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5/20/20

Political Zugzwang: An Analysis of US-Russian Relations Through Chess

Introduction:

Zugzwang is a German word that roughly translates to “compulsion to move”. In chess, zugzwang is a situation in which the obligation to make a move in one's turn is a serious, often decisive or disadvantageous. This term accurately depicts the current state of American-Russian affairs. The relations between Russia and the U.S. are extremely complicated and are critical to the world's economy and safety. While the United States and the Soviet Union fought together to defeat the Axis Powers in World War II, relations deteriorated into a conflict between free market democracy vs. communism. Relations between the two countries continue to be strained after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Recently, tension between the United States has heightened following the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the alleged Russian tampering of the 2016 election. The U.S. possess around six thousand nuclear warheads and technological advancement is rapidly taking place in both nations.¹ Direct conflict would be devastating for the entire world therefore; the two countries have combatted with each other strategically like two grandmasters using tactics to outsmart the opponent. Both countries are constantly attempting to increase influence other countries in economy and political spheres. This paper will explain how our complicated relations can to be better understood and possibly remedied through a shared contest of intellect: chess.

History of Chess in Russia Empire/USSR:

¹ “Fact Sheets & Briefs.” *Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance* | Arms Control Association, www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat.

Chess has been used as an analogy for different facets of the human condition. For Voltaire, chess epitomized the human faculty of reason. He used chess as a metaphor to denounce the Church's agenda meant to keep people in a state of ignorance and maintain its control over the masses.² Throughout Russian history, chess has been a game for the intelligentsia and elite of society. Most Russian rulers including Ivan the Terrible and Catherine the Great were fond of chess. Since the advent of the October Revolution, all forms of sport were politicized in the Soviet Union, including chess. In the Soviet Union, chess was used as a tool to raise the cultural level of the laboring masses in the Soviet Union. It was later used to display intellectual superiority and dominance over the West. This phenomenon followed the Stalinist quote: "catch up and overtake", due to Russia's rapid modernization and intellectual development.³ Chess players were the ideal representatives of intellectual innovators during a time of rapid collectivization in the Soviet Union due to their communal teamwork and national pride. In Stalin's 1929 five-year plan, which outlined the centralization and modernization of the Soviet economy; he wrote: "chess players should be in the front ranks of the fighters for the building of socialism, for technical mastery and for the rapid and successful fulfilment of the first five-year plan."

Alexander Ilyin Genevsky was responsible for promoting chess as an educational tool for developing strategical and tactical thinking. During the time of Stalin's "red terror" he organized a national Russian tournament, which attracted many top players. The first initial Soviet Chess Championships were also organized by Genevsky. These tournaments further

² Vauleon, Florian. "CHESS, PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMATIZATION, AND THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT ." 2008, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=osu1211904204&disposition=inline

³ Hudson, Michael Andrew. *Storming Fortresses: a Political History of Chess in the Soviet Union, 1917-1948*. EScholarship, University of California, 2013.

increased the popularity of chess in the Soviet Union and displayed to the world the intellectual strength that resided in the Soviet Union⁴.

Chess was also highly politicized by enemies of the Soviet Union including Nazi Germany. Russia's own Alexander Alekhine, the first world chess champion, had immigrated to Nazi-occupied France in 1940. In 1941, Alekhine wrote and published six Nazi articles which first appeared in the Paris newspaper *Pariser Zeitung*. He wrote a series of articles for *Die Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden* called "Jewish and Aryan Chess." The articles were reproduced in *Deutsch Schachzeitung*. The articles tried to show proof that Jews played defensive, cowardly chess and the Aryan chess players played attacking chess that was aggressive and brave.⁵ It is speculated that he did this, in order to protect his wife who stayed in France after he fled to Portugal. The Soviet government reacted to this by planning to pit their strongest grandmaster; a communist, a statesman, an electrical engineer, and the face of the new school of Soviet chess, Mikhail Botvinnik against Alekhine. This was planned to display the dominance and intellectual superiority of the Soviet system.

