



# Wilhelm Steinitz

1st World Chess Champion  
by Isak and Vladimir Linder

Foreword by Andy Soltis  
Game Annotations by Karsten Müller



**The World Chess Champion Series**

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2014

Russell Enterprises, Inc.  
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Wilhelm Steinitz  
First World Chess Champion

by Isaak and Vladimir Linder

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## Table of Contents

Foreword by Andy Soltis	6
Key Dates and Events	8
Prologue	14
<b><i>Chapter 1: Life and Fate</i></b>	
Childhood	15
Viennese Student	15
Family	19
Personality	20
Curiosities	21
Austria	22
England	22
Germany	23
Russia	24
Cuba	26
United States	27
<b><i>Chapter 2: Matches, Tournaments, Rivals</i></b>	
Tournaments	29
Matches	29
The London Tournaments, 1862, 1866, 1872, 1883, 1899	29
Serafino Dubois	32
Dubois-Steinitz Match, 1862	33
Joseph Blackburne	35
Blackburne-Steinitz matches, 1862-1863, 1863, 1870, 1876	36
Augustus Mongredien	40
Mongredien-Steinitz Match, 1863	40
Cecil Valentine De Vere	41
De Vere-Steinitz Match, 1865	42
Adolf Anderssen	45
Anderssen-Steinitz Match, 1866	49
Henry Edward Bird	55
Bird-Steinitz Match, 1866	58
Ignác Kolisch	59
Paris Tournament, 1867	60
Fraser-Steinitz Matches	62
Dundee Tournament, 1867	62
The Baden-Baden Tournament, 1870	63

## Wilhelm Steinitz: First World Chess Champion

Correspondence Competitions	67
Johannes Hermann Zukertort	69
Zukertort-Steinitz Match, 1872	74
Vienna Tournaments, 1873, 1882, 1898	75
Szymon Winawer	79
George Henry Mackenzie	80
The Mackenzie-Steinitz Match, 1883	83
Golmayo-Steinitz Matches, 1883, 1888	84
World Championship Matches	86
Steinitz-Zukertort Match, 1886	86
Steinitz-Chigorin Match, 1889	92
Isidor Gunsberg	96
Steinitz-Gunsberg Match, 1890/1891	98
Steinitz-Chigorin Match, 1892	99
Emanuel Lasker	102
Steinitz-Lasker Match, 1894	105
Steinitz-Lasker Match, 1896/1897	106
Mikhail Ivanovich Chigorin	107
Chigorin-Steinitz Telegraph Match	112
New York Tournaments, 1894, 1897	114
Hastings Tournament, 1895	116
Nuremberg Tournament, 1896	118
Cologne Tournament, 1898	120
Louis Paulsen	120
St. Petersburg Tournament, 1895-1896	122
Emanuel Stepanovich Schiffers	124
Schiffers-Steinitz Match, 1896	128
Simultaneous Exhibitions	129

### ***Chapter 3: Chess Art: The Game And Discoveries***

Predecessors	132
François-André Danican Philidor	132
Alexander Dmitrievich Petroff	134
Louis-Charles Mahé de la Bourdonnais	137
Howard Staunton	139
Paul Charles Morphy	140
Attack	141
Aphorisms	146
Opening Discoveries	147
Ruy Lopez	148

Vienna Game	148
Scotch Game	151
Petroff's Defense	152
Evans Gambit	152
French Defense	153
Queen's Gambit Accepted	154
Defense	155
Health and Chess	159
Famous Games	160
Combinations	161
Composition	165
Loyd and Steinitz	165
Evaluation of the Position	167
Positional Principles	167
Defeats	168
Style	169
Endgame	170
Aesthetics	175
<b><i>Chapter 4: Writer and Journalist</i></b>	
The Hoffer-Steinitz Ink War	176
Journalism	177
International Chess Magazine	177
<i>The Book of the Sixth American Chess Congress</i>	178
<i>The Modern Chess Instructor</i>	179
<i>The Field</i>	192
<b><i>Chapter 5: Forever and Beyond</i></b>	
Epilogue	181
World Champions about Steinitz	188
Steinitz Memorial	190
Bibliography	192
Summary of Career Results	194
Player Index	196
Opening Index	197
ECO Index	198

## Foreword

After his world championship match in 2013, Magnus Carlsen was not only the world's highest rated player, but he was 60 points ahead of his closest rival. It was a stunning phenomenon considering how even in Garry Kasparov's great years his rating was only modestly higher than Anatoly Karpov's.

