

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Garry Kasparov, Author and former World Chess Champion

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I: Chess and Politics in Soviet Russia (00:15 – 23:28)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to have with me today Garry Kasparov, the great chess champion, one of the greatest chess players of all time. Many people say you are the greatest chess player of all time. I won't ask you to comment on that, one way or the other. A leader of the fight for democracy in Russia.

And there's so much to talk about, I'm not sure where to begin, but I will begin where I first heard of you, I think, as you were a great young chess player and those epic matches with Karpov in 1984 and 1985. I remember reading not just – I had a mild interest in chess, not just about the chess matches, but about your own biography in the Soviet Union. Soviet Union was a long time ago now. It's hard to believe – 25 years. What was it like growing up in the Soviet Union?

KASPAROV: I think the reason you look at these matches probably was not so much the chess factor but to the political element, which was inevitable because in the Soviet Union, chess was treated by the Soviet authorities as a very important and useful ideological tool to demonstrate the intellectual superiority of the Soviet communist regime over the decadent West.

That's why the Spassky defeat – Boris Spassky's defeat in 1972 when Bobby Fischer took the crown from the hands of the Soviet Chess School. Since 1948, you know, chess title was firmly in the hands of Soviet players. This event was treated by people on both sides of the Atlantic as a crushing moment in the midst of the Cold War. Big intellectual victory for the United States, and you know, a hugely painful, almost insulting defeat for the Soviet Union, because Bobby Fischer was a great player but he was like a lonely warrior. A guy from Brooklyn taking on the mighty Soviet Chess School.

The Soviet authorities they looked for new challenger, for a player from the new generation. And they were quite lucky just having Anatoly Karpov. Again, it was not a big surprise that Karpov was around because if you have, you know, millions of kids going through these network in the country where there were very few options available for talented kids – business was not an option, politics was not an option, the law was not an option, and every parent tried to look for some opportunities for their kids, and chess was one of them.

Music, ballet, some kind of science, sports in general, so that's why Soviet authorities could, you know, could channel these huge mass of potential talented kids into these chess network and finding Karpov, Kasparov, and other great players, you know, was not that difficult because it was simply about big numbers. To the contrary, in the United States, you had, you know, maybe thousands, maybe tens of thousands of kids playing chess here in the New York City or in Chicago or in the Bay Area and again,

mathematically speaking, the chance of finding Bobby Fischer was miniscule. Fischer was some kind of miracle when almost assembly line of champions in the Soviet Union was quite predictable because of a massive investment of the state into the chess infrastructure.

I also have to add, you know, that this, contrary to popular belief in this country or in Europe, chess was never a part of the educational system of the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities had no interest in actually using chess, which I believe has the unique ability to enhance cognitive skills of kids, to use this in the schools because all they wanted was just to find talent. So it was an investment to make sure that the top tier of Soviet chess would always reinforce by new talent coming, you know, from the bottom of this pyramid.

Probably, I'm the wrong person to criticize this because I was one of the beneficiaries. I was lucky that very early age, so by five, four, six – it's hard to remember because nobody was Tweeting this moment – I was watching my parents, my mother and my father –

KRISTOL: This was in Baku?

KASPAROV: Baku, Azerbaijan. So, for American audiences I always make a joke saying that I was born and raised in the Deep South, right next to Georgia, which it technically was the deep south of the Soviet Union and the Republic of Azerbaijan, right next to the Republic of Georgia.

KRISTOL: But far away from the capital?

KASPAROV: It's about 1,500 miles south of Moscow. Really deep south of the Soviet Union, next to the Iranian border. The Caspian seaside – the shores of the Caspian Sea. And I watched them, you know, and I was fascinated immediately by these, you know, by the magical pieces, you know, moving, you know, with the strange rules and this small chess wooden board. Actually, I learned how to move pieces. Just I was all being told.

Contrary to the family traditions, where the father's side, everybody – except my father who graduated in the class of violin but he became an engineer, that's how he met my mother. Both engineers working for the oil industry because back then it was a big oil center. My father said that I would have to study chess because he thought my mind – and he was absolutely right – my mind was a perfect match for it. Understanding this was the logic of the game. Tragically, my father died when I was seven, but my mother continued this work, and she, since my father was gone, so she dedicated her life just to my success. She never married, and, you know, she was the best manager I could have in my life.

She helped me to sort of to learn more about the game of chess but was not pushing too hard. There's always a risk if you start, you know, playing too much and you're trying to climb too fast, you can fall. She just wanted to make sure that, you know, I could be gently pushed in the right direction because everybody could see I had an immense chess talent.

Growing up the family was my mother and her parents, my grandfather who was a diehard communist. On my father's side, I had a very strong influence from my father's younger brother – this is from the Jewish side of my family. My father was Jewish; my mother, Armenian.

KRISTOL: Two peoples who had a tough 20th century.

KASPAROV: And my uncle introduced me to the Jewish intelligentsia in Baku so I had access to the books that were, say, not freely distributed in the Soviet Union, so I could actually hear other side of the story. Not that I needed to realize that, but it was good that actually I could hear, you know, I could hear stories from my grandfather or I could read his books. Of course, I was the subject of Soviet propaganda, but at the same time I could hear critical views. And with my analytical skills, it was inevitable that at one point, I would start comparing these stories.

KRISTOL: Was there a moment when you realized that some people live in freedom and we're not living in freedom? Or is it gradual?

KASPAROV: Of course, it's gradual because you're living in Soviet environment, and even in the Soviet Union, people who were critical of the current regime – most of them, with very few exceptions, believed that it was not due to the sort of rotten nature of socialism and communism, but more to, it was due to the bad implementation.

So the very popular myth, with the good Lenin and the bad Stalin, dominated the sort of intellectual circles in the Soviet Union, and I have to confess that I was somehow hostage of these views for quite awhile. Only mid-80s I could realize it was nothing to do with good Lenin or bad Stalin and a bad implementation, it's gulag, concentration camps, the purges, famine, and it's suppression of all sorts of freedom. It was inevitable. It's, you know, no matter how you play these moves, it will end up with the same result. But it took some time.

