



## David Edmonds

**Bobby Fischer Goes to War**  
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**Q: *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* represents a departure from your previous book, *Wittgenstein's Poker*. In retrospect, which subject presented greater obstacles when it came to research and writing?**

A: In fact, there are resonances shared between both books. In each, one of the heroes was considered a genius with all the strangeness we associate with that word, while the other was brilliant but normal; one of the pair intended to destroy the other, or at least make off with his crown; the journey takes us into cerebral high peaks. But in *Wittgenstein's Poker* we were dealing with a mystery at the heart of a brief moment in a private room, where the few remaining witnesses disagreed; in *Bobby Fischer*, a public event where the meaning seemed clear until we began our research. For we had both to reassess the known facts and to penetrate the records and recollections of the (former) Soviet participants. This led to a fresh understanding of Reykjavik and the championship. By the end, we could show that what had seemed an unambiguous East-West confrontation was a story of flawed individuals and their often subversive choices, and of conflict not cooperation between Spassky and Moscow on the one hand and Fischer and Washington on the other.

**Q: Did you attempt to interview Bobby Fischer for this book?**

A: Bobby Fischer is a total recluse, his whereabouts unknown to the public. He has been heard only in very occasional unreal, ranting interviews on current world events, given live down a telephone. He is possibly in Japan. E-mail goes through intermediaries. Boris Spassky was very helpful. Naturally we pursued the possibility of an interview with Fischer, but, though we believe we made contact with him, nothing came of it.

**Q: How did the intense media spotlight affect Fischer and Spassky? If the match weren't played out in the context of Cold War politics, do you think the outcome might have been different?**

A: The media spotlight affected the match on several levels: it amplified the conflicts off the board and the fortunes on it; it enabled Fischer's aides to bring pressure on the organizers and on Spassky's team; it made the organizers more pliable to Fischer's demands. But it probably did not affect either player directly—it's difficult to imagine Fischer worrying about a headline, and Spassky would be concerned only about the Soviet state-controlled media. As to the outcome, if Spassky had been more of a Soviet player, as we say, he might have left Reykjavik with the crown. The match was characterized by some bizarre chess blunders—particularly by Spassky. But his state of mind was probably affected by Fischer's antics not the reporting of these antics.

**Q: In the course of your research, did you find the international chess community to be as vibrant as it was in the 1970s?**

A: Chess was given an enormous international boost by Fischer-Spassky. But once Fischer disappeared from the chess scene, interest in the game also began to wane. Nonetheless, these days the elite grandmasters can make a very good living from chess—whereas pre-1972, there was little money in the game and it was extremely difficult for Western players to turn professional and survive.

**Q: Several of the subjects you interviewed have suggested that there might have been a conspiracy on the part of the United States to undermine Spassky's performance. What are your thoughts on this?**

A: Given the US administration's hands-off attitude to Fischer, this is highly unlikely, particularly when Nixon/Kissinger policy was focused on détente. But the Soviets were by nature deeply suspicious and prone to see conspiracies everywhere. We have not seen any evidence that they believed the hand of the US was behind a 'non-chess' attack on Spassky. But such an attack seemed plausible to them, and they would not have differentiated between a citizen and his government.

**Q: Why do you think Bobby Fischer continues to perplex and fascinate?**

A: The bad boy genius, the lost hero, the sense of what might have been, the pity of it all.

**Q: How has the advent of computerized chess altered the face of chess playing in the world today?**

A: Mainly in preparation. For example, grandmasters, at the touch of a button, can see all previous games played by a forthcoming opponent. Also, during the Fischer-Spassky match, games would be adjourned after five hours. Nowadays, there are no adjournments, in part because with computers it is too easy to determine how a game should proceed.