Fritz Schumann/Cleveland Public Library

WILHELM STEINITZ

(1836–1900)

World Chess Champion, 1886–1894

Born in Prague on May 14, 1836, Wilhelm (later William) Steinitz is remembered as one of the most influential players, writers, and theoreticians in the history of the game. After beginning to play competitively in his 20s, Steinitz won every serious match he contested between 1862 and 1894. In 1883, he immigrated to the United States, settling near New York City. A few years later he became the first official world champion, following his victory in a match against Johannes Zukertort played in New York, Saint Louis, and New Orleans. He would hold the title until 1894 when he lost to Emanuel Lasker.

Steinitz's contributions to chess theory were just as valuable to the game as his competitive success. Giving up on gambits and attacking at all costs, strategies which had brought him early success, the mature Steinitz focused on positional play. His theories, along with those of his contemporary Paul Morphy, are widely regarded as having laid the foundation for the beginning of modern chess.

Steinitz lived in Europe most of his life but was never completely accepted there. Once he settled in the United States, he finally felt at home. During his "American years," he played his World Championship matches and did his most important writing. The latter included authoring a book on the 1889 New York tournament in which he annotated all 432 of the games and publishing his famous textbook, *The Modern Chess Instructor*. In 1885, he founded the *International Chess Magazine*, which he edited until 1891. Steinitz is not only the first world champion; he is also the oldest player to have ever competed in a title match. He was 60 when he challenged Emanuel Lasker in the fall of 1896. Steinitz died in 1900 at age 64 and is buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

World Chess Championships Fought

1886 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: New York, Saint Louis, New Orleans
Opponent: Johannes Zukertort
Result: Won title

1889 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Havana
Opponent: Mikhail Chigorin
Result: Won title

1890–1891 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: New York
Opponent: Isidor Gunsberg
Result: Won title

1892 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Havana
Opponent: Mikhail Chigorin
Result: Won title

1894 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: New York, Philadelphia, Montreal
Opponent: Emanuel Lasker
Result: Lost title

Photographer Unknown/German Federal Archive

EMANUEL LASKER

(1868–1941)

World Chess Champion, 1894–1921

The second world champion, Emanuel Lasker, held the chess crown longer than anyone else in history. Born in the Neumark territory of Germany in modern-day Poland, he learned to play chess from his older brother Berthold, and by the early 1890s, he ranked among the world's top ten players. In 1894 defending World Champion William Steinitz accepted a challenge from Lasker and the two competed for the title. Lasker defeated Steinitz not only in 1894 but also in an 1896–1897 rematch. He also won by large margins in later World Championship matches against Frank Marshall (1907), Siegbert Tarrasch (1908), and Dawid Janowski (1910). Only Carl Schlechter (1910) was able to draw a match against Lasker when he was in his prime.

In 1921, José Raúl Capablanca defeated Lasker to become world champion. Following this loss Lasker played successfully in many tournaments throughout the 1920s but then largely retired from competitive play. He briefly returned to the arena in the 1930s, partly due to financial difficulties. Lasker had several excellent results, including a third-place finish at Moscow 1935, showing that it was possible to play top-level chess in one's sixties. Incorporating psychology into his play, Lasker is considered by modern analysts to have had a style that was ahead of his time, as many of his moves that his contemporaries considered

World Chess Championships Fought

1894 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: New York, Philadelphia, Montreal
Opponent: Wilhelm Steinitz
Result: Won title

1896–1897 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Wilhelm Steinitz
Result: Won title

1907 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: New York City; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Chicago, Memphis
Opponent: Frank Marshall
Result: Won title

1908 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: Dusseldorf, Munich
Opponent: Siegbert Tarrasch
Result: Won title

1910 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Berlin
Opponent: Dawid Janowski
Result: Won title

1921 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Havana
Opponent: José Raúl Capablanca
Result: Lost title

mysterious are now commonplace. Lasker was a prolific author. His writing includes chess classics like *Lasker's Manual of Chess*, but his subject matter was not limited to the royal game as he also authored books on mathematics, philosophy, and other games like bridge.

Lasker, like fellow world champions William Steinitz, José Raúl Capablanca, Bobby Fischer, and Garry Kasparov has a strong connection with New York. He lived there from 1892 to 1894, during which time he defeated Steinitz in a match for the World Championship. His 1907 title match with Frank Marshall was also held partly in New York. In November 1904 Lasker founded *Lasker's Chess Magazine*. Published in New York, it ran until 1909. The following year he started a weekly chess column in the New York Evening Post. Lasker lived in Europe for most of the 1910s and 1920s, but he enjoyed the greatest success of his career at the New York 1924 tournament. He and his wife Martha fled Europe in 1937 and returned to New York where they remained until the former world champion died in 1941. He is buried less than a mile from William Steinitz in Beth Olam Cemetery on the Brooklyn-Queens border.

Harris & Ewing/Library of Congress

JOSÉ RAÚL CAPABLANCA

(1888–1942)

World Chess Champion, 1921–1927

World Chess Championships Fought

1921 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Havana
Opponent: Emanuel Lasker
Result: Won title

1927 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Buenos Aires, Argentina
Opponent: Alexander Alekhine
Result: Lost title

Nicknamed "The Human Chess Machine," José Raúl Capablanca was born in Havana, Cuba. A true prodigy, he learned chess at age four and defeated Cuban champion Juan Corzo at 13. While attending Columbia University, he joined the Manhattan Chess Club and soon became its strongest player. Capablanca's skill in rapid chess lent itself to simultaneous exhibitions where the exhibitor was expected to play quickly. Capa played not only fast but also well—on a tour of 27 American cities in 1909, he achieved a score of 96.9% in 607 games.