The first Soviet grandmaster to win a Chess World Championship was the electrical engineer Mikhail Botvinnik in 1948. Botvinnik's victory offered him influence in the Soviet party, however this also new power came with massive political pressure. He became a prolific chess author and trainer who inspired a new generation of Soviet chess players, such as Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov. This initial victory spurred the Soviet chess machine and began a

⁴ Левин, Евгений Александрович. "Феномен Политизации Шахматного Спорта в С." *Современные Исследования Социальных Проблем (Электронный Научный Журнал)*, , №11(55), 2015.

⁵ Alekhine, Alexander, and Ken Whyld. *Nazi Articles*. K. Whyld, 1986.

Soviet dominant era in chess. Chess was used as propaganda to promote this superiority. Chess in the Soviet Union was collectivized in the sense that their players were cultivated and supported financially by the government. In the United States, there was no such support for top players and players were left to their own devices. The Soviet Union dominated for 60 years until 1972 when an American Bobby Fisher, a symbol of American individualism, disrupted the Soviet monotony over chess. (Левин)

Post WWII Relations:

While the United States and the Soviet Union fought side by side in World War II against the Axis Powers, relations after the war became tense and strained. Americans as a whole, feared the worldwide influence that the Soviet Union had and the spread of communism, which was deemed a threat to democracy. The tyrannical government of Stalin's aggressive stance toward foreign affairs endangered America's hopes to create an international front against communism. By 1948, the Soviet Union had already established socialist governments in Eastern European countries that were defended by the Soviet Red Army. The United States and other members of the Allied Powers wanted to protect Western Europe from Soviet influence as a safeguard. The Soviet Union viewed their newfound control of Eastern Europe as an opportunity to create a barrier against future foreign aggression, as well as a starting point for a worldwide revolution. The 1948 Marshall Plan, signed by American president Harry Truman, provided economic assistance to recovering nations in Western Europe solidifying American influence in the region. Similarly, the Soviet Union provided economic and military support to the Eastern European countries that became part of the Soviet bloc.⁶

⁶ Levering, Ralph B. *The Cold War: a Post-Cold War History*. Wiley Blackwell, 2016.

After the United States had dropped atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviet Union began to test and develop their own nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union developed their first successful atomic weapon in 1949. Direct confrontations were near impossible, due to the threat of nuclear destruction. The political tension flared at various points resulting in proxy wars, particularly in Asia. In 1950, the Soviet controlled North Korea invaded the U.S. supported South Korea. Americans and South Koreans stood their ground and made a statement that communism would not be allowed to spread by military means. The conflict ended in a stalemate, however hostilities continued to pervade. 1953 marks the year that the dictator and General Secretary of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin died. This simply marked a new era of indirect conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The United States and the Soviet Union began the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles after World War II. There was a constant fear of nuclear attack between the two countries, which resulted in the installation of missile systems in other countries. The political atmosphere between the two nations became a battle of who could cause the most possible devastation to their enemy. The most well-known and tense example of this global defense effort is known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. In October, 1962 American president John F. Kennedy was first notified of the installation of missiles in Cuba. This followed the 1961 failed coup of communist Fidel Castro controlled Cuba, known as the Bay of Pigs. Global catastrophe was narrowly avoided when Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, offered to remove the missiles in exchange for the United States promising not to invade Cuba. The United States also was forced to remove missiles from Turkey. (Levering)

A New Conflict-Chess:

