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Checkmate: How Bobby Fischer Beat the Soviets

It was 50 years ago this summer that U.S. chess player Bobby Fischer concluded the greatest two-year run in the history of world chess, handing the socialist system of the Soviet Union one of its greatest defeats in the Cold War.

AP Images

Fischer went to Reykjavik, Iceland, in July of 1972 and took the world chess championship away from Soviet player Boris Spassky. He was the first American to win the title (and so far the only one), and the first non-Soviet to win the title since the Second World War. While some point to the victory of the American hockey team in the 1980 Olympics over the Soviet team as the greatest sports victory for America during the Cold War era, the reality is that to the Soviets, having the chess title taken away was a greater disaster.

After Alexander Alekhine died in 1948 while reigning as world chess champion, an international tournament was held to establish a new champion. It was won by Mikhail Botvinnik, and he was followed by a string of other Soviet chess grandmasters. Alekhine was also Russian, but he detested communism and defected to France after the Bolshevik Revolution. Alekhine was found dead, with his head on his chess board, and there has been speculation over the years whether KGB agents might have had something to do with it.

Regardless, Soviet chess hegemony was trumpeted as an example of the superiority of the socialist system over decadent capitalism. While Soviet grandmasters were supported by the state, the top American players had to have other jobs to put food on the table and a roof over their heads.

Bobby Fischer had no support from his government, of course, and he lived a very spartan existence in the years leading up to his remarkable run to the world chess championship. To the Soviets, Fischer was the embodiment of the individualist so hated by the collectivist system of Soviet communism.

How did Fischer manage to take on the Soviet chess empire and crush it, culminating with a 12.5 to 8.5 victory over the best they had — Boris Spassky?

Fischer was not a prodigy, although he won the U.S. chess championship for the first time at age 14. While he learned the game at the young age of six, it was not until he was about 12 years old that he became a top-rated chess player in the United States. Samuel Reshevsky, the best player in America before Fischer's emergence in 1956, *was* a prodigy, learning to play chess at two, and giving simultaneous exhibitions (playing several opponents at the same time, moving from board to board) at *six*.

Fischer's development was much slower. Born in Chicago on March 9, 1943, Fischer learned to play when he was six, when his sister Joan (then 11) purchased a chess set from a nearby candy store. He enjoyed playing, but was only an occasional player for the next year. But then he began to do little else but play with his chess set, playing both sides of the board (his sister could no longer offer much competition).

Little Bobby was spending so much time alone with his chess set that his mother sent a postcard to the chess column of the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper (where they were then living) in late 1950, asking if

they knew any boys his age he could play chess with. This led to Fischer going to an exhibition by chess master Max Pavey. Fischer lost quickly, but Carmine Nigro, president of the Brooklyn Chess Club, invited Bobby to join the club.

"Mr. Nigro [an expert, which is right below master level] was possibly not the best player in the world," Fischer later recalled, "but he was a very good teacher. I went to the Brooklyn Chess Club practically every Friday night." Nigro gave Fischer personal lessons at the rate of a dollar an hour. "I'm sure he wasn't interested in the dollar, but this was his way of making sure I took the lessons seriously."

He "Just Got Good"

After a slow improvement over the next few years, by 1954 his play had made a dramatic improvement of several hundred rating points in less than two years. When asked what he did to make such an improvement, Fischer shrugged, "I just got good."

He did get "good," but it was because of his almost single-minded devotion to getting good. He was rarely seen without a pocket chess set or not reading chess literature. He taught himself Russian — because he knew the Russian chess players were the best — so he could read their chess magazines and books. His IQ was tested at Erasmus High School at 188, but he took little interest in school, and dropped out before graduating.

He was the youngest ever U.S. junior champion in 1956, but it was his victory over international chess master Donald Byrne — when Fischer was only 13 years old — in a game that has been dubbed "the game of the century" that brought Fischer national, and even international, attention. The spectacular victory, with a bold queen sacrifice, was, according to Soviet grandmaster Yuri Averbakh, the first time the Soviets became "concerned" about the up-and-coming American.

