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A study of Bobby Fischer, Boris Spassky, the 1972 FIDE Chess Title Match, and their correlation and

A Battle Ground for Rival Ideologies:

Since World War Two had ended, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had been deteriorating steadily. Genuine concern existed whether or not the United States would survive to see the twenty-first century. A miniature version of the cold war was manifesting itself on a sixty-four square checkerboard merely eighteen inches on each side. Huddled over these sixty-four squares were two army generals ready to send their troops into fierce battle. Their names were Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer. The year was 1972, and the whole world was focused on a tiny isolated island bordering the Arctic Circle.

For years on end the Soviets had been winning the word chess championship.(1) Fischer, however, was the United States' secret weapon. In the possibility of Fischer defeating Spassky lay the hope of the United States that if they could finally triumph over the Russians in a simple game of chess, then they could eventually triumph over them in every aspect of the Cold War. Nobody could predict that 1972 would be a major turning point in the political battle that would rage merely two more decades.

THE PERFECT SETTING

Between Europe and North America lies a small island nation of 200,000 people. Completely isolated from the outside world for centuries, the language spoken

there is almost identical to Old Norse. The landscape is barren; ice sheets and glaciers cover a sizable portion of the island. The summers are cold; the winters are freezing. It remains a mystery why FIDE, the Federation International Des Eschecs, chose the tiny country of Iceland to host its 1972 title match. After all, the prize purse was only $125,000, the smallest amount offered of the locations considered.(2)

Perhaps it was the highly political nature of the upcoming match that made Iceland's Capital City of Reykjavik seem like the perfect location. Situated almost directly between the US and the USSR, Iceland was definitely the place to butt heads. The sun never sets in the summer, nor does it rise in the winter. The constant sunlight was like the eye of the world concentrating so fixatedly on Iceland. It seemed like the perfect place, since for nearly half a century, the USSR's chess title had never been challenged like this. It seemed as if the FIDE crown would be taken away from the Soviet Union, whose trust in the crown
currently resided in the hands of Boris Spassky. The man who challenged Spassky
had already come to be known as one of the greatest, most eccentric, and most egotistical chess players in the history of the game: Bobby Fischer.

A LIFE COMPLETELY DEVOTED TO THE GAME

Bobby Fischer has always been a rather strange and enigmatic character. He was
born in Chicago, Illinois and raised in Brooklyn, New York. When he was only six years old, his sister bought him a cheap plastic chess set. For three years, chess was just another game, but when Bobby turned nine, he quickly became completely absorbed by the game that was to rule the rest of his life.(3)

In 1957, at the age of 14, Bobby entered the U.S. Championship in New York City.
To the complete surprise of some and the complete lack thereof of others, Bobby emerged as the United States champion with a score of 10 ½ points out of a possible 14, beating many well-known American chess players such as Samuel Reshevsky and William Lombardy. Ironically, those two players would be his assistants in Iceland. By the time Bobby was fifteen, he was awarded the title of International Grandmaster by FIDE, completely astonishing most of the chess world in the process. He was the youngest person ever to hold the title. However, success in chess only exacerbated his already bitter sentiments toward the education system, as revealed in a January 1962 interview in Harper's Magazine.

"You don't learn anything in school. It's just a waste of time. You lug around books and all and do homework. They give too much homework. You shouldn't be
doing homework. Nobody's interested in it. The teachers are stupid. They shouldn't
have any women in there. They don't know how to teach. And they shouldn't make
anyone go to school. You don't want to go, you don't go, that's all. It's ridiculous. I don't remember one thing I learned in school. I don't listen to weakies [Bobby's term for non-chess players or for chess players who are weaker
than himself]. My two and a half years in Erasmus High I wasted. I didn't like the whole thing. You have to mix with all those stupid kids. The teachers are even stupider than the kids. They talk down to the kids. Half of them are crazy. If they'd have let me, I would have quit before I was sixteen."(4)

Fischer's IQ tested at 180, and he had always viewed school as a mechanical process - a pointless three-ring circus. At sixteen he dropped out of high school.(5)

When Fischer told this to Ralph Ginzburg in a January 1962 interview for Harper's Magazine, the world already had its eye on the then 19 year-old grandmaster. Although the United States harbored some amazing chess talent, the Soviet Union had dominated the world championship crown for thirty-five years. As Frank Brady, the business manager of the US Chess Federation, said, "Bobby is the one who will break that chain. Definitely."(6) John W. Collins, a columnist for Chess Life magazine, predicted that Bobby would probably go down in history "as the greatest chess player that ever lived."(7) The difference between Bobby and other players was obvious: Boris Spassky once said that "chess is like life."(8) Fischer, however, put it more bluntly: "Chess is life."(9)

