes a column for the Dutch Chess Federation. His web-site (<http://web.inter.nl.net/hcc/rekius/>) deals with chess





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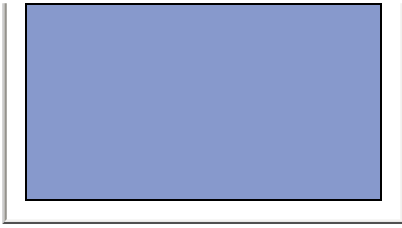
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history, endgame composition, and some unrelated topics such as lithography, Japanese woodcuts, and statistical trends in smoking. He has written about 25 books, most of them small, self-published pamphlet-style works dealing with endgame studies and composers, examples being *My Twenty Favorites* (24 pages, 1993) or the series *Schaakspelers als eindspelkunstenaars* (Chess players as endgame artists). Readers outside Holland probably know him best for *Hypermodern Strategy* (1996), an ambitious attempt at a “revision of Nimzovitch’s *My System*.”

A review, by Hanon Russell, of *Hypermodern Strategy* may be found in the **ChessCafe** archives. Many of the same flaws noted there are present in the new book: pretentiousness, insufficient or unclear explanation of important ideas, a cumbersome writing style, and poor command of English. To these flaws *Grand Strategy* adds lack of originality, failure to credit borrowed sources, a disturbing amount of misinformation, and if anything even greater pretension. We find it an especially dire book, but we feel compelled to discuss it at length.

The book’s basic thesis is a good one: that the games of Boris Spassky illustrate important aspects of chess strategy, that he is an especially good role model for the chess student. For this purpose the veteran GM Spassky, world champion 1969-1972 and probably one of the top ten players of all time, is an excellent choice, because at his best he had a very versatile, well-rounded style. Unlike, say, a Janowski, Bogolyubov, or Flohr, he was able to handle many different types of positions with equal skill, and so one can find in his games very good examples of a wide variety of strategic themes essential to chess mastery. Van Reek attempts to elucidate these strategic principles through 60 annotated games.

However, between concept and execution there is a wide gap. Problems start almost immediately, in an introduction that is at once superficial, unfocused, error-filled and ponderous. It states, ungrammatically and



inaccurately, that “an [*sic*] thorough book about Spassky’s games was lacking,” ignoring among others *Spassky’s 100 Best Games* (1972) by Bernard Cafferty, or more recently Krogius & Golubev’s 198-game, two-volume, 725-page *Boris Spassky* (in Russian, Moscow, 2000). After a brief overview of Spassky’s chess development, Van Reek writes:

“The Soviet school did not start from fascination by [*sic*] the game itself, but it [*sic*] was founded as an instrument for Stalinist propaganda ... Botvinnik developed training programs and analytical methods of a high standard ... Although the method is rational, it lacks scientific depth. The understanding of hypermodern play is limited. Only Boleslavsky differed ... [Smyslov] is able to play hypermodern chess although he cannot rationalise its principles.”

An amazing cascade of claptrap. To imply that nobody in the USSR was really interested in chess itself is absurd, and official support for chess began years before Stalin succeeded Lenin. Even more absurd are the assertions that Botvinnik’s methods were unscientific and superficial, and that Soviet masters lacked understanding of hypermodern ideas. Van Reek provides no support for these wild claims, nor gives them relevance to anything else. He names Boleslavsky the sole exception, yet quickly contradicts himself by citing Smyslov, who is somehow hypermodern despite a supposed inability to “rationalise its principles.”

Shortly hereafter Van Reek waxes ponderous and even more fallacious:

“[W]e go back to the origins of chess theory. William Cluley wrote about the main principle of chess strategy in 1857: ‘If we consider the two parties at the onset of a game, we see an exact balance of power ... Thus we recognize the *Law of Equality* ... All legitimate play ...

must end in a draw.’ ... [A lengthy discussion of the game Spassky-Ree, Beverwijk 1967, in terms of Cluley’s ideas, follows.] ... When Cluley’s *‘The philosophy of chess’* was published, Staunton criticised the book heavily ... Steinitz published similar theoretical thoughts in 1889, as ‘leading ideas of the modern school’. Although Steinitz only applied the ideas brilliantly, Lasker attributed the theory to him. Ken Whyld corrected this mistake.”

