



BOOK REVIEWS



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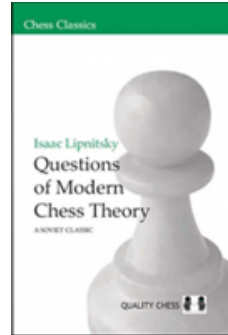
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Golden Oldie

Steve Goldberg

Questions of Modern Chess Theory, by Isaac Lipnitsky, 2008 Quality Chess, Figurine Algebraic notation, Paperback, 229pp., \$29.95

Questions of Modern Chess Theory was penned by twice-Ukrainian champion Isaac Lipnitsky in the Soviet Union in 1956. Anatoly Karpov, in his Foreword to this new edition, describes the original version as follows: “It was on the sidelines in every respect: it was published in Kiev, in a small edition (by Soviet standards of course) and with many misprints. From the very moment of its appearance the book seemed condemned to oblivion. But something extraordinary ensued.”



Karpov notes that such disparate champions as Botvinnik and Fischer eagerly absorbed Lipnitsky’s words. Indeed, you’ll find mention of Lipnitsky in Fischer’s *My 60 Memorable Games* (game 23, Fischer-Reshevsky). “Inaccessible to the mass of readers,” Karpov continues, “the book occupied a place of honour in the home libraries of grandmasters and coaches ... The book was becoming a legend.”

How so? Karpov explains that “There are some books – conscientious compilations – whose authors strive to convince you that two and two make four and the Volga flows into the Caspian Sea. And then there are some books which stimulate thought. Such a book is the one before you.”

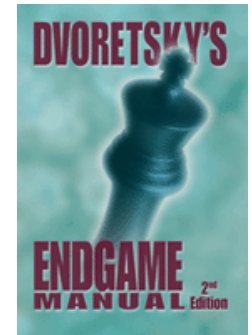
Since its original appearance over fifty years ago, opening theory has evolved significantly, particularly with the advent of the Internet and world-class chess engines. But as the book’s publisher notes, “Technology might have changed the way we look at chess, but the pieces still move in the same way they did sixty years ago.” Except for the 120 pages of analysis (now outdated) devoted to the Ragozin variation of the Queen’s Gambit, most of the original book appears in this 2008 version.

Whatever misprints may have appeared in the original edition, there remain a couple oddities in the current English translation. Chapter 1 (“On the Opening”) is very brief and serves more as an introduction than a chapter in its own right. Then chapter 2 (“The Centre”) opens with the same three paragraphs, word for word, that began chapter 1.

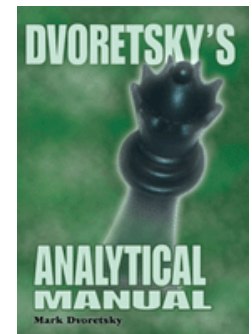
However, the rest of the book lives up to the lofty heights noted by Karpov. One can easily imagine Fischer absorbing Lipnitsky’s words like a sponge, reviewing the author’s ideas on his ever-present pocket chess set. Of course, in those days, it required knowledge of Russian to do so. Today, we have this English-language version.

An interesting sidelight developed when I read Lipnitsky’s Chapter 3 presentation of the game Em. Lasker-Janowski, New York 1924. Calling up this game from my database, I noticed a slightly different move order. Then checking online, I found yet a third move order for this game. By the end of move eight, however, all three versions were in agreement.

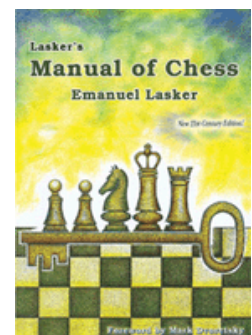
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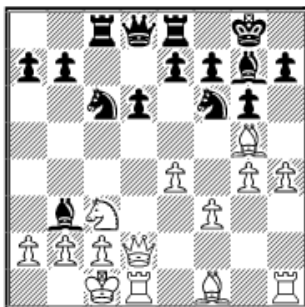
[Lasker's Manual of Chess](#)
by Emanuel Lasker

So what's in the book? There are far too many fundamental aphorisms and wonderfully illustrative game segments that Lipnitsky presents to include here, but let's start with a look at the table of contents:

