Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy

Advances Since Nimzowitsch

John Watson

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Part 2: New Ideas and the Modern Revolution

Introduction

In *Chessman Comics #2*[1], Chessman and Zugzwang are seen watching the chess western movie "Fort Blunder", starring General Principle and Chief Alternative, in which the following dialogue takes place between the General and his assistant: "General Principle, sir, you've almost killed off them Old Indians!"; "Yup, but I fear there are new Indian formations coming!". At the time of Nimzowitsch, the world of chess was undergoing major transformations which would indeed challenge the general principles then dominating chess theory. In fact, these changes, most apparent in the new Indian formations championed by Nimzowitsch himself, ultimately cast into doubt the very validity of having such things as 'general principles' at all. Nimzowitsch challenged older theory, and his successors ushered in an era of pragmatism, rejection of dogmatism, and analytical research which still characterizes chess today. My task in this book has been to identify the most important changes in chess theory which distinguish modern from classical chess thought.

Right away, since I am aware how daunting this book may seem to the reader, I want to make some organizational and philosophic points. First, defining what is 'modern' in chess has been a tricky task; as a general guideline, I have chosen 1935, the year of Nimzowitsch's death, as a dividing point between modern and pre-modern play. Of course, there was no revolution in chess thought during that particular year; so ideas which I characterize as 'modern' were not necessarily unheard of before 1935, and naturally, some of the concepts I will emphasize have only recently entered the general consciousness. But when the reader is confused as to why I am designating an idea as 'modern' or 'classical', he or she is advised to take this somewhat arbitrary dividing point as a guide.

Unfortunately, the structure of this book is a bit tricky, and I hope the reader will forgive me if I make repeated explanations about it. Part 1 is designed to make the student feel comfortable with classical theory and with Nimzowitsch's revisions to that theory. It seemed only fair to the average chess fan to explain a bit about older theory and to lay some foundation for later claims of radical change. But Part 1 also opens the subject of the modern 'evolution' of the older theory. Although the distinction is a bit arbitrary, I have introduced in Part 1 what could be termed 'natural' developments of older theory, whereas Part 2 is devoted to 'revolutionary' changes, for example, ones which refute older principles or involve fundamental philosophical changes. Thus, both parts fulfil the mandate of the book's subtitle ('Advances Since Nimzowitsch'); but Part 2 covers, with a minimal review of past thought, the new ideas which radically distinguish modern play. Hopefully, the chapter and section introductions will help the reader to make sense of these distinctions. At the risk of becoming tedious, I will repeat and expand upon what I have just said about the organization of this book in the first chapter of Part 1, and then again, to a lesser extent, in the first chapter of Part 2.

Next, I want to discuss my stylistic approach to this book, including the use of statistics and my choice of exemplary material. The first point to make is that this is *not* an instructional book. While I would hope and assume that its study can only help one as a player, that is not its primary purpose. Nor am I writing a complete guide to chess middlegame theory, in the way that well-known books written by Pachman or Euwe and Kramer have done. The book before you *is* a sort of middlegame book, with numerous examples from opening theory, since the opening and middlegame are no longer

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1 The author referring to his own *oeuvre*! *Chessman Comics #2*; Watson & Myreng; Chess Enterprises Inc., 1982.

functionally separable. Within that context, however, I am concerned with a large but limited set of topics I find relevant to my thesis of advances in modern chess. So, for example, if the reader looks for a section about "Open Files as a Factor in an Attack against the King" (Pachman), I may have said absolutely nothing about the subject. There is also little of a 'how to play' variety here. My goal has been to investigate theoretical issues, not, for example, how to handle time-pressure or prepare for the next tournament. The exciting reality is that there is enough material and food for thought to write a book twice this long without deviating from chess ideas themselves.

From time to time throughout both Parts, I have referred to statistical analysis I have run on some issue (the frequency of appearance of a certain pawn structure, for example, or the winning percentages of Black in the Sicilian Defence). In every case, this was done using the ChessBase database program. Although I have not always indicated the size or scope of the searches done, I have tried to make each search as unambiguous and statistically significant as possible. But interpretations of such data may certainly vary, and the reader might have fun doing his own research on such topics, especially since there are more subtle distinctions to be gleaned by so doing. For the first time, I think, certain ancient issues are subject to at least partial solution by using this type of analysis. As my ever-astute editor Graham Burgess points out, however, the use of such statistics leads to unavoidable ambiguities. Suppose, for example, that you examine a large set of endings to decide whether queen and knight are superior to queen and bishop. If players already feel that the queen and knight are superior, they may tend to convert superior positions into that presumably safest of advantageous endings. The resulting win-loss percentages will then be skewed in favour of the queen and knight, since they will reflect perception as well as reality. While I could do nothing about such effects, I did take care to examine not just statistics, but concrete examples whenever making a statistical claim. To cut a long story short, I feel that my tentative conclusions are largely correct in spite of this problem; and in the most controversial cases (such as ♕+♘ vs ♕+♗), any skewing would tend to favour the side I'm arguing against (in this case, the side with queen-and-knight), and thus its correction would only strengthen my argument. If that last sentence is confusing, just keep in mind the drift of this discussion when you come across statistical arguments!

The most difficult part of writing this book has involved the choice of what examples to use. At first, I wanted to avoid the re-use of the same classic examples which middlegame and instructional books have tended to beat into the ground. Experienced readers will know which ones I mean. On the other hand, it would be sheer arrogance to ignore what the many wonderful writers on middlegame topics have said about the issues I am dealing with. Ultimately, I reviewed and took notes on a wide array of books, mostly theoretical works, instructional books, and games collections. Many of these are indicated in the bibliography. I used more examples from these than I had originally intended, in part because of the wisdom imparted by their authors, but also because I discovered a number of new aspects to these examples (including errors and mistaken assessments) which I felt clarified my arguments about the differences we see in modern chess. Then, as will be particularly evident in Part 2, I used database searches to find fresh examples of games with modern ideas which range from routine to path-breaking. Since many of these modern examples might seem a little bizarre to the less experienced reader, their juxtaposition with well-known examples and with fairly nondescript exemplary positions will hopefully put one more at ease while exploring the new concepts. Another general issue which I'm sure will arouse comment concerns the relative chess understanding of classical and modern players. The reader should understand that my own early chess education was almost entirely filled by the study of the games of players before 1930; and the very first thing I did in preparing for this book was to play over and critically examine hundreds of games by the old masters, as well as to read the classic texts and tournament books. Although I seldom explicitly address the subject, it will be obvious that I consider modern players to have a broader and more subtle understanding of the

game than their predecessors. Normally, this would go without saying, and it in no way denigrates the great old masters, much as it hardly undercuts Bill Tilden's achievements in tennis to state that Andre Agassi would dominate him in a match, or Newton's work in physics to say that he failed to invent relativity theory. But there is so much emotion invested in the veneration of the old champions that I want to emphasize my respect for their play, and also how irrelevant I consider the direct comparison between champions of vastly different eras. The point of the book is to show what has changed in modern chess, not to make negative judgements about individual players.

Finally, I need to remind the reader that there is no way of 'proving' the various claims I make about modern play. I can show examples, of course, but in the end, I will undoubtedly over- or under-estimate the importance of various ideas. This book will be most meaningful if one keeps a careful eye out to assess whether the theories presented here have a solid empirical basis in one's own study and play. I hope that my book will at least influence you to do so, and to think freshly about modern chess.

John Watson
Carlsbad, CA; 1998

Part 1: The Refinement of Traditional Theory

1 Overview

The Nature of Middlegame Theory

Chess is traditionally divided into three phases: opening, middlegame, and endgame. Throughout chess history, but especially in the last four decades, opening theory has expanded steadily. Of late, this expansion has become a sort of explosion, and we are inundated with almost unlimited material on this phase of the game, from books to magazines to databases. Endgame theory, while never an area of intense popular interest, has always inspired a flow of high-quality books and articles, if only because the ending is so well-suited to definitive conclusions and strict analysis.

But what of middlegame theory? Players wishing to study this area of the game have a limited and rather unsatisfactory range of resources from which to choose. Rather than address this phase of play in a theoretical sense, books tend to focus on more popular and tractable topics such as combinations, attack and defence, how to improve one's thinking, and general advice for the competitor. In contrast to the opening and endgame, areas in which players normally turn to a contemporary work for enlightenment, many if not most students still read the classics when it comes to middlegame theory. How many of us learned our general middlegame principles from, say, Lasker and Nimzowitsch, or from the newer, but hardly contemporary, works of Euwe and Kramer, Romanovsky, or Pachman? In the United States, to this day, the most popular of these traditional sources is Nimzowitsch's *My System*, a book written in 1930! However brilliant, readable, and ahead-of-its-time that book is (and it is all those things), one has to wonder that we don't have any number of more advanced and updated works of its kind. Has the theory of the middlegame gone nowhere in the last 68 years?

Despite its appearance, that is not just a rhetorical question, and it requires a bit of thought to answer. On the one hand, this book will try to show that the state of modern chess theory is indeed dramatically different from the state of theory at the time of Nimzowitsch. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to codify that difference in the way that chess theory has traditionally been presented, that is, with general rules, principles, or philosophic statements. We are all familiar with the kind of rules to which I am referring, ones which are purportedly useful if not strictly accurate, e.g., move each piece once in the opening, develop knights before bishops, pawns are strongest abreast, rooks belong behind passed pawns, don't put knights on the edge of the board, two bishops constitute an advantage, don't move pawns in front of your king, refrain from pawn-hunting when undeveloped, and so many others. Then there are 'principles' of positional play, which are often descriptions of the advantages or disadvantages of various elements of play, e.g., bad bishops, backward pawns, knight outposts, centralized pieces, doubled pawn complexes, pawn-chains, and countless other considerations to which we will return in the course of this book.

I will now risk a statement that is at least in spirit, if not literally, true: *This type of 'rule-oriented' and 'principle-oriented' theory was worked out or at least substantially understood by the time of Nimzowitsch's death in 1935.* To put that a little differently, the rules and principles which could be clearly stated and still have

prospects of applying to practical play with general usefulness had already been enunciated and internalized by the world's best players by 1935. Let's assume that this proposition is true for the moment. Wouldn't it explain the lack of later works which posit a whole new set of principles and rules, reflecting the discoveries of later generations? But here's where things get tricky. Anyone who reads a great deal of chess literature will be familiar with a related point of view, which goes something like this: 'Oh yes, all the fundamental principles were known by the great Old Masters. Modern chess consists of applying them to an increasing number of specific positions, along with a massive increase in opening theory.' One might even add: of 'mere' opening theory, for many with this attitude make the familiar claim that if you simply gave, say, Lasker or Capablanca some time to 'catch up' with modern opening theory, they would immediately be challengers for the world title.

I completely disagree with this point of view, and I don't believe it follows from my italicized statement above at all. Furthermore, it misses the point. While modern chess theory has advanced tremendously since the time of the early masters, it hasn't advanced in a simplistic, rule-based fashion. In fact, to emphasize this, Part 2 of this book will begin its examination of modern chess with a whole chapter emphasizing its 'rule-independent' nature. But is modern chess therefore somehow less 'principled' than that of older times? There are several ways of answering this question. The first, least disturbing, answer was expressed by Richard Réti in his magnificent classic *Modern Ideas in Chess*, when he was describing the modern style:

"What is really a rule of chess? Surely not a rule arrived at with mathematical precision, but rather an attempt to formulate a method of winning in a given position or of reaching an ultimate object, and to apply that method to similar positions. As, however, no two positions are quite alike, the so-called rule, if applied to an apparently similar position, may possibly be wrong, or at least as regards that particular position, there may exist a more suitable or effectual method of play. *It is the aim of the modern school not to treat every position according to one general law, but according to the principle inherent in the position.* An acquaintance with other positions and the rules applicable to the treatment thereof is of great use for the purpose of analysing and obtaining a grasp of the particular position under consideration ... the source of the greatest errors is to be found in those moves that are made merely according to rule and not based on the individual plan or thought of the player." [italics mine]

This eloquent exposition contains the relatively benign notion that in chess, general rules will never have universal application, and the rather more daring one that each position has a principle inherent in it. That insight is closely related to another fundamental tendency of modern chess: the increasing reliance on concrete analysis. That phrase ('concrete analysis') has been a favourite of a whole series of leading players and theoreticians from what was often called 'The Soviet School of Chess'. Whether they formed such a 'school' or not can be argued, and of course, they claimed a variety of philosophic tenets. But the unifying claim which most clearly distinguishes the post-war generation of dominant players was the rejection of dogma and primacy of concrete analysis over abstract evaluation. Or, stated slightly differently, the replacement of general rules by an emphasis on the characteristics and consequences of the position at hand. In this respect, it is interesting to consider the recent books of super-trainer GM Mark Dvoretsky, which are making a huge impression on the European and American chess worlds. Among the many ideas and practical techniques he presents in his books, a powerful and consistent theme (and interestingly, the one singled out for praise by Kasparov) is the value of 'the analytic approach', which assigns paramount value to actual analysis. It would be hard to think of a modern world-class player who does not take this approach.

There is another way to answer the question 'Is modern chess less principled?'. A more radical response is to say that there are, indeed, a great number of new principles and even 'rules' *implicit* in modern play. But these principles and rules have not been explicitly stated; or in a very few cases, they have been stated, but not in a way that has infiltrated the conscious thinking of contemporary players. The reasons for this

lack of exposition are quite simple: the subtlety and complexity of such new principles would tend to require pages of painstakingly qualified prose for them to be adequately described, and it is both more natural and efficient for players to simply internalize this type of 'rule' during the over-the-board solution of hundreds of relevant positions. In fact, it may be said of any chess rule that the concrete experience of an individual player gives him a more accurate and subtle understanding of its application than any conceivable verbal statement could.

Regardless of which of these two apparently opposing models we prefer, the days of easily expressible general guidelines are over. Thus, there is very little possibility that players or researchers will ever undertake to extend the project begun by Steinitz, Tarrasch, and Nimzowitsch, that is, the codification of chess principles on a large scale. Ironically, although chess students are always warned to see the big picture rather than get lost in a morass of variations, the reality is that the modern player derives his *perspective and intuition* from the detailed analysis of great numbers of positions. When you combine this fact with the growing irrelevance of so many of the classical rules, it is hardly surprising that writers are reluctant even to address the subject of modern principles, preferring to give examples of modern play which they deem typical.

Methodology

In light of the above, the very attempt to elucidate modern chess in general terms may seem old-fashioned and misguided. And yet, our modern literature of games collections, annotated games, and magazine articles reveals a large pool of profound and revealing comments by strong players about new and subtle ways of thinking about the game. Even more powerfully, their games themselves speak to us. It is still possible to discover general wisdom in the mass of modern practice; we simply have to realize that the new ideas will be more qualified and specific than the bold and often discredited generalities of former times. Furthermore, there is a dynamic interconnectedness in chess which needs be taken into account; thus, modern guidelines will often have more to do with techniques, sequences and procedures than with static rules.

