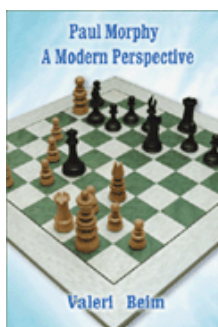




COLUMNISTS

New Stories about Old Chess Players

Jeremy P. Spinrad



Bilguer

Our subject this month is Paul Rudolf von Bilguer (born September 21, 1815, died September 16, 1840). Bilguer was one of the original members of the Pleiades, the seven German chess stars who had such a profound impact on chess in the nineteenth century. Bilguer died just short of his twenty-fifth birthday, but in his short life he made quite an impression, and started a great project which was, arguably, the most important in chess literature.

In my mind, there is a connection between Bilguer in Germany and Morphy in America. Both players were amazingly strong at a young age, and both departed early from the chess world (though for very different reasons), thereby becoming the great romantic chess figure for their respective countries. There is something about each which evokes a bygone era, with elevated notions of honor and respect that can seem strange to us. Thus, Morphy is described as a Southern gentleman, and his conviction that a gentleman does not play chess for money seemed a bit old-fashioned even to many of his contemporaries, while others found it noble and refreshing. Statements about Bilguer always remind us that he was a Prussian officer (a lieutenant). Prussian officers were known as guardians of an old-fashioned sense of chivalry and honor, and the words now convey a picture of dueling scars and an emphasis on bravery and loyalty that epitomize a bygone age. Both Morphy and Bilguer were physically frail; Bilguer apparently died of some sort of wasting disease, a great tragedy for one so young. Of course, one cannot press the comparison too far. Morphy certainly proved his chess greatness in chess during his brief heyday more convincingly than Bilguer ever could, and this is one reason Morphy is remembered throughout the world while Bilguer is largely forgotten outside Germany. Also, by dying in 1840, Bilguer left this world shortly before a major explosion of chess literature, an explosion for which, ironically, he was in no small part responsible.



Paul Rudolf von Bilguer

I know very little about Bilguer's life, nor do most chess historians; for example, the *Oxford Companion* entry on him merely refers the reader to two other entries. An article in the 1852 *Schachzeitung*, pages 437-451, informs us that he was constitutionally weak, hated exertion, suffered from many small ailments, and was particularly fond of tea and hot drinks. As his health deteriorated, his eyesight started to fail, to the point that he could recognize people only by voice. At times, he blamed life in the army for his health problems, yet according to the *Washington Post* of July 21, 1935, he nevertheless wore his uniform at all times.

Bilguer is remembered mainly for starting one of the most famous and ambitious books in all of chess literature, the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*. This is seen as the father of all opening manuals, though it was actually much more, containing important sections on history, rules, endgames, and other subjects. In Germany, "Bilguer" is sometimes even used as a noun, meaning an opening book, just as "Elo" means a rating.

Bilguer was not able to complete this enormous work by himself before his death. It was von der Lasa who took it as a mission to complete the work of his departed friend, and the final product (500 pages for the first edition, which appeared in 1843) benefits greatly

from his scholarship. Of course, von der Lasa's chess also benefited greatly from his work on the book. For those who view von der Lasa as the greatest player of his time (a view with considerable merit, though not as unchallengeable as some of his strongest boosters maintain), I would argue that before Bilguer's death, von der Lasa would not have been seen as even the strongest player among the Pleiades, but his immersion into the *Handbuch* project raised his level beyond the others; another way that Bilguer influenced chess.

The *Handbuch* had a great influence, both on opening theory and on the way that opening books are organized. It is not at all difficult to find examples of current games where the key lines were first analyzed in the *Handbuch*; this was the standard text from which opening novelties arose for many years. It may be that more original openings research went into it than any chess book before or since, and its format set the standard; as the *Oxford Companion* says, "its editorial judgment and typographical layout have not been surpassed."

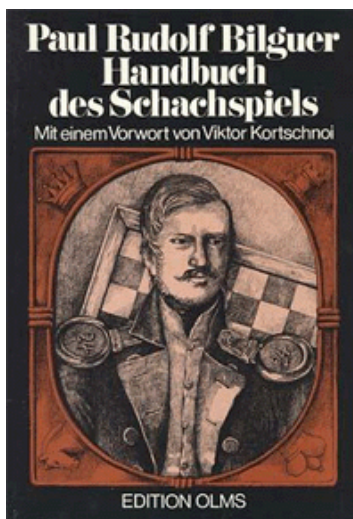
Would today's openings manuals, such as *ECO* or *MCO*, be as prevalent as they were if not for the *Handbuch*? Perhaps, but the answer is not so clear. It might be argued that it is absurd to try to collect all known openings into a single book, rather than have separate works on each. After all, there is no single book trying to present all of mathematics or other disciplines; why shouldn't chess opening theory books consist of books that give general outlines for beginners, pointing to individual monographs for serious students? If Bilguer hadn't conceived of the *Handbuch*, and von der Lasa hadn't finished it, opening theory as a whole might be considered too daunting a task; who would have been able to carry it through without building from Bilguer? Even the method for presenting opening lines has become standardized from Bilguer; would we be looking at opening books in a very different format without it?

