

## Catching 'Chess Fever'

By Tim Wall

*Darling, I didn't realise it's such a fascinating game! Let's play a Sicilian! (Chess Fever, 1925).*

In these days of pandemic and lockdown, many of us are simultaneously attracted to studying chess and playing the game online, and driven to distraction by not being able to actually play over the board.

It might seem bizarre, but imagine a world where everyone - from tiny tots to courting couples, child-minding nannies, policemen, cab drivers, chemists and aged grandparents - is mad about chess. And you are the odd one out - the only person who isn't crazy about the game.

This is the rather charming concept behind the silent film classic '[Chess Fever,](#)' made in Soviet Russia at the time of the 1925 Moscow International tournament - at that time, a very big deal in a country still recovering from a decade of world war, revolution, civil war, famine and epidemics.

The international tournament was a kind of Olympic spectacle for a country weary of real-life conflict, an affordable mind sport that everyone could take part in if they just had a simple chess board and pieces.

### Absent-minded, with cats - a chessy type we can all recognise

In the film's simple plot, the heroine of the story is waiting for her fiance to turn up for their wedding at the local registry office, and she's driven to distraction when all he can think about is chess - completely forgetting that's he supposed to be getting married that day. (At least it makes a change from today's Stag Night antics...)

The fiance is a chessy type we can all recognise - a geeky, lanky and bespectacled young gent who endlessly plays both sides in a chess game in his meagre apartment, decorated only with a chess table and a bookcase containing chess books, and (with no doubt a nod to the future World Champion Alexander Alekhine, then exiled from Russia) he has a seemingly endless supply of cute kittens popping out of his chessboard-patterned attire - from the sleeves of his overcoat, to his chequered cap and socks.

The film is perhaps most noted by chess historians and trivia fans for its cameo appearances by participants of the [1925 Moscow super-tournament](#), which featured leading international players (including then-World Champion Jose Raul Capablanca and his predecessor, Emmanuel Lasker) and 10 Soviet masters.

Nikolai Krylenko, the organiser of the tournament, was a Bolshevik official who would later use his talents in a more sinister way - prosecuting his former comrades in Stalin's show trials of the 1930s.

### Capablanca's pick-up line

It's a silent film, so we don't hear the players speak, but Capa is given a great supporting role (given the film's total 19 minutes running time, it's a bit more than a cameo), and his

immortal pick-up line to the heroine is captioned on the screen: “When I’m in the company of a beautiful woman, I also hate chess.”

Within a few moments, our non-chess-playing heroine - clearly exasperated at everyone’s love of a game that leaves her cold - exclaims: “At last, a fellow enemy of chess!” and hops into a waiting car with the smooth Cuban lothario, driving off in the Moscow snow as the jilted hero can only skulk off, desolated, in the direction of the chess tournament. (Oh yes, we’ve all been there: Chess as a consolation and retreat from painful affairs of the heart).

Capa’s dramatic role fits in, of course, with apocryphal stories about him and Alekhine going to the music hall together, with Alekhine never looking up from his pocket chess set through the performance, while Capa (ahem!)... never took his eyes off the chorus line.

(Who knows what Capa got up to in Moscow away from the board in 1925, but perhaps that’s why he only finished third in the tournament, behind Efim Bogoljubov and Lasker.)

Using a combination of actual footage of the tournament, plus a few clips with the players shot specially for the film, the film features the highest average chess strength of any film’s cast. (Certainly higher than the FIDE ratings of the cast of Guy Ritchie’s ‘Snatch’, who reportedly played blitz for cash stakes continually with the director on set.) Among the real players on screen in ‘Chess Fever’ are Richard Reti, Frank Marshall, Ernst Grunfeld, Carlos Torre and England’s Fred Yates.

But the real value of the Soviet comedy is actually not Capablanca’s appearance (he’s like the Hollywood star they bring in to sell films at the box office), but what it says about the value of chess to society.

### **Lenin, Trotsky and Arthur Ransome**

Krylenko and the Soviet authorities saw in chess a way of raising the cultural and educational level of a country that, just a few years before, had been overwhelmingly comprised of 100 million-plus peasants living in villages, with massive illiteracy, just a few million industrial workers and a thin sprinkling of the aristocracy and intelligentsia on top.

Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky definitely gave chess their full support. They were both avid players (the exiled Trotsky was a regular at Vienna’s Café Central chess salon before World War I, while Lenin was known to enjoy a game - including with English journalist and writer Arthur Ransome (of ‘Swallows and Amazons’ fame), who later married Trotsky’s secretary Yevgenia Shelepina and brought her to live with him in his beloved Lake District.