Fischer won the first of several U.S. championships in 1958 at age 14. This victory entitled him to play in the Interzonal tournament in Yugoslavia. The Interzonal tournament was composed of the strongest players in the world, with the top six finishers entered into the Candidates Tournament, which would determine who would challenge the world chess champion in 1960. Fischer finished fifth, and fifth again in the Candidates Tournament the next year.

It was about this time that Fischer's mother moved to California out of their Brooklyn apartment. While his mother should be lauded for the support she gave to her son's chess aspirations, tensions had been building between them over his mother's left-wing political views. Regina Fischer was a Polish Jew who became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1926. She went to Berlin to study, where she met and married Gerhardt Fischer. They moved to Moscow in 1933, as they were both enamored with what they believed to be the "workers' paradise."

She eventually separated from her husband and returned to America, and was a member of the U.S. Communist Party. The FBI suspected she was a Soviet spy. She was involved in various left-wing political causes, which embarrassed and angered young Bobby. Their arguments grew more frequent until she moved out.

After his mother left, Bobby spent most of each day studying chess, determined to become a professional and the world champion. In 1962, he finished first in the Interzonal in Stockholm, winning a spot in the Candidates Tournament in Curaçao (in the Dutch West Indies). Fischer expected to win the Candidates Tournament and play Mikhail Botvinnik for the world title in 1963, but instead finished

fourth behind three Russians (including Tigran Petrosian, who defeated Botvinnik the next year).

Fischer charged in *Sports Illustrated* that the Russians had colluded against him, agreeing to quick draws with each other and devoting their energy into getting wins against him. "Russian control of chess has reached a point where there can be no honest competition."

At the time, many, even in American chess, considered this simply sour grapes on Fischer's part, but Soviet grandmaster Viktor Korchnoi (who defected from the Soviet Union in 1976) confirmed Fischer's accusations. Fischer's complaints led to the use of knock-out elimination candidate matches instead of a tournament for the next cycle.

Fischer began to complain about other things, as well, including the lighting at tournaments and the crowds, which he considered both too close and too noisy. He also joined the World Wide Church of God, which observed the Sabbath, and was allowed to not play on Saturday.

His behavior was becoming more erratic, and after winning the U.S. championship in 1963 with a perfect 11-0 score (unprecedented), he mysteriously dropped out of competitive chess for a year and a half, skipping the Interzonal in 1964. Fischer returned to play — by Telex — in the Capablanca Memorial in Cuba in 1965 (Cuban Jose Capablanca was world champion in the 1920s), but he almost pulled out when Cuban Communist dictator Fidel Castro tried to use his participation as a propaganda victory.

In January 1966, Fischer won the U.S. title again, qualifying for the 1967 Interzonal in Sousse, Tunisia. Fischer was leading the tournament when he failed to show up for a game — which was forfeited — before showing up five minutes before he would have forfeited against fellow American Reshevsky, a game he won. He then demanded that the game he had lost by forfeit to Soviet Aivar Gipslis be played. When the tournament officials refused, Fischer withdrew from the tournament, and "retired" from chess for another two years.

Fischer vs. the Soviet School of Chess

There is little doubt that the Soviets were happy to see Fischer leave Sousse, and leave chess, probably hoping his retirement was permanent. They certainly considered the brash American as the biggest threat to their continued dominance of world chess. In the words of Alexandr Kotov in his book *The Soviet School of Chess*, "Chess provides indisputable proof of the superiority of socialist culture over the declining cultures of capitalist societies."

In the Soviet Union, chess stars were lauded and privileged. Their use of chess to advance the assertion that it demonstrated the superiority of their collectivist system went back to the years after the Bolshevik Revolution. Nikolai Krylenko, a close confidant of Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin, was the prosecutor in the revolutionary tribunals (before he was executed himself in 1938). He was also the chairman of the Chess Section of the Supreme Council for Physical Education, and even developed a five-year plan for Soviet chess.

Unfortunately for the Soviets, Fischer's retirement was *not* permanent. He returned to competitive chess in 1970, and began a remarkable string of victories that would take him to Reykjavik and his victory over Spassky in 1972.