But what can we make of Wilhelm Steinitz? For nearly 20 years he was clearly the world's best player. But the difference between him and the No. 2 player was typically well over 100 points, according to retroactive ratings.

For example, he was a staggering 139 points better than former world champion Adolf Anderssen, the No. 2 player in 1871, according to the Chessmetrics web site. And after Steinitz crushed Joseph Blackburne in a 7-0 match wipeout in 1876, the distance between him and the next highest rated player in the world was 186 points.

To put that in a bit of perspective, Bobby Fischer was a mere 125 points better than anyone else in 1972 and Mikhail Botvinnik was just 122 points ahead of the pack when he dominated in 1945, according to Chessmetrics.

Wherein lays Steinitz's superiority? The easy answer is "better opening preparation." That has been a major advantage for other champions, like Mikhail Botvinnik and Alexander Alekhine, and it explains how many of the elite players of the 21st century remain on top.

There is ample evidence that Steinitz was confounding his opponents in the 1870s and 1880s with theoretical innovations just as top GMs do today. But Steinitz managed to do it at move six and seven, not at 16 or 17.

True, his hard-headed attempts to refute major openings, such as the Evans Gambit and Scotch Game, look odd through modern eyes. But other Steinitz innovations remain valid. If Black doesn't like meeting the Ruy Lopez, 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♗c6 3.♗b5, with the popular 3...a6, his best bet may be Steinitz's 3...d6.

To fully appreciate his greatness, we have to use different measuring tools. Today's players are evaluated by their most recent tournament results. But Steinitz played many more matches (35) than tournaments (25) and his great tournament results, such as Vienna 1882, were few. (Steinitz lived in an era in which the champion was expected to win every tournament he entered. When he failed to take first prize at London 1883, it prompted fans to arrange a match with the winner, Johannes Zukertort, in what turned out to be the first official world championship.)

If we think of his achievements as a writer, not just as a player, Steinitz was unique. Howard Staunton was the only author and journalist before him that comes close. And none of his great successors could match his versatility and output.

Steinitz wrote a great tournament book – like Emanuel Lasker, Alexander Alekhine and Mikhail Botvinnik. But he also edited a great magazine. Only Lasker among the other champions can make that claim. And Steinitz also wrote a great instructional book – like Capablanca and Lasker. He introduced or popularized many of the terms we take for granted, including: theoretical continuation, blunder, hole, initiative, book position and transposition of moves.

Few of his great successors could claim to be accomplished chess journalists. Emanuel Lasker, Karl Schlechter and Mikhail Tal come to mind – but in reading Isaak and Vladimir Linder’s splendid biographical work, you may be surprised by some other aspects of Steinitz’s chess life. He played blindfold games, for example, and could solve even Sam Loyd’s intricate problems in minutes. Karsten Müller’s annotations add considerable depth to the original Russian-language version of this work. For example, he points out the faster wins in game 18, the missed opportunity in game 19, among others.

Steinitz had a remarkable private life, marked by the tragically early death of his daughter and his first wife, his second marriage, to a woman 28 years younger than him, and becoming a father again at age 61. His final years of poverty and mental problems could not have been happy. It is touching that his death certificate lists one of the causes as “acute melancholia.”

Let’s let Aron Nimzovich have the last word: “Steinitz had probably only one imperfection – that he was about 50 years, at least, ahead of his generation!”

