

Nudging Lasker's Pedestal

A critical examination of some of Emanuel Lasker's writings, which show him in a less flattering light than usually shines on him in chess literature



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Author's Preface

In the chess world, few if any men are held in higher esteem than Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941, World Chess Champion 1894-1921). He had a wide-ranging mind, and wrote on many subjects besides chess: philosophy, history, sociology, card and board games other than chess, and mathematics, in which he held a doctorate and wrote papers still used in university curricula. This is in contrast to many great chess masters, such as Rubinstein, Nimzovich, Alekhine and Fischer, who were interested in chess to the exclusion of almost everything else. While others have been polymaths to some extent, e.g. Euwe (mathematics), Fine (psychoanalysis) and Botvinnik (electrical engineering), none have matched Lasker's breadth of intellect and general eminence.



Emanuel Lasker circa 1915

Thus Lasker, considered in his entirety and not just as a chess player, has come to occupy probably the highest pedestal in the chess master pantheon. He is viewed with a degree of admiration, even reverence, accorded to no other. This is seen in the enduring interest he draws, and the many books about him, of which these are just a sample:

- Jacques Hannak's biography *Emanuel Lasker: The Life of a Chess Master* (1959), parts of which are better described as hagiography.
- Fred Reinfeld and Reuben Fine's *Dr. Lasker's Chess Career* (1935), and Fine's chapter on Lasker in *The World's Great Chess Games* (1951).
- *Emanuel Lasker: Schach, Philosophie, Wissenschaft* (Dreyer and Sieg, eds., 2001).
- *Emanuel Lasker: Homo ludens—homo politicus. Beiträge über sein Leben und Werk* edited by Kotowski, Poldauf and Werner (2003).
- *Why Lasker Matters* by GM Andrew Soltis (2005).
- Most recently and impressively, 2009's *Emanuel Lasker: Denker, Weltenbürger, Schachweltmeister* (*Emanuel Lasker: Thinker, World Citizen, Chess World Champion*) by Richard Forster, Stefan Hansen and Michael Negele, a massive German tome (1,079 pages) examining almost every aspect of Lasker's life and work. Also the later three-volume English adaptation of it by Forster, Negele and Raj Tischbierek must be mentioned.
- And I must own to adding at least a few millimeters to his pedestal, with the edition I edited of *Lasker's Manual of Chess* (Russell Enterprises, 2009) and *Emanuel Lasker: A Reader* (REI, 2019).

No other chess master has ever received such extensive treatment, usually reserved for statesmen such as Churchill or Lincoln, or major historical figures such as Napoleon or Julius Caesar.

For all that, though, Lasker was still human, and every human being, however saintly or accomplished, will have some human flaws or failings. Christopher Columbus enslaved indigenous peoples. Martin Luther was an anti-Semite. Sir Thomas More burned heretics. Peter the Great tortured and imprisoned his first wife and their son, leading to the son's death, and in his construction of the city of St. Petersburg, tens of thousands of conscripted laborers died.

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George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, and Jefferson fathered children by a slave mistress. Andrew Jackson carried out harsh racist policies toward Native Americans. Winston Churchill had the fiasco of the 1915 Gallipoli campaign and the mishandling of the 1943 Bengal Famine to his discredit. Joe DiMaggio physically abused his wife Marilyn Monroe. Richard Nixon considered himself above the law.

Lasker's flaws and failings, of course, were nowhere near as egregious as any named above. In what we show here, he:

- Allowed patriotic zeal to cloud his judgement during World War I, so that he badly overrated his country's capabilities and moral purpose, and disparaged both the abilities and character of Germany's opponents.
- Exhibited intellectual arrogance, expressing strong opinions about matters on which he was poorly informed.
- Casually and rudely dismissed an old friend who was trying to enlist him to help in a worthwhile cause.
- Committed some of the worst analytical mistakes in all chess literature, after boasting of his analytical accuracy.

Unlike my recent book *Chess in the Third Reich*, this work is not intended as an example of in-depth historical scholarship. Especially for Chapter 1, my main sources have been Wikipedia articles, but I make no apologies for that. Wikipedia is much more reliable than it used to be, and the articles I have consulted have well-documented scholarly bibliographies.

What I aim for here is by no means a complete disparagement of Lasker; far from it. On the whole he deserves his high place in the chess pantheon, both for his play and his eminence in other fields. It is just that it seems to me that his flaws have been largely ignored in the literature about him, and I feel they should be held up to public view, to provide a balanced picture of him.