It started, of course, in 1976. At age 13, I was already a young champion. I won early 1976 – 40 years ago – I won my first title. I became the Soviet Union champion under 18, which was a huge success, and I was sent to France to the World Union Championship under 16.

It was first abroad and – again, those who do not understand what was the Soviet Union, and I didn't grow not in just in a small city. Baku was the fourth or the fifth largest city in the Soviet Union. Probably the fourth. Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and then Baku. It's a huge industrial city. It's like an outpost of the Russian empire. That's why although I'm half-Armenian, half-Jewish, I consider myself Russian because Russian is my native tongue, and I grew up with Russian culture. Everyone in our family spoke Russian.

My mother married a Jew, her second sister married an Armenian, the younger sister married an Azeri. We had all the nationalities, but everybody spoke Russian. It's not surprising these days, everybody lives in Moscow because they moved to the capital of the empire. That was the difference between Baku and other cities like Yerevan, in Armenia or Republic of Georgia, where people spoke native tongue, even non-Armenians or non-Georgians, they tend to be part of the local culture.

KRISTOL: So you go to France?

KASPAROV: Went to France and I was probably, was in, you know, within my family and the circle of friends, I think was the only person who visited a capitalist country. Because people who travel outside of the Soviet Union, there was a very, very tiny group.

KRISTOL: It was hard to travel?

KASPAROV: There were so many, so many obstacles, you know? You had to go through very complicated procedure. Again, it's hard to imagine for boys here in US or in Europe, in the free world, who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In order to receive your passport and permission to travel outside of the Soviet Union, you had to go through a very complicated process of selection and approval.

Even I, a boy under age, 13 years old, I had to be part of this process, and I remember I was a group of adults at the meeting of the sort of local committee of the Communist Party. It's like a vetting process. They had to give permission. Again, complicated bureaucratic process. Of course, for countries like France, the United States, England, Italy, the capitalist countries, it was much more complicated.

KRISTOL: But they sent you abroad to play chess?

KASPAROV: They sent me abroad to play chess, but again, I was 13-year-old and they sent me without my mother because, again, this is a precaution. If a talented player, you know, half-Armenian and half-Jewish, you know, travels abroad with his mother, who knows? I had no intention of staying abroad, my mother would never do that as we had all the roots in the Soviet Union. But still, you know, they didn't care.

First time, my mother traveled with me aboard was in 1983. I was already one of the best players – probably second best player in the world – playing the semi-finals of the chess matches, just two steps away from challenging Karpov. First time, they allowed me to travel, and it was after, you know, sort of the full support I received from the Republic of Azerbaijan from Party authorities, you know, just guaranteed that I would not defect.

But in 1976, I was sent with just, you know, a coach. I never met him in my life before. A good coach from Ukraine. He was given like, you know, just a – kind of gift, just to go abroad so you can travel, you can just buy something to bring back to Soviet Union to sell it so making a few rubles there. He didn't care very much about me and about, you know, my results. So I actually I failed. And failed to win this title in '76 and '77, only title I haven't won in my life, World Champion under 16. But, there were two trips to France: '76 and then '77.

KRISTOL: '76 did it have a big effect on you, otherwise?

KASPAROV: Exactly. There was a second one in '77, the first was north of France, the second south of France. I actually realized this, definitely, a huge gap. The propaganda is not, you know, covering the whole story.

KRISTOL: What struck you? The gap in the standard of living or the people living in freedom, somehow?

KASPAROV: I was a professional player so I was 13 or 14, but still, you know? I could – it's like professional instincts. You understand. You move in a totally different environment. It's free. I couldn't actually – if you asked me to explain this, I wouldn't be able to actually to sort of quantify that, but I knew it was different. And I, you know, I kept learning, reading more books, and speaking to the different people because as the celebrity, even at my age, so I could speak to all the people. Especially Moscow to people who had sort of broader views about the world.

KRISTOL: Did any one or two, either people or books, have a particular influence? Did you meet –

KASPAROV: In '81 I read Solzhenitsyn. That's –

KRISTOL: In Russia?

KASPAROV: No, actually outside of Russia. I remember that in 19 –

KRISTOL: You had heard of him?

KASPAROV: Everyone heard about Solzhenitsyn in the South. You know, those were like Voldemort, the name's not to be mentioned. Enemies of the state. Naturally, you know, people I spoke to they had very different views about – While it was difficult to understand exactly what they were standing for, we didn't have Twitter. We didn't have Facebook. We didn't have the same information. Even when you look at the chess side of my life, I had to collect the data by just by going through the magazines and, you know, chess books were, you know, quite rare.

To find a good book, you had to dig deep. And my mother still keeps some of my notebooks. I had to report some of this data, analyze it. It's all handwriting. It's very hard for kids today to actually understand. Instead of sliding your finger on the screen, I had to do all these diagrams. I printed the

diagrams. I had a set, you know, where you put a diagram, chess diagram, and those are green and white and then I had the pieces, blue and red. You can actually then put chess pieces. You just had diagrams. It's all printed.

KRISTOL: What of Solzhenitsyn? I'm curious what did you read first? Do you remember?

KASPAROV: The *Gulag*, that was the beginning of my sort of –

KRISTOL: In Russian?

KASPAROV: In Russian. But also in 1980, I already had a few books that helped me to understand difference. I was reading the books – actually, I could buy the books while being abroad that were not available in Russia. And also there were moments in the Soviet Union that actually also helped me to move in the right direction. I always had this kind of debate with my diehard communist grandfather, who was a member of the Communist Party since 1931. He spent his life – he was in oil industry and in mid-70s, late 70s actually, he was quite confused because he had been expecting, you know, communism. He spent his life working for this bright future, and instead, we had food rations.

And an invasion of Afghanistan was a problem. He just couldn't understand it. Then, you could see the disappearance of some, you know, of many food items from our stores. And as the long-term Party member, he had a sort of special privilege to go and buy this food. It was difficult for him to contemplate all of this, and then the Soviet authorities, they started jamming Radio Liberty and Voice of America, and we had big debates in our tiny dining room. On the wall, we had a big political map of the world. We would look at this map and have the conversation. It was more and more difficult for him to sort of resist this pressure. Because I was young, dynamic, and I would say, why the jamming if they are convinced it's the right decision?