- Preface: Isaac Lipnitsky and his Super-Book, by Efim Lazarev
- Foreword by Anatoly Karpov
- Foreword by the UK Publisher
- Ch. 1 On the Opening
- Ch. 2 The Centre
- Ch. 3 The Centre and the Flanks
- Ch. 4 Conquering the Centre from the Flanks
- Ch. 5 Mobilizing the Pieces
- Ch. 6 Evaluating the Position
- Ch. 7 The Concrete Approach
- Ch. 8 From Critical Positions to Settled Positions
- Ch. 9 Positional Flair
- Ch. 10 Plans in the Opening
- Ch. 11 The Initiative
- Ch. 12 Modern Gambits
- Ch. 13 Opening and Middlegame
- Ch. 14 Reevaluation of Values
- Ch. 15 How Long Does a "Novelty" Last?
- Ch. 16 How is an Innovation Born?
- Appendix: Selected Games of Isaac Lipnitsky

In the early portion of the book, Lipnitsky stresses the importance of central control, whether through its actual occupation or via piece support from the flanks. He then notes the dangers of wasted tempi and the need for accurate position evaluation.

Chapter 7 ("The Concrete Approach") is only seven pages long, but it may be one of the most important sections of the book. Lipnitsky demonstrates how dogmatic adherence to general principles can lead a player to defeat without his realization of what actually happened. "In any particular position," he states, "the rejection of some laws (directives) merely makes way for the affirmation and success of others." A player must be able to accurately assess, Lipnitsky states, "which laws – maxims, principles, rules – are valid in a given, specific case." Here's an excellent example, a practical case faced frequently:



It is White to move, and Lipnitsky addresses two opposite approaches regarding how White should capture the bishop on b3:

(a) The superficial, dogmatic decision: White must capture towards the centre with $a2xb3$, since $c2xb3?$ would open up the king, which is on the same file as the black rook. Besides, after $c2xb3?$ Black would be left with an easily won king-and-pawn endgame if all the pieces were exchanged. Therefore, $a2xb3!$.

(b) The concrete, creative decision: in this position the chief, determining principle is the all-out attack on opposite wings. In the event of $13.axb3? Nb4!$, threatening $Qd8-a5$, Black obtains an extremely strong attack. On the other hand after $13.cxb3!$ Black's attack is very hard to develop, despite the placing of the rook and

king opposite each other (For example: 13...Nb4 14.Kb1!).

White for his part will be able to continue his successful storming of the opponent's kingside. In these circumstances Black's extra pawn in the centre has no special significance.

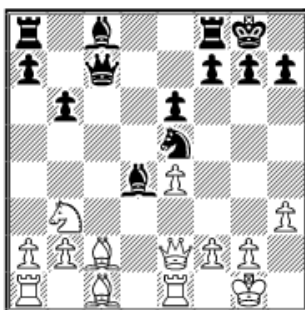
Unfortunately, the text at this point contains a rather egregious error. It states, "So a2xb3, and not c2xb3, is correct." Lipnitsky clearly intended the opposite, as the text continues, "This is not only the concrete, creative solution to the problem, but a solution in keeping with certain specific chess principles which play the central role here and can be expressed something like this: *with sharp attacks on opposite wings, success depends on your ability to combine your own offensive on one wing with the essential prophylactic measures on the other.*"

Other examples are provided, after which Lipnitsky states, "To sum up, we may say that the correct assessment of a position is inconceivable without probing deeply into its content – without specific attention to its obvious and, especially, its concealed factors. A concrete, creative decision is not at all a denial of chess generalities, since the rejection of some laws and maxims – which are often obvious ones – is counterbalanced by the affirmation of others which perhaps are more covert."

In the next chapter, Lipnitsky demonstrates a painstaking evaluation of a position, so that the reader can observe, even briefly, how a master successfully breaks down a specific position. He goes on to explain the superficial analysis that many annotators settle for. As an example, Lipnitsky quotes Chigorin, regarding a Lasker-Sheffield game he saw annotated in a German chess magazine. "There were four notes to the game in all – and not one of them was correct!"

