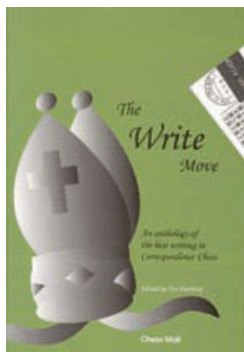




COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding



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The "What If...?" Game; Some New Case Studies

In this column, I return to the topic of counterfactual chess history last discussed over four years ago, in [Kibitzer 98](#) (July 2004). On that occasion, I introduced a device beloved of some military chess historians, which can also be interestingly transposed to sports history. What would have transpired if the result of a battle, or chess game, or personal incident, had turned out differently?

In my earlier article, I looked in detail at three apparent turning points in chess history. These were:

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

What were the ultimate outcomes of these altered events? I imagined "forking paths" in each case. One was of lesser consequences where, after a while, it doesn't make much difference, and one "chaos theory" type outcome where a whole new chain of events is set in motion across the chess world.

After commenting on those, while reviewing the general 'rules' of the what-if game, I shall examine three other possible major turning points. Arguably these were as equally significant as the ones I dealt with before.

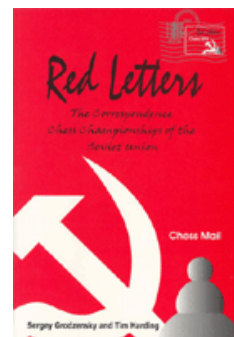
My old cases reviewed

Looking at the case of the Chigorin-Steinitz match, where the Russian blundered in a winning position, I now think that even if he had won that game he might have lost the match. If he had become World Champion, probably he would not have held the title for long, as Emanuel Lasker was on the rise. My main point in the 2004 article was to imagine a scenario leading to Rubinstein becoming world champion, and that had to mean excluding Lasker because in our 'real world' Lasker and Rubinstein never agreed terms on a match. The least plausible aspect of my 2004 scenario, it now seems to me, was the idea that Marshall could ever have won the world title. Cambridge Springs 1904 was the high point of his career and I do not think he ever played to that standard consistently afterwards.

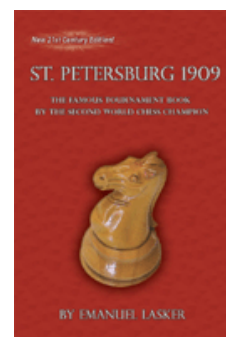
My second 2004 scenario about Paul Keres, although somewhat romanticised in that I was trying to find a 'happy ending' for the Estonian grandmaster, still seems valid to me. The least plausible aspect perhaps was that I had Keres living another twenty years, but I think that he might have done had he been able to live in the West rather than the U.S.S.R.

The third scenario, concerning Bobby Fischer defaulting the Spassky match after the first game, was of course written while Fischer was still alive. It still seems to me a plausible account of how the world title would have played out in that event, with Korchnoi not defecting and having

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three years on the throne. The long-term outcome with Kasparov ultimately succeeding Karpov as champion would not be much different, but chess in the West would have suffered. With no Short v Kasparov breakaway, the world title would have remained in the hands of FIDE.

Three more turning points

My chosen turning points this time are:

- a) August 1858. Staunton beats Löwenthal in the second round of the Birmingham tournament.
- b) 1918/19. Alekhine is executed during the Russian civil war.
- c) June 1944. The V1 flying bomb misses Vera Menchik's house.

As with my previous 'troika', only one of these, the first, really hinges on actual play at the chessboard. A fourth fascinating 'what-if' is what would have happened if Campomanes had not stopped his first title match against Karpov. This will be left for more detailed discussion in a future review article of Kasparov's new book, either in my November or December column. There are still other turning points that could be the subject of future articles, such as what would have happened if Bronstein had not thrown away a clear endgame draw in Game Six against Botvinnik in their 1951 world title match, and a more difficult half point at move forty-three in Game Twenty-three? (The latter was particularly important, as then Botvinnik would have needed a win, instead of a draw, with black in the final game to tie the match and keep his title.) Or what if FIDE had caved in to Fischer's demands and he defended his title in 1975 against Karpov under the rules he dictated?

Case a) August 1858. Staunton beats Löwenthal in the second round of the Birmingham tournament.