What brought Fischer out of retirement was an invitation to play in the 1970 USSR vs. the Rest of the

World event. The Soviets had never lost one of these events during their long domination of world chess, but there was hope among some that the rest of the world was catching up. For example, Danish grandmaster Bent Larsen had been enjoying tremendous success in recent years.

But any hope of victory was centered on luring Fischer to play. Under the international ratings system known as ELO, Fischer was the highest-ranked player available, and the organizers logically placed him on first board. Larsen, however, objected, arguing that Fischer's extended inactivity, combined with the "Great Dane's" recent successes, should place Larsen on first board instead.

Naturally, the organizers for the Rest of the World team were despondent, thinking that Fischer would never go for being put on second board. But to their surprise, Fischer said, "Larsen's got a point."

Of course, world champion Boris Spassky was on first board, and former champion Tigran Petrosian was the Soviet second board. Fischer defeated Petrosian, and the Rest of the World team fell only one point short of tying the Soviets. As the song went, "The times they are a changing."

Fischer went on to win two strong chess tournaments by such margins that many in the United States were convinced that, given the opportunity, he would win the world title in this cycle. The problem was that Fischer had not participated in the U.S. championship, which was necessary to be included in the Palma de Mallorca Interzonal, which in turn would give him the opportunity to become one of the candidates to challenge Spassky in 1972.

Chasing the World Title

The top three players from the U.S. championship had earned spots in the Interzonal, and the third-place finisher, Pal Benko, offered to give up his spot for Fischer if the rest of the contestants below him would do likewise. They did, and Fischer was given a spot in the Interzonal, where he was one of 24 players vying for the six available spots in the eight-player Candidates matches. (Petrosian and Korchnoi had already qualified; Petrosian was the immediate past champion, and Korchnoi had made it to the finals of the 1968 matches before losing to Spassky).

Fischer started slowly (for him), mixing victories with some draws, and finally, a loss to Larsen. While winning a spot in the Candidates was still probable, finishing first was now in doubt. But then, Fischer went on his historic surge of victories, mowing down seven opponents in a row to finish the tournament winning by three and a half points over Larsen, who placed second.

Fischer's first opponent in the Candidates matches was Soviet Mark Taimanov, who was also an accomplished concert pianist. Fischer was certainly favored to win the match, but Taimanov was a strong grandmaster and a former champion of the Soviet Union. No one predicted that Fischer would annihilate Taimanov 6-0 in the 10-game match.

For those who dwell on Fischer's alleged lack of concern for others, he was actually quite gracious in his stunning victory. "The 6-0 result was too high," he said after it was over. "Taimanov had a winning position in the third game, where he employed a successful novelty, and the advantage in the first and fifth game."

In his book *I Was a Victim of Bobby Fischer*, Taimanov recalled the horrible blunder that cost him the fifth game. After Taimanov made the losing move, Fischer softly said, "I'm sorry," upon making his own move that ended that game with yet another Fischer win.

But Taimanov's victimization did not end with his shellacking by Fischer. Taimanov recalled that, after the match, "I suddenly came under the fire of merciless, destructive criticism from the authorities at all levels, from the Central Committee of the Communist Party to local party cells." He was stripped of his title of "Honored Master of Sport," removed from the USSR team, and forbidden to travel outside the Soviet Union to participate in chess tournaments for two years. He was even forbidden to write chess articles or give concerts. "In short, it was a harsh 'civil execution.'"

When Taimanov arrived back at the Moscow airport, his personal luggage was searched, and authorities found a copy of a book written by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. While it was not technically illegal to possess the book, this was used to question his loyalty to the Soviet system. It led to the cruel joke that Solzhenitsyn was arrested for possessing Taimanov's book on the Nimzo-Indian Defense chess opening.

Taimanov was called before the Ministry of Sport to answer for losing to Fischer, an act some authorities said they suspected was "political." Other Soviet grandmasters were in the room, including Petrosian and Spassky, who asked, "When we all lose to Fischer, will all of us be dragged on the carpet?"

Fischer's next opponent was the next-best player outside the Soviet Union, Bent Larsen, who had been the only player to defeat Fischer at the Interzonal. But he fared no better than Taimanov, also losing 6-0. Taimanov said that Larsen's 6-0 defeat softened the animosity against him inside the Soviet Union, as it was hard to argue that the Great Dane was making some sort of political statement in getting routed by Fischer.