His success at San Sebastian 1911 moved Capablanca into consideration as a potential challenger for Emanuel Lasker. His dissatisfaction with the conditions offered at the time and the intervention of World War I delayed this match for a decade. Capablanca's chess skills and popularity got him a job as an informal ambassador with the Cuban Foreign Office. At a time when there were few tournaments and professionals had a hard time making ends meet, this was an unprecedented offer and Capa responded to the show of support by losing only one game between 1914 and 1924.

In 1921 Capablanca and Lasker played their long-expected World Championship match, where the latter resigned after 14 games with a score of 4-0 with 10 draws. Capablanca held the title until 1927 when he lost to Alexander Alekhine. He was unsuccessful in his efforts to secure a rematch. Capablanca lived in and visited New York off and on throughout his life. His crushing match victory over Frank Marshall in that city in 1909 (8-1 with 14 draws) made him world famous and he won many tournaments in the Big Apple before 1920. On March 8, 1952, Capablanca died in New York at age 53.

Photographer Unknown/Library of Congress George Grantham Bain Collection

ALEXANDER ALEKHINE

(1892–1946)

World Chess Champion, 1927–1935, 1937– 1946

World Chess Championships Fought

1927 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Buenos Aires, Argentina
Opponent: José Raúl Capablanca
Result: Won title

1929 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: Wiesbaden, Germany; Heidelberg, Germany; Berlin, Germany; The Hague, The Netherlands; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Opponent: Efim Bogoljubow
Result: Won title

Born in Moscow, on October 31, 1892, Alexander Alekhine is one of the few world champions who came from a wealthy family. He started playing chess at an early age and was already playing correspondence chess (chess by mail) when he was 10. He made rapid progress and at the great Saint Petersburg tournament of 1914 was one of the five finalists (Lasker, Capablanca, Tarrasch, and Marshall were the others) whom Tsar Nicholas II allegedly awarded the title of grandmaster. That same year he participated in the Mannheim 1914 chess tournament which was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. Interned in Germany during the war and later imprisoned in Odessa on suspicion of spying in 1919, Alekhine had some harrowing moments before settling in Paris. He later became a French citizen and represented his new homeland in several Olympiads.

Throughout the 1920s Alekhine began to train with the goal of eventually challenging for the World Chess Championship title. His third-place finish behind the reigning World Champion José Raúl Capablanca and the former title holder Emanuel Lasker, in the great New York 1924 tournament, built up both his confidence and international reputation. Alekhine would later annotate the games played in the competition for a famous tournament book. He further increased his renown through his victory at Baden Baden 1925 which featured a large field of 21 players. During a 1926 exhibition tour in Argentina, Alekhine was able to secure the financial support needed to support a World Championship challenge, and the following year, he defeated Capablanca to become the new titleholder.

During the early 1930s, Alekhine was at the peak of his career, winning several important tournaments including San Remo 1930, Bled 1931, London 1932, Pasadena 1932, and Zurich 1934. He successfully defended his world championship title in 1929 and 1934 before losing it to Max Euwe in 1935. Alekhine won a rematch in 1937, the first World Champion to do so.

Alekhine remained world champion until his death nine years later. His final years were plagued by controversy and difficulty. Nevertheless, Alekhine inspired generations of players through his imaginative and innovative play lending his name to Alekhine's Defense and other opening variations. He was a prolific author publishing several important books, in particular a two-volume collection of his best games.

Alekhine retained the title until he died in 1946

1934 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: Baden-Baden, Germany; Villingen, Germany; Freiburg, Germany; Pforzheim, Germany; Stuttgart, Germany; Munich, Germany; Bayreuth, Germany; Bad Kissingen, Germany; Mannheim, Germany; Berlin, Germany
Opponent: Efim Bogoljubow
Result: Won title

1935 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Delft, The Netherlands; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Utrecht, The Netherlands; Gouda, The Netherlands; The Hague, The Netherlands; Groningen, The Netherlands; Baarn, The Netherlands; Den Bosch, The Netherlands; Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Zeist, The Netherlands; Ermelo, The Netherlands; Zandvoort, The Netherlands
Opponent: Max Euwe
Result: Lost title

1937 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: The Hague, The Netherlands; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Haarlem, The Netherlands; Leiden, The Netherlands; Groningen, The Netherlands; Delft, The Netherlands
Opponent: Max Euwe
Result: Won title

MAX EUWE

(1901–1981)

World Chess Champion, 1935–1937

Harry Pot/Dutch National Archive

Born in Amsterdam on May 20, 1901, Dr. Max Euwe is to date the only person to become both world champion and president of FIDE. Euwe started to play chess at the age of 10 and showed excellent results in his youth including a drawn match against Geza Maroczy when he was only 19. However, after earning a doctorate in mathematics and marrying soon afterward in 1926, he concentrated his energies on family life and a teaching career. Unlike all the other world champions (Lasker and Botvinnik occasionally excepted), Euwe was never a full-time professional player.

