

White King and Red Queen – How the Cold War was fought on the
Chessboard by Daniel Johnson.
Atlantic Books 2008.

In spite of the fact that I learned to play chess as a child I was never so drawn into the game that I continued to play it in adulthood; the logic, strategy and intellectual investment that it required always feeling like it could be better used elsewhere. That having been said, chess has always intrigued me, as have those who have played the game at the highest level, and I remember well the matches played between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer.

In White King and Red Queen, Daniel Johnson tells the story of chess in the USSR, and the use to which the game was put by the communist regime from its earliest days. He recounts the development of the modern game by the Russians and the way in which it was used as a means of demonstrating the superiority of the communist super-state.

This is also an enthralling tale of the chess 'greats', both those who assumed a place on the world chess stage, and those who almost made that level. Johnson also devotes a whole chapter to Jewish chess players – the number of Jewish champions being disproportionately high – and advances reasons for their success; a significant piece of the chapter is devoted to the story of Natan Scharansky, and the part that chess played in his titanic, and ultimately triumphant struggle with the Soviet state.

The book ends with Garry Kasparov, who left the chess board for the political world, and fell foul of former President Vladimir Putin; so often, chess has been a metaphor for a wider struggle, and in the former Soviet Union this continues today. White King and Red Queen, superbly written as one might expect from its author, is an engrossing read, and as approachable to the non-chess player as to devotees of the game.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh