

Aron Nimzowitsch

My System & Chess Praxis

Translated by Robert Sherwood

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Translator's Preface

It is a pleasure to help bring out this new, combined edition of Nimzowitsch. A fresh translation has been necessary for some time, and we can all be grateful to New In Chess for publishing it.

I have kept as closely as possible to the meaning and feel of the original German text. The serious reader is owed a faithful rendering of the man's thinking and attitude rather than the simplified and paraphrased versions that are sometimes preferred. This pays handsome dividends in a considerably deeper experience of the material and the man.

Nimzowitsch, for all his depth and his idiosyncratic way of writing, makes a conscious effort to be clear and helpful, and often exudes a human warmth toward the reader that the more technical and bloodless renderings of his work fail to convey. Nimzowitsch is an interesting guy. He is profound, emotionally sensitive to the point of an almost dangerous vulnerability, refuses to suffer fools gladly, despises provincialism and dogma, and feels it his mission to penetrate into the inner truth of chess out of a deeply felt respect for the authenticity of that truth. Nimzowitsch detests the superficiality and superciliousness of pseudo-professional 'thinking'. His was a three-dimensional sensibility in a mostly two-dimensional world. In this he is situated squarely in the company of other early twentieth-century figures who also struggled to liberate us from the categorical judgments and smug self-satisfaction of much nineteenth-century thinking. Nimzowitsch himself is not without his inconsistencies, exaggerations, and occasional immature defensiveness, and one comes across errors from time to time. But, as the saying goes, the mistakes of great men are more venerable than the successes of lesser ones.

In making the translation I often referred to the version by Philip Hereford (1929). Hereford's is for the most part a quite respectable rendering of Nimzowitsch; I certainly have admired his skill at unraveling some of the denser sentences. Its defect lies in its omission of certain passages that were evidently considered to be of questionable relevance or taste. In 1929 this was a defensible position; today we prefer our texts uncensored and authentic. The version before you is frank, unflinching, occasionally hard-edged, and at times marvelously soulful and warm. It is the real Nimzowitsch.

We have chosen to include Nimzowitsch's *The Blockade* and his very interesting article *On the History of the Chess Revolution 1911-1914*. *The Blockade* is a two-part monograph originally published in *Kagans Neueste Schachnachrichten* in 1925. *Revolution* provides

essential background for understanding the inner currents of the Neo-Romantic movement. The latter article was already included as an appendix in the original German book *Mein System*. *The Blockade* was not included in either of the two books, and some of the games in this article later appeared in *Mein System*. We have decided to leave those games where they were – again, this reflects our attempts to keep as close as possible to the original works.

Thanks are due to Jeremy Silman for the original impetus to produce an unvarnished Nimzowitsch suitable for the serious contemporary reader. Dale Brandreth at Caissa Editions provided the German texts. Allard Hoogland at New In Chess has handled the tasks of publication with his usual courtesy and skill. And Nimzowitsch deserves our gratitude for his insights and for his courage in holding his ground while the flak was coming in from all directions.

Bob Sherwood
Dummerston, Vermont, USA
May, 2016

My System

Foreword

As a rule I do not care for writing forewords. But in this case one would appear to be necessary, for the entire matter before us is so innovative and unprecedented that a foreword can only be a welcome ‘mediator’ for the reader.

My new system did not come into being all of a sudden, but developed slowly and gradually; I might say it has been the result of an organic growth. It is true that the principal idea – that of analysing the elements of chess strategy individually – is based on inspiration. And yet of course it would by no means be sufficient for me to point out, about an open file, say, that one must take possession of it and make the most of it; or, concerning a passed pawn, that one has to stop it. No, the matter before us demands that we go into it in detail. It might almost sound comical, but I can assure you, my dear reader, that for me the passed pawn has a soul just as a human being does. It has wishes that slumber unrecognized within it and has fears of whose existence ‘it hardly suspects’. The same is true for the pawn chain and the other elements of chess strategy. I will give you a series of laws and rules for each of these elements that you will be able to apply, rules that I will go into in great detail and which will help clarify even the most seemingly arcane links between events that occur frequently on our beloved 64 squares.

Part II of the book discusses positional play, especially in its Neo-Romantic form. It is often said that I am the father of the Neo-Romantic school. So it will not be uninteresting to hear what I have to say on the subject.

Textbooks tend to be written in a dry and lifeless tone. It is believed we would be giving up something were we to let in a humorous turn of phrase, for what business would light-heartedness have in a textbook on chess! This is an outlook I cannot even begin to share. I will go further: I regard such a viewpoint as completely wrong. Real humor often contains more inner truth than the most earnest seriousness. For my part, I am a declared adherent of using comparisons with everyday life to comic effect. I am therefore ready to call upon the experiences of life to make comparisons so as to reach a clear understanding of the complex processes inherent in chess.