Euwe won the 1928 World Amateur Chess Championship and performed well in the international tournaments in which he competed during the 1920s and early 1930s, but unquestionably his crowning glory came in 1935 when he defeated Alexander Alekhine in a major upset to become the fifth world champion. This result while surprising did not come completely out of the blue as Euwe had shown his ability to compete with the best in his 1926 training match with Alekhine (+2, -3, =5) and 1931 match with Capablanca (+0, -2, =8). Though he was defeated by Alekhine in the return match two years later, Euwe's strong showings at Nottingham 1936, the AVRO tournament in 1938, and particularly Groningen 1946 (finishing second a half point behind Botvinnik) testify to his abilities as a player. He would represent the Netherlands in seven Olympiads and win 12 national championships.

As FIDE president from 1970 to 1978, Euwe traveled the world popularizing chess and increasing the organization's membership. His actions during the 1972 Fischer-Spassky match helped to ensure that the contest was finished without forfeit by the erratic Fischer and he guided FIDE through various conflicts with the Soviet Union. This included the defection of Gennadi Sosonko and Viktor Korchnoi in 1972 and 1976 respectively and FIDE's decision to hold the 1976 Olympiad in Israel, a country not recognized by the USSR. Noted for his logical and systematic approach to the game and opening erudition, Euwe was a prolific author with more than 70 books to his credit. These were primarily, but not exclusively, aimed at amateurs and include such well-known titles as *The Road to Chess Mastery*, Judgment and Planning in Chess, *The Logical Approach to Chess*, and *Strategy and Tactics in Chess Play*. Max Euwe is remembered as a renaissance man of chess who could do everything and do it well from playing to administrating to writing.

World Chess Championships Fought

1935 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Delft, The Netherlands; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Utrecht, The Netherlands; Gouda, The Netherlands; The Hague, The Netherlands; Groningen, The Netherlands; Baarn, The Netherlands; Den Bosch, The Netherlands; Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Zeist, The Netherlands; Ermelo, The Netherlands; Zandvoort, The Netherlands
Opponent: Alexander Alekhine
Result: Won title

1937 World Chess Championship (Match)
The Hague, The Netherlands; Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Haarlem, The Netherlands; Leiden, The Netherlands; Groningen, The Netherlands; Delft, The Netherlands
Opponent: Alexander Alekhine
Result: Lost title

1948 World Chess Championship (Five-Player Tournament)
The Hague, The Netherlands
Moscow
Opponents: Vasily Smyslov, Paul Keres, Samuel Reshevsky, Max Euwe
Result: Fifth place

Harry Pot/Dutch National Archive

MIKHAIL BOTVINNIK

(1911–1995)

World Chess Champion, 1948–1957, 1958–1960, 1961–1963

The death of Alexander Alekhine allowed FIDE to take over the organization of the World Championship and for the first time, the title was determined not by a match but instead by a five-player match tournament (it was originally going to be six players but Reuben Fine of the United States declined his invitation). Mikhail Botvinnik was the convincing winner of this marathon event which started in early March and ended in mid-May. The first in a long line of Soviet world champions, Botvinnik's reign lasted 15 years partly thanks to the champion's right to a return match should he lose his title. The "Patriarch," as Botvinnik was known due to his status as the father of Soviet chess, was first among equals as he did not dominate his contemporaries. Botvinnik drew two World Championship matches and lost another two, but ties were sufficient to retain the title and he always won his rematches or revenge matches as they were sometimes called. He was very upset when FIDE ended this right of the champion.

Botvinnik's intense training regimen distinguished him from his peers, particularly his emphasis on systems of play that extended from the opening to the endgame. While this attitude was novel at the time, his writings on the subject were legendary and eventually served as a model for a new generation of players. Botvinnik mentored and trained numerous young Soviet players including a young Garry Kasparov. Though Botvinnik retired from competitive play in 1970, he remained active in the chess world, publishing *Half a Century of Chess* in 1984 and developing computer chess programs in his later years.

World Chess Championships Fought

1948 World Chess Championship (Five-Player Tournament)
Locations: The Hague, The Netherlands; Moscow
Opponents: Vasily Smyslov, Paul Keres, Samuel Reshevsky, Max Euwe
Result: Won title

1951 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: David Bronstein
Result: Won title

1954 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Vasily Smyslov
Result: Won title

1957 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Vasily Smyslov
Result: Lost title

1958 World Chess Championship (Rematch)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Vasily Smyslov
Result: Won title

1960 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Tal
Result: Lost title

1961 World Chess Championship (Rematch)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Tal
Result: Won title

1963 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Tigran Petrosian
Result: Lost title

Koen Suyk/Dutch National Archive

VASILY SMYSLOV

(1921–2010)

World Chess Champion, 1957–1958

Chess was simply a hobby for the young Vasily Smyslov until, at the age of 14, he faced Jose Capablanca and Emanuel Lasker in simultaneous exhibitions they gave in Moscow. These experiences inspired a lifelong passion for the game. The teenage Smyslov made rapid improvement, winning the All-Union Boys' Championship and the Moscow City Championship in 1938. He would continue to perform strongly amidst intense competition, finishing third at both the 1940 USSR Championship and the 1941 Leningrad-Moscow match tournament, winning the 1942 Moscow City Championship, and placing second at the 1944 USSR Championship.