To address such a complex subject, I have chosen to divide my discussion into two rather arbitrary parts. Part 1 of this book will review classical theory, and examine how certain traditional theoretical issues have been resolved or transformed in modern chess. The advances discussed will be in the broader sense 'evolutionary'; we want to see what revisions and extensions of older theory can be described without scrapping old models or resorting to a new and potentially burdensome vocabulary. Part 2 tries to address the more 'revolutionary' ideas of the modern age. Many of these ideas involve the complete rejection of older rules, rather than their mere revision. Naturally, this distinction is rather arbitrary, and an overlapping of topics is inevitable; just for example, the treatment of doubled and tripled pawns in Part 1, Chapter 4, could probably have fitted into Part 2 as well. While on the subject of how 'revolutionary' a chess idea is, it might be useful to consider the historical role of Nimzowitsch's work. If one reviews the writings of Steinitz and Tarrasch, and games ranging from those of the nineteenth-century masters to Nimzowitsch's contemporaries, one can make the case that almost everything explicated and categorized in *My System* can be found in the previous literature and games. On top of that, Nimzowitsch's own games are often unconvincing evidence for his own principles; one could argue (and it has been said) that Nimzowitsch more often won his games by superior calculation and even trickery than by application of his principles. But the enormity of his achievement resides in something else entirely; it is in transforming the underlying, implicit principles of the chess played up to his time into an explicit, conscious part of modern chess-players' thought. Steinitz had done this with certain concepts such as the bishop-pair, pawn weaknesses, queenside majority, and other positional principles and techniques. Nimzowitsch either invented or brought into general use fundamental concepts such as the blockade, seventh rank, outposts, prophylaxis, the treatment of pawn-chains and doubled pawns, and many others. The fact that other chess-players had utilized such concepts in

their games (or for that matter, played various hypermodern openings) is hardly relevant, since they did so for the most part randomly and unsystematically.

Likewise, just about any 'modern' chess idea expounded upon in this book can be found in some game or other prior to 1935; but these ideas had not become the conscious (and everyday) property of the world's leading players. To give a simple example (only because it is more easily stated in a few words than most of the ideas we will be dealing with), the sacrifice of the exchange obviously occurred well before the Soviet masters took a particular liking to it in the 1940s and 1950s; but it was neither a frequent occurrence nor a part of the chess consciousness of the times. Similarly, the notion of attacking pawn-chains at the front of the chain (and not at the base) certainly occurred prior to modern times; but it is now a conscious part of the chess-player's arsenal, and is employed in certain familiar and well-defined contexts. Other changes are more general, for example new ideas about time and development, dynamism, modern prophylaxis, and such things. I would contend that such advances are meaningful and real, despite the difficulty in describing them.

Beginning with the next chapter, then, our task in Part 1 will be to present sketches of older theory and to show what has changed, while remaining in the context of the old formulations. I will try to do this by following, to some extent, the order of exposition in Nimzowitsch's *My System*. Furthermore, I will try to consider what Nimzowitsch himself said about a particular area first, before addressing what others before and after him thought. This is primarily a stylistic device, and due to the limited relevance of a number of topics in *My System*, it will be only a general guideline. It is important to remember that, since the subjects addressed are ones connected with particular new ideas in modern chess, this book is by no means comprehensive. The reader should not expect a primer or general work on positional chess; but rather, an exposition of certain topics which illustrate the advances of modern theory.

Without further ado, then, let's turn to the chess itself!

2 The Centre and Development

Any discussion of positional strategy must take into account issues of the centre. Consequently, this whole book will be concerned with conceptions of the centre and its treatment. But middlegame books like to emphasize certain elementary aspects of the centre in isolation. One example is the occupation of the centre by pawns and the potential for a central pawn advance. Another is the value of quick development and centralized pieces. Let's first take a look at what Nimzowitsch said about these topics, and then relate that to some modern issues.

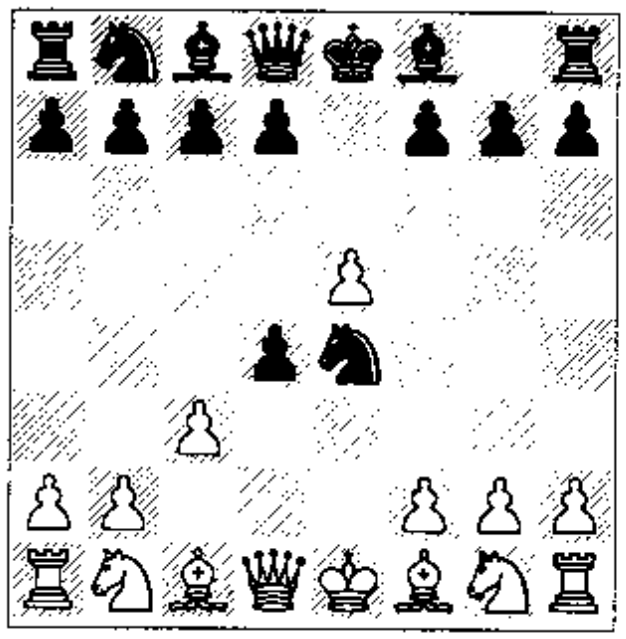
The Centre and Tempi

In *My System*, Nimzowitsch begins with a chapter called 'On the Centre and Development'. It is important to realize that the beginning of his book is to some extent an introduction to chess. It therefore includes a number of elementary 'rules' for the student, some of which Nimzowitsch himself did not adhere to. These rules, however, are reflective of the chess theory of his time, and thus of interest to us. In Part 2 of *My System*, Nimzowitsch's introductory chapter ('The Conception of Position Play and the Problem of the Centre') revisits the issues of centre and development in a more sophisticated fashion.

To begin with, Nimzowitsch addresses the traditional issue of using the centre to gain time. It is perhaps characteristic that this great hypermodern, with no special love of space or aggressive central pawn-masses, seems amusingly uncomfortable with the classical virtues of the centre. In Chapter 1, he imparts a curious lesson, beginning with the moves 1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 c3 ♘f6! 4 e5 ♘e4 *(D)*. The knight on e4, he says, "can maintain himself here, for 5 ♗d3 will be answered by 5...d5. Not, of course, a further wandering by 5...♘c5?, for after this move, 6 cxd4 ♘xd3+ 7 ♕xd3 would yield an advantage of four tempi to White."

This last variation is peculiar. Four tempi or not, 7...d5! leaves Black with two bishops and a

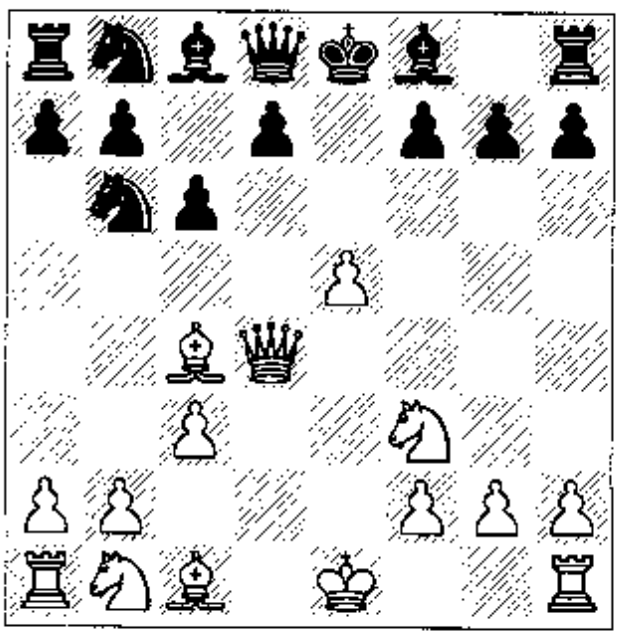
W



healthy share of the centre (and it is White's 'good' bishop which has just been devoured). Most players would be quite content here as Black. (In fact, 5 ♕e2! is usually recommended instead of 5 ♗d3, but that is just a detail).

Nimzowitsch continues: "On the other hand, after 1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 c3 ♘f6! 4 e5, it would not be advantageous to move the knight to d5, for the poor beast would not find any rest there: 4...♘d5? 5 ♕xd4 c6 6 ♗c4 ♘b6 7 ♘f3 *(D)*.

B

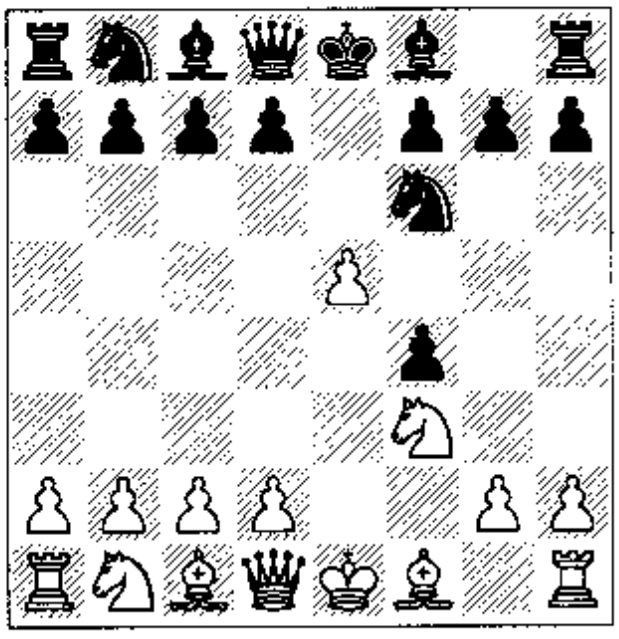


"White has six tempi as against two or one and a half, for the knight is not better placed at b6 than f6, and the move ...c6 is not really a whole tempo, since no move of a central pawn is here in question."

This assessment is really egregious. Where have those valuable tempi gone after 7...♘xc4 8 ♕xc4 d5, again with the two bishops, and with Black about to catch up in the number of minor pieces developed? Indeed, in order not to be worse, White had better try 9 exd6 ♗xd6 10 ♗g5, when Black can equalize by either 10...♗e7 or 10...♕c7 11 ♕e4+ ♗e6 12 ♘d4 0-0! 13 ♘xe6 ♖e8, etc.

This unfortunate start to one of the most brilliant chess books ever written dovetails nicely with one of the main themes of the current work. In chess, I will contend, our judgement is dulled by the use of artificial rules. Independence from such rules, moreover, is a crucial characteristic of modern chess thought. In the case before us, Nimzowitsch is caught counting tempi, utilizing the type of 'arithmetical' conception of the game of which he himself was derisive. In fact, a highly qualitative view of development, disregarding facile principles, permeates his actual play. In this context, the very next example in *My System* is noteworthy. It begins with a King's Gambit: 1 e4 e5 2 f4 exf4 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 e5 *(D)*.

B



Nimzowitsch explains: "here is an exceptional case where the square h5 is a satisfying one (as a rule, border squares are not favourable for knights), e.g., 4...♘h5 5 d4 d5 (or 5...d6) ..., and Black does not stand badly."

What he says is quite true; but it is a funny example for someone trying to teach about the classical centre! Rather, we have the beginnings of a modern view of play. Above all, the typical modern master has a pragmatic view of things: instead of counting tempi or worrying about whether knights belong on the rim in the abstract, he concentrates on what works. This will be a theme throughout our investigation, and is particularly expanded upon in Part 2. Along the lines of 4...♘h5, pragmatic knight moves to the edge of the board are abundant in modern chess, a rather amusing example being the current grandmasterly attention being given to the move 5 ♘a4!? after 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5. That may seem a bit strange, but more reliable examples will be found in Part 2, Chapter 5 ('The Contemporary Knight').

How did Nimzowitsch view the relationship between pawn moves and development? Here are two of his pronouncements (still from the more elementary portion of his book):

"In the open game, speed of development is the very first law. Every piece must be developed in one move. Every pawn move is to be regarded as loss of time, unless it helps to build or support the centre or attack the enemy's centre. Hence, as Lasker truly observes: in the opening, one or two pawn moves, not more.

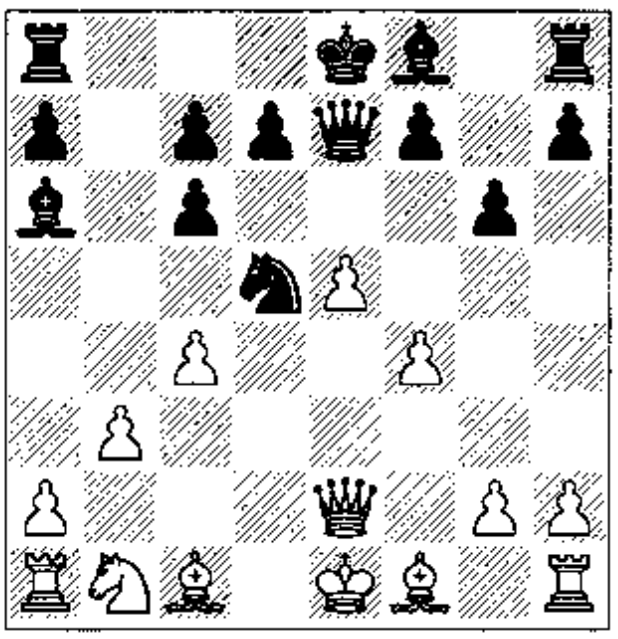
"...it follows that moves of the flank pawns must be regarded as a loss of time – with this qualification, that in closed games the rule applies to only a limited extent, since contact with the enemy is not complete..."

The modern view of these matters is quite different, of course. Whether in closed, semi-open, or open positions, flank pawn moves are regularly employed for a variety of reasons, e.g., the establishment of space, the discouragement of castling by the opponent, or the launching of a minority attack. Pieces are moved any number of times, if necessary, to achieve strategic goals. And the number of pawn moves in the opening can range from one to eight or more, depending upon the requirements of the position.

Even in the traditional 'open games' (a designation for games beginning with 1 e4 e5), completing one's development can be superseded by a number of prophylactic pawn moves, as well as by pawn moves which are necessary to establish structural advantages. In the revitalized Scotch Game, for example, White seemingly neglects development in several lines, such as 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 exd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘xc6 bxc6 6 e5 (to establish

space) 6...♕e7 7 ♕e2 ♘d5 8 c4 (to dislodge the knight or lure the c8-bishop to a potentially poor square) 8...♗a6 9 b3 (securing c4, and contemplating ♗a3) 9...g6 10 f4 (still not touching any of those five undeveloped pieces!) with this position *(D)*:

B



White's last pawn move (10 f4) prepares not to bring another piece out, but to move the queen again! For example, 10...♗g7 11 ♕f2, and now Black's pieces are all developed, but his knight would be extremely cramped after 11...♘b6, whereas on 11...♘f6, White's structure allows him to catch up in development quickly by, among other lines, 12 ♗e2 d6 13 ♗f3 0-0 14 0-0 ♗b7 15 ♗a3 ♘d7 16 ♘d2 and Black's problems are suddenly enormous. Regardless of the further play, this line features six moves by pawns out of the first ten, at which point White's only developed piece was his queen!

Not surprisingly, openings which are more modern routinely defy Nimzowitsch's rules above. I can't think of anyone who would consider the Najdorf Sicilian a 'closed game' (consider the number of violent mating attacks by White which have occurred within the first 20 moves); and yet, Black can make a considerable number of further pawn moves with only one or two pieces out after 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6, for example, ...e5, ...h6 (to prevent ♗g5 and thus guard d5), ...b5 (to prepare ...♗b7, prevent ♗c4, and in some cases, advance by ...b4) might all follow shortly, making seven pawn moves before the development of the other pieces begins in earnest (and often, one of the first pieces moved is the queen, to c7, violating the often-stated principle that early queen moves are undesirable).