How strong was Bilguer as a player? This is hard to say. Looking at a file sent to me of games by von der Lasa, Bilguer is the only player with a positive score against the baron, and this score is significantly positive (8 wins, 4 losses, 2 draws). Of course, this may be in part because Bilguer died in 1840, and von der Lasa's strongest period came later (and in my opinion as stated above, because of Bilguer's death). If I restrict myself to games before 1842, both Bledow (3-3-2) and Hanstein (10-10-6) have even scores against von der Lasa. Certainly von der Lasa and other Germans speak reverently of Bilguer's chess talent. I already alluded (in the [article](#) on Bledow) to von der Lasa listing Bilguer among the great players of chess history – along with the likes of Philidor, Sarratt, Deschappelles, La Bourdonnais, and Bledow – and von der Lasa was about as scrupulous a chess historian as you can hope for.

It wasn't just von der Lasa, a personal friend, who placed Bilguer in elite company, however. D.W. Fiske's description of the [First American Chess Congress](#) (notable as Morphy's only tournament) described the elaborate decorations of the tournament hall. There was an American flag with Benjamin Franklin's name, and rows of flags of other countries: French, with La Bourdonnais; English, with McDonnell; German, with Bilguer; Spanish, with López; Italian, with del Rio; Neapolitan, with Salvio; Portuguese, with Damiano; Hungarian, with Szen; and Turkish, with Stamma. Also intertwined French and American flags with Philidor. Living representatives of chess had a separate place: included among them were Lewis, Staunton, Walker, von der Lasa, Anderssen, Löwenthal, Harrwitz, Petroff, and Jaenisch. Certainly at this time, more than fifteen years after his death and in a foreign country, Bilguer was given a place among the immortals, in contrast to his relative obscurity today.

I know of no formal matches involving Bilguer, though he certainly played many series of games with other Pleiades members. For what it is worth, when Szen came through Berlin and played various leading figures in 1839, Bilguer beat Szen in their game; in contrast, von der Lasa lost 2-1 to Szen, while Bledow split 1-1 with him. Not much to go on, but together with the respect of his peers and the positive score over von der Lasa, we must respect Bilguer as a vital force in German chess in 1839, and name him as another candidate for the world's best player around that time period.

From a place among the immortals, to being almost completely forgotten – a sad end for one whose life itself was tragically short.



Someone with access to the *Schachzeitung* would no doubt be able to find many more Bilguer games than I can. There are eighteen attributed to him at Chessgames.com. Fourteen of these are against von der Lasa, and seem to be the exact same fourteen games contained in the aforementioned Lasa file. I have doubts about some of these. For example, a game which is listed as Bilguer-Lasa in the file and at Chessgames.com, is given on page 204 of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels* as “B..... - Lasa,” and a game given as Lasa-Bilguer appears as “Lasa-B.....” on page 245 of the *Handbuch*. The *Handbuch* clearly tends to use dots to indicate the number of letters in a person’s name, thus the games with five dots are more likely to be by Bledow. In fact, Bilguer is generally identified by name in the *Handbuch*, rather than in the more genteel encoding used for some other players. Therefore, I am skeptical that these two games are by Bilguer, and I am much more willing to accept the attribution to Bilguer for the game given as “B..... – Lasa” (six dots, not five!) on page 128. One game at Chessgames.com is an early correspondence effort, which Bilguer loses in nineteen moves to someone named Angerstein, another is a twenty move win over Schorn (this game also appears on page 134 of Mason’s *Social Chess*, though the opponent is not identified). There is also a twenty-six move loss to Bledow in an Evans Gambit, said to have been played in 1838, while one game against Lasa is listed twice.

