



David Edmonds

Bobby Fischer Goes to War
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Authors' Note on *Bobby Fischer Goes To War*
by David Edmonds and John Eidinow

We did not plan to follow a book about the duel for supremacy between two of the twentieth-century's greatest philosophers with a sequel about the duel for supremacy between two of that century's greatest chess-players.

Wittgenstein's Poker took off from a series of splenetic letters in the *Times Literary Supplement* discussing whether Karl Popper had lied in his autobiography about an argument with Ludwig Wittgenstein. Vituperation raged between Wittgensteinians and Popperians for six weeks amid charge and counter-charge over the incident. John sent the correspondence to David for his amusement, and eighteen months later the result was a 350-page book. *Bobby Fischer Goes To War* has its origins in a later BBC radio programme David produced on the history of the world chess championship. It was a

lightning tour, from Steinitz (1886) to Kramnik (2001). Coverage of the 1972 showdown was perfunctory but the story had a Poker-like resonance. Here was a compelling tale involving singular personalities, yet with plainly much more to be said than currently on the record.

There are obvious parallels between *Bobby Fischer Goes To War* and *Wittgenstein's Poker*. In each case, one of the two protagonists was generally considered a genius, possessing all the strangeness we eagerly associate with the word, while the other was seen as brilliant but normal. In each case, one of the pair intended to destroy the other or at least to make off with his crown. In each case, the story takes us on a journey into the cerebral high peaks: first world-class philosophy, now world-class chess, with the challenge to make philosophy and chess accessible to the general reader.

The mechanics of the research were also very similar. Both books, for example, had international scope. For *Wittgenstein's Poker* we had to track down eyewitnesses in all parts of the world. In *Bobby Fischer Goes To War* we travelled to meet Boris's tennis partner in Estonia, Bobby's bodyguard in Iceland, Boris's ex-wife in Moscow, and the match referee in Bamberg, Germany.

But there were also profound differences between the two events that we took as our subject. At the heart of *Wittgenstein's Poker* lay a ten-minute philosophical argument and a mystery to be unravelled. When the American challenger Bobby Fischer met the Soviet world champion Boris Spassky in Reykjavik in 1972, their battle lasted two months and was fought in public. Every move on the chessboard was endlessly dissected; the meaning of the confrontation and the roles of the characters seemed clear. A lone American star was challenging the long Soviet grip on the world title. His success would dispose of the Soviets' claim that their chess hegemony reflected the superiority of their political system. The chessboard was a Cold War arena where expressionless, hard-faced Soviet chess apparatchiks confronted the solitary champion of the free world, urged on by President Nixon's National Security Adviser, Dr Kissinger, to fight for liberty and justice. Here was the *High Noon* of chess, coming to you from a concrete sports hall in Iceland.

That is the version remembered today by an astonishing number of people. Even non-chess players - those who can't tell their King's Gambit from their Sicilian Defence, their *fianchetto*s from their *en passant*s - will react with, 'Fischer-Spassky?' 'Oh yes, that was a Cold War battle, wasn't it.'

If it were as simple as that, the events of Reykjavik could be left safely to the myriad books already detailing the contest, many written in its immediate aftermath. But it is not.

Detached by time and history from the mind-sets of the period, driven by the feeling that the preconceptions about the match were ripe for reconsideration, we set out to take a new look at the episode. The end of the Cold War has allowed access to people and records that reveal the human beings inside the Soviet monolith, a system that was as impoverished as it was cruel, recasting Spassky as the most unSoviet of champions. White House, State Department and FBI sources also offer remarkable insights on official attitudes to the match and to Fischer. With these resources, we can relate the tale from a new perspective. The simplicities of *High Noon* no longer apply. We have entered the nuanced world of Le Carré, a world of individuals and the often subversive choices that bring personal tragedy in their wake.

Bobby Fischer Goes To War is a story on several levels. Against the background of superpower politics, there are the careers and personalities of the champion and the challenger. Spassky was the product of Stalin's *imperium*, Fischer the child of post WWII America, an era of economic boom at home and communist-containment abroad. The two men had little in common but their gift for chess: their disparity of outlook and values conditioned their struggle over the board.

Then there is the chess itself - which produced both creative masterpieces and unbelievable gaffes. Finally, there is the full account of the match beyond the chessboard. In the Icelandic capital, the plot turns into tragi-farce as Fischer risks all to seize control of the contest with the organizers manoeuvring frantically under the eyes of the world press to save it. We follow the clash to its conclusion, with events away from the platform as dramatic as those on it, displaying the cultural differences between the dynamic, media-savvy representatives of the West and the baffled and impotent Soviets. Even the KGB could not help.

The question we're most often asked is how it is possible to co-author a book, dividing the work, agreeing the narrative and the plot, achieving a single voice - all without coming to blows with red-hot pokers. Well, which of us wrote that last sentence? By the end of our editing process, we ourselves can't tell. John might begin chapter one, David chapter two - but after an intensive process of internet-ping-pong, the original authorships are lost in a cyber-haze. It's a time-consuming business - but it's also fun, launching and shooting

down ideas, swapping phrases (and deleting them), testing theses to destruction, running jokes. *Wittgenstein's Poker* rose out of this interaction; the same process has produced *Bobby Fischer Goes To War*. With amazement, we contemplate the result: somehow, between us, they have taken on a life of their own.