Structure takes precedence over development in a number of modern contexts. Turning to an example that illustrates a general contempt for classical rules, a perfectly respectable Modern Defence line goes:

1 e4 g6 2 d4 d6 3 ♘c3 c6!? 4 f4 d5 5 e5 h5 6 ♘f3 ♗g4 7 ♗e3

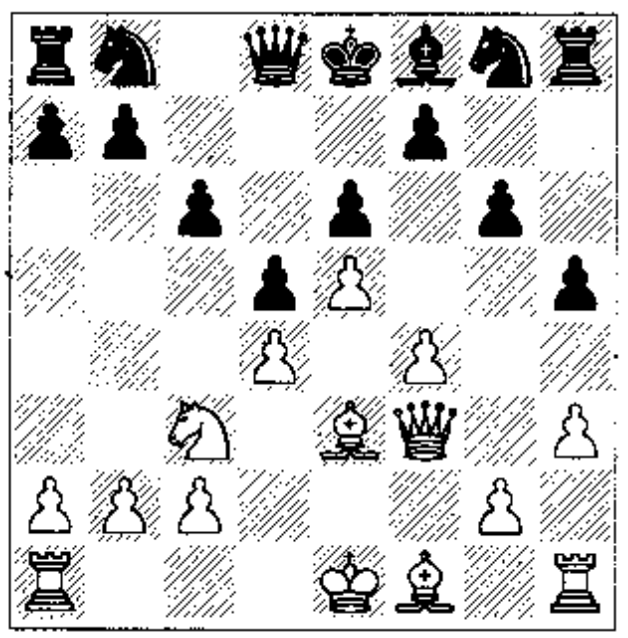
Of course, we're now in the area of closed openings. Notice that 7 h3 ♗xf3 8 ♕xf3 e6 9 ♗d3 c5 would be the ideal counter-example to Lasker's 'one or two pawn moves' rule. Then Black would have made seven pawn moves, with every one of his pieces on its original square, and yet he would probably stand better! Why? Because White's d4 is untenable, and Black's pieces will all have good squares when they finally develop: knights on c6 and f5, queen on b6, etc. 7 ♗e3 is more accurate, since it protects the centre and prepares 0-0-0.

7...e6

By not playing ...♗g7 on move two or three, Black now has the bishop where it belongs, i.e., on f8 supporting ...c5. He has wasted one move by playing ...d6 first and then ...d5, but gained two (because ...♗g7-f8 would have been necessary had Black opened with, e.g., 1 e4 g6 2 d4 ♗g7 3 ♘c3 c6 4 f4 d5 5 e5 h5 6 ♘f3 ♗g4 7 ♗e3 e6). A typical modern finesse.

8 h3 ♗xf3 9 ♕xf3 *(D)*

B



9...♕b6

Black finally brings out a piece, and it is ... the queen!

10 0-0-0 ♘d7 11 ♔b1 h4

Back to pawn moves. Now White's kingside pawns are immobilized.

12 ♘e2

White later discovered ideas like 12 g4!? hxg3 13 h4, intending h5, to open lines for his bishops, with unclear prospects.

12...♘e7 13 ♘c1 ♘f5 14 ♗f2 a5 15 c3 c5

The ninth pawn move out of 15! This not only pressures d4, but in some cases, it sets up ...a4-a3 and ...c4, or a traditional pawn-storm by ...c4 and ...b5-b4. These ideas might have got us to something like 13 pawn moves out of 19; but White ruins our fun with his next move:

16 dxc5 ♗xc5 17 ♘d3 ♗xf2 18 ♕xf2 ♕xf2 19 ♘xf2 g5!

With the collapse of White's pawn-chain, Black obtains a clear advantage.

20 ♗b5 gxf4 21 ♘d3 0-0-0 22 ♗xd7+ ♔xd7 23 ♘xf4 ♔e7

From a 1992 game Manion-Norwood. White simply has to stand by while Black plays ...♖hg8-g5, ...♖c8, ...b5, and at the appropriate moment, ...♘g3-e4, surrounding the e-pawn and creating too many threats. The lesson: there may be games in which one should make only two pawn moves and develop a new piece with every move, but there are so many 'exceptions' that to take such a guideline to heart would merely limit one's strength as a player. To wrap up this section, here's an amusing example to show how White can flaunt the rules as well: Kosten-Lucas, Tours 1996: 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 d6 3 ♘c3 e5 4 ♘f3 e4 5 ♘g5 ♗f5 6 g3!? h6 7 ♘h3 c6 8 ♘f4 ♘bd7 9 ♘g2!? d5 10 ♘e3. At this point, White has moved his king's knight six times in the first ten moves, but as Kosten says, White appears to have a small advantage anyway! He has good pressure on the centre, and can play for ♗g2, 0-0, and f3 with a positional edge. While this is admittedly on the extreme side, modern players increasingly discover positions in which structure takes precedence over development, especially when the meaning of the latter term is limited by rules such as 'move each piece only once in the opening'.

Pawn-Grabbing in the Opening

About this topic, Nimzowitsch says: "What, therefore, the inexperienced player, young or old, must take to heart is the commandment: *Never play to win a pawn while your development is as yet unfinished*!" He then goes on to give this exception: "A centre pawn should always be taken if this can be done without too great danger ... for thus you will get the possibility of expansion at the very spot around which in the opening stages the fight usually sways, namely the centre."

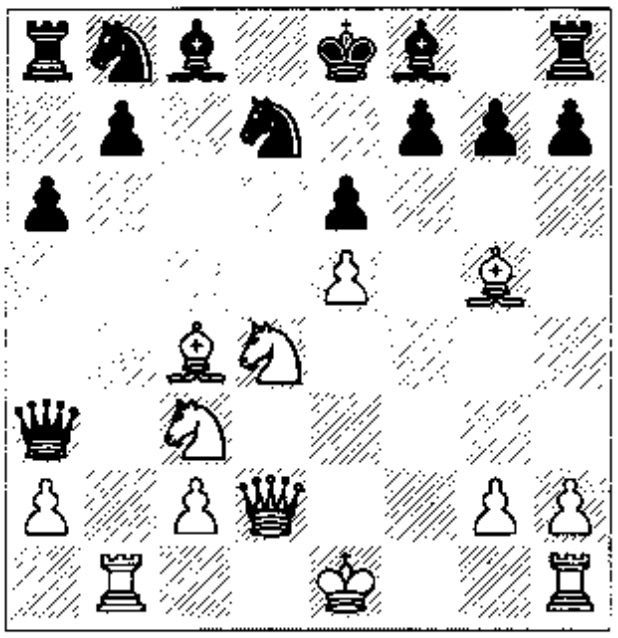
Once again, this advice is explicitly directed to the amateur. And yet, leading chess masters during Nimzowitsch's time (say, from 1910 to 1935) were disinclined to go hunting for pawns in the opening. Here, too, the modern view is distinctly more liberal. Centre pawns are still captured when possible, but flank pawn raids are also common from the outset of the game. Let's see if we can understand why. In the first place, the capture of a flank pawn often involves more than the mere trade of material for time and development. Frequently, the disappearance of a flank pawn undermines the gambiteer's interior defences, or it can allow a cramping spatial advantage for the grabber, since his pawns may advance on the same side of board with less resistance.

This is best explained by examples. Beginning with a very famous and complex one, let's consider the so-called 'Poisoned Pawn' line of the Sicilian Defence, Najdorf Variation: 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗g5 e6 7 f4 ♕b6 8 ♕d2 ♕xb2 9 ♖b1 ♕a3.

This variation is so established that we forget how utterly bizarre and suicidal the idea of grabbing White's b-pawn once looked. Black has only the f6-knight developed, and even it is subject to attack by e5. What's more, the queen on a3 will surely lose even more time retreating from attack by the white pieces. Consider the now nearly-forgotten line 10 e5 dxe5 11 fxe5 ♘fd7 12 ♗c4 *(D)*.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, White won a series of brilliant miniatures from this position. After all, he has six very active pieces out versus Black's lone knight and queen, the latter of which is about to lose more time to ♖b3 or even to some ♘b5 shot. Worse still, after 0-0, taking over the open f-file, sacrifices on e6 and f7 appear too dangerous for Black to even contemplate allowing. All for one pawn, and for a cramped position in which mate can come from almost any direction (as the continuation

B



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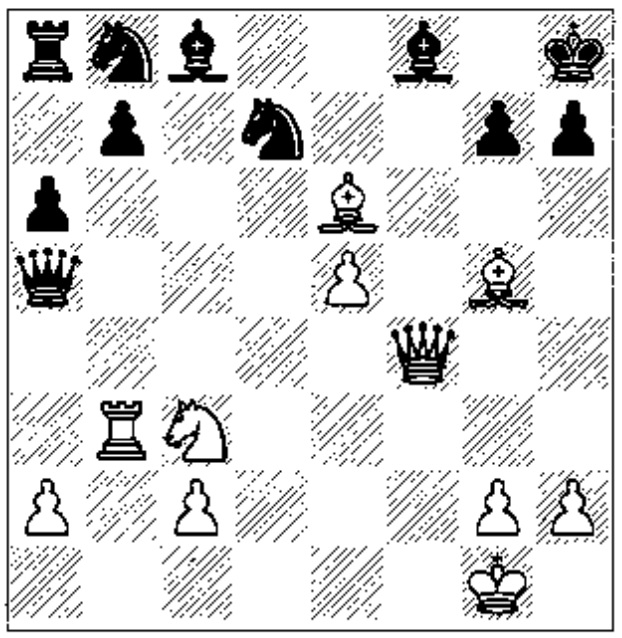


12...♘xe5? 13 ♘xe6!, leading to a quick denouement, shows).

Referring to this Poisoned Pawn Variation (after 8...♕xb2), the brilliant, classically-oriented grandmaster Salo Flohr commented, even as late as 1972: "In chess, there is an old rule: in the opening, one must make haste to develop the pieces, and must not move the same piece several times, particularly the queen. This ancient law holds good even for Bobby Fischer." Note that Flohr speaks of 'rules' and 'laws', which are precisely the constructs the modern player increasingly rejects. This variation is a perfect example, especially in that the Poisoned Pawn Najdorf was a precursor of many similar endeavours by both Black and White, and symbolic of a new attitude towards chess. Master players (most prominently Fischer, but also a number of innovative Soviet players before him) gradually adopted the attitude that these positions have nothing to do with rules or general principles, and everything to do with concrete analysis. If Black can take the pawn and win points, they concluded, anything goes. In the case before us, much of what matters can be worked out at home, and I recall that Fischer, for example, was said to have taken only a few minutes to play this game as Black against Tringov in Havana 1965 (from the diagram): 12...♗b4 13 ♖b3 ♕a5 14 0-0 0-0 15 ♘xe6 fxe6 16 ♗xe6+ ♔h8 17 ♖xf8+ ♗xf8 18 ♕f4 *(D)*.

Doesn't this game look like Alekhine versus Amateur, random simultaneous? And would any of the Old Masters after 1900 allow such things as Black? And yet: 18...♘c6! 19 ♕f7 ♕c5+ 20 ♔h1 ♘f6! (and Black wins!) 21 ♗xc8 ♘xe5 22 ♕e6 ♘eg4 0-1.

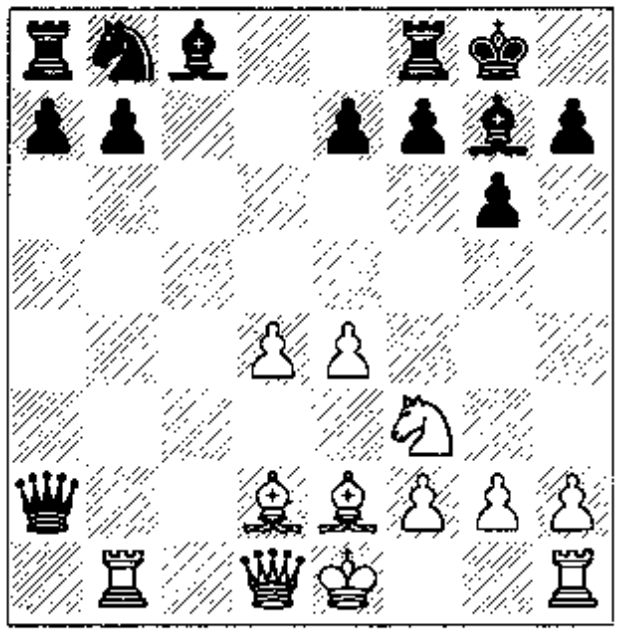
To this day, the Poisoned Pawn Variation is the main deterrent to White's 6 ♗g5 and 7 f4. When White does allow 7...♕b6, he tends to adopt more positional means (8 ♘b3, avoiding the gambit, is often played, and if the gambit is offered by 8 ♕d2, the move 10 f5 is usually chosen, with strategic aims taking precedence over immediate checkmating attempts). Kasparov, among others, continues to champion Black's position, and 6 ♗g5 has seriously declined in popularity.

Let's say that you wanted to justify this excursion (7...♕b6 and 8...♕xb2) theoretically. One might point to the first part of the explanation I gave above, i.e., that White's interior defence is compromised by the capture on b2, so he is obliged to defend c3, and loose pieces such as the bishop on c4 and knight on d4 are subject to pressure from key central dark squares such as c5 and e5. I should add that such pawn-grabs are not always a matter of homework; intuition and detailed over-the-board analysis often suffice to convince the pawn-hunter to take a chance. But in general, the attempt to codify in words how and when one may go about such raids is doomed to failure. Analysis and practice decide.

Let's look at some other examples of flank-pawn raids:

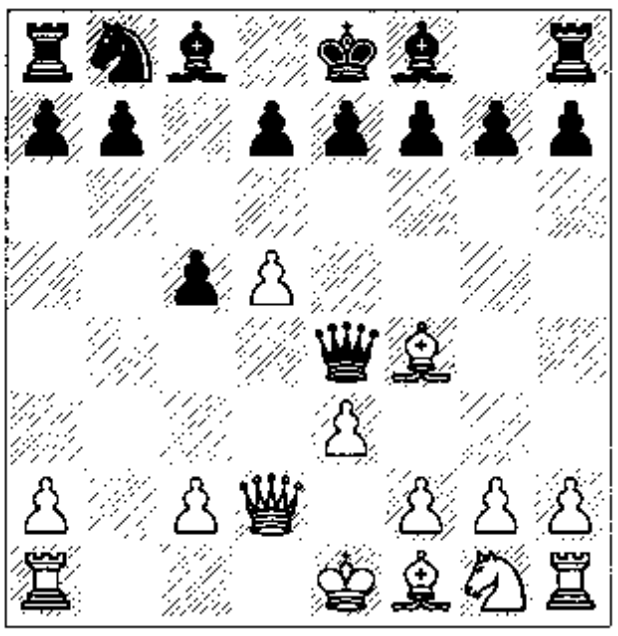
The following position arises from a Grünfeld Defence following the moves 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 e4 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 ♗g7 7 ♘f3 c5 8 ♖b1 0-0 9 ♗e2 cxd4 10 cxd4 ♕a5+ 11 ♗d2 ♕xa2 *(D)*. It is another example of an early queen excursion (with only one other piece developed) to grab a flank pawn. After about a dozen years of intense

W



practice and theoretical work, it is still one of the main lines of the entire Grünfeld Defence. Black seems to be holding his own theoretically, but White is by no means backing down from the challenge (or fun?) of trying to punish his opponent's impudence.

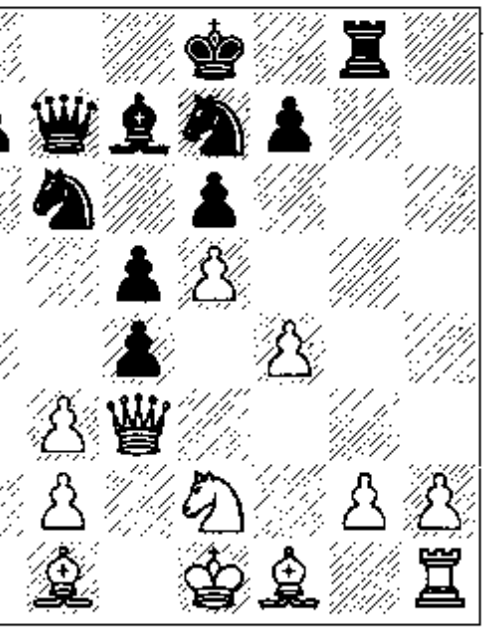
B



Here, again, Black has gone after the b2-pawn. This is from a Trompowsky Attack line which in itself contains some modern ideas of note: 1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♗g5 (bishops before knights!) 2...♘e4 3 ♗f4 c5 4 d5 ♕b6 5 ♘d2!? ♕xb2 6 ♘xe4 ♕b4+ 7 ♕d2 ♕xe4 (again, Black has no pieces out and hasn't even moved a centre pawn...) 8 e3. How to assess this position? White has space, superior development, and the prospect of kicking the queen around a bit more. Nevertheless, Black's weakness-free position is considered at least playable by theory.

