

**DON'T DRINK TEA  
WITH STRANGERS**

**DON'T FLY AEROFLOT**

**DON'T SOCIALISE WITH  
RUSSIANS YOU DON'T KNOW**

**MY LIFE AS PUTIN'S  
MOST PROMINENT CRITIC**

**Garry Kasparov** – the greatest ever  
chess player – talks to Giles Whittell  
about his archenemy and being  
Russia's leading dissident

PORTRAIT Phil Fisk

**C**an a man trained to attack and win at all costs turn out to be a big old softie? That is the question I ended up asking myself about Garry Kasparov. It didn't occur to me at first, because Kasparov doesn't do small talk. He does a brisk hello and a handshake – a handshake leading us straight to the room booked for this

interview, where within 30 seconds we're talking about toppling the North Korean regime with hydrogen balloons and memory sticks. (He has just flown into London from Seoul via Helsinki, so Kim Jong Un, the tyrant of Pyongyang, is on his mind.) "One of the top defectors told us that one million USBs could actually change the regime," he says.

If you want the answer to the big softie question you can skip to the end, because that's where it belongs. In the meantime, Kasparov, 52, moves swiftly from one dictator to the next. He orders coffee, puts his fingertips together and turns his mind to the man who has been the main focus of his energies since retiring from professional chess as the greatest player in history. We're talking about Putin, naturally. As we speak, Russian jets are bombing rebel positions in Syria – not Isis positions, but those of fighters backed by the CIA. Kasparov has only seen the TV footage but he's seen enough. Putin's aggression is like a drug, he says. "You have to constantly increase the dose. It's physiological. His next move will be even more dramatic."



**Garry Kasparov**  
photographed earlier  
this month at the  
Chesterfield hotel, London

And so it proves. Two days later, Russian warships launch more than two dozen cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea, targeting the enemies of Syria's President Bashar Assad more than 900 miles away. The machismo is breathtaking. Collateral damage and a ferocious jihadist blowback are inevitable.

There are many reasons to listen carefully to what Kasparov, a legend of the late Cold War, says about Tsar Putin. He's studied the man and his tactics as closely as he ever studied chess grandmasters such as Karpov, Kramnik or Anand. He has tangled with the Kremlin and ended up in jail for it. As a leading dissident he has agonised for years about how to revive democracy in his homeland. But mainly, time and again, he's been proved right on Russia and its empire when outsiders have been wrong. In October 1989 he told Henry Kissinger at a party that there wouldn't be any Communist regimes left in Europe by the end of the year. Kissinger laughed at him. The following year he told an incredulous interviewer most Soviet republics would soon be independent. (They were.) Earlier this year, during a lull in fighting in Ukraine, he said Putin would strike next on his

southern flank. "I thought maybe Georgia, maybe Azerbaijan, so I was wrong on the region, but right on the direction."

Kasparov is touring the world – for security reasons, not telegraphing his itinerary too far in advance – with a book on Russia called *Winter Is Coming*. Why? Because winter is coming. He reckons a serious geopolitical earthquake is looming because the West has consistently, stubbornly, wilfully misjudged Putin for the past 15 years. He believes this earthquake could trigger the sudden but not peaceful end of Putin himself. "I can bet my bottom dollar that he will die in the Kremlin," Kasparov says. "He should watch his back because the moment he sleeps he'll be out of business. And for him, to be out of business doesn't mean retirement."

Until that moment, everyone who turns against Putin is a target, and few have turned on him more venomously than Kasparov. Until 2013 he lived at least part of the time in Moscow, going everywhere with bodyguards. He was then advised by his old friend Boris Nemtsov to leave

Russia for his own safety.

Nemtsov was a fellow democrat and former deputy prime minister of Russia. ➔

**'PUTIN WILL DIE IN THE KREMLIN. HE SHOULD WATCH HIS BACK; IF HE SLEEPS HE'LL BE OUT OF BUSINESS'**





In opposition he had published detailed research showing how Putin's friends had cleaned up to the tune of perhaps \$50 billion (£32 billion) from construction contracts for the Sochi Olympics. He was, Kasparov says, "too proud and too brave to walk away". Earlier this year he was gunned down on a bridge near the Kremlin while taking an evening stroll with his girlfriend.