Next up was the former champion Tigran Petrosian. Fischer had now won 19 games in a row against grandmasters of the highest caliber. It was a feat unmatched then, and now, in the history of chess. Various comparisons have been given to explain to non-chess players of its significance. It would be like a tennis player winning Wimbledon without losing a single game.

Inside the Soviet Union, there was hope, but not expectation, that Petrosian could stop the Fischer steamroller. In fact, Fischer proceeded to win the first game, bringing his incredible winning streak to 20 games in a row.

Finally, in the second game, Fischer lost. He was visibly ill, with a heavy cold, but refused to take a medical break, which he was entitled to do. Fischer had caused high blood pressure and other such ailments over the years in his opponents, who had taken medical breaks, but Fischer never had.

How would Fischer react to his first defeat in 21 games? The next three games were draws, and hope was rising inside the Soviet chess empire. But then, Fischer reeled off four wins in a row to win the scheduled 12-game match by 6.5 to 2.5.

The Queen's Gambit

Now, only champion Boris Spassky stood between Fischer and the world championship. Spassky was hardly a doctrinaire communist, and he had rebuffed offers to join the Communist Party. When he was a teen, at the World Student Team Championship, he had asked one of the chaperones if it was true that Lenin, the first dictator of the Soviet Union, had died of syphilis. There was some talk of referring his remarks to the authorities, but they reasoned he was just a brash kid who would learn.

Spassky was confident going into the match, and expected to win against Fischer, whom he had presumed would be his challenger since at least the spring of 1971. Reykjavik, Iceland, was chosen as the site for the match, and Fischer trained in isolation for the match, poring over vast amounts of chess literature provided for him by international master Ken Smith of Dallas, a chess publisher.

Spassky, of course, had any trainers he wanted, and the full backing of all authorities inside the Soviet Union.

The winner of the match would receive $78,125, and the loser $46,875, prize money unheard of in professional chess before that time. But it was not enough for Fischer, who demanded 30 percent of the gate receipts (about $250,000). The Icelandic authorities balked, however, as they were counting on the full receipts to fund the match itself.

Fischer refused to board a plane for Iceland until his demands were met. Even Henry Kissinger, then secretary of state for President Richard Nixon, put in a call to Fischer, pleading with him to play, telling him, "This is the worst player in the world calling the best player in the world."

English businessman James Slater gave $125,000 of his own money to sweeten the prize pot, and Fischer finally relented. At the press conference in Reykjavik, Fischer apologized for being late, and applauded Spassky for waiting for him. This was no small gesture on Spassky's part, as the Central Committee of the Communist Party had pressured Spassky to take the opportunity to leave Iceland with his title intact.

Finally, the first game began on July 11, with Spassky getting the white pieces and the first move. After 28 moves, the Nimzo-Indian that Fischer used to defend had resulted in a drawish position. Spassky was startled when Fischer made a move that lost him a bishop, and eventually the game. Fischer blamed the cameras, which were distracting him with a whirring sound, and the cameramen moving around. He also said there were too many noises from the spectators in the playing hall.

He refused to play the second game unless changes were made. Chester Fox, who had the contract to film the match, agreed to withdraw the cameras for the second game, but when Fischer was 40 minutes late, he insisted that the clock be reset and restarted. The match referee, Lothar Schmid, refused, noting that Spassky had been waiting for 40 minutes and that "rules are rules."

The second game went to Spassky by forfeit, and it was the general consensus that Fischer would withdraw from the match in protest. But he did not, and he won the third game, which had been moved to a back room. Spassky refused to play the fourth game in the back room, insisting that street noise was even worse. Surprisingly, Fischer played the fourth game, which ended in a draw. Then Fischer won the fifth game, evening the match score.

The sixth game is considered one of the finest games ever played, as Fischer played an opening he had never played in his entire chess career — the Queen's Gambit. Throughout his career, he had opened with the King's pawn, rather than the Queen's pawn. Ironically, *Chess Life and Review*, before the match, had used a cartoon on its front page depicting Spassky preparing for King pawn openings only. One of his trainers asked, "But what if he doesn't play P-K4?"