The next position is from the main-line 7 ♕g4 Winawer French with 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♗b4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 ♗xc3+ 6 bxc3 ♘e7 7 ♕g4 ♕c7 8 ♕xg7 ♖g8 9 ♕xh7 cxd4 10 ♘e2

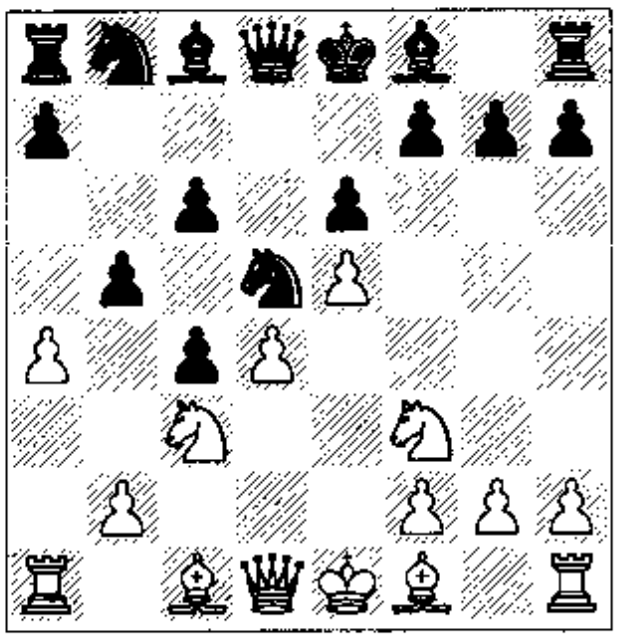
B

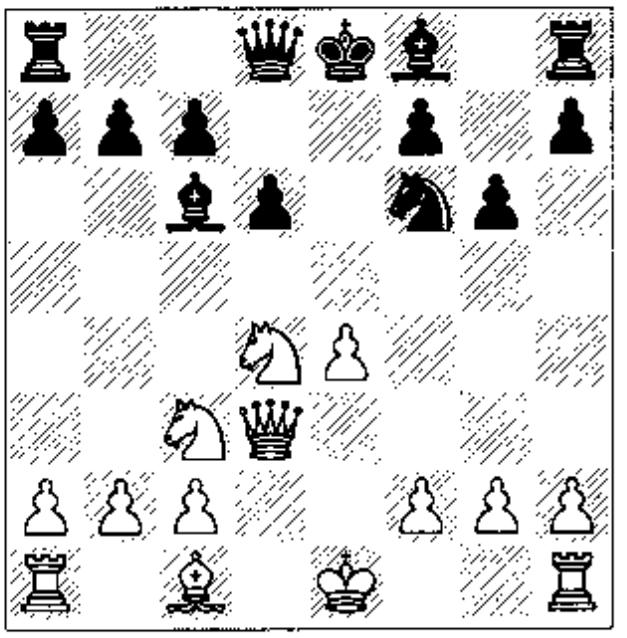


♘bc6 11 f4 ♗d7 12 ♕d3. Like the Poisoned Pawn Najdorf, it is an old and thoroughly-analysed position. White decides that turnabout is fair play in the flank-pawn-grabbing business. By consuming the g- and h-pawns at considerable cost of time (no pieces out, as usual), he will not only gain material (assuming, for example, that Black at some point captures on c3 and White recaptures), but he also destroys Black's interior defence on the kingside (f6 is a glaring hole, and White's h-pawn is passed). Black, on the other hand, has superior development, with open files on that same kingside. He also has an extra centre pawn and play down the c-file, once White captures on c3. Years of experience and thousands of games have taught that White must suffer for his excursion, but that if Black's attack fails, the second player will sometimes succumb to the two bishops in an ending. This line is still evolving, and its theoretical verdict is still 'unclear', suggesting at the very least that White has not violated any valid general principles with his pawn-hunting.

Moving away from queen pirating raids for a moment, there are any number of openings in which one side grabs a pawn on the flank and then defends it. The diagram on the following page comes from the Slav Defence: 1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 dxc4 5 e4!? b5 6 e5 ♘d5 7 a4 e6 *(D)*.

But in fact, there are a slew of such lines in the Réti, other Slavs, and the Queen's Gambit Accepted (e.g., 1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 dxc4 4 ♘f3 b5 5 g3 e6, 1 d4 d5 2 c4 dxc4 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 a6 5 e4 b5 6 e5 ♘d5, and 1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 e6 5 ♗g5 dxc4 6 e4 b5). We won't dwell on the details here, but it's worth





pointing out that Black isn't giving up the centre and his development (see that c8-bishop?) for a pawn alone. He also hopes that his pawn-mass on the queenside will exert a cramping influence on White's development, and will eventually be turned into a decisive passed pawn or two. The price he pays is to be subjected to an attack, which accounts for White's willingness to enter such lines. Both sides' assessments are pragmatic ones, based as always upon concrete analysis. Very few masters will play such lines unprepared! But unlike the queen raids described above, this type of pawn-grab does have an honourable predecessor from the nineteenth century, namely the King's Gambit (1 e4 e5 2 f4 exf4 3 ♘f3 d6 4 d4 g5, for example).

To conclude this section, let's take a look at a long-standing debate about the following flank-pawn grab:

Nimzowitsch – Capablanca

St Petersburg 1914

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♗b5 d6 5 d4 ♗d7 6 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 7 ♕d3 exd4 8 ♘xd4 g6 *(D)*

This is a fun example for more than one reason. Capablanca was certainly no great fan of the fianchetto (only marginally more so than the other great players of his day), but he does indicate in his writings that he favoured the fianchetto in Ruy Lopez-like positions where ...exd4 had been played. That he was willing to expend time in this fashion is a bit surprising, since Steinitz and even Nimzowitsch, in similar positions, tended to urge restraint of the e4-pawn by ...♗e7, ...0-0, ...♖e8 and ...♗f8. And in this particular case, the move practically loses a pawn by force.

9 ♘xc6

Coincidentally, an article by Kasparov in *ChessBase Magazine* about precisely this contest just fell into my hands (as we will see, this game has attracted attention for many years). He claims that 8...g6 is dubious because White can continue with 9 ♗g5 ♗g7 10 0-0-0, e.g., 10...h6 (10...0-0? 11 ♘xc6 bxc6 12 e5! dxe5 13 ♕f3 wins) 11 ♗h4 0-0 12 f4, when 12...♖e8 loses to 13 ♘xc6 bxc6 14 e5, etc. Nimzowitsch goes after a pawn instead.

9...bxc6 10 ♕a6 ♕d7

What else? 10...c5? 11 ♕c6+ ♘d7 12 ♗g5! is just awful.

11 ♕b7 ♖c8 12 ♕xa7

So White is a pawn up. Was this an intentional sacrifice? McDonald, in his book *Positional Sacrifices*, frames the issue nicely by reviewing historical opinion and adding his own:

"... Euwe remarks at move 8 that 'it was not so difficult to see the loss of a pawn by force in two or three moves, but Capablanca apparently did not imagine that such a thing could happen in the solid Steinitz Defence of the Ruy Lopez. Capablanca's mistakes are just as clear as his good moves.'

"Neither Nimzowitsch nor Euwe could comprehend that Capablanca had *deliberately* sacrificed the pawn. Euwe calls it an 'accident with a happy ending'. Capablanca himself saw things differently: 'I believe [Nimzowitsch] has been unjustly criticized for losing the game ... [the critics] have all suggested moves here and there; but the games of the great masters are not

played by single moves, but must be played by connected plans of attack and defence, and these they have not given.'" [remarks and italics are McDonald's; the Capablanca quote is from *My Chess Career*].

McDonald goes on to explain that, as opposed to Nimzowitsch and Euwe, "any modern player would appreciate the value of Capablanca's concept", an interesting claim. I might rephrase this to assert that, in addition, any modern player would recognize Black's main threats in the position, and probably defend a great deal better than Nimzowitsch subsequently does!

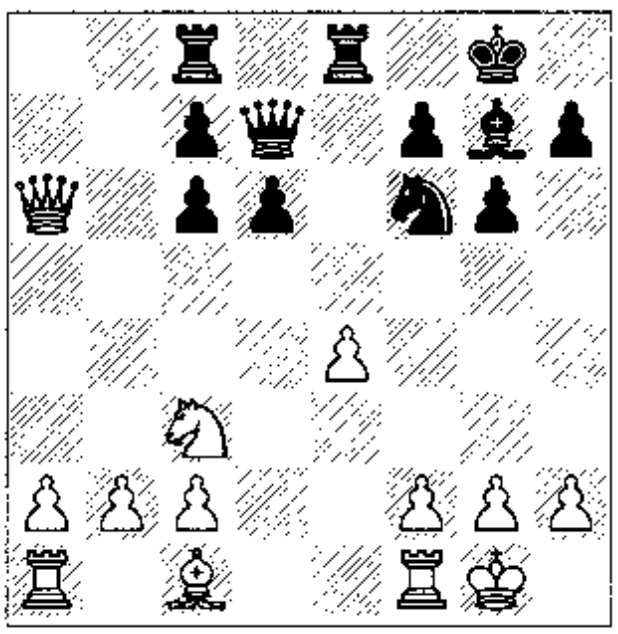
12...♗g7 13 0-0 0-0

McDonald maps out a further course for Black (put the rooks on the open queenside files and manoeuvre a knight to c4), and he believes that White lacks a good plan, which he (correctly) calls one of the 'key features of a positional sacrifice', i.e., that while the sacrificer can improve his position, his opponent has difficulty doing the same.

But is it true in this case? I marked this position for further study while reading his book, because it didn't seem plausible that Black had enough for a pawn. Remarkably, I was later browsing through Dvoretsky and Yusupov's *Training For the Tournament Player*, and found a short but excellent commentary by Shereshevsky on this very topic.

14 ♕a6 ♖fe8 *(D)*

W



Here Nimzowitsch played 15 ♕d3 ♕e6 16 f3, and after 16...♘d7 17 ♗d2 ('?' Kasparov, who gives 17 ♗f4 ♘e5 18 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 19 ♖ab1) 17...♘e5 18 ♕e2 ♘c4, Black had a great deal of pressure (...♖a8 and ...♖eb8 will follow), and went on to win. A Benko Gambiteer would be particularly happy here as Black.

But Shereshevsky writes: "I found the right explanation for what happened in Znosko-Borovsky's book [*The Middlegame in Chess*]. He writes that if your opponent has a lead in time (in development) but you have extra material, in no circumstances should you divert to defensive duties any pieces which are exerting pressure on the enemy position. Such pieces may be placed perilously, involving some risk, but they prevent the opponent from manoeuvring freely. From the a6-square the queen attacks the pawn on c6 and prevents Black from regrouping with ...♕e6, ...♘d7, ...♘b6(e5), and ...♘c4. The correct move was 15 f3!. It is necessary to reckon with the reply ...♖a8, but then White may play ♕c4. The essence of the matter consists in not removing the queen from a position where it is attacking the c6-square."

He then compares this position to a Poisoned Pawn Najdorf, in which the black queen on b2 or a3 is subject to attack, but also 'prevents White from manoeuvring freely'.

What to make of all this? In the first place, I don't believe that Capablanca intentionally sacrificed the pawn. It is hardly in his style, and I personally don't believe that the sacrifice is quite sound. Capablanca himself, a very proud man when it came to admitting mistakes, did not even claim to have sacrificed the pawn, and in fact, in his notes in *My Chess Career*, strongly implies that he just moved quickly and lost a pawn. He calls 8...g6 "a novel idea, brought out at the spur of the moment". It is interesting that Kasparov, perhaps following the lead of other annotators, simply assumes that Capablanca sacrificed the pawn intentionally, calling it 'a profound concept'. This is a little strange, since he also thinks that 8...g6 should have led to a large disadvantage against White's most natural moves (see his note to White's 9th move).

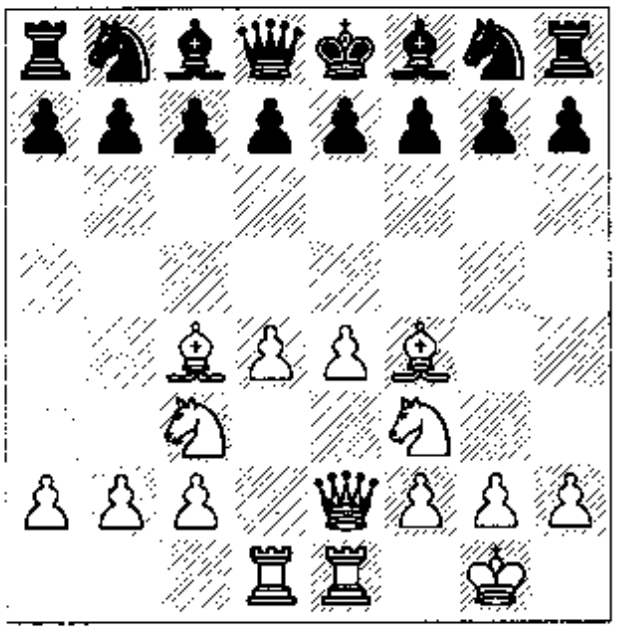
In any case, this rift of opinion is fascinating, but not very important. As for the position itself, I have looked at Shereshevsky's 15 f3! at some length, and personally believe that, although Black has some compensation for the pawn, it is not sufficient. At some point, unable to achieve the ...♘d7-e5-c4 idea efficiently, he probably has to play ...d5, and there can easily

result an ending which only White can hope to win.

More interesting still is Znosko-Borovsky's defensive 'principle'. This rather subtle notion is an example of the sort of context-sensitive rule which could still be relevant in modern chess, as opposed to the sweeping generalities of old. Sometimes, of course, hightailing it back home with that exposed queen is in fact the right thing to do, and the first step in a successful consolidation. In the Trompowsky variation cited above, for example, the idea ...♕b4, and after c3, ...♕a5, often followed by ...♕c7 or ...♕d8, is a good defensive strategy. Nevertheless, the prophylaxis exerted by the queens in Shereshevsky's two examples strikes me as both effective and typical of such positions.

