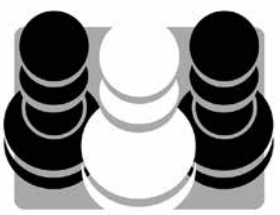
Grandmaster Guide

Beating the Queen's Gambit – Indian Style!

By

Renier Castellanos



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Preface

This book serves as the complementary second half to *Playing the Nimzo-Indian*, completing a comprehensive project that I am thrilled to see come to fruition. I cannot express enough gratitude to those who have supported me throughout this journey. The project began at the Killer Chess Training Academy (KCT), which you will see referenced multiple times in this book. One of our early decisions regarding opening courses was to create a dedicated guide to the Nimzo-Indian Defence, providing our students with a solid foundation against 1.d4. However, once that part was completed, we realized we were only halfway there; we still needed to build a repertoire to cover all of White's popular and less common alternatives after 1.d4, outside of 2.c4 and 3.♘c3.

Hence, the repertoire presented in this book was created. The goal was to provide Black with a fun and ambitious approach against 1.d4, while staying within the framework of 1...♘f6 and 2...e6. That was the initial vision, which was of course revised, improved and enhanced multiple times over. The book is divided into four parts:

The first part covers various options for White after 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6, including rare but increasingly trendy moves like 3.♗f4 and 3.♗g5. We then go a step further, by including the moves 3.♘f3 d5 and examining alternatives to the main lines of 4.♘c3 and 4.g3. Against most of the lines in that first part of the book, I propose a reaction based on ...d7-d5 and ...dxc4, followed by ...a7-a6 and a subsequent queenside expansion with moves like ...c7-c5 and ...b7-b5 – sometimes played together, sometimes independently. The influence of the Queen's Gambit Accepted (QGA) is evident here, though we never transpose to a main-line QGA – only a less critical version, with White having made certain commitments. Nevertheless, understanding QGA-style positions is of paramount importance for our success with this repertoire.

In the second part of the book, we study the Vienna Variation of the Queen's Gambit Declined. The Vienna begins with 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 dxc4!?. Many other moves exist and will be studied in detail, but clearly the main response for White is 5.e4, grabbing the centre and getting ready to take back the pawn on c4. At that point, the main move is clearly 5...♗b4, pinning the c3-knight, but we will forego that and instead choose the double-edged 5...b5!?. This was a deliberate choice. It could be considered a second-tier approach if you're preparing for a World Championship match, but I doubt that many of us are that much oriented by objectivity when choosing our openings. For the Candidates Tournament it is good enough, as proven by Firouzja employing it successfully against Radjabov in Madrid 2022. That's a high enough level for me.

Despite its risks, this enterprising line offers Black excellent chances to actively fight for the initiative – exactly what we aim for in this book. In some lines the game becomes truly chaotic,

but I believe that the approach we present sets out a clear path for Black that is always relatively easy to remember.

The third section of the book deals with the Catalan, an increasingly popular option for White in tournament play. White has two move orders through which to reach the Catalan against our repertoire. One is 3.g3, and the other is 3.♘f3 d5 4.g3. Against some other black repertoires these two move orders require completely separate ways to meet them, but not against ours. We shall prove that they should almost always transpose to each other. Once again, we adopt the early ...dxc4 approach.

Thus, after 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.g3 we go 4...dxc4, and our plan is to continue with ...a6, ...♘c6, and ...♖b8, leading to an interesting, razor-sharp struggle. Most players employing the Catalan hope for a miniscule but pleasant advantage in a two-results endgame, but we frustrate these plans and demand that White enters immense complications if an objective advantage is anywhere to be found. It was particularly gratifying to witness in the database some of our students successfully employing these lines as Black, validating our work at KCT.

Finally, the last part of the book offers extensive coverage of what I personally like to call "Anti-Systems", meaning anything that White can do after 1.d4 ♘f6 apart from going 2.c4. That part of a repertoire against 1.d4 used to be a lot smaller back in the day, but it is by now as important as anything else. We cover important and trendy White attempts such as the Colle, London and Jobava-London systems, addressing all of them from the perspective of a repertoire built around 1...♘f6 and 2...e6. Whenever we can, we keep the "Indian spirit" of our repertoire alive, aiming for double-edged solutions, breaking the symmetry.