Andy Soltis  
New York  
May 2014

**References** Gunsberg, Isidor. *Magyar sakkfortenet*. Budapest, 1975.

**Steinitz-Gunsberg Match, 1890/1891**

This match (December 9-January 22, New York) was organized by the Manhattan Chess Club. It was a best-of-20 match, with an unusual time control: 1 hour 45 minutes for 26 moves, then one hour for each subsequent 15 moves. The stake was \$375. Steinitz agreed to the match with Isidor Gunsberg after Gunsberg had a number of successes in international tournaments and a drawn match with Mikhail Chigorin (1890: +9 -9 =5). The arbiter of the match was a well-known patron, Prof. I. Rice, the inventor of the gambit of the same name that was tested in a thematic match between Emanuel Lasker and Mikhail Chigorin. Unlike impatient Zukertort and implacable Chigorin, Gunsberg fought against the world champion with his own weapon, positional play. In the beginning of the match, Steinitz quite often resorted to risky experimentation. Thus, in the first game, in the Queen's Gambit, 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♖c3 ♗f6 he surprised his opponent with the extravagant move 4.f3. Chigorin wrote that "playing with a weak player, it is possible to resort to such moves for fun." The game ended in a draw on the 25th move. Steinitz won the second game because of his opponent's blunder, and, in the third game, he again played f3, this time on the 5th move. Black obtained an advantage but was not able to convert it. In the 4th and 5th games, the world champion left his king in the center; Gunsberg punished him both times for the unjustified risk.

Steinitz stopped his experiments only after reaching a minus score of 2-3, and, in the next part of the match, he was much more successful, scoring 4-1. Gunsberg, as a rule, played the Italian Game with White; Steinitz played the Queen's Gambit. After 11 games, the score was 6½-4½ in favor of the world champion. In the twelfth game, Steinitz chose a critical continuation in the Evans Gambit, in which he had lost in the telegraph match against Chigorin. After winning this game (see the game in *Gunsberg*), the Hungarian master reduced the score difference to the minimum possible. In the thirteenth game, Steinitz restored his advantage to two points. In the subsequent four games, he again persistently played the Evans Gambit, finishing with a score of one win, one loss, and one draw in the opening. The nineteenth, and last, game of the match ended in a draw and brought victory to Steinitz with the score 10½-8½. Steinitz's best win was in the seventhth game.

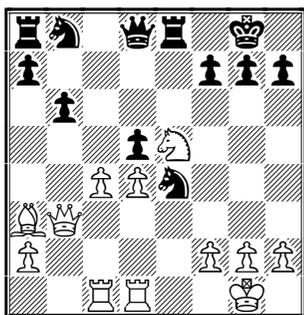
**(47) Steinitz – Gunsberg**

World Championship (7) 1890  
Queen's Gambit Accepted [D26]

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♗f3 ♗f6 4.e3 e6 5.♙xc4 ♖b4+?! The main lines are 5...c5 and 5...a6. 6.♗c3 0-0 7.0-0 b6 8.♗e5 ♖b7 9.♙b3 ♙xc3 10.bxc3 ♗d5?! More logical is 10...♗c6. 11.♙xd5 exd5 12.♙a3 ♖e8 13.c4 c5 14.♙ac1 ♗e4? Black should develop the other knight first with 14...cx d4 15.ex d4 ♗a6 16.♙fe1 ♗c7 17.c5 ♗e6. 15.♙fd1 cx d4 16.ex d4 (D)**

Steinitz-Gunsberg, New York 1890-91

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	T
Steinitz	½	1	½	0	0	1	1	½	½	1	½	0	1	½	½	0	½	1	½	10½
Gunsberg	½	0	½	1	1	0	0	½	½	0	½	1	0	½	½	1	½	0	½	8½