The Really Big Centre

One of the most confusing aspects of positional chess involves the value and drawbacks of a large, mobile pawn-centre. Classical texts tend to emphasize that, if Black doesn't challenge the centre, White should at any rate play e4 and d4 and advance those pawns judiciously to cramp the opponent. For the record, by the way, classical theory seems to imply that if God were playing White, his goal would be to reach this position:



But not often addressed is the question of whether, given a free hand to play e4 and d4, White should also throw in f4 and/or c4. Interestingly, the first reaction to most modern black defences which don't commit a pawn to the fourth rank has historically been some attempt to throw three or more pawns forward to overrun the opponent's position. In the early days of the King's Indian Defence (in the 1920s), for example, the Four Pawns Attack was very popular: 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 ♗g7 4 e4 d6 5 f4. It never has been since. And when the Pirc Defence first gained acceptance (say, in the 1960s), White played the Austrian Attack (1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♘c3 g6 4 f4) often and with gusto; in those days, e5 tended to follow quickly, whereas today, White is more circumspect. Similarly, when the Modern Defence came upon the scene (late 1960s and early 1970s), the line 1 e4 g6 2 d4 ♗g7 3 ♘c3 d6 4 f4 was exhaustively analysed, whereas now White tends to play more modestly. Moving away from examples involving ...g6, the Four Pawns Attack against Alekhine's Defence (1 e4 ♘f6 2 e5 ♘d5 3 d4 d6 4 c4 ♘b6 5 f4) used to be far more popular than it is now. And in the Grünfeld Defence, the romantic age of f4s with g4s and/or f5s (as in Spassky-Fischer, Siegen Olympiad 1970: 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 e4 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 ♗g7 7 ♗c4 c5 8 ♘e2 ♘c6 9 ♗e3 0-0 10 0-0 ♕c7 11 ♖c1 ♖d8 12 h3 b6 13 f4 e6 14 ♕e1 ♘a5 15 ♗d3 f5 16 g4, etc.) has given way to more manageable central formations for White, such as c3/d4/e4/f2.

But there are exceptions. In confronting today's irregular openings, it may sometimes be best simply to abandon restraint and charge with the troops, as in this Karpov effort against the vaunted 'Kangaroo' opening:

Karpov – Miles
Biel 1992

1 d4 e6 2 c4 ♗b4+ 3 ♗d2 ♗xd2+ 4 ♕xd2 b6 5 ♘c3 ♗b7 6 e4 ♘h6 7 f4!

Going all-out; previous games had featured simple developing moves.

7...f5 8 e5 ♘f7 9 0-0-0 g5 10 ♘f3! ♖g8 11 ♗e2 ♘a6 12 h3 gxf4 13 ♕xf4 ♕e7 14 g4 fxg4 15 hxg4 ♘g5 16 d5

The pawns are paralysing Black, who lost rather quickly.

The Mobile Central Pawn-Mass

Overall, then, chess-players have drifted away from these mega-centres. This leaves open the

issue of how the treatment of a normal central pawn-mass (with, say, two leading pawns) has evolved. Let's start with what Nimzowitsch said. Speaking of the advance of centre pawns in one game, he says: "the pawn advance was no isolated, self-contained process. On the contrary, it derived its strength from the readiness of the pieces behind them to occupy central squares." This rings as true today as it did then. If one's pieces can't follow and support the attack, central pawn advances tend (with exceptions, of course) to be premature.

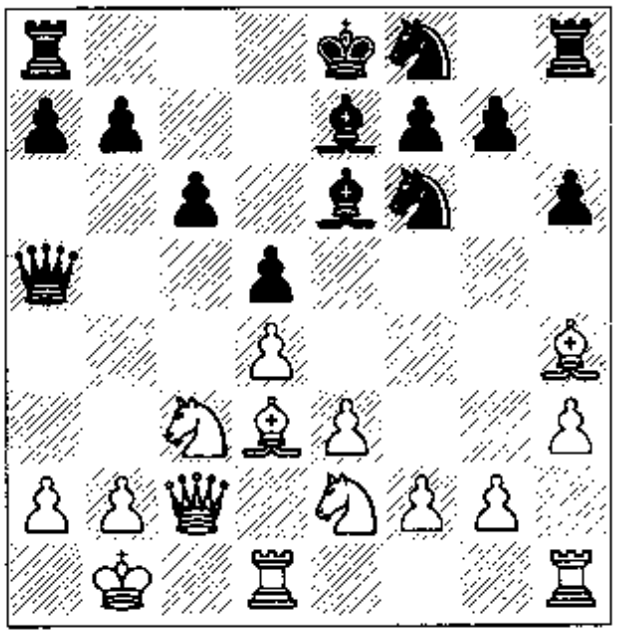
The Queen's Gambit Declined, Exchange Variation has long been an opening in which central pawn advances are common. Nimzowitsch himself, in his game as White against Romih, London 1927, played this line with a rather modern flair:

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♗g5

The modern order is 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♗g5.

4...♘bd7 5 e3 c6 6 cxd5 exd5 7 ♗d3 ♗d6 8 ♕c2 h6 9 ♗h4 ♕a5 10 0-0-0 ♗b4 11 ♘ge2 ♗e7 12 ♔b1 ♘f8 13 h3 ♗e6 *(D)*

W



14 f3!

The first step towards establishing a central pawn-roller.

14...a6 15 a3 ♗d7 16 ♗xf6! ♗xf6 17 e4 ♘e6 18 e5 ♗e7 19 f4

The pawns threaten to overrun Black's position.

19...♘c7 20 f5 ♘b5 21 ♖hf1 ♕b6 22 ♗xb5 axb5 23 ♘f4 b4 24 ♘cxd5!

Planned well in advance; this secures an even more mobile pawn-mass.

24...cxd5 25 ♘xd5 ♕a5 26 ♘c7+ ♔d8 27 ♘xa8 ♕xa8 28 d5

What pawns! The game ended nicely following 28...♕c8 29 ♕e4 ♖e8 30 ♖c1 ♕b8 31 e6 ♗b5 32 ♕d4 b6 33 d6! ♗f6 34 e7+ ♔d7 35 ♕d5 ♗xf1 36 ♕c6#. This would have been a good example for Nimzowitsch's pawn-centre chapter.

In Zurich 1934 (one year before our arbitrary 'modern' breakpoint), Euwe played the white side of a Nimzo-Indian against Bogoljubow in a similar fashion: 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♗b4 4 a3 ♗xc3+ 5 bxc3 c5 6 f3 d5 7 e3 ♘c6 8 cxd5 exd5 9 ♗d3 ♘e7 10 ♘e2 ♗f5 11 0-0 0-0 12 ♗xf5 ♘xf5 13 e4 dxe4 14 fxe4 ♘e7 15 ♕d3 ♘d7 16 ♗f4 and White had a clear advantage based on his mobile central pawns.

The basic pawn-roller concept expressed in these games appears frequently throughout modern chess. Although the treatment of such central pawns has become more sophisticated, it has not fundamentally changed since Nimzowitsch's time. Here's a more recent example, again from the Queen's Gambit:

Sadler – Murugan

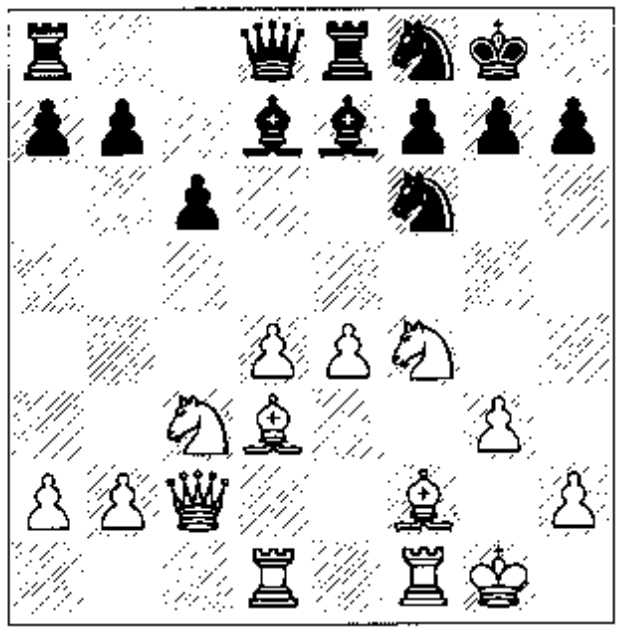
London 1993

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♗g5 c6 6 e3 ♗e7 7 ♗d3 0-0 8 ♕c2 ♘bd7 9 ♘ge2 ♖e8 10 0-0 ♘f8 11 f3 ♗e6 12 ♗h4 ♘6d7 13 ♗f2 ♗h4 14 g3 ♗e7 15 ♘f4

Not in any hurry to play for e4.

15...♘f6 16 ♖ad1 ♗d7 17 e4 dxe4 18 fxe4 *(D)*

B



The mobile pawn-centre.

18...♘g4 19 ♗c4 ♘e6 20 ♘xe6 ♗xe6 21 d5 cxd5 22 exd5 ♗d7 23 d6 ♗f6 24 ♘d5

White's passed pawn and space give him a large edge, although the play which follows is not perfect for either side.

24...♖c8 25 ♘c7!? ♘xf2 26 ♖xf2 ♖f8 27 ♕d3?! ♗g4 28 ♖e1 ♖xc7! 29 dxc7 ♕xc7

Worse is 29...♕xd3 30 ♗xd3 ♗d4 31 ♖e4 ♗xf2+ 32 ♔xf2 ♗e6 33 ♖d4.

30 ♕e4 ♗h5 31 ♗d3 ♗g6 32 ♕e3 ♕d6? 33 ♗xg6 ♗d4 34 ♗xf7+ 1-0

34...♖xf7 35 ♕xd4!.

Euwe and Kramer do an excellent job of classifying pawn centres according to type, and it might be interesting to compare older and modern treatments of a few of their classifications. In a chapter called 'Pawn Preponderance in the Centre', they discuss two formations of interest. The first is the 'Classic Centre' (e4/d4 versus a d6-pawn and no black e-pawn). Their example is an old Giuoco Piano game Leonhardt-Burn, Karlsbad 1911: 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗c4 ♗c5 4 c3 d6 5 d4 exd4 6 cxd4 ♗b6 7 ♘c3 ♘f6 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♗b3 (else ...♘xe4!) 9...♗g4 (the only critical move; otherwise h3 and where does this bishop go?) 10 ♗e3 h6 (10...♗xf3 11 gxf3 opens the g-file and permits a later f4; best was 10...♖e8! 11 ♕d3 ♗h5!, according to Euwe, who nevertheless gives 12 ♘d2 ♗g6 13 d5! ♘e5 14 ♕e2 with advantage; see a comparable idea in the next example) 11 ♕d3 ♖e8 12 ♘d2 ♕e7 13 ♖ae1 ♖ad8 14 a3 ♕f8 15 f4! (threatening f5 and h3) 15...♗c8 16 h3 ♔h8 17 g4! (using his central and spatial advantage to launch an attack) 17...♘e7 18 ♔h1 d5 19 e5 ♘h7 20 f5 f6 21 e6, and the pawn on e6 "cripples Black's whole army", in Euwe's words. White went on to win fairly easily.

Are we really any more 'advanced' in such positions today? Perhaps we have no greater understanding, but it must be said that modern players simply don't allow many such positions, and when they do, they tend to lash out for counterplay instead of being squeezed to death. Here's an analogous example from modern times:

Babula – Miladinović
Calicut 1993

1 d4 d5 2 c4 ♘c6 3 ♘f3 ♗g4 4 cxd5 ♗xf3 5 dxc6 ♗xc6 6 ♘c3 e6 7 e4

We have the same central situation as in Leonhardt-Burn above, but with a black e-pawn instead of a d-pawn. Note how from now on, Black ceaselessly tries to weaken and disturb White's structure, so as not to fall subject to that which befell Burn.

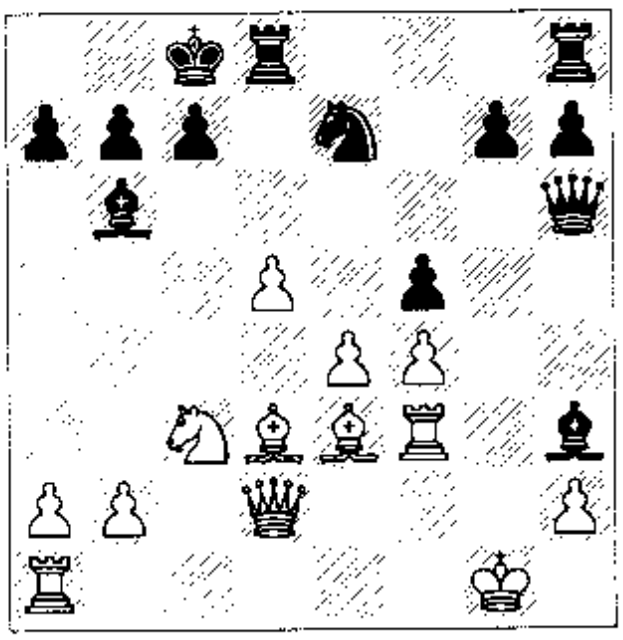
7...♗b4 8 f3 ♕h4+ 9 g3 ♕f6 10 ♗e3 0-0-0 11 ♗d3 ♗a5!

A move originally suggested by this author; compare Euwe's note about ...♗h5! in the game above.

12 0-0 ♗b6 13 ♘e2 e5 14 ♕d2 ♘e7 15 d5

So the centre is still intact and dangerous, but Black has anticipated this:

15...♕h6! 16 f4 ♗d7 17 ♘c3 exf4 18 gxf4 ♗h3 19 ♖f3 f5 *(D)*



Finally, the end of White's proud centre!

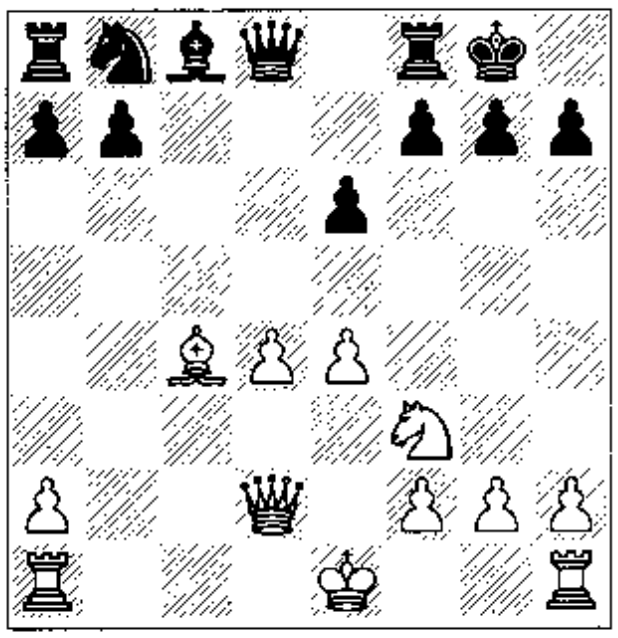
20 ♗xb6 ♕xb6+ 21 ♕f2 ♕xf2+ 22 ♔xf2 fxe4 23 ♖xh3 exd3 24 ♖xd3 ♖hf8

White's three isolated pawns doom him. The game continued 25 ♔g3 ♖d6 26 ♖e1 ♖g6+ 27 ♔f3 ♘f5 28 ♖e6 ♘h4+ 29 ♔e4 ♖g4 30 ♘e2 ♖g2 31 ♘d4 ♖f2 32 f5 ♘xf5 33 ♘xf5 ♖8xf5 34 ♖h3 ♖f7 35 ♖xh7 ♖xb2 36 h4 ♖xa2, and Black went on to win easily.

With respect to Nimzowitsch's idea of the strength of the pawn-mass residing in the "readiness of the pieces behind them to occupy central squares", the basic ideas have not changed, but the modern player is probably more willing to make concessions in order to achieve this sort of advantage, as we will examine next.

Euwe and Kramer call d4/e4 vs e6 or e7 a 'Neo-Classic Centre', which is far more frequent in modern chess than the 'Classic'. In the

Semi-Tarrasch Defence, a speciality of the old **masters**, this formation can arise after, e.g., **1 c4 ♘f6 2 ♘c3 e6 3 ♘f3 d5 4 d4 c5 5 cxd5 ♘xd5 6 e4 ♘xc3 7 bxc3 cxd4 8 cxd4 ♗b4+ 9 ♗d2 ♗xd2+ 10 ♕xd2 0-0 11 ♗c4** *(D)*.