Taylor Kingston, Paso Robles, California, July 2025

Chapter 1: Lasker's Wartime Polemics, 1914-1916

Introductory Background

Much of Lasker's subject here may be unfamiliar to today's readers. World War I, which was fought from August 1914 to November 1918, was an event of world-shaking proportions with vast consequences felt even today, though many now know little about it (especially, alas, Americans). A full examination of it is not our purpose here; interested readers are encouraged to consult the works mentioned in the bibliography, or read the condensed version on Wikipedia.

Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century was a hotbed of often conflicting nationalistic ambitions. "Balance of power" politics dominated, with the major powers — England, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Ottoman empires — making, breaking and forming new alliances to further these ambitions and curb those of their rivals. Most ambitious was Germany, which had become a unified nation only recently, in 1871. It had since striven, with considerable success, to industrialize and establish itself as a power in international trade, as a continental military power, and also belatedly as an overseas colonial empire along the lines of Britain and France, with a navy to rival theirs. This map shows the alliance lineup as of 1914:



The Triple Entente, between France, England and Russia, was the least formal of these, in fact it was described by a British official as "nothing more than a frame of mind." It did not formally require any of the three to come to each other's defense, nor have them declare war against a country that attacked any of them. But when hostilities broke out, that was its effect.

The Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy was of long standing, formed in 1882. Each member promised mutual support in the event of attack by any other great power.

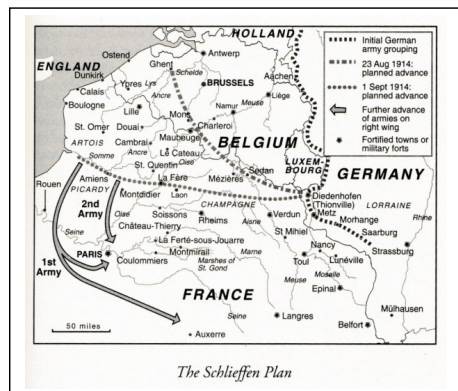
When war came, however, Italy reneged and eventually joined with the Entente powers. But Germany and Austria-Hungary remained true to each other, and were soon joined by Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire in 1915, forming what became known as the Quadruple Alliance, or Central Powers.

A very important factor, though one not expressed in any formal alliance, was Pan-Slavism. Arising in the mid-1800s, this political ideology was concerned with promoting the advancement and unity of the Slavic peoples, who lived mainly in the Balkans, Poland and Russia. Many Balkan Slavs, especially in Serbia, one of the few independent Slavic nations, looked to Russia as their protector. The government of Austria-Hungary, a polyglot empire of many ethnicities, including substantial populations of Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Czechs and other Slavs, viewed Pan-Slavism with alarm and mistrust, fearing it would promote unrest among its many Slavic subjects.

Which it did. To get to the point most relevant here, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in the city of Sarajevo, near the Austro-Serbian border, on 28 June 1914. Evidence soon emerged that the assassins had received assistance from the Serbian government. Barbara Tuchman, in *The Guns of August*, p. 71, writes "Austria-Hungary, with the bellicose frivolity of senile empires, determined to use the occasion to absorb Serbia as she had absorbed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1909." On 5 July Germany assured Austria-Hungary that she could count on German support if any punitive action she took against Serbia brought her into conflict with Russia. Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 July, and on 29 July bombarded its capital Belgrade. On that day Russia began mobilizing on her Austrian frontier, and on 30 July both countries ordered general mobilization.

The next day Germany issued an ultimatum to Russia to demobilize within twelve hours. Russia did not, and on 1 August the two countries declared war on each other. But the mobilizations ordered by the German general staff included buildups not only against Russia to the east, but also against France to the west. To understand why, when Russia was still the only officially active threat, we must go back 22 years.

In response to the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1892, Germany, on the assumption that the alliance could compel her to face war on two fronts, had devised the Schlieffen Plan,* a preemptive invasion of France through Belgium (see map at right). This plan had been in place since 1899. Its goal was a quick knockout of France in the west before Russian forces were fully mobilized in the east. Besides being an order of battle, it was a complex, intricate, meticulously designed schedule of operations and railroad timetables



* Named for Count Alfred von Schlieffen (1833-1913), Chief of the Imperial German General Staff 1891-1906 and main architect of the plan.

Chapter 4: Refuting Lasker's Analysis

In his preface to *The International Chess Congress St. Petersburg 1909* (hereinafter abbreviated *StP1909*), the first and only tournament book Lasker ever wrote entirely on his own, he boasted “This is a book in which analysis is accurate.” In 1952, his worshipful biographer Hannak wrote “It is probably no exaggeration to say that, to this day, that particular tournament book remains the most lucid and erudite of its kind.” Having already seen the fallibility of even great players compared to the lidless silicon eye of modern chess engines, I was keen to put Lasker's claim to the test, and did so in 2017.

