



COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

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Playing the "What If...?" Game

A recent series of "What If...?" books written by various historians consist of serious essays speculating how the world could have been different if certain events had not occurred, or had ended differently. For example, what if the July plot against Hitler had failed, or the Mayflower hadn't sailed, or Hannibal conquered Rome?

The idea is to reverse the outcome of a significant event and decide what the consequences of the "counterfactual" event would have been. Inevitably, as you will see from my examples below, this will involve greater speculation, with increasing uncertainty, the further you get from the divergence point. Some of the subsequent events that actually happened might be unchanged, others could be subtly altered and after a few years a totally different world could emerge. Or perhaps it would turn out that the original event was not so significant after all.

For some historians counterfactual history also serves a philosophical purpose. Whereas some have argued for a Marxist or other kind of determinism, counterfactual history can highlight the almost accidental nature of some outcomes and (sometimes) the effectiveness of the human actors on the world stage.

The idea that history is a teleological process – that some things had to turn out the way they did because they embodied the "spirit of the age" or were the inevitable outcome of "history" – is known as "historicism," and was famously challenged by the late Professor Karl Popper in his book entitled *The Poverty of Historicism*. The Berlin Wall has since fallen but historicism is still alive and well; Kasparov's over-praised series *My Great Predecessors* is at times infected with this virus; it is most evident in his introduction to the first volume, *The Champions as Symbols of their Time*.

Popular novelists like Robert Harris and Philip K. Dick have also been playing the "What If...?" game for years. Readers have probably come across some of these alternative history novels, sometimes classified as sci-fi or thrillers. Many of them posit a divergence point from our actual world as occurring some time during World War II or some other war, since battles are an obvious instance of how a different outcome could have radical

consequences.

In recent years, popular novelist Robert Harris (in *Fatherland*) posited a Third Reich which had conquered Britain but was having post-war problems, seen through the eyes of an honest policeman. Philip K. Dick (*The Man in the High Castle*) described a post-war USA under Japanese occupation.

Some books of this type make the divergence point obscure with an alternative world where the readers have to work out for themselves what happened differently to lead to the outcome the novelist describes.

With apologies to the scientists among my readership, I gather that M-theory in modern physics allows for the possibility that such alternative worlds, maybe an infinite number of them, actually exist. What form they take, however, is probably utterly unknowable.

We can play the counterfactuals game with chess history too. It could be a useful counterpoint to the Kasparov style of history referred to above.

The idea is not to come up with scenarios that are impossibly fantastic, such as Tim Harding winning the world title, but ones that have significant plausibility. It is better if they are not so obvious, such as supposing that Staunton had played a match with Morphy, but are somewhat hidden. Maybe we can shed light on what actually happened by finding some key moments where something different could easily have happened – an outcome that if seen through the eyes of a contemporary, was even more likely than what actually did happen.

In chess, which is a bit like the Borges story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, players are constantly being confronted by choices. Some are good, some bad, and some neutral. You must select one fork and you can never take the other path, at least not in this game.

It is perhaps all too easy to find cases where something else **should have happened**, just by looking at some significant blunders made at the board by famous players. If they had not blundered in a winning position, but had won the game instead, would the world have been different? A whole book could be filled with such blunders, and stories about what might have been if they had not been made, and maybe I will write a future Kibitzer on that topic.

However, this is almost too easy a game to play and some blunders are more significant than others. A grandmaster blunders his queen and loses a game he should have won; it costs him first prize or an important qualification. As in my first chosen example below, or the 10th game of the Schlechter-Lasker match, losing an individual chess game can have major and irreversible consequences, but probably in most cases it does not.

Does the player then commit suicide or go into a terminal depression like Luzhin in Nabokov's novel *The Defence*? Or does he put it behind him, win his next tournament and in a year or two his rating is no different from what it would have been had he won the fateful game?