At least Kasparov took his advice. He now lives in New York, without the bodyguards, but he "takes no tea with strangers". He doesn't fly Aeroflot and he won't spend time with Russians he doesn't know. In a terrifyingly real sense, he's in a fight to the death.

We meet not 200 yards from the Mayfair hotel where Alexander Litvinenko, the ex-KGB agent who came to work for MI6, was poisoned in 2006. Litvinenko's drink was spiked with polonium-210 traced conclusively to Moscow. His death from radiation sickness was a reality check about Putin for anyone paying close attention. Here was a Kremlin boss who played entirely by his own rules.

"His regime is a powerful one-man dictatorship, the most unstable and dangerous form of governments," Kasparov says. "All dictators have animal instincts. They can smell whether there's blood they can go for, or whether to back off. Internally, if someone like him stays in power for so long it means he's been successful in eliminating any opposition. He has created a desert. What kinds of animal survive in the desert? Snakes and rats. The political desert created by a dictator almost guarantees that something terrible will follow."

Since Litvinenko's death, Putin has invaded northern Georgia, annexed Crimea and forced the de facto partition of Ukraine. He has buzzed Nato's air defences over the North Sea. He has rattled the Baltic states by building up garrisons on their borders. On his watch his only serious rival for power, billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, has been jailed for ten years and then exiled. The bravest Russian critic of Putin's wars in Chechnya, Anna Politkovskaya, has, like Nemtsov, been shot. And Malaysia Airways flight MH17 has been blown out of the sky by a Russian surface-to-air missile with the loss of 298 lives, and no apology.

Kasparov had been busy, too. Besides helping to lead Russia's embattled democrats he has preserved his status as an icon of chess. "I keep myself in decent shape," he says. As if chess were a sport? "If you ask me to move the pieces, then yes, it becomes a sport."

We're sitting in the library of his hotel. He's

grey at the temples but well fed and strong-looking. In old footage of his great matches in the Eighties he's gaunt and lanky. There is more of the boxer about him now. Kasparov still plays regular exhibition matches against up to two dozen opponents at a time, usually club players. That's thousands of matches in all. He hasn't lost one since 2001. In April this

year he blew away the English grandmaster Nigel Short in a one-sided match in St Louis. In 2009 he had a rematch with Anatoly Karpov in Valencia and demolished him, too.

That encounter included eight superfast "blitz" games which are worth watching on YouTube. Kasparov moves like an executioner who just wants to get the job done. The jacket comes off, the pieces are rearranged out of nervous habit. In game one Karpov is played to a head-shaking halt in 26 lightning moves. This is the Karpov who, as a skinny young Soviet hero, was world champion for ten years and took a rapid 4-0 lead in their epic 1984 world championship match before Kasparov switched tactics to grind out a draw. Both have put on weight since, but while Kasparov still has the coiled energy of a young bull, Karpov has the flat hair and slack paunch of a mid-ranking post-Soviet functionary, which is exactly what he is. "He's made his peace with the regime," says Kasparov. And how. Karpov is an MP in Putin's party and in the last year has opened a chess school – in Crimea.

To resist the Putin cult is to put yourself in a conspicuous and endangered minority. The more normal thing to do is fall into line. This is what favoured members of Putin's circle did on an ice hockey rink last week in Sochi as the cruise missiles rained down on Syria. They were playing with the president and let him score seven goals. It was his birthday but it was pathetic, shaming stuff, a bit like the behaviour of successive US presidents whom Kasparov believes have also fallen under Putin's spell.

Kasparov is no great admirer of George W Bush ("Bush tried to play psychiatrist and looked at Putin's eyes searching for his soul instead of looking at his record"), but he bows to no one in his contempt for Obama's foreign policy, or lack of one, especially after 2011.

2011 was the year the Arab Spring started a spectacular toppling of dictators across the Middle East. Less well remembered, tens of thousands of protesters flooded the streets of Moscow to condemn Putin's imminent, choreographed return to the presidency after a four-year break when the post was filled by

his stooge, Dmitri Medvedev. Kasparov was there in the crowds, but powerless. "We missed the moment," he says. "Putin came back in and it would never happen again because in 2011 he realised any compromise is wrong. Gaddafi was weak. Mubarak [of Egypt] was weak. Putin thought, 'I have to demonstrate my strength,' and that's when he decided to back Assad at any cost.