In my earlier article, I declined to write about the Staunton-Morphy case but, having found out more about it since 2004, I think it is time to tackle it. I wrote then that you might need twenty counterfactuals to bring about a 'future' where Staunton played and won a match with Morphy, but I now think that is an exaggeration. Two are probably sufficient: one for the match to have taken place, and a second for Morphy to lose it.



Howard Staunton

I now accept that Dr. Adrian Harvey has validly argued (in an article in the German magazine [*Kaissiber* #17](#) some years ago) that the turning point was Howard Staunton's mini-match with J. J. Löwenthal in Birmingham. That was a knock-out tournament of mini-matches – for the best of three games, except in the final which was a longer match. No chess magazine was being published in England during 1858, so contemporary accounts are to be found only in newspaper columns; some of the games appeared the following year in *The Chess Player's Chronicle* when it was revived. Sixteen players were expected, but only

eleven appeared and some local men were put in the draw. The draw and first round games were on Tuesday 24 August.

The name of Morphy (who had won a match against Löwenthal in London just previously) was left in the draw, but he did not appear until later in the week to play his famous blindfold exhibition. George Walker wrote in *Bell's Life in London* (29 August) that 'Mr Paul Morphy ... declined engaging in the Birmingham tourney, considering it *infra dig*, to jostle in a crowd of players, to some of whom he could give the Knight.' There may be some truth in that, but perhaps he also wanted to avoid a premature meeting with Staunton, whom he played only in two consultation games involving Barnes and Owen.

With sixteen entries, there were four rounds, to be played on successive days. The best account of the tournament is in Löwenthal's column in the *Era*. In the issue of 29 August, he stated that the pairings were: Falkbeer v C. M. Ingelby; Staunton v Hughes; Löwenthal v Kipping; 'Mr Morphy v Mr Smith'; Brien v Bird; Salmon v Zabe; "Alter" v Hampton; Saint-Amant v Beetlestone. As a result of Morphy's non-appearance, C. F. Smith (quite a strong player) had a walkover. Owen, Saint-Amant, Salmon, Staunton, Falkbeer, and Löwenthal all won their matches 2-0. Brien and Bird won a game each, after which Bird was 'obliged to resign on account of a pressing engagement'.

On Wednesday 25 August, round two was paired and begun. Löwenthal wrote that Saint Amant lost two games to Falkbeer's one, while 'Alter' (i. e. Rev. John Owen) "gained two games of the Rev Mr Salmon. Mr Smith, Brien's opponent, resigned without playing, on account of other engagements, and the game between Messrs Staunton and Löwenthal, which lasted upwards of twelve hours, was adjourned till the next day."

Morphy arrived at 3pm on the Thursday and his blindfold soiree was planned for Friday. Because of the *Era* deadlines, the rest of the report was carried in the following issue, of 5 September 1858. However, the conclusion of the competition (between Falkbeer and Löwenthal) was played off in London by agreement and was reported on 26 September, the *Era* chess editor beating his opponent.

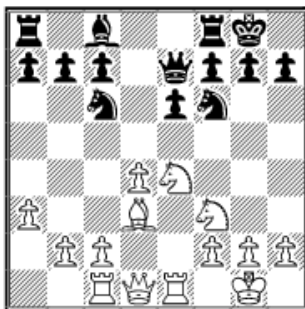
What is relevant to us is the mini-match that Staunton lost, and in particular the first game, which was decisive for ending Staunton's supremacy in English chess. It was a marathon and left him with the task of trying to win with Black, which he dismally failed to do. Let us look briefly at that second game and then the main one.

Johann Jacob Löwenthal – Howard Staunton

Second BCA Congress, Birmingham 1858

Scandinavian Defence [B01]

1 e4 d5 2 exd5 Nf6 3 Bc4 Nxd5 4 d4 e6 5 Nf3 Bd6 6 0–0 0–0 7 Bd3 Bf4 8 Nbd2 Nc6 9 a3 Nf6 10 Ne4 Bxc1 11 Rxc1 Qe7 12 Re1



Black is already in a bad position.

12...b6? 13 Nxf6+ gxf6

Desperation; if 13...Qxf6 14 Be4 Bb7 15 Ne5 wins the exchange at least: 15...Na5 16 Nd7.