The first point to make that is relevant to the **evolution** of modern chess is that such open, **more** double-edged systems did not come naturally to the classical player. I can find only 24 **examples** of the 6 e4 ♘xc3 idea in a large data**base** for the years 1900-1935. Of those games, **only** 4 were played prior to 1930 (one with **Alekhine** as White, as might be expected)! The **point** is that White almost always preferred a **line** with e3, the more passive position after 5 **e3** ♘c6 arising, for example, 264 times in the **same** time-period. In modern times, of course, **the** idea of cxd5 followed by e4 became a main **line**. I think we must credit this change to both **the** more dynamic spirit of post-Nimzowitschian play and the rise of home analysis, which allowed White to make a better assessment of the **risks** involved in exposing his queenside in this **fashion** (the a-pawn and light squares such as **c4** can be quite vulnerable, especially given the **open** c-file and ideas such as ...♕d6-a3).

At any rate, here is an older example of this **position**, in which White's treatment is not perfect, but nevertheless very admirable:

Keres – Fine
Ostend 1937

11...♘d7 12 0-0 b6 13 ♖ad1 ♗b7 14 ♖fe1 ♖c8 15 ♗b3 ♘f6 16 ♕f4 ♕c7 17 ♕h4 ♖fd8 18 ♖e3

Keres later preferred 18 e5, but keeping the tension is more subtle.

18...b5 19 ♖de1 a5 20 a4 b4!?

Euwe gives 20...bxa4 21 ♗xa4 h6.

21 d5! exd5 22 e5!

A fine conception! For a pawn, White renders Black's b7-bishop 'bad' and activates his rooks.

22...♘d7?

Black still had 22...♘e4, in view of 23 e6 fxe6 24 ♖xe4 dxe4 25 ♘g5 ♕c3, according to Keres. This casts the pawn sacrifice into some doubt; compare the next example.

23 ♘g5 ♘f8 24 ♘xh7! ♘xh7 25 ♖h3 ♕c1 26 ♕xh7+ ♔f8 27 ♖he3 d4 28 ♕h8+ ♔e7 29 ♕xg7 ♖f8 30 ♕f6+ ♔e8 31 e6 1-0

The following very famous example has both similarities and differences. On the one hand, White plays the same kind of pawn sacrifice (d5/e5), and targets the black king. On the other hand, his compensation is much more positional, and more in line with Nimzowitsch's remark about the pieces occupying central squares. It is also a more correct sacrifice. In fact, the whole idea was conceived by Polugaevsky and Spassky in home analysis, which reduces its creative status by comparison with a daring over-the-board stroke. However, this in a sense allowed Polugaevsky to be *more* creative, in that such an abstract form of compensation and the rather anti-intuitive attack which follows could probably not be risked by a successful practical player without preparation.

Polugaevsky – Tal
USSR Ch, Moscow 1969
(from the diagram)

11...♘c6 12 0-0 b6 13 ♖ad1 ♗b7 14 ♖fe1 ♘a5 15 ♗d3 ♖c8 16 d5! exd5 17 e5!

Activating the d3-bishop, f3-knight, and rooks all in one stroke!

17...♘c4

17...♕e7 18 ♕f4! led to a substantial advantage for White in Bagirov-Zhuravliov, USSR 1974, while a later game N.Popov-Rumiantsev, USSR 1978 went 17...h6 18 ♕f4 ♘c6 19 ♕f5 g6 20 ♕g4 with a winning advantage.

18 ♕f4 ♘b2 19 ♗xh7+! ♔xh7 20 ♘g5+ ♔g6 21 h4!!

This is the point. White threatens a ring-around-the-rosy mate by 22 h5+ ♔xh5 23 g4+ ♔g6 24 ♕f5+ ♔h6 25 ♕h7+ ♔xg5 26 ♕h5+ ♔f4 27 ♕f5#!

21...♖c4

The only try.

22 h5+ ♔h6 23 ♘xf7++ ♔h7 24 ♕f5+ ♔g8 25 e6!

And Black is helpless against White's threats such as h6.

The game concluded nicely:

25...♕f6

25...♕e7 26 h6!.

26 ♕xf6 gxf6 27 ♖d2 ♖c6! 28 ♖xb2 ♖e8 29 ♘h6+ ♔h7 30 ♘f5 ♖exe6 31 ♖xe6 ♖xe6 32 ♖c2 ♖c6 33 ♖e2 ♗c8 34 ♖e7+ ♔h8 35 ♘h4 f5 36 ♘g6+ ♔g8 37 ♖xa7 1-0

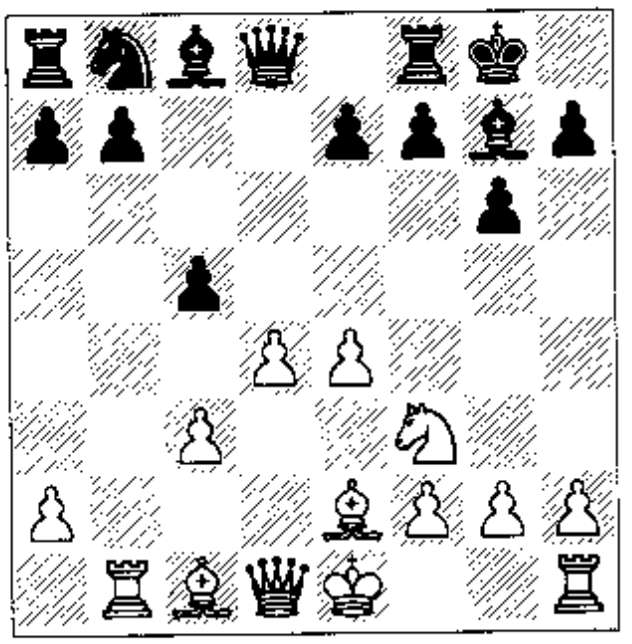
Quite beautiful. Of course, there's nothing revolutionary in all that, but the pawn sacrifice to shut out the bishop and get a knight to d4 has a modern flavour to it (see the section in Part 2, Chapter 3 on positional pawn sacrifices). The powerful influence of concrete home analysis is another (perhaps less fortunate) sign of the times.

A similar situation to that described in the Semi-Tarrasch has arisen in the Grünfeld Defence. If you look at old databases (1900-1935), White tended to choose one passive line or another against this defence. For example, 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 ♘f3 ♗g7 5 e3 was extremely popular, intending the mighty 6 ♗d2. No wonder people were giving 3...d5 an '!'. In the modern era, the main approaches became 5 ♕b3 dxc4 6 ♕xc4 0-0 7 e4 and 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 e4 ♘xc3 6 bxc3, accepting the challenge of defending a large centre in return for the its dynamic potential. In fact, the dynamism exhibited in one of the current main lines is typical of the modern approach to many positions:

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 e4 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 ♗g7 7 ♘f3 c5 8 ♖b1 0-0 9 ♗e2 *(D)*

Now 9...♕a5 10 0-0! is one of those times when grabbing pawns, either by 10...♕xa2 or 10...♕xc3, simply doesn't pay, as theory demonstrates.

Continuing from the diagram position, we present our two last examples of mobile central pawns:



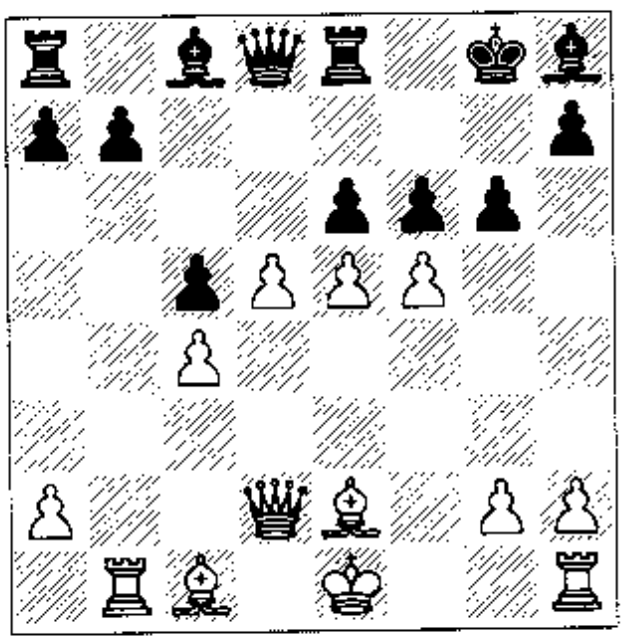
B

McCambridge – Hjartarson
Grindavik 1984

9...♘c6 10 d5 ♘e5 11 ♘xe5 ♗xe5 12 ♕d2 e6 13 f4 ♗h8 14 c4 ♖e8 15 e5 f6

Undermining the centre, or... ?

16 f5!! *(D)*



B

Sometimes the pawns are just too strong! Now 16...exf5 17 e6 will cramp Black permanently, so the game proceeded:

16...gxf5 17 ♖b3 ♖e7 18 d6

Both 18 ♗b2 and 18 ♕h6 won later games more convincingly, but the details aren't really important here.

18...♖g7 19 exf6 ♕xf6 20 ♗b2 e5? 21 ♗xe5! ♕xe5 22 ♖e3 ♕e6 23 ♖xe6 ♗xe6 24 ♕e3 ♖e8 25 ♕xc5

and White went on to win.

A bit barbaric, that one. From the diagram at the top of the column, 9...cxd4 10 cxd4 ♕a5+ 11 ♗d2 ♕xa2, illustrates that the centre pawns

can sometimes be worth a material investment, even if there are no immediate threats, for example, 12 0-0 ♕e6 13 ♕c2 ♕c6 14 ♕d3 and now:

a) 14...♗g4!? 15 d5 ♕d7 16 ♕b3 ♗xf3 17 ♗xf3 is an example from one of my own games. White's bishops are the 'pieces behind the centre', exerting terrific pressure: 17...b6 18 ♕a3 ♕d8 19 ♗b4 ♖e8 20 e5 ♘d7 21 d6, and Black had to give up material by 21...exd6 22 ♗xa8 ♕xa8 23 exd6 in J.Watson-Ramirez, Los Angeles 1997.

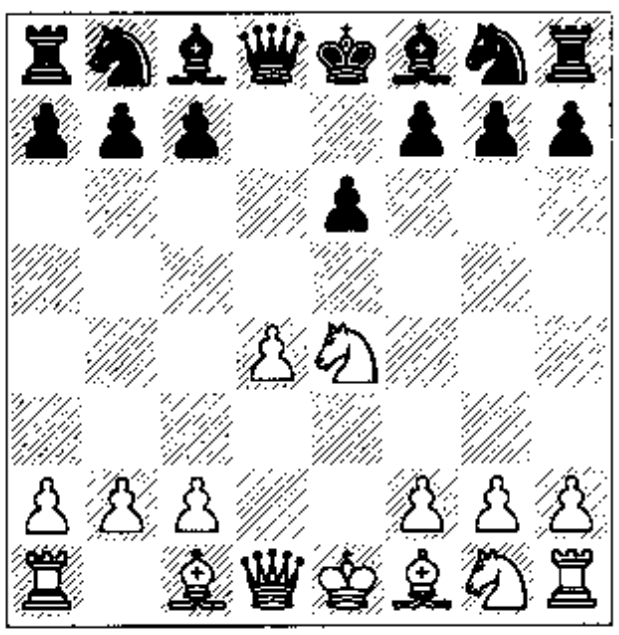
b) 14...♕d6 15 ♗b4 ♕d8 16 d5 and Black has serious difficulties coping with White's advancing pawns, e.g., 16...♘a6 17 ♗a3 b6 18 ♕e3! ♘c5 19 ♖fd1 ♗g4 20 e5 ♖c8 21 h3 ♗xf3 22 ♗xf3 with advantage, Gelfand-Kamsky, Belgrade 1991.

Nothing in this section is utterly offensive to the tenets of classical theory. Nevertheless, modern practice is clearly more confrontational and also takes some of these hyper-critical positions to the extreme, in contrast to the careful and sedate 'one or two pawns only' practice of pre-modern chess. We will explore truly revolutionary conceptions of the centre and pawn play in Part 2.

Surrender of the Centre

For our last introductory mini-topic, we examine a subject close to Nimzowitsch's heart: the 'surrender of the centre'. Nimzowitsch gives us one of his homespun metaphors about the position after 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 *(D)*:

B

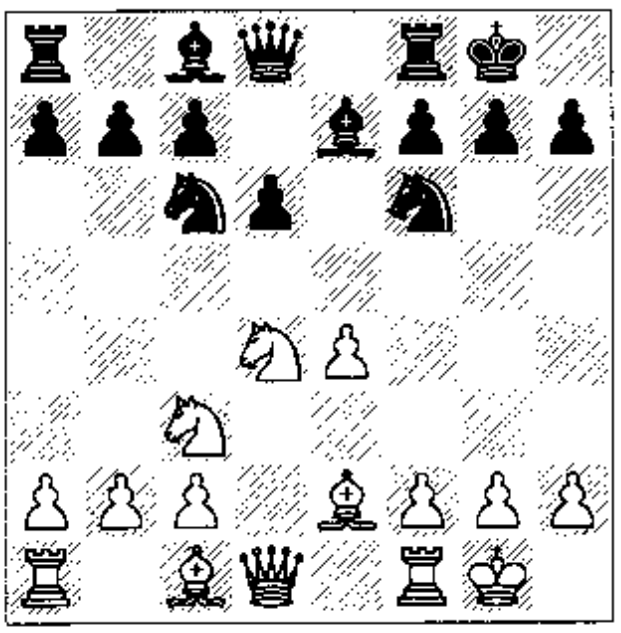


"If, in a battle, I seize a bit of debatable land with a handful of soldiers, without having done anything to prevent an enemy bombardment of the position, would it ever occur to me to speak of a conquest of the terrain in question? Obviously not. Then why should I do so in chess? ... pressure exerted on the enemy centre by the long-range action of rooks or bishops directed on it can well be of corresponding importance.

"We meet this last case in the variation 3...dxe4. This move, so wrongly described as a surrender of the centre, as a matter of fact increases Black's effective influence in the centre very considerably; for with the removal by ...dxe4 of the pawn at d5, which is an obstruction, Black gets a free hand on the d-file, and the long diagonal b7 to h1, which he will open for himself by ...b6. Obstruction! That is the dark side of the occupation of the centre by pawns."

Well, one might imagine that 3 exd5 or 3 e5 was White's only chance for equality! Of course, this was part of a greater polemic against Tarrasch, who considered 3...dxe4 inferior. Nimzowitsch's other favourite opening in this regard was Philidor's Defence, e.g., Leonhardt-Nimzowitsch, San Sebastian 1912: 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 exd4 (sometimes Nimzowitsch delayed this capture, and the year before against Teichmann, had also tried the strategy of strong-pointing e5) 5 ♘xd4 ♗e7 6 ♗e2 0-0 7 0-0 ♘c6 *(D)* followed by ...♖e8 and ...♗f8.

W



His idea was first to stop White's e5 (restraint), and then train his forces against the target on e4, finally either forcing a concession or liquidating it via ...d5. Alas, Nimzowitsch's

argument ignores White's greater space and manoeuvrability, and in fact, both of these openings disappeared into obscurity as the years went on (recently, the 3...dxe4 French has undergone a slight revival; but it is being used as a drawing weapon for Black with a quick ...c5, hardly what Nimzowitsch had envisaged). What's more, the similar lines of the Ruy Lopez with ...exd4 have always been considered better for White.