These indirect confrontations in foreign lands are the most obvious and well-known clashes of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. The countries often met and competed against each other in other spheres, such as sports and academics. However, in 1972 a new confrontation that was more abstract and surreal arose. The 1972 Chess World Championship between Soviet Boris Spassky and Robert James Fischer (better known to the world as Bobby) was set to take place in Reykjavik, Iceland. The match was seen by American and Soviet governments as a bout between American and Soviet intellectuals. The Cold War up until that point was a battle of information, espionage, and tactical positioning of troops and weapons. The match would represent either an opportunity for an American to show the superiority of American individualism or an opportunity for the Soviets to further show the dominance of their collective system. The Soviet players had access to a team of grandmasters that collaborated to gain an advantage over international opponents. Chess was treated as a full-time job and international tournaments required that much attention, in order to maintain the domination of the Soviet chess machine. (Kasparov)

Chess was ultimately neglected in the United States. By 1932 the United States had produced strong players, such as Marshall, Reshevsky, and Fine. However, these chess players could not compete with state supported Soviet players. Many of these players did not receive enough money to justify chess as a full-time career. Many of these grandmasters had other careers, in order to support themselves. Because of this, they were seen as amateurs, as opposed to the professional Soviet players. American players lacked the established team of trainers that the Soviet players had. How could an American with no financial or political support compete with a Soviet who was fully supported and trained by the government?

Bobby Fischer was a talented American grandmaster from New York. He grew up with a Russian-Jewish single mother who was suspected to be a spy of the Soviet Union. While his mother worked to become a nurse, she was also an activist who admired the Soviet Union. In this regard, Bobby Fischer seems like an unlikely candidate to face the Soviets. However, Bobby Fischer was a staunch anti-communist. His mother was often absent, due to her activism, which likely fueled his hatred for the Soviet Union. He often accused the Soviet grandmasters of cheating and collaborating against their opponents. Fischer won the U.S. Chess Championship at 14 making him the youngest player to ever do so. When Bobby Fischer's success in the chess world led to him facing the Soviet world champion, people in America began to take notice. Chess became more popular in the United States leading up to the 1972 Reykjavik match. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger himself said to Fischer in a call, "America wants you to go over there to beat the Russians."⁷ Kissinger also spoke with President Richard Nixon about ways to convince Fischer to face the Soviets. Fischer was initially apprehensive about playing in the World Championship, due to his suspicion of Soviets cheating. However, he was urged by Kissinger to play on behalf of his country. The match for the Americans was a match between good and evil. Could liberty triumph over totalitarianism? This portrayal of the match motivated Fischer to play to defeat those that he viewed as his enemy.⁸

Boris Spassky, who was the world champion until 1972, was the symbol of the collectivization of the Soviets. His seriousness and stoicism were qualities that the Soviets sought in a chess world champion. In the Soviet Union, people specialized in what they were

⁷ Johnson, Daniel. *White King and Red Queen: How the Cold War Was Fought on the Chessboard*. Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008

⁸ Kasparov, Garry, et al. *My Great Predecessors Part IV*. Everyman Chess, 2004.

particularly talented in, whether it was sports, art, or chess. The governmental support allowed them to focus all of their energy on their craft. Spassky received training from other grandmasters that analyzed his opponents, giving him an advantage. The Soviets invested highly in chess, because it was a symbol of their intellectual superiority over individualized nations. It served as an art form and allowed them to display their creativity and innovation. To the Soviets, it was a more efficient system, which contributed to their 24-year reign over the chess world. (How do you back up this assertion? You may want to cite something here.)

The 1972 Reykjavik match did not go smoothly. Fisher constantly criticized the conditions of the match. He complained about the lighting and the cameras. Spassky took the first game, however Fischer was able to regain control and attain victory with Spassky resigning the final game over the phone. This unforeseen victory disproved the belief that the Soviet chess machine could not be toppled. It showed that an unusual genius individual could pose a threat to a team of highly talented Soviets. American, democratic individualism stood a chance against Soviet, totalitarian collectivism.