Van Reek’s citing of Cluley (1808?-1858), a name unfamiliar even to serious chess history buffs, is perhaps intended as a display of erudition, but amounts to window-dressing and flim-flam. A full discussion of Cluley’s now very rare 1857 opus *The Philosophy of Chess* is beyond our scope here; we may attempt such in the future. Interested readers are referred to the entry “philosophy and chess” in *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, and to Ken Whyld’s “The Man Who Invented Steinitz” (*New in Chess*, #2/1995). Van Reek seems to have based his statements on Whyld’s article, which he misrepresents. Whyld did not characterize Lasker’s discussion of Steinitz’s theory as a mistake; he merely thinks it likely that Steinitz read and was influenced by Cluley, though his basis for this is entirely inferential (no direct evidence that Steinitz ever read Cluley is known today). Cluley’s stature as a chess player was virtually nil, his attempts to apply his philosophy to practical play were misguided and fruitless, and to say that Steinitz “only applied his ideas brilliantly” is at best rather like saying Isaac Newton merely applied the ideas of the apple that hit his head.

So why has Van Reek resurrected the obscure Cluley, whose relevance to Spassky’s chess strategy is tenuous at best? The next paragraph provides the answer:

“Theory about chess strategy made a leap forward in 1927, when Euwe wrote sagacious

articles about pawns in the centre and the attack on the king, and Nimzowitsch published his system of prophylaxis. Van Reek completed, clarified and combined these approaches into a general theory of human and computer chess in 1997.”

Thus the ponderous point finally becomes clear: Van Reek establishes an Apostolic Succession of chess theory, starting with Cluley, continuing with Steinitz, Euwe and Nimzovitch, finally culminating in — himself! The contributions of Morphy, Paulsen, Chigorin, Tarrasch, Lasker, Capablanca, Breyer, Réti, Alekhine *et al* are not even worth mentioning, but the spotlight shines on Van Reek’s ‘completed, clarified general theory’ as the Omega-point of chess.

One might dismiss this as a momentary lapse of modesty, but Van Reek seems quite serious. Elsewhere in the book he states “it is useful when someone looks into [chess] strategy every seventy years,” as if no one but he had bothered since Nimzovitch. On his web-site he claims that “Ideas of Cluley, Euwe and Nimzowitsch have been transformed into a scientific theory,” and furthermore, as shown by the quote near the top of this review, he considers his contributions to be greater than those of Lasker and Botvinnik, two great world champions, and GM John Nunn, Ph.D., one of today’s best writers on the game. Aside from James Schroeder (who said “I know more about chess than anybody that ever lived”), this is without parallel in recent memory. One wonders if “immodest” is sufficient here, or if something like “delusional” is called for.

Immodesty can sometimes be excused if the boaster delivers the goods. Both Tarrasch and Nimzovitch, for example, lacked humility but played great chess and wrote worthwhile books. However, that is not the case here. Contrary to the book’s title, Van Reek conveys no sense of “Grand Strategy.” Typically the introduction to a

chapter or game is a sometimes connected, sometimes jumbled, and usually badly composed mix of tautologies, definitions, postulates, opinions, metaphors, and history, both factual and erroneous and usually irrelevant. The intros often provide no clear sense of the strategic theme (kingside attack, central control, prophylaxis, etc.) under discussion. Some examples:

- “Restraint has the aim of restricting the opponent’s abilities.” — True, and further research indicates that eating has the aim of consuming food.
- “The aim of consolidation is a good contact between one’s chessmen and squares in the *[sic]* own territory.” — Eh? Sounds like the time Marcel Duchamp’s wife glued his pieces to the board.
- “A player needs Russian intuition at the board and Dutch science during the analysis. We cannot judge the quality of this approach, but we have no serious alternative.” — Again: eh?
- “If a steamrolling *[sic]* is impossible, a preliminary struggle for the centre will be necessary. When the centre is controlled or closed, the hostile king becomes the aim. The direction of action remains straightforward or veers off, depending on the king’s position. Chessmen are aimed at and move towards the king ... Timing is essential in an attack on the king, because the object might disappear by flight or the positional advantages may be temporarily *[sic]*.” — If a clear writing is impossible, a struggle to understand the book will be necessary. The reader’s interest may disappear by flight or be temporarily.
- “In a Western view, the preparation of a battle in any way is regarded as unchivalrous. The Japanese say: ‘A samurai fights after the battle is won.’ These views clashed at Pearl Harbor 1941.” — What “Western view” is this? Six months after Pearl Harbor, very well-prepared Western forces smashed the Japanese at Midway.
- “Nimzowitsch considers prophylaxis as the strategy

for the prevention of undesired opposing possibilities. A great historical example of a prophylactic planner is the sixteenth-century leader Shingen. He ruled by imprisoning his father and killing a son. His preparation of a military campaign consisted of plotting and bribing.” — Now there’s a role model for a chess player! This Shingen sounds like a cross between emperor Nero and Kirsan Ilyumzhinov.