Today, players are not inclined to cramp themselves so without reward. However, there are a number of openings in which a similar surrender of the centre is justified. In most cases, this is because the dark-squared bishop, instead of sitting dully at e7 or f8, takes up a dynamic post on g7. For example, in the King's Indian Defence there are a number of lines with ...exd4/♘xd4 and consequent pressure down the e-file and along the h8-a1 diagonal. One recent example is the rather Nimzowitschian 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 ♗g7 4 e4 d6 5 ♘f3 0-0 6 ♗e2 e5 7 0-0 exd4 8 ♘xd4 ♖e8 9 f3 ♘c6!?, in which one of Black's primary ideas is to play ...♘h5 and ...f5, to break down White's grip on the centre. A radical example is Adorjan's line 1 c4 g6 2 e4 e5 3 ♘f3 ♗g7 4 d4 exd4 5 ♘xd4 ♘f6 6 ♘c3 0-0 7 ♗e2 ♖e8 8 f3, but now we see that Adorjan will have nothing to do with mere 'restraint' of White's centre. Rather, his idea is active and tactical: 8...c6! 9 ♗g5 h6 10 ♗h4 d5! 11 exd5 cxd5 12 0-0 ♘c6 13 ♘xc6 bxc6 14 ♗f2 ♗e6 15 ♘a4 ♘h5! 16 cxd5 ♗xd5 17 ♖e1 ♕g5 18 ♔h1 ♘f4 19 ♗f1 ♗c4 with excellent activity, Bobotsov-Adorjan, Vrnjačka Banja 1972. This surrender of the centre for the sake of dynamic activity, as opposed to mere restraint, is more typical of modern theory.

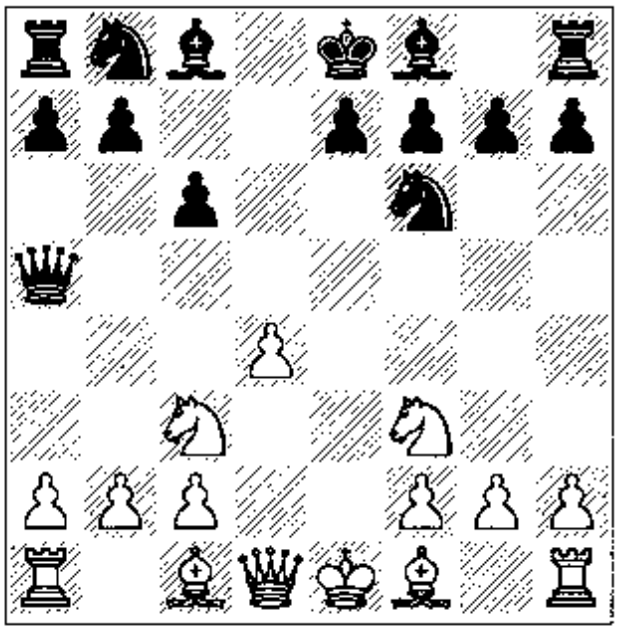
And how about the Caro Kann after 1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ? Well, to some extent, Nimzowitsch would be right to say that play down the d-file is what offers Black chances, but the rest of his formula is a bit lacking (it is not usually effective to play ...b6 or ...g6, for example). As with other modern examples of the 'surrender of the centre', Black's most realistic plan is not restraint and attack on the enemy pawn, but rather, early liquidation. In the case of the Caro-Kann (and the 3...dxe4 French, by the way), this usually involves the move ...c5.

The same pawn structure can arise via the newly-popular Scandinavian Defence, for instance:

Kasparov – Anand
PCA World Ch match (game 14), New York 1995

1 e4 d5 2 exd5 ♕xd5 3 ♘c3 ♕a5 4 d4 ♘f6 5 ♘f3 c6 *(D)*

W



Although Black hasn't played ...dxe4, he might as well have. One might think that Black should suffer from the loss of time with his queen (...♕xd5-a5), yet White would rather not have his knight on c3, blocking the c-pawn. This has interesting consequences: in what follows, Black neither puts serious pressure on d4, nor does he play the liquidating ...c5 or ...e5. Rather, his compensation for the surrendered centre consists of active piece play. This is an illustration that such positions must be assessed on a variation-by-variation basis, and not according to general principle.

6 ♘e5 ♗e6! 7 ♗d3 ♘bd7 8 f4 g6 9 0-0 ♗g7 10 ♔h1 ♗f5! 11 ♗c4?! e6 12 ♗e2

Kasparov mentions 12 ♘xd7 ♔xd7 13 ♗e3 ♖hd8 with a slight advantage for Black. Modern opening theory includes many variations in which the king is temporarily or even permanently left in the centre in order to achieve other positional goals.

12...h5 13 ♗e3 ♖d8 14 ♗g1 0-0 15 ♗f3 ♘d5! 16 ♘xd5 exd5

Kasparov gives 16...cxd5 here, with some advantage.

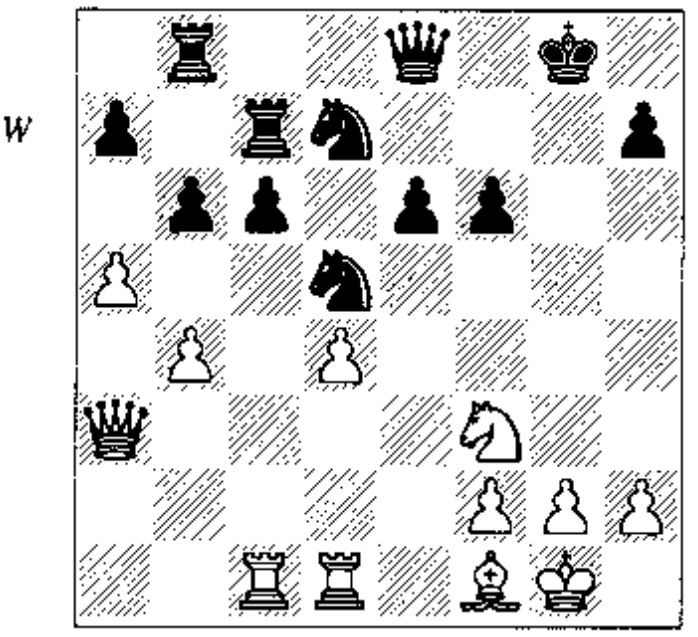
17 ♗f2 ♕c7 18 ♖c1 f6 19 ♘d3 ♖fe8

Black has a small advantage due to his somewhat better placed pieces. Thus (although this is an exceptional example), surrendering the centre sometimes incurs no penalty whatsoever. It really comes down to concrete analysis.

This could lead us into a general discussion of small centres and restraint. Hedgehog and Sicilian centres (...d6/...e6 versus pawns on e4 and c4, or just e4, with an open white d-file) have some similarities to Nimzowitsch's surrendered centre, despite the lack of an open black central file. Those structures have become increasingly popular and have the dynamic characteristics Nimzowitsch sought from his Frenches and Philidors. We will be looking at them in some detail in Part 2.

3 Minorities, Majorities, and Passed Pawns

The passed pawn, and the pawn majorities used to create passed pawns, have traditionally been accorded a lot of attention in instructional and theoretical books. Similarly, these works tend to devote at least a section to the minority attack, as exemplified by the Queen's Gambit Exchange Variation. In this chapter, we briefly review that older theory, and then take a look at modern conceptions of these subjects. Probably the most important changes here concern the relative value and importance we now attach to these elements of play.



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Minority Attacks

The minority attack is a strange area of theory. As far as I know, Nimzowitsch, who was very concerned with the restraint of pawn majorities, never dealt with attacking them from a position of numerical inferiority. Pachman claims that this concept first entered the chess consciousness in the 1920s, and thus attributes great historical value to the following game:

Capablanca – Lasker

World Ch match (game 11), Havana 1921

1 d4 d5 2 ♘f3 e6 3 c4 ♘f6 4 ♗g5 ♘bd7 5 e3 ♗e7 6 ♘c3 0-0 7 ♖c1 ♖e8 8 ♕c2 c6 9 ♗d3 dxc4 10 ♗xc4 ♘d5 11 ♗xe7 ♖xe7 12 0-0 ♘f8 13 ♖fd1 ♗d7 14 e4 ♘b6 15 ♗f1 ♖c8 16 b4

The beginning of a type of 'minority' attack, with the a-pawn and b-pawn being used against the black a-, b-, and c-pawns. Strictly speaking, there should be a black pawn on d5 to make it what we classically refer to as a true minority attack.

16...♗e8 17 ♕b3 ♖ec7 18 a4 ♘g6 19 a5! ♘d7 20 e5! b6 21 ♘e4 ♖b8 22 ♕c3 ♘f4 23 ♘d6 ♘d5 24 ♕a3 f6 25 ♘xe8 ♕xe8 26 exf6 gxf6 *(D)*

This game has interesting features aside from its minority attack. For one thing, note how Lasker accepts a very cramped position with moves like 12...♘f8 and 16...♗e8, and anticipates a Nimzowitsch or Petrosian with the prophylactic ...♖e7-c7. He even allows a white knight into d6. All of this is consistent with Lasker's tendency to play inferior positions with defensive potential, counting upon his brilliant resourcefulness to outplay his opponent later. From his standpoint, the concession ultimately forced upon him by the d6-knight – namely, giving White a bishop-versus-knight advantage – may have seemed rather small. But Capablanca proceeds to show that such advantages are generally decisive, as we know today. First, he continues his minority attack:

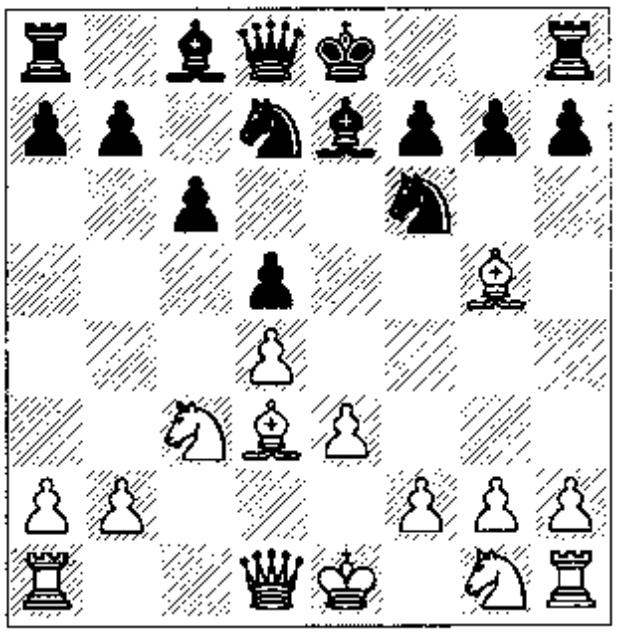
27 b5! ♖bc8 28 bxc6 ♖xc6 29 ♖xc6 ♖xc6 30 axb6 axb6

Pachman points out that "White has apparently merely helped Black to achieve his strategic aim of obtaining a passed pawn from his queenside majority." But of course, isolated passed pawns can be either weak or strong, and Black's b-pawn and e-pawn are clearly weak here. By forcing Black to defend both points (see our later discussion of the 'two weakness' theory), Capablanca is eventually able to infiltrate Lasker's position and win:

31 ♖e1 ♕c8 32 ♘d2 ♘f8 33 ♘e4 ♕d8 34 h4 ♖c7 35 ♕b3 ♖g7 36 g3 ♖a7 37 ♗c4 ♖a5 38

♘c3 ♘xc3 39 ♕xc3 ♔f7 40 ♕e3 ♕d6 41 ♕e4 ♖a4 42 ♕b7+ ♔g6 43 ♕c8 ♕b4 44 ♖c1 ♕e7 45 ♗d3+ ♔h6 46 ♖c7 ♖a1+ 47 ♔g2 ♕d6 48 ♕xf8+ 1-0

In a broader sense, any time two pawns advance against three, or one against two, we have a minority attack. In books, the concept at some point became narrower. Pachman acknowledged in 1960 that "nowadays we use the term [minority attack] to refer mainly to the strategic attack used in various lines of the Queen's Gambit". For readers who aren't familiar with the structure he refers to, it arises, for example, after 1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♗g5 ♗e7 6 e3 ♘bd7 7 ♗d3 c6 *(D)*:



As is described in great detail in the standard texts, White's minority attack consists of b4-b5. Then if Black plays ...c5, dxc5 will leave him with an isolated d-pawn. The move ...cxb5 also leaves Black's d-pawn isolated, and results in a position in which Black's a- and b-pawns are rather exposed. For example, if after ...cxb5/♗xb5, Black plays ...b6 to defend his b-pawn against attack down the newly-opened b-file, then White can play a4-a5 (another minority attack!) and expose new weaknesses. Finally, if Black allows bxc6/...bxc6, Black's c-pawn is backward and weak on an open file. The last option is the most common one once White achieves b5. As Pachman says of a game in which Keres played ...♗d7 and after bxc6, ...♗xc6: "In almost all positions of this type, it is a mistake to retake on c6 with a piece: a pawn on c6 can generally be defended more easily than the weak pawns on b7 and d5." This is an observation that remains true to this day. In the Tarrasch Defence to the Queen's Gambit, for example, the main-line Rubinstein Variation goes 1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 c5 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♘f3 ♘c6 6 g3 ♘f6 7 ♗g2 ♗e7 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♗g5 cxd4 10 ♘xd4. Now after a few moves, Black often plays ...♗d7; but when White plays ♘xc6, it is still correct to recapture by ...bxc6 and not ...♗xc6. Hundreds of games have shown that the position after the former recapture has more inherent strength and dynamic potential. Finally, the reader is referred to the Part 2, Chapter 3 section on backward pawns, for some rather surprising statistics on how well Black does with this backward ...c6/...d5 pawn structure.

How has the minority attack evolved in modern chess? I would say in two contrary directions:

a) To a large extent, this Queen's Gambit Exchange Variation was worked out between 1930 and 1970. Several interesting defences to this minority attack, and counter-plans for White, were developed and played extensively. As a consequence, the best ways of playing for White and Black became well known. In fact, for the most part, White has switched to a number of other ways of approaching these positions (we discuss central expansion via f3 and e4 elsewhere in this book, for example). To my mind, as this particular form of double d-pawn opening continues to decline in frequency, the extreme attention devoted to it in the books has become out-of-date;

b) The only marked advance in the theory of minority attacks that I can think of has been associated with the black minority advance in the Sicilian Defence and similar structures. Indeed, the Sicilian Defence minority attack was known in the 1920s, but not so much so that books made mention of it. Later, with the Sicilian Defence explosion, that minority attack became one of the main reasons why White felt obliged to launch attacks at an early stage against Black's position (I am speaking of Open Sicilians, of course, characterized by 2 ♘f3 and 3 d4). Since there are literally thousands of examples of Black's minority-attack strategy, I thought I'd use a few by GM Pal Benko, whom I watched for many years playing successful minority attacks on an almost routine basis:

Shipman – Benko
USA 1958

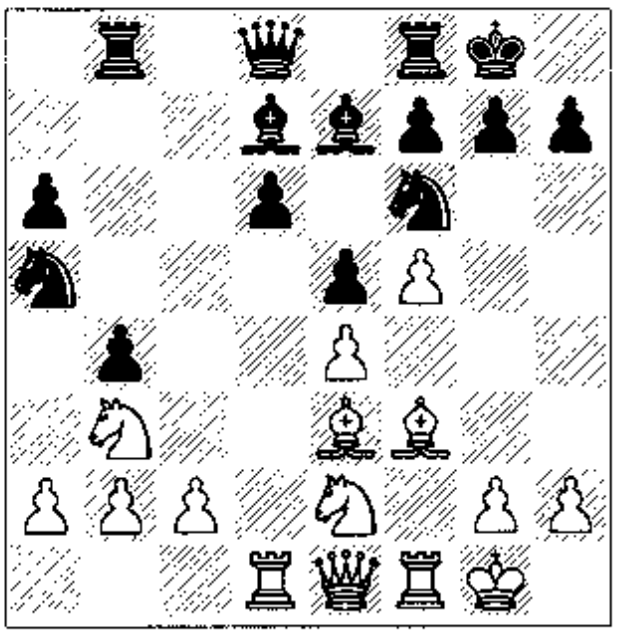
1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 e6 6 ♗e2 ♘c6 7 ♗e3

A similar version of Black's attack was seen in Reyes-Benko, Lugano Olympiad 1968: 7 0-0 a6 8 a4 ♗e7 9 ♔h1 0-0 10 f4 ♕c7 11 ♗f3 ♖d8 12 ♘b3 b6 13 ♕e1 ♖b8 14 ♗e3 ♘a5 15 ♖d1 ♘c4 16 ♗c1 b5 17 axb5 axb5 18 ♘e2 e5 19 ♕g3 ♗b7 20 ♘c3 b4 21 ♘d5 ♗xd5 22 exd5 e4 (isolating and winning the d-pawn) 23 ♗e2 ♘b6 24 ♘d4 ♘fxd5 25 f5 ♗f6 26 ♗g5 ♕c5 27 ♗xf6 ♘xf6 28 ♖f4 ♘bd5 29 ♖h4 ♘e7 30 ♕h3 ♘c6 31 ♘xc6 ♕xc6 32 ♖c1 ♕d5 33 ♖d1 ♕c5 34 g4 ♕xc2 35 ♕e3 h6 36 ♖g1 ♘d5 37 ♕f2 ♕d2 38 g5 hxg5 39 ♖h5 f6 40 ♕g2 ♘e3 41 ♕xe4 ♖e8 42 ♕f3 g4 43 ♖xg4 ♘xg4 44 ♗c4+ d5 0-1. White hardly ever seemed in the game.