I was able to find a few other games. Most of these come from the 1843 edition of the *Handbuch*. Page 107 gives a win of Bilguer over “S.....,” which follows the game Bilguer-Schorn from Chessgames.com until Black’s tenth move, and is probably between the same players. Page 108 gives a complex game won by Lasa over Bilguer, which does not seem to be available online. Page 130 gives a game of some historical importance, Bilguer’s win over Szen mentioned above. Page 264 gives a win by Bilguer over “M.....,” most likely Mayet. The opponent is identified as “M-t” in the *Chess Player’s Handbook*, page 264, and as Mayet in Schlechter’s edition of the *Handbuch*, page 675.

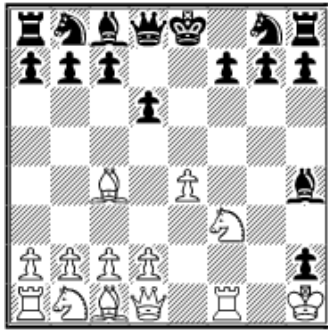
A few Bilguer games can be found in other sources. A win by Bledow over Bilguer is given on page 235 of the *Chess Player’s Handbook*; the game can also be found on page 83 of Riviere’s *Nouveau manuel illustre du jeu des echecs: lois et principes*, which is available online through the French National Library. It also appears in the *Washington Post* of August 18, 1935.

Bilguer gave a number of well-publicized blindfold performances, which were almost certainly recorded. *Der Humorist* of April 3, 1840 reports that on March 19, he won *sans voir* against a group of consulting players, and that some days later he played two games simultaneously blindfold, winning both, while also playing *avec voir* with an opponent named Erelinger, barely losing. This performance was considered sufficiently noteworthy that it appears in the *American Cyclopaedia*. The report of Bilguer’s death on October 17, 1840 in *der Humorist* says that he was noted for his remarkable blindfold games against two and three opponents, also noting his recent studies in mathematics. At the time of his death, he was probably considered to be the one of the very best active blindfold performers.

I present two very different Bilguer games, selected from those not available online. The first is his win from page 264 of the *Handbuch*. This is a game in the romantic style usually associated with both Bilguer and the nineteenth century in general; pieces are dangled before the opponent to tempt his queen out of position. It is interesting to look at computer evaluations of this game as it proceeds. If the computer is not given a good deal of time, around move eleven it starts to think that Black has a large advantage, but even though the black player makes the moves anticipated by the computer through move fourteen, the computer’s evaluation of black’s position decreases as its horizon advances. Unlike the black player, the computer realizes by move fifteen that the rook cannot be taken without dire consequences.

*Bilguer - M.... (likely Mayet)* (notes from the 1843 *Handbuch*; notes in italics by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8):

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 Be7 4.Bc4 Bh4+ 5.g3 fxe3 6.0-0 gxe2+ 7.Kh1 d6?



Modern theory prefers 7...d5, when Black has a considerable advantage.

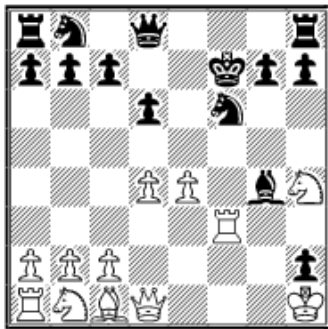
8.Bxf7+ Kxf7 9.Nxe4+

White could force a draw with 9.Ng5+ Ke7 10.Qh5 etc., but a quick draw was hardly what players of that era sought.

9...Nf6 10.d4

If 10.Qh5+ Kg8 and Black looks better.

10...Bh3 11.Rf3 Bg4



It would have been better for Black to protect the bishop by Qd7. Fritz8 concurs, rating the position after 11...Qd7 at about -0.91. After the text it first rates the position as virtually even (-0.01), but even though the game now follows its recommendations for both sides, its evaluation soon changes.

12.Rxf6+! Qxf6 13.Qxg4 Qf1+ 14.Kxh2 Qxc1 15.Nc3!



By this point Fritz8's evaluation has shifted in White's favor, to +1.47.

15...Qxa1

If 15...Qd2+ (Fritz's #1 recommendation) 16.Kh1 g6 (or 16...Re8 17.Nd5 Qh6 18.Rf1+ Kg8 19.Nf6+!) 17.Nd5 Rf8 (There's no saving the Ra8; if 17...a5 18.Qf3+ Ke8 19.Qf6 and mate shortly) 18.Nxc7 Nc6 19.Nxa8 Rxa8 Qd7+ Ne7 21.Rf1+ and wins. By the end of any of these lines, Fritz8's evaluation is no less than about +4.50 in White's

*favor. Quite a tribute to Bilguer's intuition and/or calculating ability.*

16.Qf5+ Ke8



If 16...Ke7 17.Nd5+ Kd8 18.Qg5+ Kc8 19.Qxg7 Na6 20.Qxh8+ Kd7 21.Qxa8 and wins; if in this line 18...Kd7 19.Qe7+ Kc6 20.Qxc7+ Kb5 21.a4+ and wins. Even faster in the latter line is 21.Qxb7 Ka5 22.Qb4+ Ka6 23.Nc7#.

