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Chess Update

STILL THE KING

MAGNUS CARLSEN BECOMES TRIPLE WORLD CHAMPION FOR THE THIRD TIME IN HIS CAREER



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Buenos Aires 1939: The putsch that did not happen

Richard Forster reveals how a handful of delegates tried to oust the FIDE President

A FIDE President who stays in office for far too long, who fails to bring order to the world championship and who can only be removed by a revolt? It is easily forgotten that such feelings did not start with Campomanes or Ilyumzhinov, but had already been around some eighty years ago.

At that time, Dr. Alexander Rueb was the President of FIDE. Since its foundation in 1924, he had led and developed the federation out of The Hague as a virtual one-man show. One of his greatest critics was Baruch Wood, the founder and editor of *CHESS*. He was on site, when, at the end of the 1939 Olympiad in Buenos Aires, a handful of delegates attempted to stage a coup and voted Rueb out of office. And yet, in his magazine and reports, Wood did not say a single word about these events, which is even more noteworthy as two years earlier he had claimed himself that “the present FIDE is obviously incompetent” and that “we should sack the lot!” (*CHESS*, 14 September 1937, p. 4).

Thanks to a recent motion of the Argentinean Chess Federation, that tumultuous FIDE congress is back in the limelight. What happened in those September days of 1939, when the world at large had bigger concerns than chess, and why did Wood keep silent about it? And is today's FIDE well advised by its History Committee to revise its list of presidents?

The 1939 Olympiad

The 1939 ‘Tournament of Nations’ in Buenos Aires is unique in chess history, remembered for wonderful tales and harrowing stories, celebrated in dozens of articles and some exceptional books.

Official List of FIDE Presidents

1924–49	Alexander Rueb (Netherlands)
1949–70	Folke Rogard (Sweden)
1970–78	Max Euwe (Netherlands)
1978–82	Friðrik Ólafsson (Iceland)
1982–95	Florencio Campomanes (Philippines)
1995–2018	Kirsan Ilyumzhinov (Russia)
2018–	Arkady Dvorkovich (Russia)



Dr. Alexander Rueb (1882 – 1959) was a Dutch lawyer, diplomat, and the first President of FIDE from 1924 to 1949. (picture: Livre d'Or de la Fédération Internationale d'Echecs, 1976)

Alongside the international team tournament (nowadays called ‘Olympiad’) and the women’s world championship, FIDE also held its General Assembly. On 18th September, the penultimate day of play, a controversial, unannounced vote resulted in support, by 8 to 0 votes, for replacing the incumbent FIDE President, Alexander Rueb, by Augusto De Muro, the President of the Argentinean Chess Federation.

Although this should have been significant news, it was hardly mentioned by the press at the time. The reporting centred almost exclusively on the sporting side of the event, and it all was overshadowed, of course, by the outbreak of World War II on 1st September 1939. After the War, when FIDE reconstituted itself at its next Congress in Winterthur, Switzerland, it continued with Rueb as President as if nothing had ever happened, and the Buenos Aires intermezzo was quickly forgotten. FIDE remained in Europe, with Rueb its President until 1949.

Does this part of FIDE history need rewriting? Has Augusto De Muro been unjustly neglected by chroniclers of FIDE, as claimed by the recent Argentinean motion?

FIDE from 1924 to 1939

The World Chess Federation (FIDE) was founded on 20th July 1924 in Paris. Its daily business was entrusted to a Central Committee of three people, elected for four-year terms of office during the General Assembly, which was held annually. From 1928 onwards, the Committee consisted of the President, Alexander Rueb from the Netherlands, the Vice-President, Maurice S. Kuhns from the United States, and the Treasurer, Marc Nicolet from Switzerland.

FIDE membership grew from 13 nations in 1925 to 33 in 1938. For most of that period Argentina remained the only Latin American country. However, in the year preceding the 1939 Olympiad, twelve more federations joined FIDE, many of them from Latin America, attracted by the prospect of playing in Buenos Aires.

The 16th FIDE Congress

The 16th Congress of FIDE took place in the last week of the Buenos Aires team tournament. Tensions arose early on between Alexander Rueb and the South American representatives, the most notable of whom was Luciano Long Vidal of Argentina, who made several rather sharp criticisms of FIDE and invited delegates to visit the offices of the Olympiad organisers, to see how efficiently it was handling matters related to communications and documentation.