**16...f6?** This is too optimistic; White's knight does not have to move. Instead, the retreat 16...♞f6 is necessary.

**17.c×d5! f×e5 18.d6+ ♖h8**

**19.♗d5** Even stronger is 19.♗f3!

♞×f2 20.♗×f2 e4 21.♞c7 ♖f8 22.♗e2

♞d7 23.♗g4+- . **19...♞×f2! 20.♞d2**

**♞d7?!** This development makes

White's job relatively easy. But

Steinitz's advantage is also not in doubt

after (a) 20...♞h3+ 21.g×h3 ♞d7

22.♞g2 e×d4 23.♗×d4 ♞f6 24.♞b2

♞e6 25.d7 b5 26.♗d3 ♞e7 27.♞×f6

g×f6 28.♞d2±; or (b) 20...♞e4

21.♗×e4 ♞d7 22.♞dc2 e×d4 23.♗×d4

♗g5 24.♞b2 ♞ad8 25.♞f1±.

**21.♞×f2 ♞f6?!** 21...♞c8 22.♞cf1+-;

21...♗g5 22.d×e5 ♞ad8 23.♞e2+-

**22.♞×f6 g×f6 22...♗×f6 23.d7 ♞f8**

24.♞×f8 ♞×f8 25.♗f3+- **23.d7 ♞g8**

**24.d×e5 ♞g5 24...f×e5 25.♞b2+-**

**25.♗×a8 ♗×a8 26.♞c8+ ♞g8**

**27.♞×a8 ♞×a8 28.e6 1-0**

After the match, Siegbert Tarrasch observed that "Gunsberg was Steinitz's first opponent to fight him with Steinitz's own weapon. Even though he did not defeat Steinitz, he demonstrated that Steinitz can be defeated."

**Steinitz-Chigorin Match, 1892**

The second Chigorin match (January 1-February 28, Havana) was organized by the Havana Chess Club. The match was to be played until one of the participants accrued ten wins, the stake was \$2,000, and the time control was two hours for 30 moves and then one hour for each subsequent 15 moves. In case of a 9-9 finish, an additional match awarded to the first player to reach three wins was to be played. Chigorin won the first game to take the lead. The second and third games ended in draws. The newspaper *Novoye Vremya* published correspondence from Havana about the beginning of the match:

*The first move in the first game of a big chess competition between the two strongest players of our time was made on January 1 at 2:30 PM. The match is taking place in the new luxurious club Centro Asturiano. The electric lamps from Paris alone cost almost \$14,000. A table for the two players and two assistants is on a low platform, separated with a barrier; a large demonstration board is mounted vertically for the public to watch the game. There are chess tables in the hall for the spectators to analyze each move made by Steinitz or Chigorin; the noise does not reach the players, who are far enough from it so that it does not interfere with their concentration.*

*In the first game, Chigorin got White. As everyone expected, he chose to*



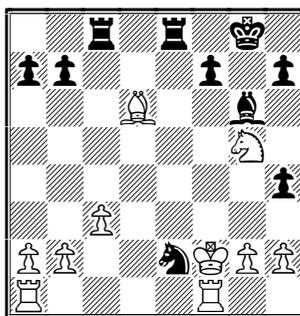
♖×b2 30.♖h5 ♖d2 31.♖×f7  
♖×f7 32.♖×f7 ♖×f2+ This is a last,  
desperate attempt. 33.♖×f2 Of  
course not 33.♖×f2?? ♖d1+ 34.♖f1  
♖e3+ 35.♖h1 ♖×f1#. 1-0

After 20 games, Steinitz was one point ahead (+9 -8 =5). The twenty-third game was one of the most dramatic in the history of chess. Playing a gambit, Chigorin earned an advantage, and Steinitz, in search for counterplay, sacrificed a piece. In a winning position, Chigorin unexpectedly missed mate in two moves.