The Space Race and Olympics:

The space race was similar to the arms race, in that victory would not only provide a technological advantage, but also cultural shift and altered global image. Similar to how the match between Fischer and Spassky sparked an interest in chess in the United States, space exploration became a cultural phenomenon that demanded Americans' attention. Before the Soviet Union launched the satellite Sputnik into space, the threat of a nuclear conflict loomed over both nations. While the Cold War is often characterized by the proxy wars that took place in

Korea and Vietnam. However, the countries competed in a variety of different spheres including sports, intellectual games like chess, and technology. Unlike sportsmanlike games such as chess and hockey, espionage was often used by both nations to attain an advantage over one another.⁹ President Dwight Eisenhower established two space programs in reaction to the Soviet Union's successful Sputnik launch. One was meant for the military, as a measure of defense. The other was top secret program that intended to gain hidden information, regarding orbiting Soviet satellites. Space was seen as a possibility by the Soviets to gain intelligence on the United States' nuclear capabilities. The United States had similar motives and gained valuable information about the Soviet Union's air and land forces. While both countries worked to prohibit weapons in space, it was clear that the space race was not only a display of technological advancement, but also a war of intelligence.¹⁰ Sputnik's success was a statement that Soviet technology was superior and that the Soviet Union was advancing technologically at a rapid pace. The Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin became the first man to enter space in 1961. When the American manned spacecraft Apollo 11 landed on the Moon, American Lance Armstrong became the first man to walk on the Moon. Just as Bobby Fischer's victory had threatened the Soviet Union's grip on the chess stage, America was finally passing the Soviet Union in the technological sphere.¹¹

⁹ Kalic, Sean N. *Spies: the U.S. and Russian Espionage Game from the Cold War to the 21st Century*. Praeger, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019.

¹⁰ Collins, Martin J. *Space Race: the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Competition to Reach the Moon*. Pomegranate Communications, 1999.

¹¹ *Apollo 11 Command and Service Module (CSM)*. NASA, 14 May 2020, nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/nmc/spacecraft/display.action?id=1969-059A.

The United States and Soviet Union did not only square up in intellectual spheres. The Olympics served as a stage for displaying athletic prowess and dominance. To this day, the United States has won the most Olympic medals of any country. The first-place American medal count of 2520 by far surpasses second-place Russia's 1865 medals.¹² However, the Soviet Union dominated in several sports throughout its existence, namely hockey. The Soviets dominated Olympic ice hockey from 1952-1992. The Soviet team lived with each other and practiced 11 months throughout the year.¹³ Throughout this reign, the Soviet team remained largely intact further promoting their cohesiveness as a team. The only break during this domination of ice hockey in the Olympics was the 1980 Olympic Games at Lake Placid, USA. The Soviets were defeated by a young American team made up of college amateurs.¹⁴ This showed that a team that did not receive much governmental support could compete with the state supported Soviet team. The Olympic game between the United States and the Soviet Union closely mirrors the chess match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. Despite all odds, American individualism was able to score a victory over an established organization.

Souring of U.S.-Russian Relations

In 1983, U.S. President Ronald Reagan gave a speech in which he deemed the Soviet Union an "evil empire" responsible for the arms race between the two countries, and the Cold War in general. He further proposed the notion that the struggle between the United States and

¹² Statista Research Department. "Olympics Medal Table by Country." *Statista*, 22 Aug. 2016, www.statista.com/statistics/262864/all-time-summer-olympics-medals-table/

¹³ Pakarinen, Risto. "1980 Soviet Union Squad Was History's Greatest International Hockey Team." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 13 Sept. 2016,

¹⁴ loc. "US Ice Hockey Rookies Conjure up a Miracle on Ice." *International Olympic Committee*, IOC, 17 Dec. 2018, www.olympic.org/news/us-ice-hockey-rookies-conjure-up-a-miracle-on-ice.