Fischer now had the lead in the match, and only lost one more game, finally winning 12.5 to 8.5. Throwing out the forfeit in game two, a five-game win over the reigning world champion capped a remarkable and unprecedented run to the world championship. Future world champion Garry Kasparov

later commented it was the greatest achievement in chess history — that no champion had ever been so much better than his contemporaries.

U.S. chess boomed in the aftermath of Fischer's triumph. For years, the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) had survived with fewer than 10,000 members and the financial support of wealthy donors such as candy maker Robert Welch, a member of USCF's executive committee. (Welch is more famous for launching the anti-communist and constitutionalist John Birch Society, the parent organization of *The New American* magazine.) USCF membership soared to over 60,000 in just a few months, and tournaments had participant numbers never seen before.

Fischer's Last Years

But what would Fischer do next? Although he boasted he would be an active champion, he also told Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show* that he would be careful not to play too much and give away his "tricks." Carson knew nothing about chess, but he was a skillful interviewer, and he asked Fischer a question that would lead to an answer that might explain Fischer's mysterious disappearance from competitive chess.

"What do you do now?" Carson asked. Fischer looked uncomfortable when he answered, "This is the problem. How to top it."

He added, "I woke up the day after … different … like something had been taken out of me."

Clearly, Fischer's myopic focus since his early teen years had been to become the world champion, and now he had achieved it. What more did he have to prove? What else was there to accomplish?

He refused to defend his title in 1975 against the Soviets' new star, Anatoly Karpov, a self-proclaimed and dedicated Marxist. Fischer insisted that the match rules be changed. Instead of a 24-game match, in which draws would count as a half-point, as had been done for many years, he told the world chess federation that he wanted a match only after one player had 10 wins. More amazingly, he wanted to retain his title if the match reached nine games to nine.

Fischer was stripped of his title, which went to Karpov, who eventually lost it to Kasparov. Kasparov believed that Fischer would have defeated Karpov in 1975, but is not sure about Fischer's ability to regain the title in later years.

For the next several years, Fischer lived off meager royalties from his chess books, especially *My Sixty Memorable Games*, and the charity of others. Despite some arguing that Fischer was no longer a top chess player, he stayed at the home of grandmaster Peter Biyiasas and his chess-playing wife, Ruth Haring, in San Francisco in 1981, and played Biyiasas in speed games during his two-month stay. He left and later returned for two more months.

Fischer won 17 consecutive games against Biyiasas. "He was too good. There was no use playing him.… I was getting beaten, and it wasn't clear to me why.… The most depressing thing about it is that I wasn't even getting out of the middle game to an endgame," Biyiasas remarked.

To the astonishment of the world, Fischer came out of retirement in 1992 to play a match with Boris Spassky, who had defected to France. While it is unclear exactly why Fischer ended his isolation after 20 years, the purse of $5 million (two-thirds to go to the winner) no doubt had something to do with it. Fischer won the match 10 games to five.

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After the second Spassky match, Fischer went into seclusion again. Part of the reason for his second isolation was that the match was held in Yugoslavia, then under UN sanctions. The Bush administration issued an executive order, based on the UN sanctions, that travel to Yugoslavia was illegal. Exactly how a president can make a law with an executive order based on UN sanctions is not clear, but a warrant was issued for Fischer's arrest and he could not return to America. Eventually, he settled in the nation of his greatest triumph, Iceland.

In his last years, he is believed to have descended into a period of mental illness, ranting about Jews and the like (even though he was of Jewish ancestry himself).

Despite all of this, his mind remained creative, and he developed a new type of chess clock, now used in tournaments all over the world. Instead of an absolute time limit, a player receives extra time for each move made. This is believed to have increased the quality of endgame play, previously often marked by wild time scrambles.

Fischer was not allowed to come back to America for the funerals of either his mother or his sister. He remained in Iceland, where he died in January 2008 of kidney failure at age 64. His condition was considered treatable, but he refused surgery.

His body is now in a small Christian cemetery in Iceland, but his legacy lives on. Chess players still praise the genius of Bobby Fischer — not only in America, but even in the nation he "conquered" in 1972, Russia.

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