For this article, I chose three possible turning points in chess history, all concerning major chess players, but only one of them is a specific blunder in a game. The other two are events in the player's lives that they may or may not have had control over, but which were not actual chess games. It would also be possible to find examples where the outside world might have impinged on a major player, such as if the Bolsheviks had liquidated Alekhine in 1918, or positing that some major player lost his life in a major disaster like the sinking of the Titanic or an air disaster.

A game like this must have some rules and I gather that the historians who play it seriously have a "minimum rewrite rule", i.e. you want the smallest possible change from the actual course of events and then see what could follow from that, rather than imagining Staunton beating Morphy in a match, which would probably require twenty major counterfactual events to set up the conditions for such a match occurring in the first place.

Also, I have not attempted to invent any games that could have been played in these alternative worlds. So there are no actual chess games in this column, sorry, except one fragment of an actual game finish.

So my three chosen counterfactuals are:

- **The fatal blunder doesn't occur and Chigorin wins the 23rd game of his second world championship match against Steinitz on February 28, 1892 in Havana.**
- **In 1945, Paul Keres and family safely escape the chaos of war to Sweden.**
- **Bobby Fischer fails to arrive for Game 3 against Spassky in Reykjavik, 1972.**

What are the ultimate outcomes of these altered events? I have imagined "forking paths" in each case. One of lesser consequences where, after a while, it doesn't make much difference and one "chaos theory" type of outcome where a whole new chain of events is set in motion across the chess world. The popular image of chaos theory, as applied in meteorology, is that an additional butterfly fluttering its wings in the Amazon rain forest could lead to a hurricane half way across the world.

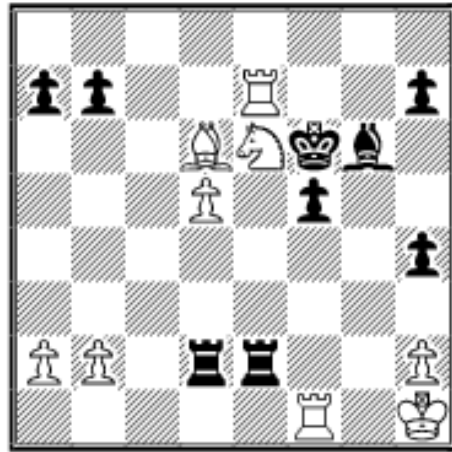
A: The fatal blunder doesn't occur.

Major Premise: Mikhail Chigorin wins the 23rd game of his second world

championship match against Wilhelm Steinitz on February 28, 1892 in Havana.

Background: The match was for the first player to win 10 games, or in the event of 9-9 tie (draws not counting), a play-off match would be held, the first to win three games becoming World Champion.

The lead had fluctuated through the match and Steinitz now led by 9-8 but his challenger, the Russian M. I. Chigorin, had a winning position after the first time control in Game 23.



Here is the position after Black's 31st move ...Rc2-d2. It was time to seal a move and the spectators, more than a thousand of them, expected Steinitz to resign without resuming, or perhaps a few moves later, assuming White would play the obvious 32 Rxb7.

What actually happened: Without sealing a move, Chigorin played openly on the board 32 Bb4??, moving the bishop that was protecting h2. After

32...Rxb2+ he resigned as it is mate next move.

Counterfactual: Chigorin keeps his composure, and seals 32 Rxb7. A few moves later Steinitz resigns and the match score is 9-9.

The consequences – Scenario 1: It makes little difference as Steinitz, more comfortable with the Havana heat, wins the play-off match. The major course of chess history is unchanged.

The consequences – Scenario 2: His challenge revitalized by his opponent's mistakes in game 23, Chigorin sweeps to victory in the play-off match and becomes World Champion.

Steinitz's health and finances fail and he is unable to raise backers for an 1893 revenge match. By 1895 he is dead. Or alternatively, he gets a re-match in 1893, but loses it. The next challenger for the world title is Dr. Siegbert Tarrasch – who “in real life” drew a Challengers match 9-9 with Chigorin in 1893.

How much further do you want to go on with this game? Here again there is a chance for the consequences to “dampen down” or to “open out.”