- “During the match preparation [for Fischer-Spassky 1972] ... the ‘Russians’ ... did not recognise Fischer’s knowledge of prophylaxis ... This ‘Russian’ blunder shows a great defect in the Soviet school: the abstract properties of prophylaxis are not understood.” — Mainly this shows a great defect in Van Reek’s understanding of both prophylaxis and the Soviet school.

Van Reek’s intros often use a lot of words to say next to nothing, and to invent useless terms:

“Complicated medium term planning can be called ‘pocket strategy’. If a chessman [*sic*] spends extra time on restraint or consolidation, we call it a *prophylactic manoeuvre*. Matter is sacrificed for time in the *development sacrifice*. The *positional sacrifice* gives matter for a favourable position. ‘Pocket’ strategy is shown by the following examples.”

While prophylaxis and positional/developmental sacrifices are valid, established chess concepts, the superfluous label “pocket strategy” does not advance our understanding of them in any way.

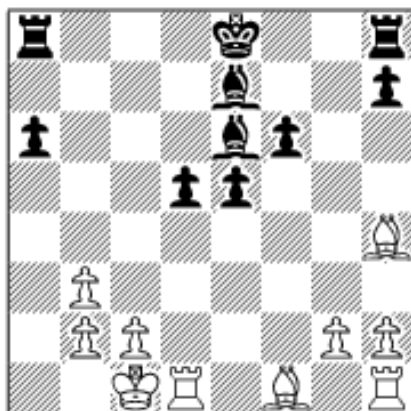
The best material in the introductions is not Van Reek’s, but derives from writings by Euwe in the 1920s. In a discussion of pawn centers, Van Reek writes:

“[An] important theoretical study is given by

Euwe on the static and dynamic characteristics of pawn centres ... A pawn centre has four static features:

1. A means to control important squares
2. A shelter for the captured area
3. A group of pawns requiring protection
4. An obstacle to the player's own long-range pieces."

This is followed by the game Belyavsky-Spassky, USSR Championship 1973. The annotations include a lengthy discussion of this position



in terms of Euwe's four static features. If the entire book were of comparable quality, we would have little cause for complaint. And to Van Reek's credit, this game is a particularly good example of the theme under discussion. Unfortunately, that standard is not consistently upheld. For example in the hodge-podge 51-page chapter "Prophylaxis" we find Shaked-Spassky, Cannes 1998, a 23-move Scotch Game slugfest that has about as much prophylaxis as a Roman orgy.

The annotations are, for the most part, not by Van Reek. He provides no bibliography, though he usually credits his sources: Euwe, Keres, Fischer, Botvinnik, Geller, Timman, Donner, Spassky himself, and other GMs. With his usual modesty, Van Reek comments that "these were valuable but needed correction." Yet what he mainly provides is merely the occasional computer-assisted addendum, the sort of thing any good player with *Fritz* or

Junior can add to almost any notes by a human analyst, even a great GM.

And sometimes Van Reek does not credit his source. His annotations to Spassky-Fischer, Santa Monica 1966, written in the third person, give the impression of being by Van Reek, but in fact they have been taken almost verbatim from Spassky's in *Second Piatigorsky Cup* (1968), the official tournament book. Looking at this position,



after **12.Qd1-e1**, here are comparative excerpts:

Spassky: "I approach Black's opening pawn structure somewhat skeptically since it gives the pawn center to White. I have gained favorable results many times with this line."

Van Reek: "Spassky approaches Black's pawn structure somewhat skeptically since it gives the pawn centre to White. He had had a favourable result with 12. f4."

Presumably Van Reek had Spassky's blessing to use his notes, but it is deceptive not to mention the source specifically. Even copying, Van Reek is inaccurate, since by "this line" Spassky referred not to 12.f4, which he played against Shishkin at Tallinn 1959, but to 12.Qe1, his text move against Fischer.

Van Reek's conceit crops up in the annotations. At this point in Spassky-Fischer, WCh 13th game, 1972,



Fischer played **21...Qd7**. Van Reek writes “So far Fischer has played the game with great strategic superiority. Now he fails to find the simple tactic **21...Bxe5!** **22. Qxh6 Bg7.**” What amazing condescension, both arrogant and misleading. To assume that after **21...Bxe5 22.Qxh6**

one of the the best players in the world did not see that **22...Bg7** was necessary (to prevent **23.Ng5**) is presumption of a very high order. In addition to Fischer, who chose not to play the move, and Spassky, who was willing to allow it, various commentators including Timman, Gligoric, Alexander, and R. Byrne, have been skeptical or negative toward **21...Bxe5**. Furthermore the situation after **21...Bxe5** is not simple, **22.Qxh6** is not White’s only playable reply, and the resulting variations are quite complex and not clearly better for Black compared to the text. Only the omniscient Van Reek tells us that it’s all so simple.