He died in 1981. We were very close. He loved me and he held me a lot because I grew up without my father, but it was quite an interesting moment. And '79, '80, '81, it's more and more people actually saw that the regime was no longer vibrant as it used to be.

KRISTOL: And you had that succession of all the leaders.

KASPAROV: Brezhnev's already looked like a complete joke. And of course, 1980, Ronald Reagan.

KRISTOL: Was that very big even –?

KASPAROV: It was like a panic. Again, we didn't know what to think because the way Soviet propaganda treated the elections in 1980 was we are about to start a war. Right-wing, crazy, maniac – this is the anti-Communist from Stone Age, and he would attack us. They went amok. It was quite amazing just to recall the reaction, because after Jimmy Carter and Afghanistan, they thought we could always deal with Western leaders by just giving some concessions, but eventually preserving the Communist dominance in many quarters of the world. And actually, I have to say the Nixon-Kissinger policy preceded, you know, a Jimmy Carter policy of détente. So for more than ten years, Communist leaders believed that they had a sort of dominant hand in the world affairs.

KRISTOL: Or weren't being challenged.

KASPAROV: And suddenly someone was bold enough to call them an evil empire. At that time, I already entered sort of professional chess. Everybody knew I would be most likely the next challenger. Being young challenger – half-Armenian, half-Jewish, coming from Baku, challenging Anatoly Karpov, the darling of the system, Brezhnev's favorite, ethnic Russian – it was more of a challenge than I could imagine at that time. I knew it would be difficult, but I still believed my chess skills would help me overcome this.

In 1981, I was bluntly told by Soviet authorities that the country had already won the World Champion so it didn't need a second one. I was lucky – everybody needs luck, when you're trying to climb to the Olympus. You have your skills, you could have all your talents, you could have discipline, you could have a strong mother behind you, I had coaches that helped me, but I still needed political luck. I had support from the Republic of Azerbaijan – the leader, the communist leader there, for his own political calculations, he thought it would be nice just to push me, and just you know –

KRISTOL: They didn't stop you from playing –

KASPAROV: I got enough back-up in Baku, in Azerbaijan and that helped me to sort of to eventually climb to the top and challenge Anatoly Karpov. After this long story, we reached a point where you actually learned about my existence.

II: Kasparov v. Karpov (23:28 – 35:11)

KRISTOL: For young people today and people who aren't chess followers, it's hard to imagine the amount of interest and the drama, they were all such close and dramatic matches with comebacks and then they cancelled, didn't they, the 1984 match before it was over?

KASPAROV: It's also you know, we should remember that – and to inform our audience – after 1972, Fischer's victory, Fischer left chess. He refused to defend his title in 1975 so Anatoly Karpov was proclaimed World Champion. I think, you know, he deserved to play a match against Fischer. I wouldn't call him a favorite, but I think he had a very good chance of winning because Karpov already represented a new generation of the players. One of the reasons Fischer ducked and refused to play Karpov, I think he wasn't sure how to deal with him. Karpov was quite different from all the players that Fischer successfully beat earlier.

And then in 1978 and 1981, Karpov played Viktor Korchnoi who was a former Soviet player, defector. Like an evil man. A traitor. And Soviet propaganda billed those two matches, especially the first one where Karpov won a very dramatic event, just winning the last game with the score being 5-5. And the final victory gave Karpov in Game 32, sort of saved Karpov from a disaster. And it was trumpeted as a big victory of Soviet political system, and of course, he was personally congratulated by Brezhnev and praised by top Soviet authorities. So Karpov became kind of a cult figure. So the man who helped to bring back the title from Americans in 1975, and nobody remembered that Fischer hasn't played, but what was important that Karpov brought the title back and also he twice defeated a traitor, a defector.

Challenging Karpov was somehow was like challenging a Soviet myth. And what I think the authorities in Moscow, they at that time I doubt they saw me as the potential freedom fighter. Yes, of course, as I said, I was half-Armenian, half-Jewish, it was kind of instinctively they could smell that I was not a loyal party soldier. So I was not like Anatoly Karpov. So I was a rebel. And I was too unpredictable. I think they just wanted to ward off trouble so that's why Karpov received full support.

He was a hell of a player so we should give him credit. I entered, you know, this match in September 1984, it was in Moscow, big event. I was 21, Karpov was 33. He was very young, and it's in his ripe – he was top player for ten years, and everybody expected a big fight, but still Karpov was not maybe heavy favorite, but a favorite by all odds at that time. And of course, the beginning of the match was more disastrous than anybody could have imagined. The four games I was trailing 4 to nothing. And the rules of the match were the same as Karpov played against Korchnoi, to win the match one player had to score six wins and draws were not counted.

So Karpov was just two wins away from a big smashing victory, and then the miracle has happened. I managed to sort of slow down the match, to play against my own instincts, so just to make draws, short draws. To diffusing the tension. And though Karpov won one more game, Game 27, it was 5 to nothing.

At least, I could recover, and eventually I scored one victory in Game 32, and for some reason Karpov lost his energy. I think it was just my resilience, you know? Just stubbornness. Somehow, he just he couldn't overcome his stiffness. He wanted to win, you know, without taking any risks. So he wanted to win, as the beginning of the match by just, you know, waiting for my mistakes, but I didn't make big mistakes at the end of the match.

The more draws, but eventually I won Game 47 and 48 – can you imagine 48 games? We played five months. And then suddenly for Soviet authorities, it was quite a shocking revelation. 5-3. Still mathematically speaking, Karpov was a favorite, but if you go from 5 to 0 to 5 to 3, and I won the last two games, momentum was on my side, and Karpov looked totally exhausted, psychologically, and I had a real chance. I don't know how big of a chance, but it was a chance. It was no longer, you know, slim to none. I had a real fighting chance, and if, you know, I could score one more victory, 5-4, Karpov could have collapsed.

Then, the decision was made to stop the match. They brought the President of the International Chess Federation, a Filipino, Florencio Campomanes, who was clearly, you know, just a KBG stooge. They actually supported him in the elections in 1982 after he helped Karpov and his team in 1978 in the Philippines against Korchnoi. He declared that the match would be stopped because players were exhausted. Technically, yes, but you know, there's exhaustion and exhaustion. I was exhausted and Karpov was exhausted, but I was winning and he was losing.