Smyslov first began to attract international attention when he defeated Samuel Reshevsky twice in the famous US-USSR radio match of 1945. He would go on to become the most dominant player of the 1950s. Besides winning Candidates tournaments in 1953 and 1956, he had a plus score (35–34) in his three titanic World Championship matches with Mikhail Botvinnik. Only Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov have had a greater rivalry on the biggest stage in chess, playing 144 games against each other in their five World Championship competitions held between 1984 and 1990.

Though he only wore the crown for one year, Smyslov is remembered as one of the all-time greats. He played in eight Candidate's tournaments including twice in his sixties. His 17 Olympiad medals are second all-time behind only Garry Kasparov. Other impressive results include ten gold medals in five European Team Championships and winning the inaugural World Senior Chess Championship in 1991.

World Chess Championships Fought

1948 World Chess Championship
(Five-Player Tournament)
Locations: The Hague, The Netherlands; Moscow
Opponents: Vasily Smyslov, Paul Keres, Samuel Reshevsky, Max Euwe
Result: 2nd place

1954 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Botvinnik
Result: Draw (Botvinnik retained title)

1957 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Botvinnik
Result: Won title

1958 World Chess Championship (Rematch)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Botvinnik

Result: Lost title

Vasily Smyslov also competed in the 1998 World Chess Championship, which was staged as a knockout tournament.

Photographer Unknown/World Chess Hall of Fame

MIKHAIL TAL

(1936–1992)

World Chess Champion, 1960–1961

World Chess Championships Fought

1960 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Botvinnik
Result: Won the title

1961 World Chess Championship (Rematch)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Botvinnik
Result: Lost the title

The eighth world champion, Mikhail Tal is the fiercest attacking player ever to hold the title. As a young and irresistible force, he won the Soviet Championship in 1957 and 1958. Following victories at the 1958 Interzonal Tournament and the 1959 Candidates Tournament, he became the then-youngest world champion in 1960 at the age of 23. Bad health and the dominance of Mikhail Botvinnik led to his loss of the crown just a year later; however, he would continue his strong play throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During his career, Tal won three Interzonals (a record he shares with Bent Larsen), the Soviet Championship a record six times (tied with Mikhail Botvinnik), represented the Soviet Union on eight Olympiad teams (winning team gold medals each time and 7 board medals) and was a competitor in six Candidates Tournaments. Chronic health problems hampered his career, but he continued to play in tournaments right up until his death.

Known as "the Magician from Riga," many players were inspired by Tal's highly creative and explosive style. Particularly during his early years, his imagination and powerful play led to complicated situations on the board, situations to which most leading grandmasters of the time eventually fell prey. Later in his career, he became more well-rounded, and during 1972 and 1973 he had unbeaten streaks of 85 and 96 games respectively which were unprecedented at the time. The legacy of Mikhail Tal lives on through his brilliant games and numerous writings.

Photographer Unknown/World Chess Hall of Fame

TIGRAN PETROSIAN

(1929–1984)

World Chess Champion, 1963–1969

World Chess Championships Fought

1963 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Mikhail Botvinnik
Result: Won the title

1966 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Boris Spassky
Result: Won the title

1969 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Boris Spassky
Result: Lost the title

Impoverished and orphaned during World War II, the young Tigran Petrosian began to develop his chess skills through reading and training at the Tbilisi Palace of Pioneers where he developed a solid, scientific style of play under Archil Ebralidze. After drawing against Paul Keres in the 1946 Georgian Chess Championship at the age of 16, Petrosian moved to Yerevan where he won the Armenian Chess Championship in 1946 and 1947. He then went to Moscow in search of greater competition. After a slow period in the early 1950s, Petrosian began to find success in his new home and won his first of four USSR Championships in 1959. He was awarded the title of Master of Sport of the USSR in 1960 and he won the national title in 1961.

In 1962 Petrosian won the Candidates Tournament in Curacao and the following year ended Mikhail Botvinnik's reign as world champion. Petrosian successfully defended his crown against Boris Spassky in 1966, the first titleholder to win a match since 1934. After losing the title to the same opponent in 1969, Petrosian continued playing in Candidates cycles, eventually qualifying for eight during his career. Petrosian was a brilliant team player. While representing his country in ten Olympiads and eight European Team Championships he amassed an amazing record of 93 wins, 87 draws, and only one loss. His patient rock-solid play style earned Petrosian the nickname "Iron Tigran" and made him one of the hardest players to beat in the history of chess.

Koen Suyk/Dutch National Archive

BORIS SPASSKY

(B. 1937)

World Chess Champion, 1969–1972

World Chess Championships Fought

1969 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Tigran Petrosian
Result: Won the title

1972 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Reykjavik, Iceland
Opponent: Bobby Fischer
Result: Lost the title

Boris Spassky is most famous for losing his World Championship crown to Bobby Fischer at Reykjavik in 1972 in the most famous chess match of all time. Despite this dubious honor, he is considered one of the greatest chess players of the 20th century. World junior champion and a candidate by age 18, Spassky showed an early, hyper-aggressive brilliance that matured into seamless universality. He won the Soviet Championship twice outright, lost in playoffs twice more, and participated in seven Candidates Tournaments between 1956 and 1985. The high point of his career was defeating Tigran Petrosian to become the 10th world champion in 1969. This marked the end of a long hard climb to the top. Even after losing the title to Fischer three years later, Spassky continued his strong play throughout the 1970s.

