



# Bobby Fischer Goes to War: How the Soviets Lost the Most Extraordinary Chess Match of All Time

*By David Edmonds, John Eidinow*

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In the summer of 1972, with a presidential crisis stirring in the United States and the cold war at a pivotal point, two men -- the Soviet world chess champion Boris Spassky and his American challenger Bobby Fischer -- met in the most notorious chess match of all time. Their showdown in Reykjavik, Iceland, held the world spellbound for two months with reports of psychological warfare, ultimatums, political intrigue, cliffhangers, and farce to rival a Marx Brothers film.

Thirty years later, David Edmonds and John Eidinow, authors of the national bestseller Wittgenstein's Poker, have set out to reexamine the story we recollect as the quintessential cold war clash between a lone American star and the Soviet chess machine -- a machine that had delivered the world title to the Kremlin for decades. Drawing upon unpublished Soviet and U.S. records, the authors reconstruct the full and incredible saga, one far more poignant and layered than hitherto believed.

Against the backdrop of superpower politics, the authors recount the careers and personalities of Boris Spassky, the product of Stalin's imperium, and Bobby Fischer, a child of post-World War II America, an era of economic boom at home and communist containment abroad. The two men had nothing in common but their gift for chess, and the disparity of their outlook and values conditioned the struggle over the board.

Then there was the match itself, which produced both creative masterpieces and some of the most improbable gaffes in chess history. And finally, there was the dramatic and protracted off-the-board battle -- in corridors and foyers, in back rooms and hotel suites, in Moscow offices and in the White House.

The authors chronicle how Fischer, a manipulative, dysfunctional genius, risked all to seize control of the contest as the organizers maneuvered frantically to save it -- under the eyes of the world's press. They can now tell the inside story of Moscow's response, and the bitter tensions within the Soviet camp as the anxious and frustrated apparatchiks strove to prop up Boris Spassky, the most un-Soviet

of their champions -- fun-loving, sensitive, and a free spirit. Edmonds and Eidinow follow this careering, behind-the-scenes confrontation to its climax: a clash that displayed the cultural differences between the dynamic, media-savvy representatives of the West and the baffled, impotent Soviets. Try as they might, even the KGB couldn't help.

A mesmerizing narrative of brilliance and triumph, hubris and despair, *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* is a biting deconstruction of the Bobby Fischer myth, a nuanced study on the art of brinkmanship, and a revelatory cold war tragicomedy.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The duo that crafted the bestselling *Wittgenstein's Poker* returns to chronicle "the most notorious chess duel in history," the 1972 match between world champion Boris Spassky and challenger Bobby Fischer. Although the competition has achieved iconic status, Edmonds and Eidinow do an excellent job of making the story fresh, recreating the atmosphere of controversy that surrounded both players long before they met in Reykjavik, not to mention the extraordinary hurdles tournament organizers faced in getting the already eccentric Fischer to even show up, which ultimately required a phone call from Henry Kissinger and prize money put up by an English millionaire. Fischer's troubling personality is a matter of common knowledge, but the thawing of the Cold War enables the authors to flesh out the Soviet side of the story, offering a fuller perspective on the friction between the rebellious grandmaster and Communist officials, and revelations about the very active presence of the KGB during the games, while debunking other rumors about plots to poison or brainwash Spassky. (Declassified FBI files also present groundbreaking information about Fischer and his family.) The actual chess has been analyzed to death elsewhere, so the authors don't delve into the games' details much except when the players made horrendous blunders, which segue into the underlying focus on psychology, addressing Fischer's ability to get away with bullying officials into meeting his exacting demands and Spassky's loss of confidence over the course of the match. Even if you think you know the story, this highly entertaining account will surprise and delight.

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From [Booklist](#)

From Edmonds, author of the unexpectedly popular *Wittgenstein's Poker* (2001), comes this intriguing look at the world of competitive chess, circa 1972. That was the year Boris Spassky, the Russian, and Bobby Fischer, the upstart American, fought it out for global chess supremacy. It was a match that held the world spellbound, a two-month marathon that hit the front pages (during the last stages of the Vietnam War and the early stages of Watergate) and turned millions of people into chess addicts. But, as the authors demonstrate, the story was not just about two chess masters; it was about politics, about two countries fighting a cold war. Could Fischer break Russia's decades-long hold on the world chess championship? And, by association, could the U.S. vanquish its nemesis? The narrative never really takes off here, as it did in *Wittgenstein's Poker*, but the book does a very good job of setting the scene, of making us feel as though it's 1972, and we are witnessing something of truly global importance. Good reading, especially for chess buffs. *David Pitt*  
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Review

"Readers will savor a marvelous portrait of East against West, with perceived societal superiority as the real prize." (Kirkus Reviews)

"[An] intriguing look at the world of competitive chess, circa 1972.... Good reading, especially for chess buffs." (Booklist)

"[A] praiseworthy, terrific book... marvelous." (Chess Life)

"Bobby Fischer Goes to War tells the story in fine, brisk style...conveying the richness of the world beyond the chessboard." (Time magazine)

"[Edmonds and Eidinow] show themselves once again to be grandmasters of nonfiction narrative."  
(Christian Science Monitor)

"The book will be one of the major sources of history for new generations of chess players." (Boston Globe)

"David Edmonds and John Eidinow have penned a delightful book about the politics of that legendary match." (Washington Times)

A superbly researched reminder of a 20th century culture clash." (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

"A fascinating story well told." (Nashville Tennessean)

"Engagingly written... a real page-turner!" (Library Journal)

"Enthralling.... Edmonds and Eidinow are ideal guides through the history and psychology of chess." (San Francisco Chronicle)

"This is the definitive history of Fischer vs. Spassky." (Washington Post Book World)

"Note to Hollywood: It's Miracle meets A Beautiful Mind. Get on it." (Entertainment Weekly)

"The finest addendum ever to the 1972 chess world championship.'" (Los Angeles Times)

"Superbly researched.... Bobby Fischer Goes to War fills an important gap in the literature on this showdown." (Florida Sun-Sentinel)

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