17.Qc8+ Kf7 18.Qxc7+ Ke8 19.Qc8+ Kf7 20.Qxb7+ Ke8 21.Nf5 1-0

The second game, Bilguer's win over Szen from page 130 of the *Handbuch*, seems to come from a completely different era. Szen had a very distinctive style, which I will discuss in a

separate article. The initial maneuvers look more like Petrosian than Anderssen or Morphy. Szen prefers giving up the exchange rather than lose a pawn, in keeping with his reputation as the leading expert in pawn play. He counterattacks swiftly and nicely to get back in the game, but uncharacteristically relaxes and is beaten in the endgame. In fairness to Szen, this is probably a game from a short visit to Berlin in which he played two games against Bledow, three against Lasa, three against Mayet, and one against Bilguer over the course of just two days. Bilguer shows that he is

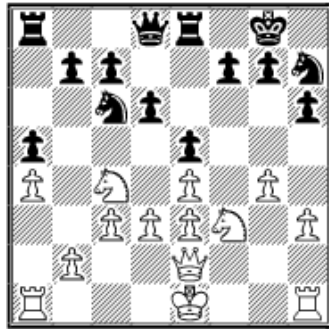
able to adapt to a variety of styles in this game, despite making a serious mistake in overlooking White's clever thirty-third move.

*Szen-Bilguer* (notes from the 1843 *Handbuch*; notes in italics by Taylor Kingston assisted by Fritz8):

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.c3 Bb6 5.d3

*Szen has opted for a rather tame form of the Giuoco Piano, rather than the then more commonly played Evans Gambit.*

5...d6 6.h3 h6 7.a4 Nf6 8.Qe2 0-0 9.g4 Nh7 10.Na3 Be6 11.Bd2 a5 12.Be3 Bxe3 13.fxe3 Bxc4 14.Nxc4 Re8



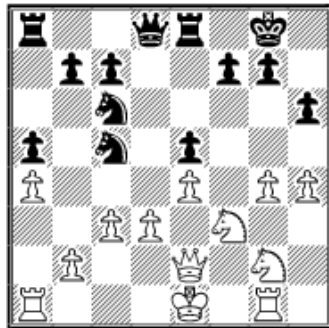
15.h4 d5

*Played like Nimzovitch, who a century later would advise that a flank attack should be countered by play in the center.*

16.exd5 Qxd5 17.e4 Qd8 18.Ne3

*Szen continues rather meekly. 18.g5, or 18.0-0-0 followed by 19.g5, were more aggressive.*

18...Nf8 19.Rg1 Ne6 20.Ng2 Nc5



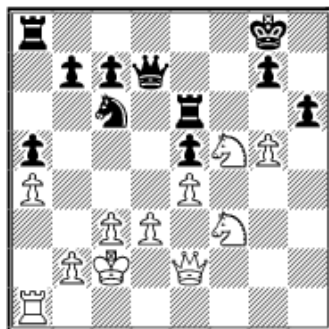
21.Kd2?

The king moves, so the pawn is not lost; if he had for example castled, the pawn on a4 would have been lost, and Black could advance the pawn on a5. Therefore White prefers to give the rook for a knight, and seeks to stop the attack through this sacrifice. *The exchange sacrifice does not seem objectively justified. If White is aggressive enough, it appears his attack can gain the initiative before Black's. More consistent therefore is 21.0-0-0 Nxa4 22.g5 h5 23.g6.*

21...Nb3+ 22.Kc2 Nxa1+ 23.Rxa1 Qd7 24.Ne3 f6?!

*This allows White to force open more kingside lines. Preferable seems 24...Rab8, intending ...b7-b5.*

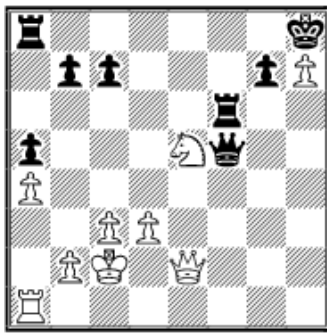
25.g5! fxg5 26.hxg5 Re6 27.Nf5



27...Ne7?!

