

# The Second World

A play by Tim Luscombe

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### **Scene Ten.**

*A clock ticks wealthily.*

*Mikhail moves a chess piece.*

**George:** I guess, in the end, withdrawing from Afghanistan was the only course left open to you, Mikhail.

**Mikhail:** Oh, Afghanistan. Our bleeding wound. You win all the battles and lose the conflict. A village is destroyed, and the next day Mujahedeen pop up from nowhere. We kill a million of them, three million more leave the country, and for what? It's in a worse state now than it was when we started. Take my advice, George. Never get involved in a war in Afghanistan.

*George takes Mikhail's knight.*

Hmmm.

*Mikhail offers George vodka.*

**George:** *(Declining the offer)* It's not sitting well on the antacid in fact.

**Mikhail:** Stolichnaya.

**George:** Any more, and you'll finish me off in three moves.

**Mikhail:** Triple distilled, blended through Siberian birch charcoal and ice-filtered through a sand of crushed diamonds.

**George:** To tell you the truth, I prefer exercise to alcohol these days. Everyone's jogging in the States.

**Mikhail:** I have no time for jogging. (*Moves*).

**George:** Make time. I'll send you a treadmill. You'll find it exceptionally useful. Now, this revolution of yours, Mikhail –

**Mikhail:** Yes! Glasnost. Perestroika. Opening. Transparency.

**George:** A revolution indeed. And (*sarcastically*) I'm so impressed with what you've achieved that I'm gonna follow up the loans you already can't re-pay with new loans worth half a trillion dollars. To the communist party of Russia.

**Mikhail:** Yes. Your people tell you, you can't trust old Gorby, but our soldiers have withdrawn from Hungary and brought back our nuclear warheads with them. I'm sincere, George. I started this revolution and I'm gonna finish it.

**George:** With American money.

*George moves.*

**Mikhail:** You're the richest country in the world. Who else should I ask?

*Mikhail takes a rook.*

**George:** Well, that's arresting positional play.

**Mikhail:** Speciality of the Soviet school of chess. Use my bishop pair and space advantage to mount an attack on your kingside.

**George:** How the hell did you sneak it past the generals and the apparatchiks? You sure didn't broadcast perestroika while you were climbing the greasy pole.

*George moves.*

**Mikhail:** Half a trillion. What do you say? You can do it?

**George:** If you make concrete moves towards democracy, I expect a few billion's something we could think about –

**Mikhail:** Billions? No! You want my reforms to succeed –

**George:** We support any move you make towards democracy and freeing up the markets –

**Mikhail:** Then help me pay for it. Your Grandfather's banks subsidised Hitler, you can lend us what we need.

**George:** It's an interesting idea, isn't it, getting the enemy to bankroll you.

**Mikhail:** Why should you be my enemy? The Cold War? Let's end it. Now.

**George:** Really? You concede?

**Mikhail:** Call it a draw.

**George:** I don't like those terms.

**Mikhail:** Do you have a choice?

**George:** Plenty.

**Mikhail:** (*Moves*) Check.

**George:** Hey! I thought we were into some kind of variation of a Sicilian defence, but we're way out of book here.

**Mikhail:** I'm offering you a theoretical variation.

**George:** You certainly are, Mikhail, you certainly are.

**Mikhail:** You believe in democracy –

**George:** But you don't. You make noises about a market economy, but you haven't actually introduced one.

**Mikhail:** Understand the local conditions. America's model isn't necessarily right for us. There can be any number of expressions.

**George:** I disagree. You either have democracy or you don't.

**Mikhail:** Well, we have one-party democracy.

**George:** But that's a contradiction in terms. It's impossible.

**Mikhail:** Well, I assure you, we have it! And you're still in check.

*He offers more vodka. George declines. Mikhail pours for himself.*

Brain medicine.

*George chuckles. Mikhail gets up to stretch his legs.*

You have to remember: even if *you* do not, *we* feel a responsibility to the ineluctability of the victory of socialism –

**George:** The victory of...? Wait a minute –

**Mikhail:** The party retains control and we introduce freedom within that. We have democracy and we have central control. That is the genius of perestroika.

**George:** Wait, wait, wait. Far be it from me to give you a lecture on Lenin or dialectic or any of that theoretical claptrap you love, but I know about the market. And I'm telling you: you either abandon communism altogether, and give the market a real chance –

**Mikhail:** No, no, no! It can work! Look at China. You help me – you must help me! – the same thing can happen in Russia.

**George:** No, Mikhail. How the hell can you maintain absolute power and institute democracy at the same time?

**Mikhail:** Watch me.

*George is dumbstruck.*

You're going to move?

*George moves.*

That's what I was hoping you'd do.

*Mikhail moves.*

**George:** You don't imagine I'm going to instruct American banks to subsidise the Soviet Union's return to Leninism, do you? That's the last thing I'm interested in doing. (*Moves*).

**Mikhail:** George. Stalin's dream for our land led to the harvest of sorrow and a million people died of starvation, including half my family. Stalin's thugs took my grandfather in the night. The usual story. Jailed and interrogated for fourteen months, confessed to things he hadn't done. Yet my University dissertation was called 'Stalin is our battle cry, Stalin is the wings of our youth'. You work for the party – you commit yourself to daily self-abasement. You conceal your disdain for the bosses you despise, and you speak their language. Yes, I hid my ideas about glasnost and perestroika while I was 'climbing the greasy pole'. But beneath my mask of obedience I retained my spirit. And now I'm here. And I can say what I must. And do what I must. What I *must*, George! Democracy, yes, but the party *must* retain it's authority. What else?

**George:** Abandon socialism!

**Mikhail:** Why?

**George:** Because, apparently, it's bankrupt! Broken! Finished! Christ, you're telling me Brent was right! The empire is crumbling! Abandon it entirely and be done with it!

**Mikhail:** And embrace what? Your system?

**George:** Of course. It works. That's why you're asking for our money.

**Mikhail:** But what is your system? Beyond making money. What is your philosophy? Help me understand. Where on earth does the West imagine it is within the historical narrative?

**George:** There is no historical narrative! Stop hiding behind the jargon. Historically inevitable Leninism's been a delusion all along.

**Mikhail:** No, you haven't answered me. I must understand what you're offering me. If there's no great cause, tell me, how can good and bad be measured? How are the big questions of our lives answered?

**George:** Well I find the marketplace to be a perfectly adequate judge of values in actual fact.

**Mikhail:** No, no, I'm not talking about money –

**George:** Well, if you valued the market, you wouldn't be coming to me for handouts. Still your move, by the way.

**Mikhail:** Public policy as an extension of private interests. There's no morality in that. (*Moves*). Yours.

**George:** And we have God. He judges good and evil in our affairs.

**Mikhail:** A lame conclusion to the Age of Reason. God and the markets.

**George:** The only two infallible things known to man.

**Mikhail:** As God's go, money is a faithless serpent. One day you'll see I'm right. We are broke! (*Pause*). And your queen is under threat.

**George:** Really?

**Mikhail:** Better look to it.

**George:** (*Addressing himself to the board*) Now, where was I?

**Mikhail:** I pray for your sake you never get into debt, George. I'm begging you. If you don't authorise your banks to extend fresh loans to us –

**George:** It's over for you. Right? You're telling me I can end the Cold War, no, *win* the Cold War by turning off the money taps? Well, well, well.

Speciality of the American school of chess. Here ends the Cold War. (*Knocks over Mikhail's king*) Checkmate.

To read the entire play, please contact Tim directly on  
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