the Soviet Union was a war between good and evil. NATO began to establish nuclear armed ballistic missiles, in a response to the Soviet Union establishing their own in Eastern Europe. However, the Soviet Union would soon become more open to the West. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected to be the General Secretary of Soviet Union. Gorbachev implemented policies that would promote what were considered “western values’ in the Soviet Union.¹⁵ This included transparency in the government, more rights concerning freedom of speech and expression, and economic decentralization. Free-market capitalism was finally being allowed to plant its roots in the Soviet Union. Elections were also intended to be more transparent and fairer. Western investment was encouraged and Soviets had more ownership over their own business ventures. This westernization of the Soviet Union became known as the first steps towards the collapse of the Soviet Union.(Levering)

Dissidents vs. the Establishment

Not long after Reagan’s “Evil Empire” speech, another contentious World Chess Championship occurred. This time the conflict was within the Soviet Union. In 1984, the World Championship between World Champion Anatoly Karpov and challenger Garry Kasparov took place in Moscow. Anatoly Karpov was born into an ordinary Soviet family. He was a follower of the Soviet doctrine and was rewarded with support from the Soviet government. He had been named champion by default when Fischer failed to appear to defend his title in 1975. Garry Kasparov was born to a Jewish father and Armenian mother in Baku in the Azaerbaijan republic of the Soviet Union. Karpov had a steady 5-0 lead until Kasparov began a dramatic comeback. The 1984 World Championship match lasted 48 games until it was abruptly stopped by FIDE

¹⁵ “Reagan, ‘Evil Empire,’ Speech Text.” *Voices of Democracy*, 5 July 2016, voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/.

president Florencio Campomanes with the score being 5-3 in Karpov's favor. Kasparov was upset by this considering that he had momentum and demanded that the match be extended. He suspected that the Soviet authorities had called off the match.

A new match between Kasparov and Karpov started in 1985. After 24 games, Kasparov won by a score of 13-11. Kasparov's win was symbolic given that he was not part of the Soviet inner circle like Karpov was. It became clearer as time went on the Kasparov was a rebel that did not tolerate what he considered was foul play from the Soviet government. He was a fairly vocal critic of Soviet politics and aligned himself with a movement that supported a "new Russia" that allowed for more personal freedoms that were present in the West. Kasparov was supportive of glasnost and perestroika, while still being critical of Gorbachev at certain points. An example of this was when Kasparov criticized Gorbachev of being partially responsible for ethnic violence in Azerbaijan by placing troops in the region. Meanwhile, Karpov represented the older Soviet government of Leonid Brezhnev due to his participation in the communist youth group "Komsomol" and his loyalty to the party.¹⁶

A World Superpower Crumbles:

On Christmas December 25, 1991 Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had already announced that they would no longer be part of the Soviet Union. They became independent, sovereign nations. This collapse was largely due to Gorbachev's radical policies. By decentralizing the power of the Soviet government, protests broke out and voices that had been suppressed were making themselves be heard. Kasparov had done his part in toppling the Soviet

¹⁶ Kasparov, G. K. *Garry Kasparov on Modern Chess*. Gloucester/Everyman Chess, 2010.

regime by helping create a centrist party in Russia called the Democratic Party of Russia. He fled shortly after its formation. He staunchly stood against communism and supported human rights and democracy. He also attempted to dissuade the United States from providing any financial support to the Soviet Union.

Boris Yeltsin came to power after Gorbachev had resigned and been removed from his position as General Secretary. Kasparov was supportive of Yeltsin's initiative to break up the Soviet Union. While the tyrannical Soviet government had been disbanded, corruption and crime remained rampant. Russia did not seem to have the clear direction and political goals that the Soviet Union had. This led to the reign of a new leader that had a clearer vision of Russia, Vladimir Putin. Vladimir Putin became the president of Russia in 1999.

Kasparov continued to dominate in the chess world defending his title five times before retiring from professional chess in 2005. He had quit chess in order to join a Russian pro-democracy movement. While Kasparov had been supportive of the new direction that Russia had been taking, he was against the suppression of human rights and free speech, which arose during Putin's presidency. He viewed and continues to view Putin as an enemy to the values that Gorbachev had promoted during the times of glasnost and perestroika.