Scenario 2a: Chigorin and Tarrasch play their match in 1893 anyway, but

now it's for the world title. It finishes in the 9-9 tie and Chigorin keeps the title. Next he plays Emanuel Lasker and loses; after that it is more or less "business as usual."

Scenario 2b: This is a mirror of our first counterfactual. With a 9-8 lead, Tarrasch actually failed to draw a game he could have saved. If it had turned out differently, a completely different series of events could have occurred.

Counterfactual: If Tarrasch saved the 22nd game, he would quite likely have won the next game with White as nearly all games in the match were decisive. After he became World Champion, the prestige and authority of Tarrasch would have increased still further. Close to his peak as a player, Tarrasch could have resisted the challenge of Lasker in 1894, who would be further discouraged by his failure to make an impact at the great Hastings 1895 tournament, perhaps now finishing: 1. Pillsbury, 2. Tarrasch, 3. Chigorin, 4. Lasker.

Lasker then concentrated on his mathematical and philosophical work. He never again took up serious chess after gaining his doctorate and emigrating to America.

(In "real life" Lasker remained world champion after being Steinitz in 1894, and again in 1895-6. He made a come-back in 1904. He defended his title against Tarrasch in 1908.)

Tarrasch, who after all was still an amateur at chess, then played and lost a world championship match to Pillsbury in 1896, who thus became the first American world champion. Pillsbury successfully defended the crown against Tarrasch in 1898 and against Chigorin in 1899. This effectively ended the challenge of the older generation and it was not clear at the start of the 20th century which of the new generation (Maroczy, Marshall, Schlechter or the inactive Lasker) should be his next challenger.

Then Pillsbury got married and by 1904 his health began to fail. When Lasker was tempted out of retirement for the great Cambridge Springs 1904 tournament, but was beaten by Pillsbury in a famous game, while Marshall won the tournament, the issue was settled. American backers hastened to arrange a Marshall-Pillsbury world title match in the Fall of 1904, which of course was won by Marshall, as Pillsbury was only able to show his former strength in a handful of games. He died in 1906.

The chess world expected a Marshall-Tarrasch match now but Tarrasch, having held the title already, was concentrating on his writings and his work as a doctor. Traveling to America for a match would have taken too long and Marshall, as champion, would not play him in Germany unless the money being offered was irresistible. So he defended his title against lesser

grandmasters instead.

Marshall had little difficulty in holding the title against the challenge of Janowski in 1905 but the re-match in 1908 was closer. The clamor for Lasker to resume the fray was growing, but he had essentially lost interest in chess and so it should have fallen to Schlechter to bring the title back to Europe, but the Austrian was slow to get the monetary backing together.

Marshall recognized an opponent with a style that would have been “difficult” for him, so the American tried to postpone the clash by finding a different challenger. He disposed of Teichmann and Mieses without much trouble but avoided Maroczy whose fine positional style could have posed him problems. In those days, of course, the world champion had a lot of power to dictate the terms of matches and who his challenger might be; the less he needed the prize money, the choosier the title-holder could be.

In 1908-9 a new star emerged from Poland and in a surprise move Marshall announced that Akiba Rubinstein would be his new challenger. He too might have had problems raising the stake money, but Marshall was more accommodating in this case because he believed his relatively inexperienced opponent would be easier for him to deal with than the vastly experienced Schlechter. This was soon proved a miscalculation as Rubinstein in his prime was even more formidable a strategist than Schlechter and so the world title went back to Europe in 1910. Marshall’s contract stipulated a re-match, but in 1912 Rubinstein won that by an even greater margin.

Rubinstein did not enjoy his honor for long, however, as the new rising star Jose Raoul Capablanca challenged Rubinstein in 1914 took the world chess championship back to the New World just before the outbreak of the First World War...

Some comments on the above: The observant, or those with good reference works, will notice that I have left some facts unchanged (e.g. Pillsbury’s illness), subtly altered others (e.g. the finishing order of the runners-up at Hastings 1895) and made some fairly radical assumptions towards the end. This is because I wanted to see if I could create a scenario where Rubinstein became World Champion.