At the end of the fifth and final official session of the General Assembly, the Paraguayan delegate, Dr. Luis Oscar Boettner, requested the floor. In view of the war in Europe and the exposed location of Holland, where FIDE had its headquarters, he foresaw great dangers for the continuation and development of FIDE’s activities. He therefore put forward a motion that FIDE’s headquarters should be moved temporarily to Buenos Aires, that Rueb should be elected Honorary President, and that the President of the Argentinean Chess Federation should be appointed as the acting President of FIDE, with his mandate to continue until the next FIDE Congress. The motion was co-signed by the delegates from Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Costa Rica, and Guatemala.

Rueb argued that no elections were on the agenda and that the proposal, not having



Paraguay's Dr. Luis Oscar Boettner proposed the temporary relocation of FIDE's headquarters to Buenos Aires due to the outbreak of war. (picture: Corte Suprema de Justicia, Paraguay)



From an official gathering at the Buenos Aires 1939 Olympiad, taken during a captains' meeting or perhaps even a session of the General Assembly. On the far left, speaking, seems to be Augusto De Muro. (picture: courtesy of Jurgen Stigter)

been announced prior to the Congress, violated FIDE's Statutes and Regulations. The General Assembly, whose working session at this point consisted mostly of Latin American representatives, chose to follow not Rueb's view, but that of the Peruvian delegate, Dr. José Jacinto Rada, who claimed that "According to the letter and the spirit of the Statutes, the General Assembly was the supreme authority of FIDE, and that it could thus adopt any resolution."

A vote was held. Six South American nations (Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay) and two European countries (Denmark and Lithuania) voted in favour of the controversial motion. Estonia, France, Germany, and Argentina abstained, the last-named as a "matter of délicatesse", although it was clearly in favour of the proposal and, presumably, its *spiritus rector*.

Rueb left the meeting, having declared that he would not accept the decisions, which he regarded as illegal. The General Assembly continued without him, and the next day it had its decision ratified by a total of 19 delegates. No further debate took place, however, and it is unclear how many delegates were aware of all the circumstances and of Rueb's objections.

Formally, the war in Europe was given as the reason for moving FIDE to Buenos Aires, but growing discontent with Rueb was also a factor, and perhaps even a greater one. This was revealed by, for instance, Roberto Grau (1900–1944), a co-founder of FIDE, "father of the 1939 Olympiad", and the top board of the Argentinean team:

[N]otable federation and club directors, who in the first hour were indispensable elements for success, unfortunately fail later on, and they have to be violently ousted from the positions they consider their own

property. For many years, FIDE has been a prime example of this.

Dr. Rueb became, little by little, the dictator of FIDE, and a traveller who every year had his wife's expenses paid to attend the congresses, which had to work through dumb agendas, and to solemnly inaugurate the big team tournaments, FIDE's only effective activity. It was necessary to put an end to such an abnormal state of affairs. Rueb had turned the FIDE presidency into an asset of his own; in the debates he respected the agenda when it suited him, and incorporated matters when they were brought up by him or by the Swiss Federation, which followed him faithfully.

This means that there was perfect agreement and that the desire was evident to remove Dr. Rueb from the post which he had retained by always evading responsibility for his actions...

(¡Aquí Está!, 18 May 1940)

The frustration which had built up over the years is evident. With the congresses taking place in far-away locations and with elections timed inconveniently, it was hard for South Americans to bring about any changes. But now the outbreak of the war, together with the absence of many of the European delegates, offered an unexpected opportunity to change the situation radically.

Was the 'De Muro Presidency' legitimate?

In legal terms, the vote in Buenos Aires was almost certainly invalid. 1939 was not an election year, and the proposal to relocate FIDE and to oust Rueb had not been properly announced in advance and should thus not have been on the agenda at all. Both the FIDE Statutes and the applicable Swiss Civil Code

leave no doubt about that. Meanwhile, the clause granting "supreme power" to the General Assembly can hardly have meant that the latter could violate its own Regulations and Statutes whenever it might wish to.