Chapter 10 stresses a point often missed by beginning and intermediate players – the overriding importance of developing and implementing a proper plan of action, right from the opening. He states, "During the process of development in the opening, special attention must be given to devising concrete plans. The plans we conceive must be pursued with maximum energy and without being sidetracked by minor details, even though losses of tempo are sometimes unavoidable ... In pursuing his plan, each player must try to oppose the other's efforts to do the same ... It is important to understand that in the opening you have to contend not so much with your opponent's individual moves as with his ideas and plans. Fathoming your opponent's designs makes it far easier to conduct the ensuing fight successfully."

In chapter 11, Lipnitsky reviews the importance of obtaining and maintaining the initiative. Essentially, he says, use it or lose it. "The initiative in chess does not like to remain homeless," he quips. As an example, he discusses the following position from his 1955 game Khalilbeyli-Lipnitsky:

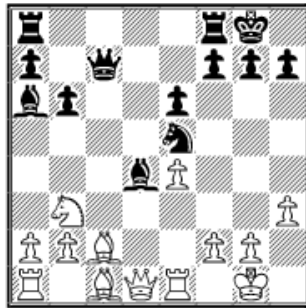


Black has the initiative. His minor pieces have seized strong positions in the centre. His queen has taken aim at the kingside from c7 and is exerting pressure on the c-file. But how is he to maintain the initiative? His bishop on d4 is attacked, and if it retreats to c5

there follows 17.Nxc5 Qxc5 18.Be3 Qc7 19.Rac1 – when the initiative, which Black has lost, passes to White. In such cases, looking for a way to develop your initiative further is an especially urgent matter. Here such a possibility exists:

16...Ba6! Black seizes an important diagonal with tempo, and constricts White's forces even more. White cannot take the black bishop, in view of 17.Qxa6 Nf3+! 18.Kf1 (after 18.gxf3 Qg3+ White is quickly mated) 18...Nxe1 19.Kxe1 Qxc2 20.Nxd4 Qxe4 21.Ne2 (21.Be3 is even worse, as 21...f5! wins a piece) 21...Qxg2, and having regained the sacrificed material, Black maintains a very strong attack. He answers 22.Qa3 with 22...Qh1+ 23.Kd2 Rac8, winning. In the game, White replied:

17.Qd1! Again Black is faced with the same problem of maintaining the initiative, since 16...Ba6 has not done the trick by itself.



There followed: **17...Bxf2! 18.Kxf2 Rfd8!** This move is the point of the combination. White is forced to place one of his minor pieces in a pin, since the queen is tied to the defence of the bishop on c2. **19.Bd2 Nc4** Black plays to win his piece back. **20.e5!** Best! The threat was 20...Nxd2 and 21.Qf4+.

Lipnitsky provides another several moves, noting, “At the end of it all, Black has emerged with an extra pawn. He might have let the whole combination pass, if the question of keeping or losing the initiative had not confronted him so urgently.”

Over and over again, Lipnitsky urges his readers not to blindly accept everything they hear or see. Although many of the fundamental principles he stresses are well known (“control the center,” “obtain the initiative,” “develop and follow a plan”), he constantly warns his readers to always take into account the specific nature of any given position. Every rule has exceptions, and the astute player must understand when to apply and when to discard any given maxim.

If I had to encapsulate Lipnitsky's approach very succinctly, I would state it as follows: “Always question, always probe, think for yourself.”

My only real complaint about the book is the frequent lack of complete game scores. In many instances, only a partial game segment is given. I like to see how a player takes what may be a relatively small advantage and converts it to the full point. However, most readers with access to a large chess database will readily find the majority of the games that Lipnitsky presents.

Questions of Modern Chess Theory is described on the back cover as “the lost masterpiece of Soviet chess literature ... Russian experts say it is one of the most influential chess books of the 20th century.”

If it was important enough for Botvinnik and Fischer to hold dear, this reviewer would suggest, without reservation, that this book still belongs in every serious player's library fifty years later. It holds very little endgame instruction, and doesn't contain the breadth and depth of

positional and tactical detail of many of today's manuals. But what it does contain is even more important – it teaches the player to be creative and to think independently.

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by Isaac Lipnitsky

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