Boris Spassky's brilliant and imaginative chess play caught the eye of Hollywood, as his stunning 15th move against David Bronstein, played during the 27th USSR Championship in 1960, was immortalized in the James Bond film classic *From Russia with Love*.

Photographer Unknown/World Chess Hall of Fame

BOBBY FISCHER

(1942-2008)

World Chess Champion, 1972-1975

World Chess Championships Fought

1972 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Reykjavik, Iceland
Opponent: Boris Spassky
Result: Won the title

Bobby Fischer forfeited the title in 1975. As a result, Anatoly Karpov, the winner of the Candidates Tournament, became the new world champion.

As the 11th world champion from 1972 to 75, Bobby Fischer interrupted the Cold War Soviet hegemony of chess. His phenomenal skill was apparent from an early age. He tied for first in the U.S. Open in the summer of 1957 and four months later won the U.S. Chess Championship at the age of 14, a record which still stands. He would go on to win all eight of the United States Chess Championships in which he participated, and in the 1963/64 competition become the only player to achieve a perfect score in the event. My *60 Memorable Games*, which Fischer authored in 1969, is widely considered one of the greatest pieces of chess literature. He made valuable contributions to opening theory and was renowned for his opening preparation and endgame technique alike.

Fischer is best remembered, however, for his win at the 1972 World Championship, defeating Boris Spassky in the most famous match of modern times. From 1970 to 1971, Fischer won a record 20 consecutive games in world championship qualifying events. These included victories over world-class players such as Mark Taimanov and Bent Larsen. After defeating former world champion Tigran Petrosian in the 1971 Candidates Match, there was a record 125-point differential between the ratings of number-one-ranked player Fischer and Spassky, the second-ranked player. Fischer was the first non-Soviet player to earn the title in 24 years, Fischer's thrilling rise to the top of the world of chess and his landmark victory in the "Match of the Century" greatly increased the popularity of chess in the United States. His world championship win was especially impressive considering that the American player lacked the state support that the Soviet Union offered to its champions. While there were only 5000 registered players in the United States in 1960, there were five million in the Soviet Union during the same year.

Fischer declined to defend his world championship title in 1975, retreating from the chess scene until 1992, when he faced—and defeated—Spassky in an unofficial rematch in Yugoslavia. Since that country was then under a United Nations embargo, his participation violated an executive order by President George H.W. Bush, and Fischer spent the rest of his life in exile to escape prosecution in the United States. Though his reputation suffered during his later life, his accomplishments on the chessboard cemented his reputation as one of the game's greatest players.

Kevin Duggin/Saint Louis Chess Club

ANATOLY KARPOV

(B. 1951)

World Chess Champion, 1975-1985
FIDE World Chess Champion, 1993-1999

World Chess Championships Fought

1975 World Chess Championship (Match)
Anatoly Karpov became the world champion after Bobby Fischer declined to defend his title.

1978 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Manila, The Philippines
Opponent: Viktor Korchnoi

Born in Zlatoust in the Urals on May 23, 1951) Anatoly Karpov has compiled perhaps the best tournament record in chess history, achieving more than 160 first-place finishes. As a teenager, he won the 1967 European Junior Championship and the 1969 World Junior Championship and was awarded the grandmaster title in 1970. He continued his ascent by winning Moscow's 1971 Alekhine Memorial, sharing second place in the 1973 USSR Championship, and qualifying for the 1974 Candidates Matches. His victory in the latter competition earned him the right to challenge defending World Champion Bobby

Fischer. Following Fischer's forfeiture, Karpov was named the 12th world chess champion in 1975. Karpov successfully defended his title in 1978 and 1981 before losing to Garry Kasparov in 1985.

During his decade as world champion, Karpov was a constant and dominant presence on the international tournament scene. Karpov and Kasparov would compete for the World Championship three more times, in 1986, 1987, and 1990, with Kasparov narrowly defending his title each time. However, Karpov would recapture the World Championship crown in 1993 and successfully defended his title in 1996 and 1998. Following changes to the format of FIDE competitions, he resigned from the title in 1999 and has since limited his chess participation to exhibitions and rapid chess events. Despite his retirement from competitive play, Karpov's impressive record remains, including a peak FIDE rating of 2780 and 102 months as the world's top-ranked player, the third highest in chess history behind only Magnus Carlsen and Garry Kasparov.

1981 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Merano, Italy
Opponent: Viktor Korchnoi

1984/85 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Garry Kasparov (match called off after 48 games in 5 months)

1985 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Lost the title

1986 World Chess Championship (Rematch)
Locations: Moscow; London
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Lost

1987 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Seville, Spain
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Lost

1990 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: New York City; Lyon, France
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Lost

1993 FIDE World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: Zwolle, The Netherlands; Arnhem, The Netherlands; Amsterdam, The Netherlands; and Jakarta, Indonesia
Opponent: Jan Timman
Result: Won the title

1996 FIDE World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Elista, Russia
Opponent: Gata Kamsky
Result: Retained the title

1998 FIDE World Chess Championship (100-player knockout tournament to determine challenger, as reigning champion Karpov faced Anand in finals)
Location: London
Opponent in finals: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Retained the title

Anatoly Karpov declined to participate in the next World Chess Championship due to objections to the format.