"Like or dislike Putin, he has a strategy," Kasparov continues. "He follows his logic, and if one side has a bad plan and the other has no plan, the bad plan wins. And Obama has no plan." His failure to take military action last year when Assad crossed a red line by using chemical weapons on his own people was a signal to every thug on the world stage, Iran's included, that at a push America would walk away. "That's it. That's [Neville] Chamberlain. Actually, I wouldn't criticise Chamberlain too much because he didn't have the history book to read from. He didn't have the next chapter. Obama does."

The reference to Chamberlain is, of course, to Munich and "peace for our time". Kasparov is big on analogies between Germany circa 1938 and Russia circa 2015. He doesn't think them remotely overdone.

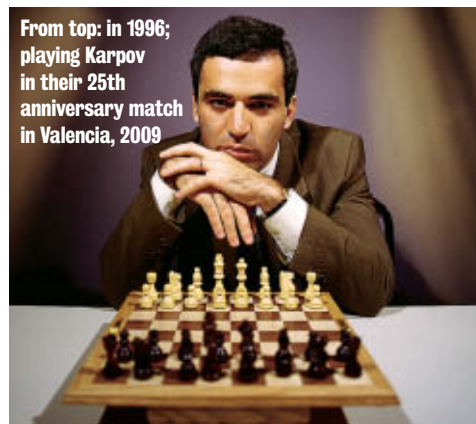
What exactly should Obama have done to punish Assad? "Take him out of office at any cost," Kasparov says, growling like a supervillain from central casting. "The only thing you learn from history is that no matter how costly the response is today, politically or otherwise, tomorrow it will be higher."

What if removing Assad means a full-scale ground invasion? "Doesn't matter. You said it. You are the president of the most powerful nation in the world. You can't throw words like 'red line' around without backing them up. It means you will never be able to use ➔

**'IN CHESS WE HAVE FIXED RULES AND UNPREDICTABLE OUTCOMES. IN RUSSIAN POLITICS WE HAVE EXACTLY THE REVERSE'**



From top: in 1996;  
playing Karpov  
in their 25th  
anniversary match  
in Valencia, 2009



credible threat. And next time no matter what you say people will pay no attention, which means you will be involved in a bigger war.”

If Putin's logic is clear, Kasparov's is clearer. You can't help but see parallels between his world view and the black and white world of the chessboard. Indeed, one of his earlier books is called *How Life Imitates Chess*. But it doesn't always. “People often ask me, ‘Did chess prepare you for navigating Russian power politics?’ And I say no. In chess we have fixed rules and unpredictable outcomes. In Russian politics we have exactly the reverse.”

Unpredictable rules. Fixed outcomes. We are back to the endgame; to the end of Putin. I mention having spoken recently to someone who works for a potential future president, a proper democrat. This person was immensely depressed by the idea – the probability – that whoever succeeded Putin would be even more ruthless and corrupt. Kasparov doesn't reject the idea but he still waves it aside: “I think this is the wrong discussion. Could it get worse? Absolutely. But the problem is the longer Putin stays in office, the worse the outcome. Every extra day means he will destroy more of what is left of civil society and engage Russia in more wars creating more enemies.”

Kasparov sees a successor trying and failing to persuade Russia's neighbours that Russia is not, in fact, the enemy. He sees radical Islam setting fire to the south and China indulging in designs on Siberia – first its oil and then, who knows, its territory. In a worst-case scenario, he sees Russia falling apart.

He started his talk in Helsinki the previous morning with an apology: “I said, ‘You want to hear good news but I'm not here to tell you good news. I'm giving you a forecast, but I believe it's an accurate forecast so don't shoot the weatherman. I'm saying winter's coming, because it's coming. I'm trying to analyse why we've reached this point 25 years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War when we all celebrated and expected to live happily ever after.’”

I ask how the unravelling begins and he says, basically, follow the money. The tight inner circle – the ice hockey players skating round the 63-year-old president so slowly he cannot fail to score – are so bound to him financially that they are unlikely to move against him. “As long as he's in power he controls all the money. He is by far the richest person on the planet because if you start adding up all the money he controls you'll probably end up

with something like a trillion dollars. But the moment he loses power he loses control, and those who are most closely connected to him know that they may not save their fortunes.”