Such problems are minor, though, compared to the simple fact that, on the whole, the annotations fail in Van Reek’s stated objective, i.e. they do not convey much understanding of strategy. Unlike the Belyavsky-Spassky example, most of *Grand Strategy*’s annotations deal with tactical details or irrelevant asides, and do little to explain the salient strategic features of a position and the plans appropriate to it. Compared to books that do a good job in this area (see list below), *Grand Strategy* is anything but grand.

Additionally, the annotations suffer from Van Reek’s own misconceptions, irrelevancy, poor style and uncertain English, viz.:

“Although Fischer leads in the match, he chooses a hypermodern opening.” — We say again: “Eh?”

“So far the game is nearly identical to Parma-Bogdanovic, Novi Sad 1965, but the players didn’t know of it. This was usual in the days, before chess games were filed in computer databases.” — Nothing of any further relevance from Parma-Bogdanovic is given, making the remark about databases as meaningful as noting the absence of aircraft at the Battle of Waterloo.

“An obstacle to the player’s the own pieces ...”

“It is an excellent pragmatism for the over-the-board player.”

“White’s courageous advance starts a new harmonica.”

That last is the book’s malapropist gem. The book’s introduction says “John Beasley gently improved the English grammar.” We recommend that next time Mr. Beasley use brutal force.

Presumably reviewers already noted such flaws in the first edition, yet the flaws persist. The main new feature of this 2nd edition is a 25-page autobiographical appendix by Spassky. Though quite interesting at times, it unfortunately suffers the same affliction, viz.:

“This is how A. K. Tolush (K.) Dified [*sic*] our alliance from the beginning. He made a remark about no payment, ‘just expenses’ and trouble for eight years.”

Though Van Reek’s web-site gives *New in Chess* as the book’s publisher, *NiC* says it is merely a distributor. *NiC*’s name is nowhere in the book, and it is hard to believe that *NiC*, which though edited by Dutchmen is generally an exemplar of good English, would let such bad writing appear under its auspices. The involvement of Spassky himself defies all reason. Van Reek is described as being “supported by Boris Spassky”; we can only urge

Boris to drop him like Prince Hal dumped Falstaff. For those seriously interested in Spassky's games we suggest the aforementioned Cafferty work (an excellent book, reissued in 1991 as *Boris Spassky, Master of Tactics*), *Boris Spassky's 300 Wins* (Chess Stars, 1998), or Soltis' *The Best Chess Games of Boris Spassky* (1973, but many used copies still extant). For German speakers there is *Weltgeschichte Des Schachs: Lieferung 27 Boris Spassky* (1972), or for Russian speakers the aforementioned Krogius & Golubev work. Anything but this.

And for those interested in chess strategy there are many better books: along instructional lines there is Chernev's *Logical Chess*, Stean's *Simple Chess*, Euwe's *Judgement and Planning in Chess*, Silman's *The Amateur's Mind* and *How to Reassess Your Chess*, Keres and Kotov's *The Art of the Middle Game*, and Nunn's *Understanding Chess Move by Move*, or in a more historical vein Coles' *Dynamic Chess*, Saïdy's *The March of Chess Ideas*, Euwe's *The Development of Chess Style*, and Watson's *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*, to name only a few.

We have seen some pretentious chess books in our day, such as Schultz's *Chessdon*. Some over-ambitious books, e.g. Rowson's *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*. Some unoriginal cobblings (e.g. much of the Eric Schiller catalog). Some rife with historical error (e.g. Schiller again, or Charushin on Charousek and Bogolyubov). Some with bad writing (Paul Motwani's books, or Levitt's *The Turk*). And many with bad English, by both native and foreign speakers. Yet seldom have we seen such a combination of pretentiousness, over-ambition, unoriginality, historical error, bad writing and bad English in one volume, as *Grand Strategy*. In its own unfortunate way it comes close to serving as a perfect negative example, embodying most of the worst tendencies in today's chess writing.

The third quote at the start of this review is from Staunton's review of Cluley's *Philosophy*. His remarks

condemned the book to quick and lasting obscurity. It perhaps did not deserve this, but *Grand Strategy* does. We recommend that the chess public consign it to a similar fate.



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