Lennart Ootes/Saint Louis Chess Club

GARRY KASPAROV

(B. 1963)

World Chess Champion, 1985–1993
Classical World Chess Champion, 1993–2000

Garry Kasparov was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, and by the age of seven was recognized as a chess prodigy. While still very young, he won both top-level junior and adult events, including two first-place ties at the USSR Championship as a teenager in the early 1980s. In 1985 he became the youngest-ever world champion, defeating Karpov at the age of 22. He would defeat Karpov three more times between 1986 and 1990 to retain his title. After breaking with FIDE in 1993, Kasparov created the rival Professional Chess Association (PCA); this split resulted in the naming of two world champions under two different banners, a fracture that would last 13 years. During this time, Kasparov played outside FIDE's jurisdiction, including the well-publicized Deep Blue matches, in which he defeated the computer in 1996 but lost the 1997 rematch. He lost his world title to Vladimir Kramnik in the Classical World Chess Championship 2000, the successor to the PCA World Championship.

Though he won several major tournaments following the 2000 loss, Kasparov announced his formal retirement in 2005. Since that time, he has coached top-ranked Magnus Carlsen, assisted Viswanathan Anand in his preparations for a World Championship match, and written many books. Outside of the chess world, Kasparov is an activist in Russian politics, particularly in opposition to its current President Vladimir Putin. Kasparov was the top-rated player in the world for roughly 20 years, was the first to break the 2800 barrier, and achieved what was at the time the highest rating ever (2851), a record since eclipsed by Magnus Carlsen. Kasparov holds the record for most consecutive professional tournament victories, placing first or equal first in fifteen individual tournaments from 1981 to 1990. Such statistics support the claim that Kasparov is one of the greatest chess players of all time.

World Chess Championships Fought

1984/85 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Match called off after 48 games in 5 months

1985 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Anatoly Karpov
Result: Won the title

1986 World Chess Championship (Rematch)
Locations: Moscow, London
Opponent: Anatoly Karpov
Result: Retained the title

1987 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Seville, Spain
Opponent: Anatoly Karpov
Result: Retained the title

1990 World Chess Championship (Match)
Locations: New York City, Lyon, France
Opponent: Anatoly Karpov
Result: Retained the title

1993 PCA World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: London
Opponent: Nigel Short
Result: Won the title

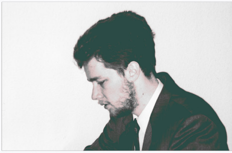
1995 PCA World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: New York
Opponent: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Retained the PCA title

2000 Braingames World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: London
Opponent: Vladimir Kramnik
Result: Lost the title

ALEXANDER KHALIFMAN

(B. 1966)

FIDE World Chess Champion, 1999–2000



Stefan64/Public Domain

Alexander Khalifman was born to a Jewish family in Leningrad, Russia, in 1966. After a successful career as a youth which included a victory in the European Junior Championship (1985/86), Khalifman was awarded the grandmaster title in 1990. He became the second FIDE world champion after the 1993 split between FIDE and the Professional Chess Association (PCA). At the time of his 1999 championship win, he was ranked 44th in the world. He would go on to express his views on the ranking system by stating, "Rating systems work perfectly for players who play only in round-robin closed events. I think most of them are overrated. Organizers invite the same people over and over because they have the same rating and their rating stays high."

Khalifman was a member of many gold medal-winning Russian teams in Olympiads (1992, 2000, and 2002), World Team Chess Championships (1997), and European Team Championships (2003). Along with Gennady Nesis, Khalifman has been running "the Grandmaster Chess School" in St. Petersburg since 1998. He is also a celebrated chess author with over three dozen books to his credit. In March of 2022, he signed an open letter with other Russian grandmasters to Vladimir Putin urging him to cease the war in Ukraine.

World Chess Championships Fought

1999 FIDE World Chess Championship (100-player Knockout Tournament)
Location: Las Vegas
Opponent in finals: Vladimir Akopian
Result: Won the title

Alexander Khalifman also competed in the 1998, 2000, and 2002 World Chess Championships, which were staged as knockout tournaments.

VISWANATHAN ANAND

(B. 1969)

FIDE World Chess Champion, 2000–2002
World Chess Champion, 2007–2013

Spectrum Studios/Saint Louis Chess Club

Viswanathan "Vishy" Anand learned to play chess from his mother when he was six years old. Even at an early age, he aspired to rise to the top of the chess world. In an interview with *Forbes India*, he stated, "When I was six or seven years old, if you had asked me what my goal was in chess, I would have said, world champion...Now, is that a dream or a realization? That's a harder question. I would put it this way, for me it was always obvious that that's what I should aim for, and then every year, it seemed less unrealistic."

During his teenage years, he earned the nickname "Lightning Kid" due to his rapid playing speed. At 15, he became India's youngest player to earn the title of international master. In 1987, at the age of 17, he became the first Indian player to win the World Junior Championship. The following year he became the first grandmaster from India. He won his first major international chess tournament in 1991 at Reggio Emilia, placing ahead of World Chess Champions Garry Kasparov and Anatoly Karpov. Anand first became world champion in 2002 and successfully defended his title on many occasions. Anand has the eighth highest rating of all-time at 2817 which he achieved in 2011. On the March 2024 FIDE rating list, at the age of 54, he is still ranked number 10 in the world. In 2022, he was elected Deputy President of FIDE.

