

Chess, Bobby Fischer, and the Cold War

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The mass media hysteria over the Bobby Fischer-Boris Spassky match for the World Chess Championship can only be fully understood after scrutiny of the history of Soviet-American athletic relations, the role of chess in the popular culture of the USSR and the USA, and the specific sport history of chess in the United States and the USSR.

A match between the best ten chess players in the Soviet Union and the best ten American players took place during the closing days of World War II. The Americans, as the dominant chess power prior to the war, expected victory. The match mood emphasized the “harmonious spirit” of wartime allies, and American dignitaries lent their prestige to the support of this “friendly match” organized by the Soviet-American Friendship Committee. The American team was shocked at the chessboard, however, as the Soviets convincingly defeated the Americans. This was the first example of a Communist “athletic shock” to Western assumptions of athletic prowess.

Soviet achievements in sport during the 1950s, particularly in track and field, were greeted by apprehension and hostility in the American press. The imagery of the Western press discussion of Soviet sport achievement suggested the Soviets were “stealing” western sport knowledge like so many “atomic secrets.”

The rise of Bobby Fischer to prominence as an American celebrity coincides with the post-Sputnik concern for the quality of American education. The enormous interest in young Bobby Fischer was in part due to the American desire to “beat the Russians at their own game.” American public opinion was extremely sensitive to the argument that the Russians were beating the Americans at the Americans’ games — whether technology or track and field.

Both American and Soviet politicians intensified the hysteria around Fischer’s march toward the championship by their encouragement of the idea that sport was a symbolic avenue of competition between competing social systems.



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