But because it was 1985 and because I made a big scandal at the closing ceremony, at the closing press conference, because technically, nobody had rights to stop the match. The rules were clear. One player had to win six games, and it was still 5-3, and suddenly at the interference of the Filipino president declaring that the match was over, but instead of keeping Karpov's 2-0 advantage under this pressure because it was press conference, and the first time the foreign press in Moscow could actually see a Soviet athlete – and I guess, you know, we can consider chess players athletes – Soviet celebrity openly opposing decision backed by Soviet authorities. It was February 1985, Gorbachev was not –

KRISTOL: I was going to ask. When did Gorbachev take over?

KASPAROV: In March, April. So this is, Chernenko was the General Secretary at that time, he died in March.

KRISTOL: And were you taking a big risk by speaking out, or did you think you were pretty safe because you were such a celebrity?

KASPAROV: In the Soviet Union in 1985? No, I was risking everything. Even later on, so this is when in May 1985 when I just you know sensed the danger of them, you know, backing off from his decision and creating some sort of new sort of new conditions. Because Karpov was not happy with the new match.

We scheduled with 0-0. It was 24 games, not unlimited match, and he still had an advantage of a tie. So 12-12. And, he was given a rematch. They gave him quite a good, a very soft cushion protecting him so for the future. But still he didn't like it. He wanted to start the match with 2-0, which was ridiculous, of course, because, you know, just absurd to give him two-points advantage just in 24 games and for why? Because he actually signed the decision to stop the match, I obeyed because I had no choice but I was dead against it, and I made my disagreement public.

KRISTOL: In early '85 –

KASPAROV: In May, I gave an interview to the German magazine *Der Spiegel* –

KRISTOL: How did that work in the Soviet Union? They could just call you up and come see you, or was it difficult –

KASPAROV: No, because I played a match, training match, with a German leading player, Robert Hübner in Hamburg, invited by *Der Spiegel*, and they wanted an interview and I grabbed my opportunity to express the protest –

KRISTOL: But you couldn't have done that, maybe in Moscow?

KASPAROV: Technically, I could but –

KRISTOL: It was lucky you were in Hamburg.

KASPAROV: Again, it was already 1985, Gorbachev was in charge, and there was a slight relaxation of the steep rules. But you know, it was a huge risk because immediately after this interview where I blasted Soviet sports authorities and International Chess Federation – by the way, when you read this interview, today it's naive, it's weak. It's still, you know, inconclusive because I tried, you know, to just sort of to land only soft shots.

But at that time, 1985, May, it was like a bomb exploding, and dozens and dozens of publications around the world picked it up. And sports authorities in Soviet Union, they actually appealed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, asking to disqualify me for discrediting the image of the Soviet Union. And I was not a – just you know, it's probably just it's very, very, very close just to being simply disqualified.

But again, I was lucky because there was a change, and Gorbachev brought Alexander Yakovlev, the man to his Party career, but was then sent to exile in Canada as a Soviet ambassador and was brought back, and he was instrumental in relaxing Soviet public, social, and cultural life. He never met me, but at the meeting, you know, Yakovlev convinced Gorbachev – and then he told me these stories when I met him in 1985 in August – he said, “Look, Comrade Gorbachev, it's a chess match, so why do you bother? Let them play and let the best player win. They're both Soviet players.” And that was the decision and I remember after meeting Yakovlev, so I came back home and my mother looks at me and I says, “Mom, great news, they let me beat Karpov.”

III: Was a Soviet Collapse Inevitable? (35:11 – 46:31)

KRISTOL: That's fantastic. And how much of a sense did you have – what was it like in '85 until '89? Watching *perestroika* and *glasnost*, you were a World Chess Champion. You were a young man, but you were at the highest level, you dealt with people like Yakovlev at the highest levels of the Soviet Union. How much did you see if coming? When did you have the sense that this could be an unbelievable moment? I think a lot of people don't appreciate, and certainly for us in the US, but I think for you also over there, we didn't think it was going to end.

Maybe you did, I don't know? Did you? I sort of assumed growing up and being interested in politics and then being a professor and writing a little bit about the fight against the Soviet Union, that would be something that would continue for my entire adult lifetime, you know?

KASPAROV: It was very hard to imagine that in '83, '84, even '85, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But in '87, '88, I had pretty good idea that something similar, you know? Some kind of collapse. Some kind of dramatic change already was inevitable.

But in '84, '85, I think everybody expected that something would change because the regime – the Soviet regime was run by this gerontocracy. They were always subjects of jokes, and also Soviet economy was not in good shape, and the war in Afghanistan was quite an undertaking. The Soviet army was bleeding there. Body bags coming back.

And you know, they met very formidable opponents like Ronald Reagan and also Maggie Thatcher, they had the Western world really opposing the expansion of communism. There were problems on many fronts, and Gorbachev's task because he was very young when he was elected to General Secretary of the Communist Party, he was just 54. And again, few people remember he was Andropov's favorite. From the very early days, even in the 50s, he was a KGB favorite. He always had the full support of KGB.

Of course, when he took over, his goal was to ease the tension, and that's why he was supported by the KGB faction in the Politburo against all Party apparatchiks. In April 1985, when Gorbachev made his first big speech at the Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, he didn't talk about *perestroika* or *glasnost*, openness. He talked about acceleration. It was all about rearming Soviet military, of finding adequate ways of meeting new challenges from the United States, namely Strategic Defense Initiative, Star Wars. That scared off Soviet authorities. It was quite amazing to understand today that is, despite all the claims of the leading Soviet scientists that Reagan's idea of Star Wars was simply inconceivable, America couldn't afford it, not financially nor technologically.

KRISTOL: It wouldn't work.