After Gorbachev's implementation of glasnost and perestroika, Russia advanced toward hosting democratic elections. Americans hoped to work with Boris Yeltsin to establish democratic values and a free market in Russia. Russians were suspicious of American intentions, but ultimately invited cooperation with the United States in hope of a more prosperous future. The Russian economy was in shambles after the fall of the Soviet Union and the 90's proved to be a difficult economic period for everyday Russians. However, as Vladimir Putin came to power, authoritarian tendencies entered the Russian political climate once again. President Putin

has publicly announced that he supports democracy in Russia and freedom of the press. However, he has instituted policies that actively restricted social liberties and promoted state control over the Russian media. Regardless of these oppressive policies, Putin enjoys an approval rating of about 70%¹⁷. The Russian economy under Putin vastly improved with more investments in domestic energy. Russia's military budget had been increased. Russia was beginning to resemble the economic and military powerhouse that the Soviet Union was in its prime years.¹⁸ Because of these factors, Russian sportsmen, as well as other Russian celebrities feel pressured to support Putin, in order to avoid social and political backlash. Russian hockey players like Evgeni Malkin and Alexander Ovechkin have publicly expressed their support of Putin as a display of solidarity. "I know him," Malkin said. "I've met him a couple of times. I have a great life."¹⁹ While dissidents like Kasparov have been critical of Putin, Russian chess player that still reside in Russia like Sergei Karjakin are vocal in their support of Putin. These sportsmen are members of the national teams of Russia and feel the need to preserve the status quo rather than cause any disturbance. They feel a sense of national pride and by association support the leader of their country, Vladimir Putin.

¹⁷ Statista Research Department. "Putin Approval Rating Russia 2000-2020." *Statista*, 8 May 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/.

¹⁸ Bjorkman, Tom. "Russian Democracy and American Foreign Policy." *Brookings*, Brookings, 28 July 2016, www.brookings.edu/research/russian-democracy-and-american-foreign-policy/.

¹⁹ "Select the Subscription That's Best for You." *Home*, archive.triblive.com/sports/penguins/penguins-evgeni-malkin-finally-addresses-support-of-vladimir-putin/.

Media Perpetuates Conflict:

Propaganda poses a threat to collaboration between the United States and Russia. The state-run media perpetuates Russia's superiority despite its glaring issues regarding democracy. "America-bashing is 24/7 on all the Russian channels, on Kremlin-controlled media," Kasparov says.²⁰ This continues the state's propaganda that the West are the enemies and that people that protest against the government simply sympathize with the West. In the United States, we have our own propaganda with news outlets such as CNN reporting that Russian interference in our elections is undermining our democracy. These types of headlines cause animosity between the two countries. This is unproductive and not helpful in Russia and the United States' search for global problems, such as national security, protection of economic interests, and preservation of diplomatic relations.

The Role of Technology in U.S.-Russian Relations

During World War II, the development of modern computers was accelerated. This technological advancement was largely for defense purposes.²¹ The United States Department of Defense computer research projects, in order to enhance national defense. The following Cold War saw the development of the internet. In 1969, ARPAnet, was created by DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) to protect information between military installations.²² In

²⁰ Edwards, Jim. "Garry Kasparov Told Us What It's like to Live in Fear of Being Assassinated by Putin." Business Insider, Business Insider, 23 Jan. 2018, www.businessinsider.com/garry-kasparov-fear-of-being-assassinated-by-putin-2018-

²¹ *A Brief History of the Internet*, www.usg.edu/galileo/skills/unit07/internet07_02.phtml

²² *The Cold War & ARPANet*, ocean.otr.usm.edu/~w146169/2Arpanet.htm.