World Chess Championships Fought

1995 PCA World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: New York City
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Lost

2000 FIDE World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: New Delhi and Tehran
Opponent: Alexei Shirov
Result: Won title

2007 World Chess Championship (Eight-player Double Round-robin Tournament)
Location: Mexico City, Mexico
Opponent: Vladimir Kramnik
Result: Placed second

2008 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Bonn, Germany
Opponent: Vladimir Kramnik
Result: Retained the title

2010 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Sofia, Bulgaria
Opponent: Veselin Topalov
Result: Retained the title

2014 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Sochi, Russia
Opponent: Magnus Carlsen
Result: Lost

2012 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Moscow
Opponent: Boris Gelfand
Result: Retained the title

Viswanathan Anand also participated in the 2002 FIDE World Chess Championship, which was staged as a knockout tournament.

2013 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Chennai, India
Opponent: Magnus Carlsen
Result: Lost the title

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RUSLAN PONOMARIOV

(B. 1983)

FIDE World Chess Champion, 2002–2004

World Chess Championships Fought

2002 FIDE World Chess Championship (100-player Knockout Tournament)
Location: Moscow
Opponent in finals: Vassily Ivanchuk
Result: Won the title

Ruslan Ponomariov also competed in the 1999 and 2000 FIDE World Chess Championships, which were staged as knockout tournaments.

Ruslan Ponomariov was born in Horlivka, Ukraine, where he learned to play chess at the age of five. He moved to Kramatorsk to further his studies when he was nine. He soon showed great promise and realized his potential, winning the European Under 18 Championship at age 12, the World Under 18 Championship at 13, and becoming a grandmaster at 14. Ponomariov became the youngest world champion in the history of the game in 2002 when he defeated fellow Ukrainian Vassily Ivanchuk in the finals of the FIDE World Cup, which was held as a knockout tournament. He held his half of the divided title until 2004.

Ukraine has been a chess powerhouse since regaining its independence in 1991 with outstanding results in many Olympiads. Ponomariov played a key role in helping his nation win gold in 2004 and 2010, silver in 2016, and bronze in 1998, 2000, and 2012. Today, Ponomariov continues to take part in high-level tournaments and streams regularly. In an interview with ChessBase in 2023, he stated that "Chess, of course, [is a] kind of addiction, already. Even if I'm not playing chess, I still enjoy the possibilities that chess gives to me."

Frans Peeters/Public Domain

RUSTAM KASIMDZHANOV

(B. 1979)

FIDE World Chess Champion, 2004–2005

World Chess Championships Fought

2004 FIDE World Chess Championship Tournament (128-player Knockout Tournament)
Location: Tripoli, Libya
Opponent: Michael Adams
Result: Won the title

2005 FIDE World Chess Championship Tournament (Eight-player Double Round-robin Tournament)
Location: Potrero de lo Funes, Argentina
Opponents: Viswanathan Anand, Peter Svidler, Alexander Morozevich, Peter Leko, Michael Adams, Veselin Topalov, and Judit Polgar
Result: Placed sixth

Rustam Kasimdzhanov also competed in the 1999, 2000, and 2002 World Chess Championships, which were staged as knockout tournaments.

Born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Rustam Kasimdzhanov became a grandmaster in 1997. He followed this up with victories in the 1998 Asian Chess Championship, Essen 2001, Pamplona 2002, and the HZ Chess Tournament 2003. He also achieved great results at the 1999 World Junior Chess Championship, the 2002 FIDE Chess World Cup, and as first board for Uzbekistan in the 2000 Chess Olympiad. In 2004 he won the FIDE World Chess Championship. In a 2004 interview with *New In Chess* about this win, he stated, "Of course I did not expect to win this. I thought I should be mentally ready to lose and go home any given round. I think I managed this and this greatly helped. Once you are reconciled that you can lose and given round you are basically freed from the fear of losing."

Kasimdzhanov began the transition from player to coach and trainer in the late 2000s and has achieved outstanding success here as well. He stated in an interview with Deutsche Welle, "I don't enjoy classical chess anymore – it's simply too strenuous and the pressure is too great. I don't need it anymore." Kasimdzhanov served as a second for World Champion Viswanathan Anand from 2008 to 2012, as a trainer for Sergey Karjakin in 2014, and as both a trainer and second for Fabiano Caruana from 2016 to 2018. More recently he has been working with his young countryman and potential future World Champion Nodirbek Abdusattorov.

Austin Fuller/Saint Louis Chess Club

VESELIN TOPALOV

(B. 1975)

FIDE World Chess Champion, 2005–2006

World Chess Championships Fought

2005 FIDE World Chess Championship Tournament (Eight-player Double Round-robin Tournament)
Location: Potrero de lo Funes, Argentina
Opponents: Viswanathan Anand, Peter Svidler,

Veselin Topalov of Bulgaria started to play relatively late by today's standards, only picking up the game at the age of eight, but he made quick progress, winning the World Under 14 Championship in 1989. He became a grandmaster in 1992 and two years later made his Olympiad debut in Moscow where he defeated World Champion Garry Kasparov. He continued to make steady progress over the next decade and in 2005 won the eight-player FIDE Candidates tournament to become World Champion, a title he held until the following year. Topalov, currently (March 2024) one of only two players over the age of 40 rated

Alexander Morozevich, Peter Leko, Rustam Khasimdzhanov, Michael Adams, and Judit Polgar
Result: Won title

among the top 25 players in the world, is tied with Hikaru Nakamura as the ninth highest-rated player in the history of chess at 2816 FIDE.