*27...h5 would keep things a bit more closed.*

28.gxh6 Nxf5 29.h7+ Kh8 30.exf5 Rf6 31.Nxe5 Qxf5



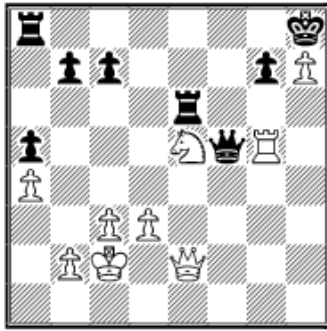
32.Rg1

*If 32.Rh1 Raf8 (not 32...Qf2?? 33.Ng6+) 33.Rh5 (if 33.Rh2?? Re6), then either 33...Qf2 or 33...Qe6, and Black should win.*

32...Re6?

*With 32...Qf2! Black could have forced the exchange of queens and solved most of this problems. Now he suddenly has a new one.*

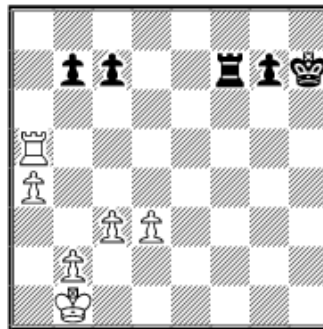
33.Rg5!



33...Qf6

*Of course not 33...Qxg5?? 34.Nf7+ etc. Relatively best is probably 33...Qf4, when after, say, 34.d4 c5 35.Qg2, Black is forced to give back the exchange by 35...Rxe5, but should be able to hold a draw. After the text White can force liquidation into a favorable endgame.*

34.Qh5 Qf2+ 35.Kb1 Rf8 36.Ng6+ Rxc6 37.Qxg6 Qf7 38.Qxf7 Rxf7 39.Rxa5 Kxh7

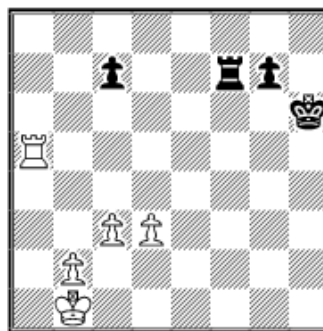


40.  
Ra7?!

*Decades later*

*Nimzovitch would preach the virtues of prophylaxis and brand the passed pawn "a criminal who should be kept under lock and key." White might have encompassed both goals by 40.Rg5.*

40...b6 41.a5 bxa5 42.Rxa5 Kh6



43.Ka2?

*Starting a too-slow and fatally flawed plan, of bringing the king up via*

*the a-file to support his queenside majority. Better instead was 43.Ra8, when if 43...g5, 44.Rg8 puts the rook behind Black's passed pawn before it gets dangerous, or if 43...Kh7, 44.Kc1 to bring the king toward the kingside.*

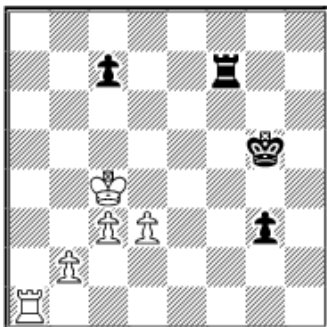
43...g5!

Passed pawns must be pushed!

44.Kb3?

Continuing his flawed idea.

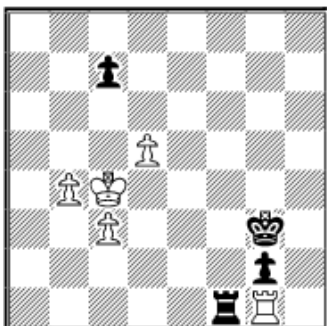
44...g4 45.Kc4 g3 46.Ra1 Kg5



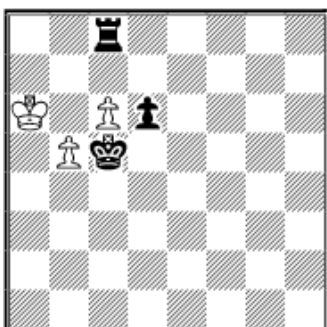
47.b4

Finally mobilizing his queenside pawns, but too late. Black's g-pawn now can be stopped only at the cost of White's rook.

47...Kg4 48.d4 g2 49.Rg1 Kg3 50.d5 Rf1



51.Rxg2+ Kxg2 52.Kc5 Rf6 53.c4 Kf3 54.Kd4 Rb6 55.b5 Kf4 56.Kc5 Ke5 57.Kb4 Kd4 58.c5 Rb8 59.d6 cxd6 60.c6 Rc8 61.Ka5 Kc5 62.Ka6



62...Rxc6+ 0-1