The results were, frankly, quite surprising, even shocking sometimes. I did not expect Lasker's boast to be literally true, but neither did I expect it to be so far off. The full analytical critique of *St. Petersburg 1909* ran to 271 pages, about 80 pages more than the book itself!* Lasker committed almost every kind of analytical error there is, including about two dozen out-and-out howlers, over the tournament's 175 games.

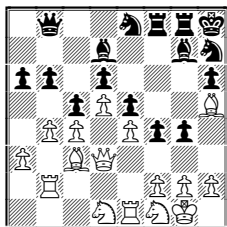
At the time I was preparing the *StP1909* critique, a possible explanation for the high level of error was suggested by British historian Bernard Cafferty, who heard it from the late David Hooper of *Oxford Companion* fame. Hooper knew Lasker in the mid-1930s, and got the impression that he was rather lazy! In the absence of real evidence, this hypothesis must be considered speculative, and Lasker in his early 40s, when he wrote *StP1909*, was probably more energetic than in his mid-to-late sixties when Hooper knew him. Still, this would definitely fit the facts.

Further errors turned up when I edited *Emanuel Lasker: A Reader* (Russell Enterprises 2019), which included many Lasker-annotated games from magazines such as *The Chess Fortnightly*, *Lasker's Chess Magazine (LCM)*, and the *Wiener Schachzeitung*, plus newspapers, and his book *Mein Wettkampf mit Capablanca*. The most egregious of those and from *StP1909*, plus some from *Lasker's Manual of Chess* (abbreviated *LMOc*), have been assembled for this chapter. I have grouped them thematically, according to the main type of error each note had. The numbers given at the end of some lines are the computer's evaluation of the position, in centipawns. See Appendix B for a full explanation of the analytical methodology.

* See the Russell Enterprises web-site, <https://www.russell-enterprises.com/excerptsdownloads>.

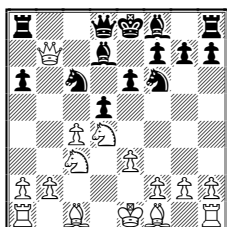
Lasker Overlooks the Obvious

Perhaps the most glaring and puzzling case ever of this kind of howler is found in a note by Lasker in *StP1909*. At move 28 of game 50, Speijer-Tartakower,



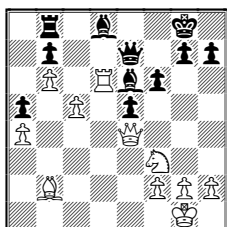
Lasker strangely claims that “Black could here already win a piece by 28...♖ef6,” but obviously White can reply 29.♗g6, losing nothing.

Another glaring example from *StP1909* is found in Game 166, Bernstein-Mieses. In the note at move nine, Lasker says that after 9.♙×b7,

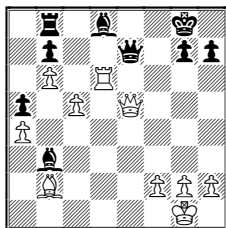


Black draws by 9...♖b4 10.a3 ♖b8 11.♙a7 ♖a8 etc. Surely most players would prefer 9...♖a5 winning the queen.

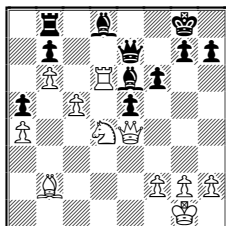
A third example from *StP1909* is the note at move 25 of Game 159, Dus-Chotimirsky–Perlis:



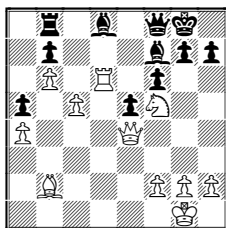
After 25. ♖×e5 f×e5 26. ♜×e5 ♙b3



Lasker's 27. ♜×d8+?? loses horribly to 27... ♜×d8 when the threat of back-rank mate (28. ♜×e7?? ♜d1+ 29. ♜e1 ♜×e1 ♠) forces White into 28. h3/g3 ♜×e5 29. ♙×e5 ♜d5-+. Perhaps Lasker gave this bad move intentionally for instructive purposes, but it bears mentioning that 25. ♖×e5 was not all that bad, as long as White avoids 27. ♜×d8+?? in favor of 27. ♜d3!?. However, all this is pretty much academic, because the best 25th move for White went unmentioned by Lasker, to wit, 25. ♖d4!:



Forced now is 25... ♙f7 26. ♖f5 ♜f8,



when White has a definite positional advantage (about +1.30) but no material edge as yet.