NOT QUITE RUSSIA'S CROWN JEWEL OF CHESS

The Soviet Union was a chess-mad nation. In 1972, there were 35,000 registered chess players in the United States, compared with a whopping four million in the USSR.(10) The primary reason for this huge disparity was economic lifestyle. In the United States, where people were reasonably wealthy, there were many things to do - go out to a restaurant, see a show, buy a new game on the market, and so on. Thus, the capitalist United States treated its chess players just like any other citizen. The USSR, on the other hand, was a nation stricken with poverty. For many of its citizens, chess was the easiest game to make if they couldn't afford a set. In fact, many of the poorest Soviet citizens played chess with little rocks, leaves, slips of paper, coins, or anything else they could get their hands on. Thus, the Soviet government readily encouraged chess - the game

was taught in school just like mathematics or physics.

Every Soviet chess champion was a product of the soviet chess school, and Boris
Spassky was no different. He was a chess player in stark contrast to Fischer - a family man with a wife and children, and very levelheaded in relation to most of the chess world.(11) Of course, one possible reason for the difference between Spassky's gentlemanly levelheaded play and Fischer's paranoid lunatic antics is the mere fact that the Soviets had a chess craze. Fischer was obviously worried that he was not only playing Spassky, but also the entire Soviet Union.

Spassky's rise to the top in 1969 was half due to his chess talent and half due to pure luck. In the playoff rounds, Spassky barely squeezed his way to the finals, and even then barely won the World Championship match in Moscow.(12) Once he achieved the goal of the title, however, the pressure of holding the world's most prestigious chess title began to take its toll. "In Russia they have a saying," said Spassky, "that 'Shapka Monomakha wears heavily'. The Shapka
Monomakha is the Czar's crown. And I felt it quite keenly."(13) For Spassky, indeed, the crown wore very heavily, leaving him apathetic towards the title crown in 1972.

HAMMER AND SICKLE V. STARS AND STRIPES, 1972

"Short of actual blunders, lack of faith in one's position is the chief cause of defeat. To be sure, it is easy to recommend faith and not so easy to practice it."

-Fred Reinfeld (14)

In many ways, Spassky's close-call rise to the top in 1969 reflected the way the

Soviet Union was operating at the time. Once Spassky had attained the crown, the
Soviet propaganda machine advertised him to the chess world as the greatest player in the USSR, even though he had barely edged his way to the title. This was very similar to the way the Soviet Union was advertising itself to the world. From the outside, it appeared that Communist Russia was one of the most powerful
nations in the world - strong-willed government officials, an army with an almost endless supply of soldiers and weapons, and ever-growing political influence around the globe. In reality, the country was spending so much on its military that it was quietly going bankrupt.(15)

Bobby Fischer also played a symbolic role in the miniature Cold War that was manifesting itself around sixty-four squares in Reykjavik. For years, the United States had been scared to death of Communism. In fact, except for a brief propaganda campaign during World War Two that convinced Americans that the USSR
was their friend(16), the United States had been running like a frightened squirrel from the threat of communism since the Soviet Union's inception in the early 1920s. Nobody could have predicted that in 1972 the cold war would start to be melted by Fischer and Spassky. However, it took Nixon going to China to turn up the heat.

ONLY FISCHER COULD GO TO ICELAND

In 1972, one man became the first Western leader in history to visit communist China. That man was Richard Nixon, president of the United States. The meeting between President Nixon and Mao Tse-Tung was shown by the American propaganda
machine as being for the sake of trade agreements and to better the American economy. Why is it, then, that only Nixon could go to China?

The American people viewed Richard Nixon as a hard-core conservative and a rabid anti-Communist. Only a leader as fiercely opposed to the Communists as Nixon could successfully convince the American people that a trade agreement with a Communist nation would be for their own good. A liberal who had the reputation of either being indifferent to communism or, even worse, caring about the well-being of the communist nations would have watched helplessly as his approval ratings dropped off sharply, virtually guaranteeing his failure to win re-election.

Fischer, too, was a rabid anti-Communist. He was a paranoid lunatic convinced that anything causing him to play poorly was a secret evil plan of the Russians, thought up to guarantee Fischer's elimination and to guarantee that the world chess crown would remain Soviet property. As with Nixon, the American chess community was so weary of the constant Soviet domination of the game that they truly believed Fischer was their only hope. Not only was he an amazingly good chess player, but he was so paranoid and so completely unpredictable that he had the power to destroy the Soviets both on and off the chessboard.