In many places I have provided a schema to make the mental edifice clear in a visible way. I took this step for pedagogical reasons as well as reasons of personal safety, for otherwise, mediocre critics – there are such people – would be able or willing to see only the individual details but not the wider ramifications of the conceptual framework that forms the real content of my book. The individual items, especially in the first part of the book, are seemingly very simple – but that

is precisely what is meritorious about them. Having reduced the chaos to a certain number of rules involving inter-connected causal relations, that is just what I think I may be proud of. How simple the five special cases in the play on the seventh and eighth ranks sound, but how difficult they were to educe from the chaos! Or the open files and even the pawn chain! Naturally each new part was more difficult to think through, as the book was organized in a 'progressive' way. But this increasing difficulty I did not hold before me as, say, armor to protect myself against attacks from small-caliber critics. I emphasize this only for the sake of the reader. I will also be attacked for giving illustrative games played for the most part by myself. But such attacks, too, will hardly bowl me over. How could I not be justified in illustrating my system through my own games? Incidentally, I am in fact publishing a few (well-played) amateur games as well, so I am not all that self-indulgent.

I now hand this first installment over for publication. I do so in good conscience. My book will have its defects – I was unable to illuminate all the corners of chess strategy – but I flatter myself of having written the first real textbook of chess and not merely of the openings.

The Author, August 1925

Appendix

On the History of the Chess Revolution

1911-1914

1. The general situation of things before 1911

The first harbinger: I launch an assault against the arithmetic understanding of the center (on the occasion of my annotating a few games in the *Wiener and Deutsche Schachzeitung*). My article, 'Is Dr. Tarrasch's "Die Moderne Schachpartie", etc.' To say it up front: within the framework of a textbook, especially as space is limited, I am unable to write a fundamental or even profound study of my chosen theme. I will settle for re-publishing my revolutionary article from that earlier period. The same is true with respect to the important games that pertain to this theme.

So we have prepared our very esteemed reader and, having done so, may now, with a clear conscience, turn to this yellowed parchment.

First, however, an observation to which I want to assign enormous value: it is not my intention here to engage in polemic. Everything that smacked of polemic therefore had to be purged from the document. And if some small bit of polemic should be found adhering to this or that slip of paper, such a thing occurred against my will or because I could not rid the article of this mote without doing a disservice to the historical truth.

The first sortie against that orthodox doctrine of the center, which expected well-being only from the pawns,

I published in 1911 in the notes to my games vs. Salwe and Levenfish at Karlsbad 1911. That foray became even more pronounced in the game notes in the article on Tarrasch's *Die Moderne Schachpartie* ('The Modern Chess Game') (below).

Furthermore, I began to doubt (to put it mildly) the omnipotence of the forward-marching enemy center. In particular, I discovered the line 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 (stem game: Spielmann-Nimzowitsch, San Sebastian 1911).

Likewise, I was the one who could grasp the significance of the maneuver that today (to a considerable extent) has become common knowledge: play against a complex of weak points of a certain color. Compare my opening vs. Tarrasch in 1912: 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♘f5 4.♘d3 ♘xd3 5.♙xd3 e6 6.♘f3 ♙b6! and ...♙a6. This exchange signifies play against the weak light squares. I made use of this intention even more incisively in my game with Leonhardt (San Sebastian 1912).

There would be no point in recording all the scorn and derision directed at me during this period, or even in pointing it out. Suffice it to say that no one in the whole history of chess has been subject to such abuse. I was rewarded for my new ideas with invective and at best a systematically practiced silence.

The revolution occurred in 1913. It came in the form of an article, given below, that was revolutionary to a high degree.

I emphasize again that any polemical intent was far from my mind – I sanitized the article, removing from it any polemical sharp edge. I want to emphasize that when I mention Tarrasch in that article I refer to him

less in a personal way and more to the whole school he represents.

I also omitted the bold outcries in bold print around the article, which worked like fanfares trumpeting on all sides. For the revolution is all over and done with – we don't need the fanfares anymore, only further development that is leisurely and quiet.

And now the article.

Is Dr. Tarrasch's *Die Moderne Schachpartie* Really a Modern Conception of the Game?

New Thinking on Modern and Pre-Modern Chess

by A. Nimzowitsch

(Published in 1913 in the *Wiener Schachzeitung*, Nos. 5-8)

The collection of games published by Dr. Tarrasch under the title *Die Moderne Schachpartie* really represents a critical textbook on the openings in a unique form.

The whole (and, by the way, highly felicitous) scheme of the book, by which Dr. Tarrasch arranges his work, consists of a grouping of games (annotated by him) by opening. He demonstrates first the inadequate lines of play, later goes over to the better continuations, then finally pleasantly surprises us with the 'only correct' way of playing.

From my heart I wish for the book a wide distribution – it is chock full of 'system', expressed with clarity.

And yet it looks to me as though Tarrasch's conception does not by any means fully coincide with the new, truly modern understanding of chess.

Above all, Dr. Tarrasch is and will remain for us the author of 300 Chess Games. In this book he sought in the first place to meet the need of the public for strictly logical precepts, in the form of laws, for playing chess. Everything offered in game annotations before him is either a framework of variations or else too deep (Steinitz!!), for the latter is a mistake.

