



BOOK
REVIEWS

A New Look at 1972

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Bobby Fischer Goes to War, by David Edmonds and John Eidinow, 2004
Harper Collins, New York, hardcover, 342 pages, \$24.95.

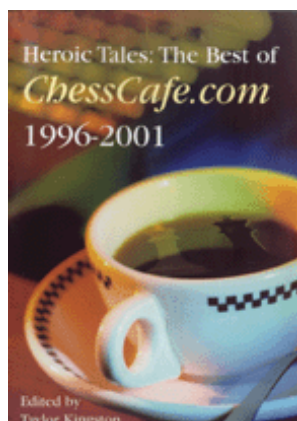
On first hearing of *Bobby Fischer Goes to War*, our immediate thoughts were, in order: 1) “Good grief, talk about overkill,” 2) “Probably more recycled junk,” 3) “What could possibly be left to say?” and 4) “Why now?”

Fischer is the most written-about figure in chess history, and the most written-about event of his career is clearly the 1972 World Championship, in which the American deflated Soviet chess supremacy by wresting the title from Boris Spassky. Over 400 books, ranging from excellent to trash, have already been written in dozens of languages on the “Match of the Century.” It was therefore surprising to see yet another appear almost 32 years after the event, and to see it garner attention not only from the chess media but from mainstream newspapers and magazines.

Our fourth thought remains partly unanswered: what personally attracted BBC journalists Edmonds and Eidinow, who are not known as chess historians, to this oft-told story after so many years is not clear. Happily our first and second thoughts turned out to be quite wrong, and the answer to our third is “Quite a lot,” in part due to the benefit of thirty years’ hindsight, but due more to the authors’ considerable new research.

Rather than just recycle existing material, they conducted extensive interviews with dozens of people: Spassky, chief match arbiter Lothar Schmid, Gudmundur Thorarinsson and other Icelandic organizers, Fischer’s Reykjavik bodyguard Saemundur Palsson, Spassky aides Ivo Nei and Nikolai Krogius, Soviet sports ministers Viktor Ivonin, Leb Abramov, and Mikhail Beilin, innumerable players and administrators on both sides (e.g. Averbakh, Korchnoi, Baturinsky, Taimanov, Larsen, Olafsson, Benko, Evans, Bisguier, Saidy et al), various diplomats (e.g. Henry Kissinger, Anatoly Dobrynin, U.S. chargé d’affaires in Iceland Theodore Tremblay), Fischer aides Paul Marshall, Frank Skoff, and Don Schultz, and many others, virtually everyone still alive who was associated with the match, except the reclusive Fischer himself. Additionally they assembled much previously unreleased archival material, such as Ivonin’s personal records and the massive FBI dossier on Regina Fischer, Bobby’s mother.

Combining this new material with existing sources, organizing it all with BBC professionalism, and presenting it in clear, succinct prose, Edmonds and Eidinow provide a comprehensive account of practically everything about the match except the moves of the games.



They begin with extensive biographical profiles of the protagonists (about 29 pages on Fischer, 36 on Spassky), then describe Spassky's pre-match preparations and Fischer's path thru the FIDE qualifying events. They describe at length the problems that almost ended the match before it began: negotiations over conditions and venue, Fischer's incessant demands and wild volatility over money and other issues, the exasperating difficulties involved in getting Fischer actually to go to Iceland, and finally getting him actually to play once there.

In describing the Reykjavik circus that was the match itself, the focus is on backstage intrigue and the tensions created by Fischer's endless demands and threats to withdraw, which continued even after he was leading in the match. The viewpoints of all the major parties are given: Fischer's camp, Spassky and his group, the Icelandic organizers, chess officials of the FIDE, USCF, ICF and USSR, would-be filmmaker Chester Fox, the US, Soviet and Icelandic governments and diplomatic delegations.

The last forty pages discuss the match's Cold War geopolitical significance (virtually none, in the authors' opinion), Spassky's post-match difficulties back in the USSR, Fischer's forfeiture of the title in 1975, and his and Spassky's lives since then.