14 d5 Ne5 15 Nxe5 fxe5 16 Bxh7+! Kxh7 17 Qh5+ Kg7 18 Re3 Rg8 19 Rg3 + Kf8 20 Qh6+ Ke8 21 Rxg8+ Kd7 22

dxe6+ Qxe6 23 Rd1+ Kc6 24 Qxe6+ fxe6 25 Rdd8 1–0

Now for the main struggle.

1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 e3

This was the usual move here in the 19th century but the plan of an early d4 is not good. The best move is 3 Nf3; 3 g3 was maybe first played in the 1890s by Maróczy.

3...Bb4

3...Nc6 4 d4 exd4 5 exd4 occurred in a Brien-Janssens game from 1854 which the players would have known.

4 Qb3

4 Nd5 is perhaps better (Von Bardeleben-Mieses, Berlin 1897).

4...c5! 5 Nd5 Nc6 6 Ne2 6 7 Ng3 Be6 8 a3 Ba5 9 Qxb7

This was given a ? in the *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Chess Games* (following Staunton's notes in *Chess Praxis*). Although Fritz 8, analysing overnight thought it best, the pawn grab entails responsibilities and does not seem to yield any clear advantage. 9 Nxf6+ first may be better.

9...Bd7

An interesting choice. Against 9...Rc8 Staunton intended 10 b4!?, but it is not clear whether that is better than 10 Nxf6+ Qxf6 11 b4 or 10 Qb3.

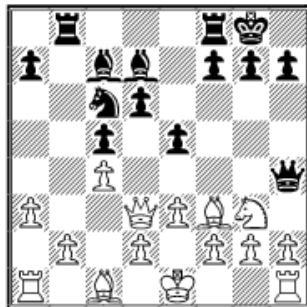
10 Qb3

After 10 Nxf6+ gxf6 11 Qb3 f5 12 Be2 (or 12 Qc2) Black's compensation for the pawn is not altogether clear but he at least has temporary initiative.

10...0-0 11 Nxf6+ Qxf6 12 Be2 Qh4!

The idea is 13...f5; White becomes rather cramped with backward development.

13 Bf3 Rab8 14 Qd3 Bc7



15 Bxc6?

A positional blunder, giving up his good bishop and allowing the black light-squared bishop to become a monster. Probably 15 Qc2 is best, keeping Black guessing about where the white king will go. After 15 0-0 f5 16 Qc2 e4 17 Be2 Rf6 18 d3 f4 19 exf4 Nd4, Black has good compensation for the pawn.

15...Bxc6 16 e4? f5! 17 0-0

White has to abandon his planned 17 Nxf5?? because of the reply 17... Bxe4.

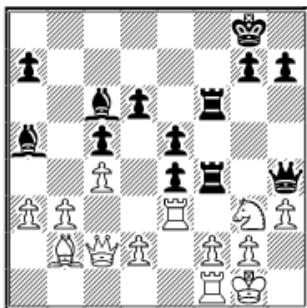
17...fxe4

Black regains his pawn with the bishop-pair and open lines for all his pieces except the dark-squared bishop, while White's queenside remains undeveloped.

18 Qc2 Rf4 19 b3 Rbf8 20 Bb2 R8f6 21 Rae1 Rh6 22 h3

Staunton strove for many hours to defend and hope for a mistake from his opponent.

22...Rh6 23 Re3 Ba5



Löwenthal correctly tries to activate his only badly-placed piece.

24 Qd1!

As Black has removed one of the defenders of the d6-pawn, Staunton now plans 25 d3 exd3 26 Rxd3 to attack it. (Not 24 d3 exd3 25 Rxd3 e4). If the bishop now goes back to c7, White could force off the queens by Qh5.

24...Qh6 25 Qe2 Qg6 26 Bc1

An odd-looking move, apparently with the intention of playing d3 and setting up a battery against the rook on f4, so Black moves it.

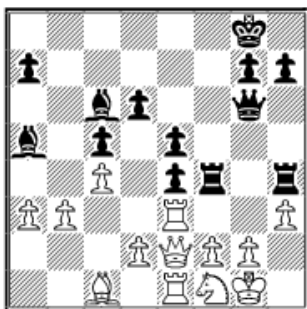
26...Rh4 27 Re1

If White was ever going to play d3, now was the time to do it. Although Black still holds an edge, the central counterplay would make it harder to build up his kingside attack.

27...Rff4

Taking advantage of the fact that White cannot play d3 now that his rook is on e1.

28 Nf1?!



Staunton had been defending quite well but this just cost two tempi. Either 28 Bb2 or 28 Rd1 would be more constructive.