It’s surprising that a second-rate champion (Marshall) could hold the title for several years but just think later of how Alekhine avoided his most dangerous challenger until he made a fatal misjudgment. Also having the title of world champion is worth some extra half-points and Tarrasch, Pillsbury and Marshall could have benefited from this effect. The champion has more confidence and opponents are more likely to agree draws with him in difficult positions.

The “power vacuum” in world chess in the early 1900s, in the absence of Lasker, was apparent in my January ‘Kibitzer’ articles of the past few years. Pillsbury partially filled this vacuum but after his decline, if Lasker had not made a comeback, the rise of Rubinstein and Capablanca could have been accelerated.

B) The chaos of war, 1944-45. Paul Keres escapes the USSR.

Major Premise: Paul Keres, from Estonia, a Soviet citizen against his will, escapes to Sweden with his family as the Red Army sweeps west chasing the German forces out of the Baltic States.

Background: Estonia was independent between the World Wars, but became part of the USSR after the Hitler-Stalin pact divided up the buffer countries between them. Then Germany invaded the USSR and Keres, who was the rightful world title challenger after his victory in AVRO 1938, played in some tournaments organized by the Nazis.

What actually happened: Keres had a chance to escape to Sweden when the Germans were retreating, but his biographer Valter Heuer recounts that he went back for his family and the boat that was supposed to collect them never arrived.

Counterfactual: Keres, his wife and children escaped to Sweden. After the end of the war, they moved to Finland which was the nearest free country to Estonia has close linguistic and ethnic affinities to it. Keres renews his challenge to the world champion Alekhine, then in Spain, for a world title match and Alekhine accepts.

The consequences – Scenario 1: Alekhine dies in 1946 before the match can take place. The 1948 world championship tournament is arranged as in “real life.” Keres does a bit better because he is living in a free country but he cannot overcome his nemesis, Botvinnik, who becomes world champion. The subsequent chess career of Keres is not radically different.

The consequences – Scenario 2: Dutch chess patrons raise the finance for a series of matches, instead of the Groningen 1946 tournament. First Keres plays Alekhine for the world title, with the winner to be challenged six months later by Euwe. In the meantime, FIDE is invited to organize an elimination series to decide the next challenger.

Keres had problems against Alekhine in the wartime tournaments because he didn’t play well when his life was unhappy, but now he is much more settled and Alekhine’s health is poor. The old champion puts up a good fight in the early games but soon the result is beyond doubt and Alekhine resigns the match. Stalin and Botvinnik call on Keres to return to his “true home,” the Soviet Union, but he refuses.

In the next match, Keres retains his title against Euwe, and now holds the title for three years until he has to meet the official FIDE challenger, Botvinnik in 1948-49, in Helsinki. Botvinnik wins the match and Keres does not take up his return match option because it would mean returning to the USSR.

He never attempts to regain the world title, but remains a very strong grandmaster; playing only in events held in the West. In 1962 he draws a sensational match with the 19-year-old Bobby Fischer in California, sponsored by the Piatigorsky family (+5 −5 =2).

After the 1968 Lugano Olympiad, in which Keres scores the second best result on board 1 playing for Finland, he retires from competitive play on doctors' advice. He writes his best-selling book *My Chess Career* in which he denounces Botvinnik for his hypocrisy and political machinations, including trying to arrange matches with Alekhine in both 1939 and 1945 at Keres' expense. It is widely believed that these parts of the book were ghost-written.

Keres returns to his first love, postal chess, accepting an invitation from ICCF to play in the final of the 7th Correspondence World Championship that begins in 1972. He wins it by a margin of two points over Yakov Estrin, defeating all the representatives of the USSR in the tournament. Then he wins the 8th World Championship too, the only player ever to win this championship twice in a row, after which plays only in a few special events by invitation.

In the early 1990s, Estonia regains its independence and the Keres family returns home to a rapturous welcome. Paul Keres is named President, an honorary Head of State position created specially for him, which he holds until his death in 1995.