Steinitz' only mistake after all was that he was at least fifty years ahead of his generation! So it could happen that he might become notorious for his baroque ideas; and it is not without interest that it was just Tarrasch, his popularizer, who originated this altogether unmotivated, but today still generally widespread, point of view.

But to return to 300 Chess Games. In this book Dr. Tarrasch offers only very little that is his own, for the ideas in the book

The Blockade

By blockade we mean the mechanical stopping of an enemy pawn by a piece. This mechanical stoppage is achieved when one's own piece stands immediately in front of the pawn to be blockaded. For example, a black pawn at d5 is blockaded by a white knight on d4. It is customary, at least in master practice, to block the enemy pawn. But to my knowledge no attempt has so far been made to provide a theoretical rationale for the necessity of this strategic measure. Once we find such a rationale we will have solved the problem of the blockade!

We can get a little closer to an understanding of this problem by delving deeper into the essential nature of the pawn. One of its most marked peculiarities is unquestionably its powerful lust to expand, its desire to press forward. The free center provides a clear idea of this propensity of the pawn to gain in significance by its advance. Let us look, for example, at the following, previously unpublished, game:

Aron Nimzowitsch
Amateur

Riga 1910

(Remove White's a1-rook and place his a-pawn on a3.)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3
♘f6

As we shall soon see, Black is willing to let his e-pawn be captured, but now White's center becomes mobile. Hence it would have been more circumspect for Black to call a halt to the potential

white pawn avalanche by playing 4...d6.

5.d4 exd4 6.cxd4 ♙b6

Black is missing his check on b4 and this weakens his defense. The check (we are imagining the a-pawn on a2) would give Black time to consume the e4-pawn. And that would have been an excellent opportunity to hold up White's pawn advance, for – as I am wont to say with facetious pathos – years of experience should have proved to us that a dead pawn... cannot advance any farther. Now, however, after 6...♙b6, the pawn mass is set in motion.

7.d5 ♘e7

In presenting this little game we are able not only to elucidate the pawn's lust to expand but also to have a chance to behold the meaning of its advance. Had the knight gone to b8 or a5, it would have been driven away or displaced. Thus we note: (a) the propensity to advance is based partly on the wish to demobilize the enemy, and (b) the intention to storm forward with the pawns in order... to get rid of them. A rather suicidal tendency, don't you think? No, not at all, for by its nature the pawn is also a blocking unit, standing in the way of its own pieces, obstructing their view of the enemy territory, so the suicidal tendency associated with its advance is in fact imbued with power and self-affirmation. So, to summarize, (b) wishes to gain open lines for the pieces (rooks!) posted to the rear of the pawns by advancing the pawns and achieving a breakthrough. Finally, it is also conceivable that the pawns in their advance might attempt to form a wedge (c).

Chess Praxis

Foreword

The modern chess master is not given to hoarding secrets. Positional play, like any other province of chess art, is built up from a collection of devices – and these can be learned. This fact is the purpose and intrinsic *raison d'être* of the present book.

Accordingly, it is the intent of this book to instruct the reader in *positional play*. The stratagems already indicated in my earlier work are examined in detail and with scrupulous care (in interspersed articles), and are then illustrated by available master games. And yet this book has been purposely kept completely independent of *My System*: at no point is any sort of knowledge of the principles of *My System* presupposed. When deemed necessary these principles have been explained in brief. It is not at all difficult to make practical use of 'prophylaxis', 'over-protection', etc., but one must first become acquainted with them!

This book also has its value as a collection of games; it brings together – setting aside those already published in *My System* and *The Blockade* and consequently not reproduced here – 109 of my best games.

A few words concerning the layout of the book. We have refrained from self-praise, for we have come to the view that this 'variation', which stems from the pseudo-classical period is just as little 'playable' as, say, the 3...c7-c5 line and many others whose praises were at that time sung in every musical key. Self-praise is 'playable' in only one instance, namely, when merited recognition has remained unjustly withheld; in all other cases it comes across as tasteless and demoralizing.

This time I have not spared the indexes. In addition to a detailed table of contents, we have provided indexes of games and openings. Furthermore, since, with respect to the division of the material, we could take into account only the more comprehensive stratagems, like centralization, restraint, etc., and not the 'minor stratagems', such as 'open lines', the '7th rank', etc., we thought it expedient to provide an index of various tactical maneuvers used in the games. That this index could not be exhaustive goes without saying; still, the amateur player is given the opportunity to study more closely those 'elements' (lines, passed pawns, etc.) that are of greatest interest to him.

One point in closing. I should have liked to have seen every game provided with four or five diagrams, to facilitate the playing-over of variations that are often quite intricate. But corpulent compendiums are not in favor today – slender is the watchword. Yet there is a solution that is as simple as it is effective and one that we can well recommend, and that is, in playing over each game, to use two chess

boards at the same time (perhaps a regular playing set and a pocket set), playing over the game on one board and going through the variations on the other. This is much simpler than one might imagine: the effort involved is minimal, and often quite interesting variations are no longer lost.

With that, we believe we have said all that need be said, and we can pass on to the substance of the book itself.

The Author, August 1928