Both the legality and the legitimacy have to be questioned. Although the circumstances were exceptional, they were not of the kind that justified the forcible ousting of the President without due process. Several legal options existed within the framework of FIDE



Augusto De Muro, born in 1886 or 1887 in Buenos Aires, was for decades one of Argentina's leading sports journalists and editors. (picture: Jaque Mate, May 1929, courtesy of the Cleveland Public Library and of Chess Notes)



to bring about a change or to mitigate the impact of war. For instance, the Vice-President Maurice S. Kuhns was an American and thus far from the war zone. He could have been entrusted with continuing FIDE's business in case of need. Kuhns, incidentally, was regarded by both Rueb and De Muro as being on their respective sides. After initially congratulating De Muro, however, Kuhns soon retracted his words. Once the full picture emerged and he had heard from both parties, he came down on Rueb's side, describing the Buenos Aires FIDE as "spurious".

The Paraguayan motion was an obvious violation of democratic principles. Only about half the members of FIDE were represented in Buenos Aires, and even fewer knew that such an important vote was being held. Ultimately, only 8 of the 45 member nations had voted against Rueb. Not surprisingly, some commentators spoke of a "coup".

Reaction in Europe to the news from Buenos Aires fell short of the "perfect agreement" postulated by Grau. It was lukewarm at best and derisive at worst.

The position of *CHES*

Baruch Wood was one of the writers who essentially chose to ignore the story altogether, although he was in a perfect spot to report. He had been in Buenos Aires as the reserve player of the English team. In the preliminaries he had scored one win, two draws, and one loss. Then war broke out. As his team-mates decided to return to Europe immediately, England retired from the competition (the only nation to do so). Wood, however, did not sail with the others and remained until the end of the tournament. With plenty of time on his hands, he prepared reports on the chess tournament and also appears to have participated in some of the sessions of the FIDE Congress, although presumably without voting rights, since the official delegate of the British Chess Federation was Thomas Henry Acton, who also returned to Europe early.

There seems to be only one plausible reason why Wood did not report in *CHES* about the attempted ousting of Rueb, which he had demanded two years earlier himself: he considered it entirely illegitimate and unnewsworthy.

Curiously, Wood finally picked up the story one-and-a-half years later, when publishing a longer exchange of letters from America, wherein Maurice S. Kuhns described the situation regarding FIDE and also expressed his doubts about the legitimacy of the alleged "elections" (see *CHES*, May 1941, pp. 114-115, and June 1941, p. 131). Unlike Kuhns, Wood had been on site, but he limited himself to a very brief postscript, correcting Kuhns on Rueb's presence in Buenos Aires and declaring that "it might have cleared the situation a little had [Rueb] lodged a vigorous protest at the time, instead of saying little or nothing until he had returned to Europe. The

remainder of the paragraph containing this statement is perfectly correct."

Decades later, when Wood wrote down his memoirs of the Olympiad, he again made no mention of the contentious Congress (see the posthumous publication in *CHES*, September 1999, p. 42).

From a historical point of view, when judging the current Argentinean motion to have Augusto De Muro retroactively recognised as FIDE President for the years 1939 to 1946, the crucial final question to consider is not only the legitimacy, but also whether he effectively led FIDE in those years or at least had a significant impact.

The answer is decidedly negative. The 'De Muro Presidency' existed primarily on paper. Apart from a few speeches, De Muro did not continue with FIDE's activities during the war years. No reports were produced, no gatherings held, and no membership fees collected. The coup attempt was thus not only largely ignored outside Latin America, it also had no real consequences whatsoever.

Summary

In conclusion:

i. The 1939 vote to replace Rueb by De Muro and move FIDE's headquarters to Buenos Aires was a violation of the Federation's Statutes, committed by an unrepresentative minority and, essentially, behind the back of the other member nations. Growing discontent with the incumbent President was just as much a motive as geopolitical considerations. The 'De Muro Administration' faced opposition from overseas from the outset and never became truly productive.

ii. In the 21st century, it seems ill-advised for FIDE to endorse retrospectively an illegitimate and illegal attempt to usurp power, and particularly given that the action had little practical impact at the time, except for increasing FIDE's paralysis during the war.

iii. Augusto De Muro, Roberto Grau, and others deserve great admiration for organising a splendid Chess Olympiad in 1939, after overcoming countless obstacles. There are far better ways of honouring their names than rewriting FIDE's presidential history. Launching a proper gallery of honorary members and founders of FIDE would be a welcome first step.

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