There are others, less intimately bound to Putin, whom Kasparov believes will probably decide the country's future. “There are factions that believe they still haven't burnt all their

bridges with the outside world. Some are chained to the sinking ship, but the majority believe they can do better, especially those who have got used to enjoying their fortunes, houses, kids being located elsewhere, in South Kensington or Miami. They can tolerate Putin as long as they see he's an invincible leader. But he can't afford any mistakes, because any mistake for him is most likely the last.”

On mistakes Kasparov speaks with feeling. He loathes them. At the chessboard, in his prime, he felt them “like a physical pain”. And that pain, that instinct to blame himself in defeat rather than credit his opponent, is what he credits for keeping him at the top for so long. He taught himself the rules of chess as a young child and took it up in earnest aged 7 after his father died from leukaemia at the age of 39. By 13, he was junior chess champion of the Soviet Union. At 17 he was world junior champion; at 18 a grandmaster. He was the world's top player for nearly 20 years.

Chess brought fame, foreign travel and enough money to charter a 68-seat Tupolev that he filled with family members and refugees to escape from Baku, his home town, in 1990. He is half-Jewish, half-Armenian, and Armenians were suddenly not welcome in Azerbaijan as the Soviet Union fell apart.

Chess also cost him dearly. He told David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker* magazine, in 2007: “When you have to fight every day from a young age, your soul can be contaminated. I lost my childhood. I never really had it. Today I have to be careful not to become cruel.” After our interview, I wondered about that use of “cruel” and asked him via email what he meant. He replied promptly. “It referred to my tendency to judge harshly and hold people to high standards. I feel however that since I said that I have in some ways gotten in better touch with my softer sympathies and perspectives thanks

to my wife, Dasha, and our daughter, Aida, who was born in 2006. It has been a great gift.”

Back then Remnick called Kasparov's private life “messy”, which it was. It's tidier now, and he talks about it proudly and unbidden. The subject comes up by accident

when I ask what's the most important part of his livelihood these days – chess, writing or public speaking. The answer is public speaking. He gives about 15 talks a year at \$50,000 (£32,000) a pop plus expenses, and takes pride in making each one different. But initially he misunderstands the word “livelihood” to mean “life”, and says at once: “What about family? That’s pretty important.”

And complicated. His older daughter, from the first of his three marriages, lives close to him in New York where she has just finished a political science degree. His older son, from his second marriage, lives with his grandmother – Kasparov’s beloved mother, Klara – in Moscow. He’s 19 and a heavyweight weightlifter who doesn’t play chess. (“He’s a smart kid, but he’s 6ft 4in and 275lb.”) Dasha is his third wife and in addition to Aida they have an infant son, Nickolas.

On to this intercontinental complexity Kasparov has imposed a sort of order. “It’s a very intense family life but it’s very important to keep in contact with all the kids, so two or three times a year we have a family gathering,” Kasparov says. In the summer, at Christmas and new year the clan meets, usually in Croatia, where the Kasparovs are citizens and owners of a beach house near Split. “The little one hasn’t travelled yet, but he will. It’s what we do.”

The only person missing, every time, is Kasparov’s father, Kim Weinstein, who loved chess but never saw his son win a match, let alone defy the president of Russia in the name of democracy and human rights. Kasparov took his mother’s maiden name but in his autobiography he names his father as his inspiration. Weinstein is buried in Baku, to which Kasparov has not returned since 1990.

Will he ever? “It’s a tough question,” he says, the voice almost catching but not quite. “I wish I could go to his grave, but the city is not just stones, it’s the people who live there. The city where I was born doesn’t exist any more. Would I love to go? Yes, especially as my mother would love to go, too, but there’s also psychological pain.”

Can a man trained to attack and win at all costs turn out to be a big old softie? Not if he’s Vladimir Putin, but if he’s Garry Kasparov, I suspect he can. ■

Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped, published by Atlantic Books on October 27, is available from the Times

Bookshop for £15.29 (RRP £16.99), free p&p, on 0845 2712134; timesbooks.co.uk

## ‘THE BAKU WHERE I WAS BORN DOESN’T EXIST ANY MORE. WOULD I LOVE TO GO BACK? YES’