KASPAROV: It wouldn't work. But the Soviet Politburo believed American President, trusted his claims, despite the contradictory opinions provided by the leading Soviet scientists. It tells something about reputation, about credibility. So the credibility of the office, of the Oval Office and the country led by Ronald Reagan was so high, and it was so believable that Gorbachev's priority was to give up everything, literally every trump card they had, every bargaining chip, but to bring down SDI. For two years, Gorbachev worked tirelessly, trying to drag Reagan to the negotiating table and to find a way of eliminating SDI, Star Wars from the agenda.

KRISTOL: So was Reykjavik really a decisive moment? It seems like it's underrated today.

KASPAROV: It's the importance of the meeting in Reykjavik is, unfortunately has been, it has been underrated. And I believe it's one of the turning points, not of the 20th century, there were two wars there, but post-World War II. That's – Reykjavik sealed the fate of the Soviet Union and Soviet Empire.

Because for two years Gorbachev worked, has been working very hard to convince Americans that we could find, we could make a deal. In Reykjavik, he suggested the most comprehensive nuclear disarmament deal that one could imagine, just for America to agree to stop any research supporting Star Wars' progress. And against the advice of the State Department and Pentagon and most of his advisors, Ronald Reagan said no. And that was, today I can say – and I'm willing to defend his views, some would say it's too radical – that that was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. Because if Reagan said yes, who knows maybe I would still be playing chess under Soviet flag?

And only after Gorbachev failed, and it was already second meeting, the first one was 1985 in Geneva – actually, it's ironically both meetings were immediately after I played my match with Karpov. I became the World Champion in '85, and they met in Geneva. I beat Karpov in the rematch in '86, and there was a meeting in Reykjavik. Of course, we could all see these were the signs of relaxation. I remember in 1985 I was allowed to talk to, I think, ABC News. This is a state, there were some kind of signs that it was different. But only after Reykjavik, Gorbachev came back, and he changed the narrative. Within three of four weeks, he called Sakharov. Andrei Sakharov was an exile in Gorky. He was sent to the exile –

KRISTOL: This is the great Soviet physicist –

KASPAROV: One of the great physicists, the father of the H Bomb.

KRISTOL: But also the most famous dissident of the Soviet Union.

KASPAROV: One of the most decorated Soviet physicists. It's the early age, he fathered the program of the H Bomb, and he was instrumental in creating, you know, Soviet military nuclear industry.

KRISTOL: But then became a fighter for human rights.

KASPAROV: But in the late 60s, he decided to make his contribution for – actually, he started with a political philosophy, like a science, you know? He talked about convergence of capitalism and socialism. He didn't like the confrontation, and he talked about, you know, peaceful cooperation between two systems. Of course, the Soviet authorities didn't like it. At the beginning, they simply shunned him, they did nothing, but they just tried to push him from gradually, to push him away from his new engagements. But eventually, he became most prominent supporter of human rights.

And from his fairly innocuous theories on political philosophy moved into the area of human rights, and he harshly criticized Soviet authorities for violating human rights and after the invasion of Afghanistan, he became, his criticism became intolerable.

KRISTOL: He was exiled?

KASPAROV: He was exiled.

KRISTOL: And Gorbachev called him back?

KASPAROV: Gorbachev called him back, and then Gorbachev, you know, started what we know as *perestroika* and *glasnost*. It's a very important moment, because now Gorbachev looked for different tools. Not just, you know, acceleration or rearmament, but opening up Soviet Union because they realized that slaves couldn't compete with the United States building personal computers. They just realized that they were lagging behind the new technological challenges required a new political culture.

I think this was, I think in '85 or '86, was quite a moment in the Soviet Academy of Science where you had all the scientists, very traditional, aged great minds. And they had a young American inventor who visited them and just like two different worlds met – his name was Steve Jobs. I spoke to people who were at the meeting, and of course, he was in jeans – they didn't even understand yet fully the consequences of Macintosh and personal computers, but I think, you know, it's the lack between the Soviet technology and new, great inventions in the free world. This lack was quite evident.

And that's why Gorbachev, actually under strong influence of Alexander Yakovlev, they decided they would need to find a new algorithm, how to keep political control, but to find a way of releasing this huge energy. It was a big mistake.

KRISTOL: Turned out to be difficult.

KASPAROV: But it was, you know, it was I believe it was, let's say, inevitable after Reykjavik because Gorbachev had to find sort of a new response to this challenge.

IV: The Fall of the USSR (46:31 – 1:19:58)

KRISTOL: So you're the chess champion of the world, and you're a major figure in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union is coming to an end. What was that like? What are the most memorable moments? The Berlin Wall? The coup of '91? Personal moments for you? Meeting with Gorbachev, Yeltsin? You knew them all, right?

KASPAROV: Becoming the World Champion at age 22 was just – it was very emotional. I could hardly describe it in words because it was Soviet Union, 1985, the title of the chess World Champion was kind of a sacred title. I was there at age 22. Youngest ever. And I also realized that, I could do more in

advancing the, again, not the cause of freedom, because at that time I was still under the impression that it was bad implementation. You could still do things within the system.

KRISTOL: This was still in '85 and '86?

KASPAROV: It was '85, '86, '87. So that was a moment I was gradually moving in a direction that was there was something wrong with the whole idea. It's a foundation that was wrong. It's not about implementation, we have to look deeper and deeper. When I challenged a local chess federation, I didn't understand it was bigger picture and then it was all Soviet Chess Federation, and then I didn't see the International Chess Federation and it's also controlled by Moscow authorities, by these KGB authorities, but challenging these Soviet sports authorities, I didn't understand it was about the system.

Also climbing the stairs, eventually you reach the conclusion that something was wrong with the system, and as the World Champion – and I played '85, winning the title the first time, '86 the second time, '87 defending the title – so by the time I felt I could you know, I was ready to challenge the system and to join part of democracy movement in the Soviet Union in '88, I was already three-times World Champion. So age 24, 24, 25.

I had, you know, I didn't have enough wisdom, of course, but I had plenty of experience by dealing with all sorts of authorities, traveling abroad and playing and reputation. Let's be honest, status. Almost untouchable because I was the World Champion, and *perestroika*, and I could speak out not only inside of the Soviet Union, which was still difficult because there were limitations, even at that time. Quite severe limitations, so you couldn't attack the Congress body openly, but I could do it outside of Russia. I could sort of present my views, and I –

KRISTOL: This was self-conscious on your part? And you thought you had an opportunity?