Russia, the internet was developed by Moscow-based Moscow-based Institute of Precision Mechanics and Computer Engineering by conducting work on automated missile systems.²³

Currently due to globalization, 245 million people in the United States have access to the internet (75% of the population), while in Russia 109 million people have access (76% of the population).²⁴ Online chess servers like chess.com and lichess.com have made the game accessible to anyone with access to the internet. This has leveled chess playing field. Before the advent of the internet, chess players had to rely only on chess books. Access to books from overseas was difficult and rare. Prolific works of Soviet chess authors like Dvoretsky were largely not available in the West. However, chess publications from a myriad of countries are available to all people with internet access in PDF form. This accessibility to learning materials makes it possible for American and European grandmasters compete with their Russian counterparts. Chess talent, as a result has diversified. The current World Champion Magnus Carlsen originates from Norway, a country not generally known for its chess prowess. However, with access to the internet, chess talent can be cultivated in the most unlikely areas. China, a country known for traditional games, such as go have exponentially been improving and have Ding Liren, who is the current number 3 ranked player in the world. The United States claims successful grandmasters, such as Fabiano Caruana (current world number 2) and Hikaru Nakamura (world number 18). With chess becoming a more global sport, nationality and politics have played less of a role in chess. No longer is chess an intellectual contest of nations pitting their champions against each other. Contemporary chess players are more interested in their own chess careers and personal achievements. The decrease of politics in chess have led to a more

²³ Анатолий Алексеевич Клёсов, www.pseudology.org/webmaster/Klyesov_Internet.htm

²⁴ Roser, Max, et al. "Internet." *Our World in Data*, 14 July 2015, ourworldindata.org/internet.

friendly and relaxed atmosphere among players. Players from the West regularly receive training from grandmasters from the East, which would have been politically incorrect a few decades ago. For example, Magnus Carlsen received training from former Soviet/Russian World Champion Garry Kasparov early in his career. Fabiano Caruana was trained by Russian grandmaster Vladimir Chuchelov for several years.²⁵ Russia still claims strong players such as Ian Nepomniachtchi (current world number 4). This international community is an ideal place to find common ground between cultures. While the political climate between the two countries remains tense, the United States and Russia can find similarities through the common interest of chess and better understand each other's cultures as a result.

Chess as a Cultural/Political Symbol:

Chess remains a cultural icon in Russia and the United States to this day. In Russia, figures like businessman Kirsan Ilyumzhinov hope to promote chess as a teaching tool in schools and preserve chess as an art in Russian culture. Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was elected to become the president of a small Buddhist republic of Russia called Kalmykia. Ilyumzhinov spent millions on promoting chess in the city. Chess became a mandatory subject in elementary school, which was not the case anywhere else in the world. In 1995, Ilyumzhinov was elected President of the World Chess Federation. He hoped to attract the top players to play in the capital of Kalmykia, Elista.²⁶ He admires Bobby Fischer who he compares to Russian pioneers like Yuri

²⁵"Interview with GM Chuchelov - Caruana's Coach." *Chess News*, 7 Sept. 2014, en.chessbase.com/post/interview-with-gm-chuchelov-caruana-s-coach.

²⁶ "Prominent Russians: Kirsan Ilyumzhinov." *Kirsan Ilyumzhinov – Russiapedia Politics and Society Prominent Russians*, russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/kirsan-ilyumzhinov/.

Gagarin. He started the development of his “Chess City” (Город Шахмат), which was completed in 1998. The city includes a museum with artifacts and art pieces related to chess.