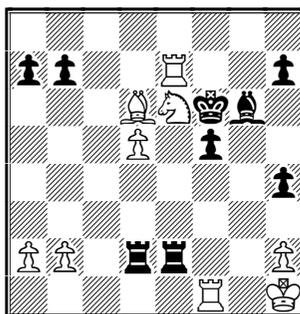
#### (49) Chigorin – Steinitz

World Championship (23) 1892  
King's Gambit Accepted [C34]

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.♖f3 ♖f6 4.e5  
♖h5 5.♖e2 g6 6.d4 ♖g7 7.0-0  
d6 8.♖c3?! More precise is 8.exd6  
cxd6 9.♖c3 0-0 10.♖e1 ♖f6 11.♖×f4=  
(Gallagher-Curran, Lyon 1993). 8...0-  
0 9.♖e1?! Again, 9.exd6 is called for.  
9...d×e5 10.♖×h5! White can limit  
the damage with 10.d×e5! ♖×d1  
11.♖×d1 ♖c6 12.♖×h5 gxh5 13.♖d5  
♖×e5 14.♖×c7 ♖b8 15.c3. 10...g×h5  
11.d×e5 ♖×d1 12.♖×d1 ♖c6  
13.♖×f4 ♖f5?! Even stronger is  
13...♖×e5!?. 14.♖e3 ♖e4 15.♖f3  
♖fe8 16.♖g5 ♖g6 17.♖d5 ♖×e5  
18.♖×c7 ♖×c7 19.♖×c7 ♖ac8  
20.♖g3?! ♖d4 21.c3 ♖e2+  
22.♖f2 h4? Steinitz should eliminate  
his problem knight; 22...♖×g3 23.h×g3  
♖e5 24.♖f3 ♖b5, with a strong initia-  
tive. 23.♖d6 (D)  
23...♖d4? This is desperation;  
Steinitz will not get enough compen-  
sation. However, after 23...♖cd8!  
24.♖fd1 ♖h5 25.♖f3 ♖e6 26.♖c7  
♖c8 27.♖d7 h3 28.g×h3 ♖f6, Black



has sufficient counterplay. 24.c×d4  
♖c2+ 25.♖g1 25.♖f3!? 25...♖ee2  
26.♖ae1 ♖×g2+ 27.♖h1 ♖g7 Of  
course not 27...♖×g5?? 28.♖e8+ ♖g7  
29.♖f8+ ♖g8 30.♖h6#. 28.♖e8  
f5?! 28...♖d3 29.♖×f7+ ♖g6 30.♖g8+  
♖h5 31.♖e6 ♖×g8 32.♖f4+ ♖g5  
33.♖×d3± 29.♖e6+?! More precise  
is 29.♖e7+! ♖g8 30.♖e6 f4 31.♖×f4  
♖×h2+ 32.♖g1 h3 33.♖fe1+-.  
29...♖f6 30.♖e7 ♖ge2?!  
30...♖×h2+ 31.♖×h2 ♖×e7 32.d5±  
31.d5 ♖cd2?! (D)



32.♖b4?? This is one of the biggest  
blunders in world championship  
matches. 32.♖×b7 ♖×d5 33.♖f4 ♖×d6  
34.♖×e2 wins easily. 32...♖×h2+ 0-1

Vásquez wrote in the magazine *El Pablo Morphy* that:

...as a result of this blunder, Chigorin  
has lost a superlative game and  
missed his opportunity to even the