LET THE POLITICAL CHESS BEGIN

Saturday, 1 July 1972. Fischer and Spassky arrived in Iceland, drew for the first game, and sat down at the chessboard - or so it was planned. The reality, mostly due to Fischer's temperament, was that the chess game had already begun long before either Spassky or Fischer pushed a pawn. On that Saturday, only Spassky and his delegation were in Iceland for the opening ceremony. Fischer was

in an apartment several thousand miles away from Reykjavik complaining about the
financial end of the match. He demanded thirty per cent of the gate receipts, a sizable portion of the film and television revenue, and wanted to have the loser's share of the purse in his hand as he landed in Iceland.(17) Even after a rather spirited battle between Fischer, his delegation, and the Icelandic chess federation that resulted only in Fischer agreeing to fly to the island, the political chess battle was just beginning.

"The Soviet Chess Union made a statement today that they are protesting the handling of the chess championships in Reykjavik. They are also accusing the challenger, Bobby Fischer, of trying to milk the championship for money. In a statement which the Soviet Union's TASS news agency released today, they accuse
FIDE of gross rule-breaking. Thus, FIDE says that if it does not have a meeting before noon on Tuesday to go over the rules with the participants, the match will not take place."(18)

As soon as Fischer arrived on the island, he began to complain about everything. Even the simple act of drawing sides was not free from politics. Fischer arrived at his residence two hours beforehand, and decided he was too tired to draw sides. Thus, he sent his second, William Lombardy, to draw for him. This horrendously upset Spassky, who threw down a statement and walked away:

"Fischer broke the rules of holding the contest by refusing to come for the ceremony of opening the match. By this, Fischer insulted me, personally, and the Chess Federation of the U.S.S.R., which I represent.

"The public opinion in the U.S.S.R. and I, personally, are indignant over Fischer's conduct. Under all human notions, he discredited himself completely. By this he jeapordized his moral right to play in the match for the world chess

crown.

"Fischer must bear the just punishment before there is a hope of holding the match. Only after this can I return to the question about the possibility of holding the match."(19)

In response to this, Fischer himself wrote up an apology. However, even though one would generally use such an apology to appease an opponent, Fischer does exactly the opposite, letting his anti-Communist sentiments show through:

"Dear Boris,

"Please accept my sincerest apology for my disrespectful behavior in not attending the opening ceremony. I simply became carried away by my petty dispute
over money with the Icelandic chess organizers. I have offended you and your country, the Soviet Union, where chess has a prestigious position.

"Also, I would like to apologize to Dr. Max Euwe, president of FIDE, to the match organizers in Iceland, to the thousands of chess fans around the world and
especially to the millions of fans and many friends I have in the United States.

"After I did not show up for the first game, Dr. Euwe announced that the first game would be postponed without prejudice to me. At that time, you made no protest. Now I am informed that the Russian Chess Federation is demanding that the first game be forfeited to you. The timing of this demand seems to place in doubt the motives for your federation's not insisting at the first for a forfeit of the first game."(20)

Despite Fischer's menacing undertones in the second half of his apology letter,

the Soviets eventually agreed to play chess. Spassky promptly won the first game,
at which point Fischer began his now-legendary complaint tirade. He protested everything he could lay his eyes or ears on - the lighting, the high polish of the chess table, the proximity of the audience to the stage, and a whole host of other things that most chess players wouldn't have given a hoot about. However, FIDE and the Icelandic chess federation couldn't see their way to all of Fischer's requests by game two, and so Fischer forfeited the point to Spassky.

For game three, Fischer demanded that the game be held in a small ping-pong room
adjoining the main stage, closed off to the main audience and broadcast to them via closed-circuit television. Spassky lost the game, complaining of street noise filtering into the room. Fischer agreed to play the rest of the matches in the exhibition hall, but demanded that the television cameras be removed. Fischer was waging an all-out psychological attack on his opponent, and he was beginning to win.