KASPAROV: I remember, we're speaking at one of the events in Germany when I was doing an advertisement for German computers for Atari. Very few people remember that. Atari 286. There were 50, I think 53 computers that day, they were given to me and I brought them to Moscow, starting the first computer club for kids in Moscow. That was in '87. And, I told people that, you know, unless I was dead wrong, the collapse of the Berlin Wall was inevitable. They looked at me like, okay, he's a chess player.

KRISTOL: This was even before Reagan's speech in '88?

KASPAROV: Actually, I think it was May '87. Reagan spoke in June '87. And then this is also very important moment. Reagan speech in Berlin and the four words, the four key words: "Tear down this wall." Actually, for me it is a very similar speech, a resemblance with JFK: "*Ich bin ein Berliner*". Also few people remember Harry Truman: "We shall stay, period." Also four words in 1948 when he decided to protect West Berlin, besieged by Stalin's forces and, you know, for 11 months American and British planes brought all the supply needed for the besieged city, and Stalin eventually backed off.

It's four words: "Tear down this wall." I mean, it had a profound effect. It was easy for Reagan to be satisfied. Okay, fantastic, Gorbachev was able to make all the concessions, but he pressed because Reagan, some may call him a chess player because it was black and white. He had a picture of absolute evil and good. You cannot find absolute good, but you can find absolute evil. He knew that, you know, as long as communism is around there would be no peace. There would be no lasting peace.

So you've got Gorbachev and you have somebody else, but it was his task, you know, which many believed was insane, just pushing his luck, but he wanted to destroy the Soviet Empire and he kept pushing, and it had a phenomenal effect, psychological effect on people who lived on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

When I hear people born and raised in the United States, people always take all these freedoms and the human rights – it's guaranteed by birth. Or you know, Western Europeans, when they say, "Thatcher, Reagan, they pushed too hard, and it's, you know, the *perestroika* was inevitable, the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable." Excuse me? Inevitable? I remember these years. Even in '87, '88, to imagine the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was not inevitable. It required a strong leadership and the big push. Gorbachev was playing with the idea of what he called "socialism with a human face," but at that time I was already confident that it was a wrong narrative, and my response in one of the interviews outside of the Soviet Union, I said, "Frankenstein also had a human face."

And the book actually that actually was in my philosophy, the last nail in coffin of these "good Lenin, bad Stalin" story, was George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. I read *1984*, but *Homage to Catalonia*, it's not as popular as –

KRISTOL: But it's a wonderful book. I read it when I was young –

KASPAROV: But the importance of the book was he actually could explain the similarities of communism and fascism.

KRISTOL: This is his book about the Spanish Civil War, just to explain to people, which he was at.

KASPAROV: Spanish Civil War. He was there, and he was there as an idealist, socialist, defending Spanish Republic against fascists. He just realized that while he was fighting an absolute evil, he was also surrounded by evil. It was very important to understand that Stalin and Hitler, they were two poles of absolute evil. It's the totalitarian regimes, they could have different colors. They could have sort of different cover-ups, but the package, what is inside the package is the same.

And by probably '88, I had already known solutions, the only way for my country, for the Soviet Union to move forward was to eliminate communism, just to find sort of new framework. I didn't know what exactly. I didn't have a clear idea, but I knew that we had to move away from all these, you know, plans to reform socialism, to find sort of a new meaning for Soviet Federation, we needed to find a sort of something that would work for the future, and I moved in with all my energy and impatience to join this pro-democracy movement. First time I met Andrei Sakharov – unfortunately, it was a very short-lived interaction because he died in 1989.

But I already wanted to help and to be part of the process. My personal big challenge to the Soviet regime and to the Soviet Union was in 1990. I mean, I said many things before, but acting was different. It's a public act here in New York City. It was the beginning of the match. My fifth match with Anatoly Karpov. It was divided between New York City and Leon, France. We started playing here in 1990 in October, and I already had to leave my native town of Baku because of Armenian pogroms, I had to evacuate my family.

After this tragedy, with Yakovlev's support, I met Gorbachev. I spent two hours with him and I was totally shocked by his indifference to my story about suffering, and there's just people being killed and he kept talking about new leadership of Azeris' Communist Party, how we can fix it. I realized that we just belonged to two different worlds; we spoke different languages although we both spoke Russian, of course. In the Fall of 1990, I publicly refused to play under the Soviet flag, I demanded a Russian flag.

KRISTOL: I had forgotten that part. This is in October of 1990, here?

KASPAROV: Actually September here. We started playing here, and I refused to play under Soviet flag. I demanded Russian flag, and I remember at that time you couldn't find Russian flag. My mother spent a whole night, you know, actually building this, using the stick and the collar ribbons just to make Russian flag, and I showed up in the CBS studio, and I was interviewed in this morning show, and I came up with a flag, and I looked at me and said, "What was that?" Nobody saw Russian flag before.

So it was a big scandal. Karpov's delegation and the pressure from Moscow, of course – the instructions from Moscow, of course – they protested, vehemently protested. And International Chess Federation didn't know how to react so for four games, I had Russian flag next to me. Eventually, they decided to remove Russian flag, but Soviet flag as well. So we played with no flags. But from Game Five onward, I had sort of a pin with Russian flags was on my jacket. That was my personal challenge, and at that time, I had no doubt that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable.

KRISTOL: Collapse in the sense of the dictatorship going away? Or collapse of the empire, as well?

KASPAROV: Both. Because I already could understand that the collapse of communist dictatorship would lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union. We had Baltic States and Central Asian Republics in one federation, and it just didn't belong there. It was like having Poland and Afghanistan. With the collapse of central authority, I had no doubt that they would split. Also, I could see that local authorities, the local party bureaucracy, they saw big opportunity to become independent. It's a little surprising that you have dictators, like Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, or Karimov in Uzbekistan. They are former First Secretaries of their respective Communist Parties.

These people are in charge of their Republics, first and now, independent countries, for more than 25 years. I could sense that it would be impossible for central authorities to control this very powerful interest. It was not about democracy or freedom, but it was about power. Sheer power. And though Nazarbayev, the Kazakh dictator, at that time don't think he could imagine that he'd become a multibillionaire and create a family dictatorship there, but they knew it was a right moment so just to walk away.

KRISTOL: And they were no longer scared.

KASPAROV: Absolutely. Because they had Yeltsin. Yeltsin fought Gorbachev, and Yeltsin knew that his best chance was to be a Russian leader. A leader of Russian Federation, Russian Republic, and the way to beat Gorbachev was to actually find allies in the ranks and files of party bureaucracy in other former Soviet Republics. I think Gorbachev was doomed. And to my surprise, I wouldn't say horror, but great surprise, I discovered that American officials that were in charge of US foreign policy, they had no idea of this process.

I started my affiliation with the *Wall Street Journal* in 1990, the first time I met the editorial board, and then I just had few opportunities to speak between the very prominent audiences and ended up meeting eventually the National Security Advisor, General Brent Scowcroft in the White House. And his assistant, the head in charge of the Soviet desk, Condoleezza Rice. It was quite a shocking meeting because, I guess, there was great mutual dissatisfaction. They asked me at the very end of March 1990, and they asked me about Gorbachev and Yeltsin. And I said what I knew was obvious at that time. I said Gorbachev's star was falling down, and Yeltsin had a big future.

They were shocked because the policy of Bush 41 Administration was based on preserving the status quo, helping Gorbachev, preserving integrity of territorial Yugoslavia and just making sure that the collapse of communism would not lead to a sort of brand-new world that could be unfamiliar to them. And when I said that Yeltsin would be elected and the head of all Russian Federation People's Congress, the supreme sovereign of these entities, in May 1990, they couldn't believe and they just asked me, "Yeltsin you know, Yeltsin is a drunk, he's a loose cannon." My response was, we're not talking about Yeltsin's character, but about his political future.

And I remember also in 1991 in November, I was in DC receiving one of the awards, Keeper of the Flame Award, and in the same day, Bush, President Bush, and his Secretary of State, Jim Baker III, they received Eduard Shevardnadze, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Soviet Union, who was sacked and

then reappointed, and it was already after the failed coup. And everybody knew that the days of the Soviet Union were numbered.

And still in the middle of November 1991, there was a big reception in DC, celebrating a new dawn in Soviet-American relations. In five weeks, the Soviet Union was gone.

KRISTOL: I remember that. I was Dan Quayle's Chief of Staff in that White House, and we met with Yeltsin, and I remember we got the briefing beforehand, and of course, it was extremely negative. And Quayle, who had good instincts and was anti-Soviet and good instincts that something big was happening.

I remember saying to the briefer, who worked for the CIA, but also for Brent Scowcroft and Condi Rice, "Isn't Yeltsin kind of the future even though people might have questions about his personal habits or whatever?" "No, no, no, Gorbachev's the man, and he's done so much and we need to work with him, and it will be terrible. We can't put out a public statement encouraging Yeltsin." I can't remember – the meeting was very – we kept it off the calendar because they didn't want to acknowledge that Yeltsin was being treated so well. I can't remember when this was, late '90, early '91, something like that.

How important was Yeltsin? Does he deserve credit? He's treated afterwards as a sort of –

KASPAROV: It's a very controversial figure, but probably we couldn't expect – and again, maybe if Sakharov wouldn't have died so early in 1989 we could hope for – Still, Yeltsin was very powerful figure because he, I mean he was ready to break –

KRISTOL: He insisted on breaking it up.

KASPAROV: The breakup – actually to become the leader of the people. We, the people. People could feel that in Yeltsin, they could actually, they could push their agenda. First time they could have someone who was a representative of the people, who could speak with the voice of the people. And I think for the first two years in '91, '92, he did a very good job. By moving forward – it was inconclusive. The big mistakes were made. The KGB was still around. Yeltsin had no guts to go after KGB.

The tribunal – the kind of Nuremberg Tribunal on the Communist Party and the crimes of communism. This is something that will have to happen later on because I believe that Russia will not have a chance to be reestablished as a normal civilized state in the 21st century without settling old scores. Without recognizing the crimes of communism. Without eliminating the roots of evil. Stalin was KGB. Yes, I do understand every state needs security apparatus, you need your intelligence, but you cannot rely on SS and Gestapo, and this is kind of equivalent. Understanding that the crimes against humanity committed by the Communist regime and the KGB as its, you know, military arm, it's absolutely vital for the future. Yeltsin failed to complete this task.

KRISTOL: Could he have, do you think?

KASPAROV: I think it was very difficult. Also, I'm not here to spread the blame that something was wrong here and there, but you know, the moment of '91, '92, probably easy now to be a Monday morning quarterback and sitting here comfortably and say, he made a mistake. It was the collapse of the empire. And by the way, we should give Yeltsin credit, it was almost bloodless. It's not Yugoslavia. Yeltsin had good instincts. He gave up Crimea – he knew it was very important to move forward without trying to sort of adjust the borders because, you know, this is mine, this is yours.

And everywhere in the former Soviet Union when you look at a map, everywhere where there was a quarrel about the border whether it was in Armenia, in Georgia, in Moldova. Everywhere where there was a quarrel, there was bloodshed. Thank God, we avoided the Yugoslav scenario. Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Kazakhstan divorced peacefully. And Yeltsin pushed for, I think, a rational solution sort of it's

like zero solution. Not to start calculating and recalculating the Soviet debt – how you should split it here and there? The basic decision was Russia accumulated all the Soviet debts, but all other former Soviet Republics gave to Russia, signed to Russia the rights for Soviet property abroad. Short term, it was good for national republics, not good for Russia, but long term, of course, Russia was the beneficiary. Again, it helped us to move forward without having endless debates – who owned what and why?

Then, there was another important decision that unfortunately, had consequences recently. It's about Soviet nukes. Soviet nukes were distributed among four former Soviet Republics: Russia Federation, Russia proper, Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakhstan. Belorussia and Kazakhstan relatively small portions of that, but still we're talking about considerable nuclear arsenal. Ukraine had the third largest arsenal, bigger than France, United Kingdom, and China combined. Two thousand nuclear warheads.