Since g2-g3 is clearly not a threat, it must have been Staunton's intention to continue 29 Rg3, the strong reply forestalls that.

28...Rf3! 29 Ng3

There is no alternative because of 29 Kh2 Rhf4 threatens ...Rxf2, and 30 gxf3? exf3 is horrendous. Fortunately for Staunton, his position is still tenable thanks to the bad black bishop. His opponent seems to drift somewhat in the next phase of the game.

29...Rxe3 30 Qxe3 Qf7 31 Re2 Rf4 32 Bb2 Qg6 33 b4!

Staunton sees a chance to improve his position; 33...cxb4? is bad because of 34 Qxa7.

33...Bb6 34 b5 Bb7 35 Qc3

Staunton clearly envisages a4-a5 and the creation of a passed pawn eventually, but Black now revives his own attack and there is no time to complete the plan.

35...h5! 36 Re3

Necessary, because if 36 a4 h4 37 Nf1 Rf3.

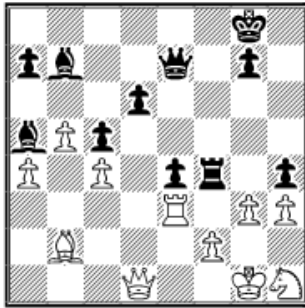
36...h4 37 Nh1?

Staunton chooses this awful square in order to protect the f-pawn, leaving his rook free, but 37 Nf1 was correct. He is close to lost now.

37...Qf7 38 a4 Qc7 39 d3?

A fateful decision. As a4-a5 has been prevented, Staunton gets 'active' elsewhere, but it was probably better to continue waiting and hope for a draw. As the game becomes more open, the two bishops become a real factor.

39...Ba5 40 Qc2 exd3 41 Qxd3 e4 42 Qd1 Qe7 43 g3!



This is the consequence of the previous errors; White needs his knight in play and the only way to achieve that is to incur more weaknesses and hope for sufficient piece play.

43...hxg3

Probably 43...Rf7 is better.

44 Rxc3

The threat to capture on g7 is easily met, and the rook must go back, returning the tempo which Black's 43rd move had donated him.

It is hard to understand why Staunton rejected the obvious 44 Nxg3!, when the knight threatens to go to h5 with counter-play (attacking f4 and g7) and then back to g3 (pressurizing e4) when the rook retreats. This might have obtained a draw.

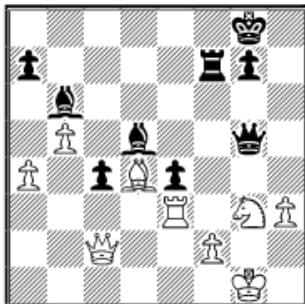
44...Rf7 45 Re3 d5!

With the knight on g3 this move, eliminating the weakness and creating a passed pawn, would not have worked because there would have been no check next move.

46 cxd5 Qg5+ 47 Ng3 Bxd5 48 Bc1

Staunton seems to lack any plan except tactical tricks now. Perhaps he thought the endgame was lost if he exchanged queens (Qg4 or Qh5).

48...Qe5 49 Qc2 c4 50 Bb2 Qg5 51 Bd4 Bb6



The white bishop must not be allowed to take up a strong post unchallenged. White should now have exchanged bishops but he still dreamt of playing a4-a5. Maybe he was tired. Unfortunately I cannot tell you at what point this game was adjourned.

52 Qd2 Qf4!

Again White is thwarted in the a4-a5 idea because of the threat to f2.

53 Nh5?

It was absolutely imperative to capture on b6. Staunton must have overlooked the reply.

55...c3!!

Now if 56 Nxf4 cxd2 and Black obtains a new queen with an easy win. Therefore White loses the exchange and the rest is easy.

54 Bxc3 Qg5+ 55 Ng3 Bxe3 56 Qxe3 Qxe3 57 fxe3 Rf3 58 Be5 Rxe3 59 Nf5 Rd3 60 a5 e3 61 Nd4 Rd1+ 62 Kh2 e2 63 Nxe2 Rd2 64 Bb8 Rxe2+ 65 Kg3 Rb2 0-1

This was effectively the game that ended the final illusions of Staunton's supremacy in British chess. The massacre in the return game merely confirmed it.