7...♗e7 8 0-0 0-0 9 f4 ♗d7 10 ♘b3 a6 11 ♗f3 ♖b8 12 ♕e1 b5

The start of the minority attack. It sweeps away White's queenside defences in short order.

13 ♖d1 b4 14 ♘e2 e5 15 f5 ♘a5! *(D)*



The idea of ...a5-a4 could also be used, but Black wants to tie White down with moves like ...♗b5 and ...♘c4, followed by ...a5-a4. White wants to attack, so he abandons his queenside for the sake of a desperate advance on the kingside. This trade-off – being subjected to attack in exchange for winning on the queenside – is also characteristic of the Queen's Gambit Exchange Variation minority attack.

16 ♘xa5 ♕xa5 17 g4 ♖fc8! 18 g5 ♘e8 19 ♖d2 ♕xa2 20 ♘g3 ♗f8 21 ♘h5 ♕xb2 22 ♕g3 ♖c3 23 ♗g4 ♕a3 24 ♖e1 b3 25 g6 fxg6 26 fxg6 ♖xe3! 27 gxh7+ ♔xh7 28 ♖xe3 ♗xg4 29 ♕xg4 ♕c1+ 30 ♕d1 b2 31 ♖e1 ♕xd1 32 ♖dxd1 a5

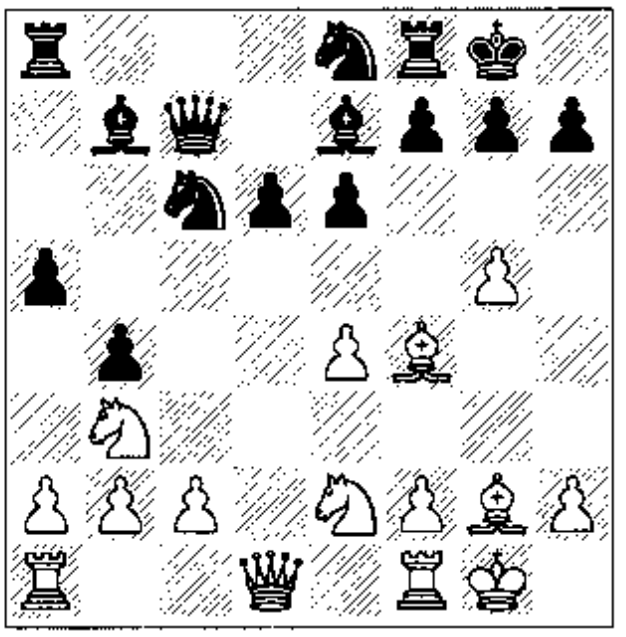
The end of Black's fine combination; he will recover his material and then some by running the a-pawn down the board. The rest is easy:

33 ♘g3 a4 34 ♘e2 ♖c8 35 c3 a3 36 ♖b1 ♖b8 37 ♘c1 bxc1♕ 38 ♖exc1 ♖a8 39 ♖a1 ♘f6 40 ♖a2 ♘xe4 41 ♖ca1 d5 42 ♖c1 ♖c8 43 ♖ac2 ♖xc3 44 ♖xc3 ♘xc3 45 ♖xc3 a2 46 ♖c1 ♗c5+ 47 ♔g2 ♗d4 48 ♔f3 a1♕ 49 ♖xa1 ♗xa1 50 ♔g4 ♔g6 0-1

Here's another Benko game, this time illustrating a pure form of minority attack:

Conrady – Benko
Dublin 1957

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 a6 5 ♘c3 ♕c7 6 ♗e2 ♘f6 7 0-0 ♗e7 8 ♘b3 b5 9 ♗f3 ♘c6 10 g3 0-0 11 ♗f4 d6 12 ♗g2 ♗b7 13 g4 b4 14 g5 ♘e8 15 ♘e2 a5 *(D)*



Black simply drives away the pieces and then uses his c-file pressure.

16 ♘g3 a4 17 ♘d2 ♘d4 18 ♖c1 a3 19 b3 ♖c8 20 ♘c4 ♘b5 21 ♕g4 ♘c3 22 ♖fe1 ♘xa2 23 ♖a1 ♘c3 24 ♖e3 e5 25 ♘h5 exf4 26 ♖h3 ♘xe4 0-1

What other minority attacks are common in modern chess? A familiar one occurs against the Sicilian Defence, Maroczy Bind structures (c4 and e4, without a d-pawn), which also arise from Hedgehog openings. Black attempts to

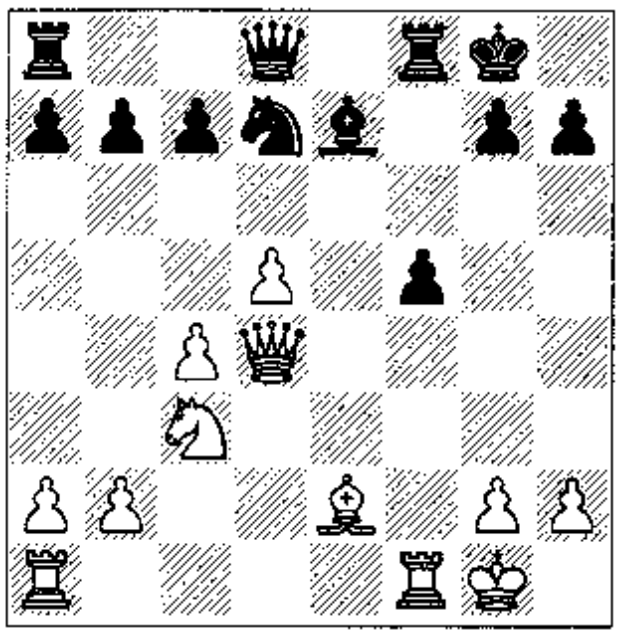
achieve ...a6 and ...b5, a minority attack to chip away at White's bind. If White has to accede to the exchange cxb5/...axb5, Black may then follow up with ...b4, to immobilize and target White's a-pawn. One of White's best responses to this plan can be to utilize his own *majority*, a subject to which we now turn.

Majorities and Candidates

Steinitz first drew attention to the subject of pawn majorities as a separate element of the game. For years thereafter, teachers and theoreticians put great stock in majorities, and in particular, in the queenside majority, which was supposed to be a significant advantage. How often have we read an annotator saying that one side or another has an advantage due to his queenside majority? But as chess has evolved, the value of the queenside majority has become controversial. For one thing, we have just seen positions in which a minority is more effective than a majority. Furthermore, the advance of a majority will often simply expose weaknesses behind the very pawns which have advanced.

It is interesting to look at majorities in terms of the passed pawns they potentially create. This is the traditional reason for liking queenside pawn majorities, i.e., that a passed pawn created from it in the ending will be an outside passed pawn, far from the reach of the kings (which are presumably on the kingside). An associated reason is given by Pachman: "In the middlegame, [the queenside pawns] are easier to advance without weakening one's own king position." In other words, both sides may be able to create passed pawns, but the player with the queenside majority will be able to do so earlier and with less risk. He adds: "A queenside majority shows to best and lasting advantage in positions where ... the reduced material has cut out the danger of an attack on one's own king. This is usually the case in the transition stage between middlegame and ending."

That's pretty much the traditional view. One of Nimzowitsch's contributions was in focusing on the mobility of pawn majorities, i.e., to point out that majorities are only useful to the extent that they are mobile. He also systematically worked at restricting the mobility of majorities in his own games. In the following example, Colle seems to be thinking along the same lines:



Spielmann – Colle
Dortmund 1928

Black threatens ...♗c5. White's next move not only prevents this, but prepares for the later advance of his majority by c5.

17 ♘a4 b5!

At the cost of a pawn, Black now cripples that majority. One feels that Nimzowitsch would approve. As Pachman points out, White's two extra pawns on the queenside are very difficult to convert into a passed pawn, and Black's bishop gains a beautiful post on d6, aiming at the kingside. Suddenly, too, the knight on the rim (a4) is out of the action, and Black's opposite-colour bishop has no counterpart on the side with *his* majority. In short, Black has full compensation for his pawn.

18 cxb5 ♗d6 19 ♖ae1 ♕e7! 20 ♗d3 ♘e5 21 ♔h1 f4

This unopposed pawn threatens to cause damage by ...f3. White's play now deteriorates, but his defence was difficult in any case.

22 ♖e2?! ♖ae8

With the tactical point 23 ♖xf4? ♖xf4 24 ♕xf4 ♘xd3 25 ♖xe7 ♖xe7, etc.

23 ♘c3 ♕h4 24 ♘e4?

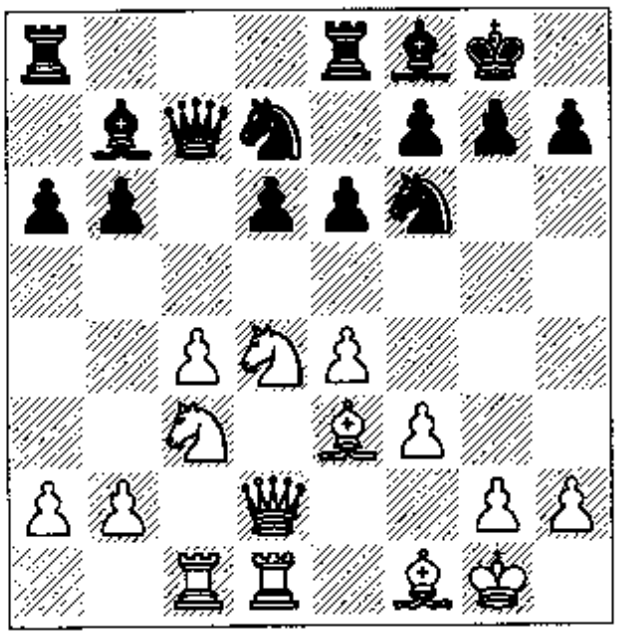
Probably not best, but it may be too late, since 24 ♗e4 ♘g4 25 h3 f3 26 ♗xf3 fails to 26...♕g3 27 ♕g1 ♗c5. This is a typical case of opposite-coloured bishops favouring the attacker.

24...♘g4 25 h3 f3 26 ♖xf3 ♖xf3 27 ♘f6+ ♔f7 0-1

Today, the *theory* of the queenside majority has changed very little, but its relative importance has declined. Modern openings abound in which one side or the other voluntarily accepts a queenside minority; such minorities may even constitute an advantage as late as the early stages of the endgame. Another serious consideration is that acquiring a queenside majority tends to mean ceding a central majority. An obvious case of this is on the white side of the Sicilian Defence (which we have already mentioned), as well as in many variations of the 1 c4 e5 English Opening in which, after ...d5, White plays cxd5 and operates with his a- and b-pawns against Black's majority. To give a couple of concrete examples in other openings, take the French Defence after 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 c5 4 exd5 ♕xd5 5 ♘gf3 cxd4 6 ♗c4 ♕d6 7 0-0 ♘c6 8 ♘b3 ♘f6 9 ♘bxd4, and the Caro-Kann line which goes 1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♘d7 5 ♗c4 ♘gf6 6 ♘g5 e6 7 ♕e2 ♘b6 8 ♗d3 h6 9 ♘5f3 c5 10 dxc5 ♗xc5.

Nevertheless, one can still find examples of effective queenside majorities. In the Modern Benoni, for example, the advance of Black's a-, b-, and c-pawns (his majority) is essential to his success in nearly every line. Or, in the Hedgehog, consider this typical position *(D)*:

W



Polugaevsky – Ljubojević
Bugojno 1980

Elsewhere in this book, we will see how White plays similar positions with b3, c4, and e4 versus this Hedgehog structure, but has trouble dealing with Black's latent dynamism (see especially Part 2). Here, however, White's pieces are well-placed for a more ambitious plan, the activation of his majority:

15 b4! ♖ac8 16 a3 ♕b8 17 ♘b3 h6 18 ♕f2

Notice that White's point is not so much the creation of a passed pawn as it is direct pressure on Black's queenside, eventually opening lines there.

18...♗c6 19 h3 ♗e7 20 ♖b1 ♕c7 21 ♖dc1 ♕a7 22 a4!

A real majority attack commences. Now a5 is a major threat, but something like 22...♕b8 23 a5 bxa5 24 ♘xa5 ♗a8 25 c5! is ultimately hopeless for Black, so he strikes back in the centre:

22...d5 23 exd5 exd5 24 a5 ♗xb4 25 axb6 ♕b8 26 c5

So Black has maintained material equality, but his weak a-pawn and White's two connected passed pawns give the first player a clear advantage.

26...♗b7 27 ♗d4 ♖e6??

Black neglects his trapped bishop, but 27...♗xc3 28 ♖xc3 would be excruciating to defend. The rest is straightforward:

28 ♘a2 ♗a3 29 ♖c3 ♖d8 30 ♘a5 ♗xc5 31 ♗xc5 ♘xc5 32 ♕xc5 d4 33 ♘xb7 ♕xb7 34 ♕c7 ♖b8 35 ♕xb7 ♖xb7 36 ♖c8+ ♔h7 37 ♗d3+ g6 38 ♖c7 ♖bxb6 39 ♖xf7+ ♔g8 40 ♖b7 ♖xb1+ 41 ♖xb1 1-0

Finally, the worm will occasionally turn even in the Sicilian:

Anand – Kasparov
PCA World Ch match (game 9), New York 1995

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗e2 e6 7 0-0 ♗e7 8 a4 ♘c6 9 ♗e3 0-0 10 f4 ♕c7 11 ♔h1 ♖e8 12 ♗f3 ♗d7 13 ♘b3 ♘a5 14 ♘xa5 ♕xa5 15 ♕d3 ♖ad8 16 ♖fd1 ♗c6

A fairly typical Sicilian Defence position. White hasn't even started his usual kingside probes by f5 or g4-g5, so one would think that Black is sitting pretty. But Anand's eye is on the other flank:

17 b4! ♕c7 18 b5 ♗d7 19 ♖ab1!

This is a truly unusual use of the majority. White's point here is to open lines for his pieces and expose Black's weaknesses on the queenside.