A few games later, Fischer was in the lead, triumphing over Spassky game after game. The Russian delegation decided to get into the mind game by attacking Fischer. They claimed that Fischer was using some sort of electronic device to alter Spassky's concentration, noting that members of the American delegation could often be found in the playing hall when chess was not being played there. Soon, the match was put on hold and the police combed the arena - inspecting Fischer's chair, inspecting the stage and the arena, and dismantling the lighting fixtures. After a grueling search of the entire arena, the police turned in what they had found: two dead flies.(21)

BORIS BUCKLES

By the time the match had been underway for 13 games, Spassky was beginning to collapse under the stress of Fischer's psychological attack. Either brilliantly conceived or completely randomly loony (whichever way one looks at it), Fischer's attack consisted mainly of a lot of complaining and threats. Fischer complained about the size of the audience, repeatedly demanding that the first seven rows of seats in the exhibition hall be removed. He demanded that the television cameras filming the match also be done away with. On top of this, Fischer was busy making Spassky uneasy as to whether or not he would actually play that day.

On no occasion did Fischer show up on time for any of the games, leaving in serious doubt the assumption that Fischer would play at all. Only did repeated threats from the arbiter and FIDE to award the crown to Spassky by default lure Fischer out of his foxhole. In addition, the papers talked about Fischer much more than Spassky, with "the American papers [likening] Fischer with James Bond" and the New York Times declaring that "In Moscow, despite his antics, Fischer is the favorite of many."

On August 13, just before the 14th game was to begin, Spassky claimed that he was ill.. The New York Times concluded that Spassky was not in fact ill, but merely postponing the game and thus following the pattern of many of Fischer's prior opponents. Even this break, however, could not rescue Spassky from Fischer's determination to win the chess crown from the Soviet Union. On September 1, Spassky resigned, making chess history and giving Fischer the crown.

THE COLD WAR THAWS

After Fischer won the tournament, the political and chess worlds were reeling. For the first time in three decades, an American had won the FIDE chess title match. 1972 was a year of many victories for the United States and a warming of relations between the US and the Soviet superpowers. That year saw such events as Nixon traveling to China and the signing of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. By January of 1973, the United States had begun withdrawing troops from Vietnam - a sure sign that the cold war was beginning its end. For a while, it seemed as if Bobby Fischer had single-handedly brought about the end of the Cold War. However, if Fischer was in reality the keystone of the Relations Bridge to the Soviet Union, it was to everyone's surprise when Fischer let that bridge fall to pieces in 1975.

COLD WAR II

Three years after Fischer had crushed the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky and claimed the title crown for the Americans, it was time for Bobby to defend it from the Soviets. The challenger was the Soviet Union's new frontrunner Anatoly Karpov. Once again, Fischer would try to use his psychological attacks to weaken Karpov and successfully defend his title. This time, however, neither FIDE nor the USSR was going to stand for it. Of Fischer's multiple demands, FIDE could see its way to all but one of them. Fischer flatly refused to play. FIDE decided it had had enough of Fischer's antics and promptly awarded the title to Karpov. The keystone of the relations bridge went into hiding, and the Cold War went back into the freezer, closed the doors, and witnessed the coldest, darkest years in human history. It would take seventeen years and a rich crony of Slobodan Milosevic to bring a conclusive end to the cold war.

By the time 1991 rolled around, the scene had changed dramatically. For once, it appeared to the American people that perhaps the Soviet Union was on its last leg. They were right. Years and years of horrendously wasteful military spending had finally bankrupt the Communist Russian Empire. The residents of the USSR's republics had finally had enough of the old Soviet Regime, and began to revolt. In no time at all, the USSR was no longer a union of republics - it consisted only of Russia. The Soviet Union was declared dead in the water in December of 1991. Waves of shock and joy rippled through the American public. Was the Cold War really over?

The answer came from none other than Bobby Fischer himself. Lured out of hiding by a Serbian millionaire offering five million US dollars in a rematch against Boris Spassky, Fischer was ready to declare the cold war officially over by doing what he did best: beating the Russians at chess. Of course, nothing had changed about Fischer - he was still the same old Bobby, complaining about everything imaginable and making a fuss about everything else. Unfortunately, the government of the United States didn't see Bobby as their anti-Soviet secret weapon anymore. Economic sanctions effectively made it illegal for Fischer to play and accept the prize money. In a pre-match press conference, Fischer held up the notice and spat on it.

But Fischer was still the same old complaining chess master. He even went so far as to demand that the noise from the nearby war not interfere with his concentration. Fischer was Fischer, and Spassky was Spassky, and just like in Reykjavik twenty years previously, Fischer won the match. Unfortunately, the United States put out an arrest warrant for Fischer, sending him into seclusion once again. A stanza which Tim Rice wrote for a stage musical perfectly captures the role chess had finally taken in international politics:

How sad to see

What used to be

A model of decorum and tranquility

Become like any other sport

A battleground for rival ideologies

To slug it out with glee.