Ilyumzhinov’s actions have not gone without scrutiny. Kalmykia, with a population of 290,000 is one of Russia’s poorest republics. News of Ilyumzhinov investing tens of millions of dollars into the construction of his extravagant “Chess City” sparked outrage. He planned to add a water sports facility to the chess complex, which seemed suspect considering Kalmykia’s desert climate. Ilyumzhinov also faced controversy when a Russian journalist Larisa Yurdina , who had accused Ilyumzhinov of corruption, was stabbed to death in 1998. Two men admitted to the murder with one of them being an aid to Ilyumzhinov. Ilyumzhinov denied any involvement.²⁷ As a result, Garry Kasparov accused Ilyumzhinov of corruption and being an agent of Vladimir Putin. Anatoly Karpov decided to against Ilyumzhinov in 2010, but was defeated 95 votes to 55. Many including the president of the English Chess Federation accused FIDE of cheating and corruption. He stated, "This was a farce of a vote... There wasn't even a pretence of fairness and free speech." Kasparov attempted to oust Ilyumzhinov in the FIDE presidential election of 2014. Kasparov noted, "Nothing in FIDE will change until Ilyumzhinov and his entire lot are thrown out."²⁸ He was also defeated by a wide margin of 110 votes to 61. Considering that Karpov and Kasparov were both established figures in the chess world, it is hard to imagine a Russian politician would possess greater influence in FIDE than two world champions. Ilyumzhinov displays the corrupt political climate that remains in Russia under the

²⁷ Williams, Daniel. “DEATH, CHESS AND POLITICS IN RUSSIA.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 13 Oct. 1998, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/10/13/death-chess-and-politics-in-russia/d1f98016-594b-4dc4-ab66-963ea3160bf8/

²⁸ Watson, Leon. “Garry Kasparov: Deposed Head of World Chess Kirsan Ilyumzhinov Has Got His Comeuppance.” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 8 Dec. 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12038502/Garry-Kasparov-Deposed-head-of-world-chess-Kirsan-Ilyumzhinov-has-got-his-comeuppance.html

reign of Vladimir Putin. Kasparov said, “Just how valuable it is to Putin was made obvious by how mobilized the Russian diplomatic and foreign security services became in the 2014 presidential election, when I ran against Ilyumzhinov. “Kasparov is persistent in his criticism of Putin and anyone that acts in the same vein as the Russian leader.

Interest in chess in America has been steadily declining over the years after Bobby Fischer’s victory over the Soviets. The New York Times had published several hundred articles about the match between Spassky and Fischer in 1972. That number has since fallen to around 28, while players like Hikaru Nakamura still represent the United States at the top level.²⁹ However, American chess lacks the charismatic characters that symbolized the United States, such as Bobby Fischer. The political angle that the Fischer-Spassky match had entranced American viewers, due to the high stakes of the match. According to the editor of *New in Chess*, “Fischer and Kasparov were much bigger personalities than the relatively modest Anand, who will rarely say things that will stir controversy.” In chess's heyday, players, like boxers, would criticize their opponents before a match, offering demeaning remarks both to wage psychological war and to spike the public's general interest. Kasparov, on the other hand, used his position as world champion to voice his political opinions regarding FIDE and the Kremlin. Statements from both men were picked up by the mainstream media, drawing attention to themselves and to the chess matches or tournaments they were playing.”³⁰ However, the United States had its own chess federation called the USCF, which is independent from FIDE. The USCF has hundreds of thousands of members that enjoy chess without the political scandals of FIDE.³¹

²⁹ Weber, Bruce. “Bobby Fischer, Troubled Genius of Chess, Dies at 64.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 19 Jan. 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/crosswords/chess/19fischer.html.

³⁰ Wills, Santiago. “How America Forgot About Chess.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 May 2012, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/05/how-america-forgot-about-chess/257049/.

³¹ “OUR HERITAGE.” *2016 Yearbook*, USCF, 2016, www.uschess.org/images/stories/Yearbooks/2016yearbook.pdf.

Conclusion:

While U.S.-Russian relations appear to be consistently contentious, chess has changed from a political tool to show superiority to a game that brings nations together. American and Russian chess players can play against each other knowing that politics can be put aside and that personal comradery is more important. Chess symbolizes a pastime that allows for an exchange of cultures and traditions. As chess modernizes, American chess enthusiasts are likely to learn more about the cultures and Russian players and vice-versa. This mutual cultural is the first step for bringing two contending nations together.

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