Unlike American journalism, which sometimes overdoses on metaphorical spice, the authors' style here is more straightforward and matter-of-fact, but still far from bland. A few samples:

“For several moves, Spassky maintained triple isolated pawns ... This is a most unusual chess formation, and to a chess player its strange architectural structure has a visceral ugliness.”

“The price Euwe paid for his management of the location issue was that the Soviets would never again fully trust him to be impartial ... In Euwe's defense, it should perhaps be said that rather than being on Fischer's side, he was on the side of the match taking place — but for the Soviets, in the light of Fischer's behavior, this amounted to much the same thing.”

“What was Fred Cramer planning now? This self-made millionaire from Milwaukee and former president of the U.S. Chess Federation was a tiny man with a giant ego ... Cramer regarded himself as a man of many key roles ... someone equivalent to the U.S. president's chief of staff, barring the way to Oval Office. In reality, he was little more than chief gofer, in charge of a coterie of lesser gofers, all tensely awaiting Fischer's barked orders ...”

“Hate was among Fischer's mechanisms for dealing with the world beyond the board; indeed, he was capable of being a grandmaster of hate. This hate could spring from the most trivial personal slight or from a worldview most would find bizarre. Once formed, it was unshakeable; he had no concept of forgiveness.”

“Mikhail Beilin says that it was in Spassky's nature to delight in outraging others, even at the risk of offending them. This

meant saying what nobody else would dare to say ... Perhaps there was even a hint of cruelty when Spassky forced unsafe political opinions on a listener ... Spassky's trainer Nikolai Krogius, the psychologist, says the world champion's politics were the consequences of his complex character — an aspect of which was his hostility to discipline.”

That last paragraph touches on this book's chief difference from its predecessors: its more extensive coverage of Spassky and the Russian side. Through the aforementioned interviews, the authors have constructed a much more detailed picture of events in the Soviet camp, surpassing at times even Plisetsky & Voronkov's *Russians Versus Fischer* (1994). Spassky's pre-match preparation (or lack thereof), and the bureaucratic tug-of-war over it, are discussed at length. Backstage views of events in both Reykjavik and Moscow during the match are given. Also of events in Spassky's head, for example:

“Spassky was not fooled by his victory [in game one of the match], describing Fischer's blunder as ‘a present to the Sports Committee.’ When he and Fischer parted at the adjournment, Fischer had spoken to him in Russian, saying ‘*Do zavtra*’ (‘Till tomorrow’). The Russian interpreted this as a mark of Fischer's resilience, understanding immediately that he had a fight on his hands ...”

It is interesting to compare *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* to what is probably the most similar earlier book in English, *Bobby Fischer vs. the Rest of the World* (1974), a day-by-day, sometimes minute-by-minute insider's account by Brad Darrach, who was with Fischer much of the time before and during the match. Structurally the books are almost identical, but stylistically very different.

As might be expected from a *Life* magazine writer, Darrach took a somewhat sensationalist slant typical of a celebrity-oriented weekly, alternating between serious journalism, human interest, local color, personality caricatures, gossip and scandal-sniffing, all described with more punched-up prose and colorful similes than a Mickey Spillane novel. Edmonds/Eidinow treat the match more as an historic event; Darrach treated it as a pop-culture phenomenon, with Fischer like a rock star overdosing on ego. Darrach seems to have tape-recorded every juicy conversation extant, and his apparently verbatim retellings, with their eavesdropper quality, show him eager to dish the dirt. Those who enjoy being a fly on the wall when shit hits the fan will like Darrach, those favoring a more reflective, sober (though hardly boring) style will prefer Edmonds/Eidinow.

Another difference is in their interpretations of Fischer's behavior. Both Darrach and Edmonds/Eidinow seem to agree that much of Fischer's hesitation and demanding, provocative behavior before the match stemmed from a sort of stage fright that sometimes seized him before major competitions. However, Edmonds/Eidinow invoke game theory to indicate that Fischer may have been playing a conscious game of brinkmanship, adopting, somewhat like Hitler in the late 1930s, the pose of a reckless madman, as a deliberate negotiating tactic. In contrast, Darrach shows Fischer as an utterly self-centered solipsist so lacking in maturity, practicality, common sense, empathy, tact and even the most rudimentary social skills that he is simply indifferent and even oblivious to the immense problems he causes and the massive, repeated offense he gives.