As the notes show, although Staunton had his back to the wall almost throughout, he was not clearly lost until his mistake at move 55. Yet in this long game, it was not just the tactical oversights (Staunton must have overlooked 16...f5! and 55...c3, and probably some other points also), but the lack of judgment shown several times, especially in the move 15 Bxc6?, which shows that the Staunton of 1858 was not the player of 1843 or even of 1851.

Not just the defeat, but the abject manner of it, must have disillusioned Staunton. He had not the ghost of a chance against Morphy, who had recently won a match against the same opponent.

However, had Löwenthal blundered in the above game (as he did in several of his other important games), enabling Staunton to escape and win, then he would have faced a much more formidable opponent in the second game. Thus if Staunton had received some 'help' from Löwenthal and won this second round match, he would have gone to play Rev. John Owen in the semi-final, an opponent with whom he was familiar and, after him, Falkbeer in the final. With victories in these three mini-matches under his belt, Staunton would have been back in strong practice and confident once more, and would not have backed out of the match with Morphy. Whether he could have won it, however, is another story.

Case b) 1918/19. The execution of Alexander Alekhine.

This was another case that I alluded to in the earlier article. First, let us look at what actually *did* happen to Alekhine in the First World War and Russian Revolution. At the outbreak of war, he was one of the Russian contingent interned at Mannheim where the international tournament was brought to an abrupt close. In September he was released and eventually made his way home. The Bolshevik Revolution in late 1917 and subsequent upheavals were followed by the Civil War that came after the separate peace Russia made with Germany, and then the end of the world war. I am not concerned here with exact biographic details, but it seems likely that at the end of December 1918 and some period in early 1919, Alekhine was in detention and could have been liquidated by one side or the other. Many people, especially of an aristocratic or bourgeois background, did not survive those years. Whatever crisis Alekhine survived was probably instrumental in persuading him to leave the country of his birth permanently.



Alexander Alekhine

All I am concerned with here is what would chess in the inter-war years have been like without Alekhine who, of course in 'real life' became world champion in 1927 and then again in 1937. I am assuming for these purposes that Capablanca's succession from Lasker would have occurred just the same; Alekhine was not involved in top chess at that stage. There are two principal issues: how long would Capablanca have remained world champion, and what would then have happened when he lost the crown or died?

José Raúl Capablanca became world champion in April 1921. He had no challenger until 1927 when Alekhine managed to raise the money demanded for a challenge. Over the next few years he either won or took a high prize in the tournaments in which he played: including London 1922, New York 1924 (second to Lasker), New York 1927 (first) and he continued to do so after losing the title. Nobody else would have been able to raise the money to challenge Capablanca, then or in the next few years, and even if they had, it is improbable that they could have defeated the Cuban who remained almost unbeatable for several more years. Alekhine's first challenger was Bogoljubow, whom he comfortably disposed of twice; there is no reason to suppose that Capablanca could not have done the same.

Of course other people would have won the great tournaments that Alekhine dominated when he became champion, such as San Remo 1930 and Bled 1931. Maybe some new elite grandmaster would have emerged from these events instead, or perhaps Capablanca himself would have played in them re-asserted his dominance. As years went by, the chess world would have wanted a challenge for the title to be mounted, but the years of financial depression from 1929 meant that this was unlikely to happen unless there was a challenger with a really good prospect of winning.

It is hard to see any realistic challenge emerging until about 1935, the year Alekhine was defeated by Euwe. By then Capablanca (born on 19 November 1888) was in his mid-forties and his powers were surely declining. In 1931, in the 'real world', Capablanca had defeated him in a match. Maybe the Dutch financiers would have found the money for a 1935 Euwe-Capablanca title contest, but a Euwe victory is somewhat implausible. Alekhine was undone by alcohol and had a style of play perhaps suited to Euwe whereas Capablanca had a similar style to the Dutchman.

Then at Nottingham 1936, Capablanca shared first prize with Botvinnik; so there is still no reason to be sure he would have been deposed. Not until 1938, when Capablanca was almost fifty, can one imagine that he would have not been favourite to win a world title match. Apart from Euwe, there were three other plausible challengers: Botvinnik and the joint winners of AVRO 1938: Fine and Keres. If whichever of these managed to raise the money first had their chance before war broke out

again, then Capablanca might have been deposed.