Naturally, bringing new powers to the table, negotiating table, was a nightmare. And I don't understand why the United States, with Bill Clinton's Administration, and the United Kingdom, with John Major's government, decided to push Ukraine, and subsequently, Belorussia and Kazakhstan to give up all these nukes back to Russia. Ukraine, under pressure, agreed. And in 1994, there was a memorandum signed in Budapest, which was a fair exchange. Ukraine was guaranteed its territorial integrity.

When today I hear people saying, "Yes, but it was not, you know, proper treaty. America didn't take any responsibilities." You had the signature of the US president. And it's 2,000 nuclear warheads. You do understand if Ukraine kept even a few, there would be no Crimea annexation, no Eastern Ukraine. So Ukraine gave up its nukes and basically received guarantees from parts of Russia that was violated by Putin, eventually, but from the United States and the United Kingdom.

The fact is we are seeing such a vacuum of leadership these days. It makes us think again about decisions made in early 90s. And I think the biggest mistake that was made – again I don't know whether you could avoid it. In '91, '92, the United States was in the position to come up with a new vision for the future. It's similar to what Woodrow Wilson suggested in 1919, but it didn't work out – the League of Nations failed. But in 1945, '46, Harry Truman's Administration came up with a new plan, a new vision for the future. The United Nations was already created, but it would not be functional institution without Truman's ability to build entities to resist communist expansion. CIA, NATO, National Security Council, sort of reorganizing the Voice of America, and supporting West Germany, Marshall Plan. These were institutions that were absolutely instrumental in preventing the further expansion of communism and eventually helping Ronald Reagan to deliver the final blow to communist system.

In '91, '92, America didn't come up with new plan. At that time, it probably was a unique opportunity to suggest a drastic change for the United Nations. To move this organization from an entity that was built to freeze conflicts to the entity that could offer solutions. But to be different, United Nations had to move from a lip service to human rights and freedom agenda into the institutions that could really advance this causes. But Bill Clinton's Administration had no interest.

KRISTOL: To be fair, the first Bush Administration didn't after '91. I remember I was there. I think Bush continued Reagan – with some hesitation and despite himself, to some degree – continued pushing as Reagan had and I think – at least, he supported Kohl and the effort to have Germany whole and free, within the West and in NATO, which people forget was not a guaranteed thing. There were a whole lot of people who wanted to divide it.

I think the failure of nerve in the Balkans and Yugoslavia was very big. When Baker said, "We don't have a dog in that fight." As if in the post-Cold War, post-Soviet world, we were not going defend people against ethnic cleansing, we were not going to take responsibility for a new order, as you say. At the time, I was unhappy with what Baker was doing, but I didn't understand its implications. I think it really had a big effect in terms of what you're saying. Not creating the new –

KASPAROV: Let's not forget, Iraq. Not finishing the job.

KRISTOL: Those two that were very much related to each other, incidentally.

KASPAROV: They didn't want to upset Gorbachev. It's the same story, let's not upset Gorbachev. At that time the Bush 41 Administration still saw the world like a geopolitical game board with superpowers sort of playing moves and other nations just had no choice but follow these decisions. But also, it's the fact is that Bush lost elections. Because American people had no appetite for the rest of the world, for any foreign policy agenda. It was all about famous Clinton slogan, "It's the economy, stupid" –

KRISTOL: I always wondered how much of that was because Bush himself didn't try to make the case that it's not an end of history, it's not a break from history, it's not a holiday from history, we don't get a peace dividend. But that's a tough message to send.

KASPAROV: You needed a different personality. Reagan could have probably sold it to the American public, but Bush, it's very difficult to sell something that's not part of your own beliefs. And that's why he was doomed against Bill Clinton. And it's a famous song, tomorrow's gone so let's – yesterday's gone, it's tomorrow. Yesterday is gone. And Clinton he capitalized on this mood.

And for instance, Fukuyama's famous bestselling book, *The End of History* actually was a reflection of what we all believed. I myself, you know, was guilty of this complacency because we all thought that it was over. The Soviet Union has collapsed, there's no more Berlin Wall. The Berlin Wall is gone. It's a dark symbol of our generation, and to imagine that okay, this is the evil hasn't disappeared. It could be buried under the rubble of the Berlin Wall, and eventually, it sprouts out.

Now, we know that, but at that time, it was very difficult whether you were here in the United States or in Europe that was in a celebratory mood, or in Russia where everybody thought we have problems but it's a brand new world. We definitely can make things better. And to imagine in August 1991 when the big crowd, the joyful crowd celebrated the removal of the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the founder of KGB from Lubyanka Square. And basically everyone knew it was the end of communism.

To imagine that in less than nine years, a KGB lieutenant colonel would be elected the President of Russian Federation, it was inconceivable. Absolutely inconceivable. And you know, and I think it's time now actually to understand what happened during the Cold War, what's happened in the late 80s, early 90s. As a professional chess player, I always urge the young students to look at their own games, to look at the mistakes they made. There's some good moves, and to understand the algorithm of the success or failure. Because you can learn from these moves, and you can come up with a comprehensive strategy for the future. I think the problem that these days, nobody wants to remember this.

People see that it's – any sign of confrontation is return to the Cold War. Somehow it is, but the nature of the enemy has changed. But the West won this Cold War, it's not just – it's not by accident, it was not inevitable, it was a combination of technology, technological advantages of the free market over the planning economy, centralized economy. It was freedom and human rights versus concentration camps and gulags of the unfree world.

But what is also a political will. It's a political – it was an understanding from both Right and Left in this country and in Europe that the free world has an existential enemy. With certain deviations in foreign policy, there was not a game plan, but it was always in the range. And, it's very important to sort of recover the spirit, the spirit that we are defending the free world and though the nature of the enemy has changed so the ideas, the values that helped us to prevail in this fight, they have not.

KRISTOL: That's a very good note to end this conversation. We'll have to have another conversation about the last ten years and Putin and what to do now. You've been so involved and such a leader in that effort, which is inconclusive at this point, but let's hope that we have the same kind of leadership that we had in the late, in the 1980s, here in the US and in the free world.

Garry Kasparov, thank you so much for joining me today, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

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