Chess was an affordable way to raise the country’s cultural level, and it didn’t require much in the way of education - it could be played and enjoyed by a cook as easily as by a prime minister.

The 1920s were a time in the Soviet Union before Stalin’s later repressions and murder of millions in the GULAG, when there was greater hope and belief in a new society, and there was a feeling that chess (like other mass activities introduced to the general public at that time) was a game that anyone could enjoy. Thanks to the massive promotion of chess and chess teaching through Pioneers Palaces (the Soviet equivalent of the Scouts or Guides), the game took off from the 1920s onwards, and no doubt the Moscow tournament and ‘Chess Fever’ played a big part in popularising the game.

Also in the 1920s, chess featured in the tales of Ilf and Petrov, two Soviet authors whose comedy classic ‘The Twelve Chairs’ tells the story of Ostap Bender, a charlatan who goes

around the country pretending to be a grandmaster, fleecing townspeople in rural Russia for a simultaneous display in which he loses every game, then scarpers with their hard-earned roubles. As Tal (who studied 'The Twelve Chairs' in his literature course at university) impishly points out in his autobiography 'The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal,' 1. e4 is the best opening move in chess, "as recommended by Grandmaster Ostap Bender." (It was where Bender's opening theory ended.)

Although today 'Chess Fever' is widely praised as one of the few non-propaganda Soviet films - there is no politics of any sort in the film - it is propaganda of a sort: for chess.

Indeed, there is an innocence and pure joy associated with the game in the film that is definitely infectious: a policeman catches a fare-dodging tram passenger, but they end up playing chess with a pocket set thrown out of the window by the furious heroine; while a toddler's nanny exclaims, "Kolya's played a beautiful Queen's Gambit - I'm breathless!" Elsewhere, a faking blind beggar catches a falling chess book and starts to read it excitedly, and two workers in a pharmacy are so distracted by the mind-boggling tactics in their chess game that they wrap up a queen instead of a vial of poison to give to the suicidal jilted fiance.

All in all, 'Chess Fever' is about the most fun I've ever had watching a short film about chess (that even includes [Alexander Grischuk's 'Thug Life' compilation](#)). It's pretty universal and timeless, too. Even though the captions are in Russian (with English subtitles) I showed it at our local junior chess club, and the kids enjoyed it immensely.

As experienced chess players, it is easy for us at the moment to get rather jaded, naturally frustrated by the lack of OTB chess and annoyed by the cheating, suspicion and artificial nature that come with online chess.

But let's try to put that aside, and focus on the positive.

### The Zak Crawley Attack

'Chess Fever' gives us that 'Ratatouille' moment - like when the cynical food critic in the Disney film of that name recalls that joyous, innocent moment from childhood when he tasted his mother's favourite country recipe for the dish. Similarly, let's recall the sheer joy of discovering chess for the first time, as people did in Soviet Russia back in the 1920s, and many people are doing now during lockdown.

Today, in these altered Coronavirus times, many people are taking up the game - getting 'Chess Fever' - in casual games online against their friends, and actually think the game is cool.

(During one rain-affected Test Match cricket highlights programme this summer, for instance, I noticed how Stuart Broad talked excitedly about chess games with Zak Crawley (you can see [Zak's games on Chess.com](#), by the way. He seems to favour a Five Pawns Attack against Joss Butler's Hippopotamus Defence, with 1 e4, 2 d4, 3 f4, 4 c4 and 5 b4. Rather like his swashbuckling batting style!)

We should encourage the many thousands of Zak Crawleys, Jos Buttlers and Stuart Broads (very casual players) to get involved in organised chess, whatever the format (online in local club events, online, or later when lockdowns are lifted, in fun rapidplays, blitz tournaments and even chess variants in relaxed, social settings).

And we need to acknowledge that the type of chess they are interested in is not necessarily the more serious form of the game that we are used to.

Let's face it, many young casual internet players, if they went along to many of our real OTB chess clubs, might easily walk out again if faced with our dour long games and rule of silence.

If we are to kindle the current 'Chess Fever' that many young casual players are experiencing in lockdown, our chess clubs and other events need to welcome these new players in - not purely on our terms, but to meet them at least halfway.

As the chess-obsessed hero and new-to-chess heroine are about to discover at the end of 'Chess Fever,' they will have to find a form of the game that both can enjoy in their future life together.

After all, a certain amount of compromise and doing things the other person wants to do are essential in any relationship...

*[‘Shakhmatnaya Goryachka’ \(Chess Fever\)](#) stars Jose Raul Capablanca, Vladimir Fogel and Anna Nemtsova. It was released in December 1925, and written and directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Nikolai Shpikovsky.*

You can watch it (with English subtitles and a great, entertaining musical score) here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLuZRIY6k34&t=927s>