Edmonds/Eidinow allow the possibility that Fischer may have been crazy like a fox, Darrach's Fischer is just a jerk.

Whichever view is more correct, the new book is much more useful to historians than Darrach's. Though not really a scholarly work, it has a carefully prepared index and an extensive bibliography (Darrach's had neither). It will serve as a sound reference for future generations interested in the match. Also, the passage of time has allowed Edmonds/Eidinow to place the match in a much clearer historical perspective. For example, they rebut the "Cold War confrontation" angle taken by most other writers, noting how miscast Fischer and Spassky were as archetypes of their respective countries, and how US-Soviet relations in 1972 were actually the best they'd been in decades.

There are also some new revelations not directly related to the match, such as who Fischer's father actually was, and a summary of the FBI files on Fischer's mother, a communist sympathizer who was suspected for years of being a Soviet spy. The dossier contains some interesting material, such as the prescient observation that Fischer in 1959 was "a very sick boy emotionally."

The book has a few flaws worth mentioning. As noted by Edward Winter (*Chess Notes* 3099) it repeats a number of hoary, shopworn myths depicting chess masters as mentally unbalanced, such as Morphy dying "surrounded by women's shoes" and Carlos Torre disrobing on a bus. On several occasions it goes beyond unsubstantiated fable into outright error, e.g.:

- Alekhine is described as "capable of turning violent on the rare occasions that he suffered defeat." (p. 71) — This is probably based on the apocryphal old furniture-smashing story, long discredited. Unless the time he resigned to Grünfeld by throwing his king qualifies, we know of no credible instances of physical violence to persons or property by Alekhine.
- Morphy's and Torre's temporary mental disturbances are depicted as lifelong, e.g. "From that moment on [Torre] never recovered his sanity." (p. 78) — This is patently false: see Velasco, *The Life and Games of Carlos Torre*.
- Page 78 says that in the 1920s Akiba Rubinstein "lived in an asylum from which he journeyed to the chessboard." — According to biographer IM John Donaldson, Rubinstein did not reside in an asylum until 1932, by which time he had retired from chess.
- "[I]n 1958, [William Lombardy] took the World Junior Chess Championship ... and he went on to become U.S. champion twice." (p. 133) — It was 1957 that Lombardy won the junior title, and he was never US Champion.
- Page 266 says of Robert Byrne "This former U.S. champion was in Reykjavik as a commentator for a Dutch television station." At that time Byrne was not a former US champion, he was *reigning* US champion, having won the title for the first and only time earlier that year.

Curiously missing from the list of those interviewed for the book is GM Lubomir Kavalek. According to Darrach he, rather than Lombardy, was actually Fischer's main second from game 13 on, but he is scarcely mentioned by Edmonds/Eidinow. Perhaps he declined to be interviewed.

In any event, these are not major flaws. The historical errors, though

regrettable, have little relevance to the book's main theme. The only other omission worth mentioning is the fact that the book contains very little actual chess. Aside from one diagram, and a few moves and openings, there are only general descriptions of the actual games. However game analysis is outside the authors' scope and purpose, and has already been done in many other books. (For serious chess fans who do not already own one, we would recommend *Fischer World Champion!* by Euwe and Timman (New in Chess, 2002).)

Bobby Fischer Goes to War has managed a difficult task, providing fresh material and new perspectives on a heavily analyzed subject, and in a highly interesting and competent fashion. While long-time chess history buffs and readers who remember the heady days of 1972 will find much of its story familiar, they will also find much new and worthwhile. Not having read all 400+ books on the match, we cannot say that this is categorically the best, but it is surely one of the best, and as an historical account it is the best we have seen. For serious chess fans, for casual players, and even for non-players, we recommend it highly.

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by David Edmonds and John Eidinow

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