## Wilhelm Steinitz: First World Chess Champion



*Steinitz-Chigorin, World Championship Match, Havana 1889*

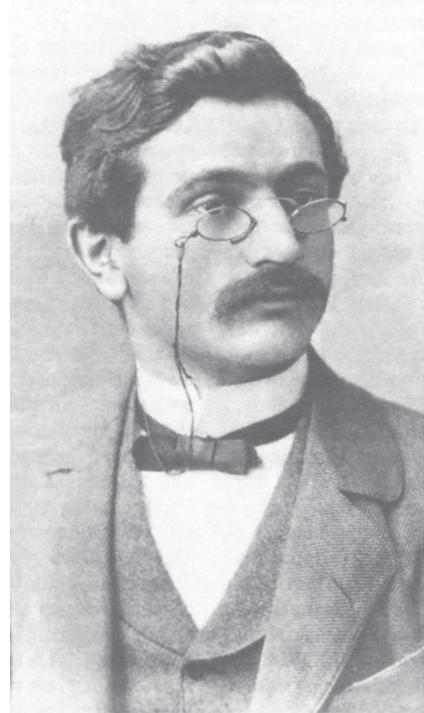
*score. In that case, according to the regulations, the match would have continued until one player accumulated 12 wins. Who knows what would have happened? We will be hard-pressed to forget this important moment. More than a thousand spectators witnessed the twenty-third game; everyone commented on Chigorin's brilliant play. We were expecting that Steinitz would resign any minute. Then, suddenly, there was unusual excitement; people would rise, everybody could see how the Russian master; nervous, with his facial expression changing, lifted his hands to his head in horror. He needlessly moved his bishop protecting him from the checkmate. "What a pity," repeated hundreds of voices, "What a depressing and awful end to a magnificent match for the world championship!" Chigorin can be justly proud: never before was Steinitz so close to defeat as now.*

Steinitz won the match (+10 -8 =5).

**Emanuel Lasker** (December 24, 1868, Berlin – January 11, 1941, New York) was the second world chess champion. Emanuel showed extraordinary mathematical abilities in early childhood, multiplying two-digit numbers in his head. At the age of 11, he moved to Berlin to live with his older brother Berthold, who was a medical student at the time, as well as one of the strongest chessplayers in Berlin. When Emanuel got measles, his brother taught him how to play chess.

In the spring of 1888, Lasker finished school and entered the Department of Philosophy of the Berlin University. In the winter, he won all of his games in his first tournament, at the Café Kaiserhof. The next year, he became a master after winning a side tournament of the German Chess Congress. Victories in matches against famous chessplayers of the time such as Curt von Bardeleben, Jacques Mieses, Henry Bird, and Berthold Englisch placed 22-year-old Lasker among the leading Eu-

ropean masters. He had outstanding successes in London, where Emanuel won a double-round tournament (1892) and matches against Joseph Blackburne and Henry Bird without losing a single game, and these helped his confidence. Lasker got the ambitious dream of becoming a world champion. A year later, he came to the United States, and, after winning the New York tournament (13 points out of 13!), Lasker challenged the world champion to a match. Wilhelm Steinitz accepted his challenge. The match, played to ten wins (draws did not count), took place in 1894. It was a heated battle. The New York part of a match was like a seesaw: Lasker won the first game, then Steinitz won, then again Lasker, then again Steinitz. After six games, the score was 3-3. The seventh game was the tipping point. Steinitz lost even though he had an advantage in the middlegame. Lasker led and did not let up until the end of the match. He scored his tenth win in the 19th game (+10 -5 =4). Thus, Lasker became world champion at the age of 25!



*Emanuel Lasker*

the other prize winners by 4½(!) points, and in St. Petersburg and Paris, by two points.

### (50) Steinitz – Lasker

London 1899

Vienna Game [C29]

**1.e4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.f4 d5 4.d3**  
 The main line is 4.fxe5 ♘xe4 5.d3.  
**4...♘c6 5.fxe5 ♘xe5 6.d4 ♘g6**  
**7.exd5?! Critical is 7.e5. 7...♘xd5**  
**8.♘xd5?! ♙xd5 9.♗f3 ♔g4**  
**10.♕e2 0-0-0 11.c3 ♕d6 12.0-0**  
**♚he8 13.h3 ♕d7 14.♗g5?** This  
 runs into a spectacular counter; 14.♕d3  
 is more circumspect. **14...♗h4**  
**15.♗f3 (D)**

Later, Lasker confirmed his reputation as the world's best chessplayer in a number of the largest international tournaments. Except for Hastings (1895, third place), he convincingly won the first prizes in St. Petersburg (1895/1896), Nuremberg (1896), London (1899), and Paris (1900), with the participation of the other strongest players of the time, such as Tarrasch, Pillsbury, Chigorin, Blackburne, Charousek, Marshall, Schlechter, and Janowski. In the London double-round tournament, Lasker finished ahead of