Equally likely, though, is that he would still have been world champion in September 1939. Outbreak of war would have ruled out Euwe, perhaps, certainly after May 1940, but the USSR and USA were still neutral and either Botvinnik or Fine might have arranged a match up to 1941.

The most likely scenario is that in late 1938 or early 1939, Capablanca would have narrowly won a match against one of these challengers. Then in 1940 or 1941, the American would have been in the best position to challenge for a new match, given Cuba's proximity to the United States and America having the best financial options.

On this scenario, Reuben Fine becomes world champion around 1940. Then one of two things would happen during the 1940s. He would either remain unchallenged until 1946 when FIDE would arrange a qualification tournament between Euwe, Reshevsky and the top two Soviet players to decide who challenged Fine. In this case, we can imagine that Fine would have ultimately lost and from that point would have devoted himself to his career in psychiatry, as in fact he did from a much earlier date. Alternatively, and more likely, Jewish supporters of the emerging Reshevsky would have arranged a wartime match with Fine around 1944, which Fine, already becoming absorbed in his Freudian psychiatric work, would have lost without too many qualms.

A totally different scenario sees Capablanca losing the title before world war broke out, in which case the new champion would have been a European. Then the question is: which one? If it was Botvinnik who had won the title from Capablanca, he would probably have gone unchallenged until after the war.

On the other hand, if Keres had beaten Capablanca, say in late 1938, then the Soviets would certainly have tried to arrange a challenge to give Botvinnik the chance of being world champion. In this scenario, timing is all-important. If the match were held in 1940 or early 1941, while Nazi Germany controlled most of Europe but was not at war with the Soviet Union, the match could well have happened even though Keres was living in territory under German occupation. We can expect that Botvinnik would have won such a match, and indeed at any time Botvinnik would have won a match between these two.

However, if the Botvinnik-Keres match were not played before Hitler launched *Barbarossa* on 22 June 1941, then Keres would have remained world champion until after the war. Indeed he might have been able to escape with his family to the West by agreeing to give Capablanca a return match in Cuba or the United States in 1941. Such a match would probably have been stipulated in a clause in Capablanca's contract for the first match, although given the Cuban's age and health he would certainly have not been able to regain the title.

From these various possibilities, we can see that the chess world and the championship would have proceeded anyway, and indeed the post-WW2 complications over the world title would have been avoided. The main loss to the chess world, had Alekhine been liquidated, would have been the marvellous games which have delighted and instructed millions of chess players ever since. A secondary effect is that the Netherlands would probably not have had such an exciting peak to the career of their chess hero and consequently Dutch chess might not have developed so strongly. American chess might have received the boost instead.

Case c) 26 June 1944. The V1 flying bomb misses Vera Menchik's house.

I chose this as my third counterfactual to bring in some gender balance to this series, but there is not really much evidence to go on. Vera Menchik (1906-44) was the strongest female chess player in the world until, at

least, the rise of the Georgian 'grandmistresses' Nona Gaprindashvili and Maia Chiburdanidze in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and perhaps until the rise of the Polgars. These were the first women who could compete on equal terms with almost all male chess masters in tournaments. Vera Menchik had a Czech father and English mother and lived in England from 1921 onwards.



Vera Menchik

The Moscow-born Menchik had done well in some minor master events of the 1930s and was clearly far stronger than the other women of the period, even Sonja Graf. Menchik also wrote on chess, especially for B. H. Wood's magazine during the war when there were few opportunities to compete. Had she not been killed by the bomb that hit her home in London, also killing her sister and mother, Menchik (who was then only 38-years old) would clearly have continued as women's world champion well into the 1950s. Soviet players would undoubtedly have challenged her, at first unsuccessfully, and she would have thereby raised the general standard of women's competition as rivals strove to equal and surpass her. Instead of the twenty-year gap in which the standard of top female play fell back from the peak she had achieved, women's chess would have continued to progress in Elo-rating terms.

Still more importantly perhaps, her presence as a competitor in international events with men would have served as a role model to girls, as the Polgars have done in recent times. It is also quite likely that she could have become involved as coach to the new generation of English players, particularly Elaine Saunders (later Mrs. D. B. Pritchard) who had won the British Ladies' Championship in 1939 at the age of thirteen.

On the other hand, perhaps Menchik (who had been widowed during the war) would have remarried in 1945, when she would still have been just young enough to have children. She might have dropped out of chess altogether, or become mother to the first British world champion (of either gender).

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