In summary, this repertoire based on 1...♘f6 and 2...e6 is designed to offer a dynamic approach against 1.d4. As Black, we seek to steer the game away from dull positions and infuse it with more life than is typically associated with the standard Queen's Gambit. We'll be fighting for the initiative every chance we get, just like in the sister volume *Playing the Nimzo-Indian*, hence the name of this book.

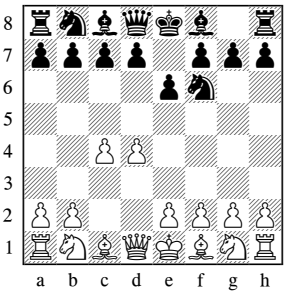
I have made every effort to provide clear explanations behind the moves and outline the plans for each side in each line. Moreover, I often suggest what important memory markers you can use to remember our analysis, as well as outline what absolutely needs to be remembered. I tried my best to check all recent (and some not-so-recent) publications on 1.d4 repertoires for White and suggest clear-cut solutions on how to meet them.

Without further ado, I hope the reader finds this repertoire both enjoyable and successful in tournament practice.

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to my family, my wife, and everyone who has supported me and offered advice throughout the process of writing this book.

Renier Castellanos
Bucharest, August 2024

Chapter 1



Minor 3rd Moves

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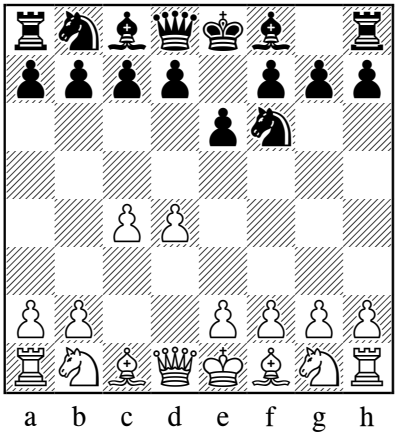
1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6

Introduction

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6



The first volume of this series, *Playing the Nimzo-Indian*, provided coverage of 3.♘c3. Consequently, the main chunk of this book will provide coverage of 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 and 4.g3. We will also cover the immediate 3.g3, but it should almost always lead to the same thing as starting with 3.♘f3 and going g2-g3 on move 4. These are the two main approaches at White's disposal, apart from entering the Nimzo-Indian. However, before diving deep into the labyrinths that are these lines, we should examine any possible deviations on moves 3 and 4 – that's what this first part of the book is about.

In this first chapter, we shall examine any minor lines on move 3, namely:

3.a3 stops the bishop from coming to b4 and is generally useful in most d4-structures. However, it loses precious time, and staying consistent with the rest of the book we will opt for 3...d5 followed by a quick capture of the pawn on c4.

3.♗g5 used to be considered suboptimal, but it recently got trendy with top players giving it a go. Notable names include Arjun Erigaisi and Alexander Grischuk who tried it in several rapid games. White's main aim is to take us away from our normal repertoire and into some ♗g5 variation of the Queen's Gambit Declined (QGD) – but we won't oblige.

We will meet this with 3...h6!, immediately asking the bishop a question, and answer 4.♗h4 with 4...c5!. White's bishop on h4 is unable to properly support the centre, and we will get an excellent Benoni. This is the only time in the whole book where I suggest something like that; everywhere else possible I propagate for early ...d7-d5 and ...d5xc4 approaches. But in this case that is impossible without entering a main line of the classical QGD, which is obviously not our repertoire.

3.♗f4 also used to be frowned upon, but that's a thing of the past. Many strong players are giving it a go, even more than those trying 3.♗g5. I suggest we go for 3...d5 and answer the topical 4.cxd5 with 4...♘xd5! followed by ...c7-c5, obtaining an easy game.

Let's dig a bit deeper:

Theory Section

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6

We will study: **A) 3.a3**, **B) 3.♗g5** and **C) 3.♗f4**.