2006 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Elista, Russia
Opponent: Vladimir Kramnik
Result: Lost title

2010 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Sofia, Bulgaria
Opponent: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Lost

Veselin Topalov also competed in the 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2004 FIDE World Chess Championships, which were staged as knockout tournaments.

VLADIMIR KRAMNIK

(B. 1975)

Classical World Chess Champion, 2000–2006
World Chess Champion, 2006–2007

Lennart Ootes/Saint Louis Chess Club

Born in 1975 in Tuapse, Russia, Vladimir Kramnik was identified as a prodigy at an early age. Selected to join Mikhail Botvinnik's famous chess school, he would go on to win the World Under 18 Championship in 1991. His big breakout came the following year when he won both individual and team gold medals as a member of the Russian team in the 1992 Chess Olympiad in Manila. During the 1990s Kramnik did not play in a world championship despite being rated the number one player in the world on the January 1996 FIDE rating list, the youngest player to reach this ranking at the time. This was the only year between 1986 and 2006 in which Garry Kasparov did not hold the number one spot.

During the 1990s Kramnik enjoyed more success in tournaments than matches (he lost to Gata Kamsky, Boris Gelfand, and Alexei Shirov in the latter format), but this changed in 2000 when he defeated Kasparov for half of the then-divided world championship. His victory marked the first time since 1921 that someone won a championship match without losing a game. 2001 saw Kramnik become the second player in the history of chess to reach a rating of 2800. (he achieved his peak of 2817 on the October 2016 FIDE rating list). He became the undisputed world champion by beating Veselin Topalov in their 2006 unification match. Kramnik was not only a great player but an outstanding theoretician whose innovations in numerous openings significantly impacted the game. This was particularly true in his successful rehabilitation of the Berlin Defense to Ruy Lopez in his 2000 title match with Kasparov.

World Chess Championships Fought

2000 Braingames World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: London
Opponent: Garry Kasparov
Result: Won title

2004 Classical World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Brissago, Switzerland
Opponent: Peter Leko
Result: Retained title

2006 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Elista, Russia
Opponent: Veselin Topalov
Result: Won the title

2007 World Chess Championship (Eight-player Double Round-robin Tournament)
Location: Mexico City
Opponent: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Lost the title

2008 World Chess Championship (Match)
Bonn, Germany
Opponent: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Lost

Vladimir Kramnik also participated in the 1998 and 1999 FIDE World Chess Championships, which were staged as knockout tournaments.

MAGNUS CARLSEN

(B. 1990)

World Chess Champion, 2013–2023

Lennart Ootes/Saint Louis Chess Club

Magnus Carlsen of Norway, though only 33, is on the shortlist of the greatest players of all time. World champion from 2013 to 2023 (when he chose not to defend his title), Carlsen holds the record for the highest published rating in the history of chess at 2882 May 2014 FIDE rating list). He is currently (March 2024) ranked number one in the world in classical, rapid, and blitz chess. A five-time world champion, the reigning five-time world rapid chess champion, the reigning seven-time world blitz champion, and the reigning world cup champion, Carlsen also holds the record for the longest unbeaten streak at the elite level (125 games).

World Chess Championships Fought

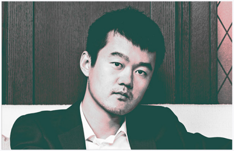
2013 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Chennai
Opponent: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Won the title

2014 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Sochi, Russia
Opponent: Viswanathan Anand
Result: Retained the title

2016 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: New York City
Opponent: Sergey Karjakin
Result: Retained the title

2018 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: London
Opponent: Fabiano Caruana
Result: Retained the title

2021 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Dubai
Opponent: Ian Nepomniachtchi
Result: Retained the title



Stev Bonhage/FIDE

DING LIREN

(B. 1992)

World Chess Champion, 2023–Present

Magnus Carlsen also participated in the 2004 World Chess Championship, which was staged as a knock-out tournament. He declined to participate in the 2023 World Chess Championship, the first reigning champion to decline to participate since Bobby Fischer.

World Chess Championships Fought

2023 World Chess Championship (Match)
Location: Astana, Kazakhstan
Opponent: Ian Nepomniachtchi

Ding Liren was born in Wenzhou, China, on October 24, 1992. He began studying chess at four years old and made his first big breakthrough in 2006 when he won the Chinese Chess Championship. Three years later he became his country's 30th grandmaster and in 2010 broke the 2600 rating barrier shortly after turning 18. Two years later Ding crossed over 2700 and into the world elite. Ding Liren became the first Chinese player to qualify for the Candidates Tournament in 2017 and the same year became the first player from China to be rated over 2800.

In 2018 he held the record for the longest unbeaten streak at an elite level, reaching 100 games, beating the previous record held by Mikhail Tal at 95 games. This was later surpassed by Magnus Carlsen with a 125-game unbeaten streak. Speaking about the streak in 2020, he said, "To be honest, I am not so concerned about those kinds of things. I think all strong players just focus on the chess itself. [...] But everybody at that level hates to lose. They will do everything to prevent defeat, try every resource to save their position." In 2022, Magnus Carlsen officially declared he would not return to defend his title in 2023. This led to the world championship match between Ian Nepomniachtchi and Ding Liren, the winner and second-place winners of the challengers tournament (respectively). Ding defeated Nepomniachtchi in a tiebreak, becoming the 17th world chess champion. After the emotional win, he is quoted as saying "It's already changed my life."