Some comments on the above: According to Heuer, it's true that the Keres family waited in vain for a ship but I am not sure what date this was. I wanted a "happy ending" to the Keres story but I do not believe that he could ever have beaten Botvinnik or a full-strength Alekhine in a match. Keres actually died of a heart attack on his way home from the Vancouver Open in 1975. Although he had intended to take up postal chess again, he did not live to do so.

C: Fischer doesn't show up.

Major Premise: Reykjavik, July 16, 1972. Bobby Fischer fails to arrive for Game 3 against Spassky because of a row over television cameras in the playing hall. Having lost Game 1 and having defaulted Game 2 over the cameras issue, he concedes the whole match and returns ignominiously to the

USA. Boris Spassky remains World Champion.

Background: Fischer, a troubled and obsessive young genius, was the first western challenger for the world title since 1948. He turned up late in Iceland and nearly didn't play at all. The opening ceremony was held while he was still in the USA, because he deliberately missed his flight. The drawing of lots and first game were postponed for two days while efforts were made to persuade him to fly to Iceland. A doubling of the prize fund by English businessman Jim Slater was instrumental in making Fischer play.

After losing the first game, the American grandmaster demanded the removal of television cameras for Game 2, although an Icelandic scientist had proved that the cameras made no more noise when running than when stopped. When his demand wasn't met, he remained in his hotel. For more details, you can read the recent book *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* by David Edmonds and John Eidinow, or the older books about the event. If some of the Soviet officials had had their way, Spassky would have returned to Moscow, but Spassky was conciliatory, which was his downfall.

What actually happened: Concessions were made and Fischer returned to win game 3, played in a smaller room. The decisive moment is described in detail for the first time on page 181 of the book by Edmonds and Eidinow. When Fischer arrived in the new room, there was a closed-circuit TV camera to relay the action to the audience in the hall. Fischer refused to accept this also; his adolescent behavior was so appalling that the match was close to being terminated, but the arbiter Lothar Schmid handled the situation well and the game got under way.

Schmid insisted on the main hall being used for future games and Fischer, now in better humor after his win, agreed and ultimately won the match. A huge chess boom immediately followed in the West but Fischer did not play again for years.

Counterfactual: After the delay in the start of the match, the arbiters and officials and Spassky himself refused to make any further concessions to Fischer. After Fischer, having been warned, failed to turn up for the third game, his clock was started and after an hour he lost the game. The same thing happened in Game 4, after which Spassky was declared the winner of the match.

The consequences – Scenario 1: I cannot imagine a low-consequences scenario where the Fischer-Spassky match was staged after all. Who would have put up the money for a new match? FIDE and especially the Soviet Chess Federation would not have permitted it.

The consequences – Scenario 2: The collapse of the Fischer-Spassky match

means that the world title remains indefinitely in Soviet hands. The western chess boom of the early 1970s does not happen and there is no 'English Chess Explosion' of the 1970s-1980s, because Jim Slater does not put any of his money into the Leonard Barden/Bob Wade coaching schemes that (in real life) did so much to develop a generation of British GMs and IMs who were growing up in the 1970s.

Many older players in the west, those in their twenties in 1972, become disillusioned with the game and abandon it for the Japanese game of 'Go' or other activities. The leading young chess players of the West, Ulf Andersson and Jan Timman, do well but are not technically or psychologically strong enough to break through to a world title match. There is little money in western chess. *New In Chess* magazine is founded in 1984 and flops.

The Soviets do not need to "force-feed" Karpov to produce a new world title challenger to defeat Fischer. His development proceeds more calmly and Viktor Korchnoi, not persecuted, remains in the Soviet Union. In 1975 Korchnoi wins the world championship match against Spassky, and in turn he loses to Karpov in 1978. Some time in the late 1980s or early 1990s Kasparov beats Karpov. There is no challenge from Nigel Short, who never played chess and became the leader of a rock group instead.

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