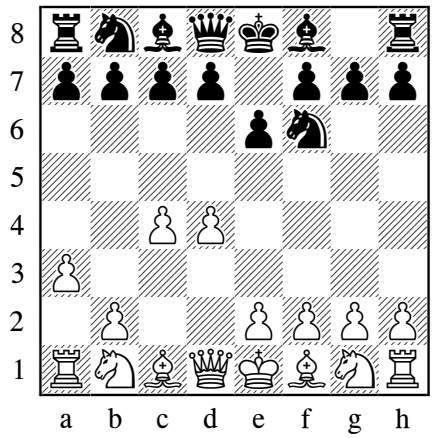
3.e3 is the only sensible move we have not yet mentioned, but after 3...d5 we will inevitably transpose somewhere else in the book, likely the Colle System when the knight goes to f3. Trying to develop the g1-knight elsewhere doesn't make any sense.

3.g4 is a typical coffeehouse move, but the inclusion of c2-c4 and ...e7-e6 favours Black compared to the more common 1.d4 ♘f6 2.g4 (see page 297). A way to illustrate that

would be: 3...♘xg4 4.e4 f5! 5.♘c3 ♕h4 6.♕e2 fxe4!?N 7.♘xe4 ♗b4† 8.♔d1 d5! With a dangerous initiative against the exposed white king.

Of course, that is not the end of the story, but I see no reason to deal with this any longer. Black is a bit better in multiple ways after 3.g4. If you don't remember this line, then you can just play 3...d5!?, and you should be fine anyway.

A) 3.a3



This actually appears fourth in popularity after the three main moves, leaving 3.♗g5 in fifth place and 3.♗f4 only seventh, even behind 3.e3 which comes sixth. It was only recently that these bishop moves became a thing, but I digress.

When meeting a move like 3.a3, the question that comes to mind is: in what possible variation is this move less useful? In my mind, the answer is, without a doubt, the Benoni. I cannot recall a single Benoni line in which White plays a2-a3. However, the "Son of Sorrow" Opening (a literal translation of the Hebrew name "Benoni") is not for everyone, and it is not our repertoire in this series. Moreover, against ...c7-c5 White will likely refrain from d4-d5 anyway.

3...d5!

Making our claim in the centre. If we were allowed to play another move, we would take the pawn on c4 and then try to hold on to it.

4.♘c3

The most popular.

4.e3 b6 is what we play against the Colle System (see Chapter 17), but with a useless a2-a3 flicked in for White.

4.♘f3 is examined in the next chapter, on page 20.

4.cxd5 leads to a good version of the Carlsbad structure for us after 4...exd5 5.♘c3 c6 6.♗g5 ♗f5, transposing to Chapter 3 but with a useless a2-a3 included.

4...dxc4

Taking the pawn gives the position a more open character, which is logical when White has wasted time on a2-a3. The resulting positions are extremely similar to the ones examined in Chapter 6. That's why we keep coverage here to a bare minimum.

4...♗e7 5.♗f4! is an actual line in the Queen's Gambit Declined.

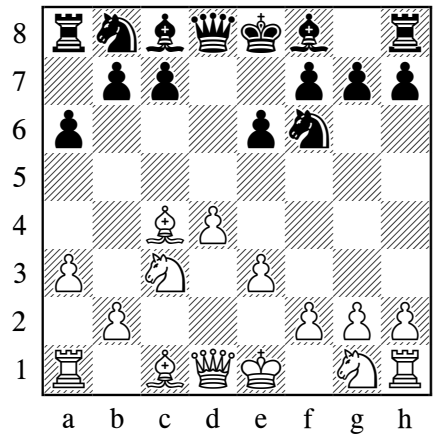
4...c6 is reasonable if you like the Semi-Slav.

And 4...c5 is reasonable if you like the Tarrasch. Everything works.

5.e3

5.e4 c5 is another pleasant version of a QGA where a2-a3 isn't useful.

5...a6 6.♗xc4



6...b5

Starting with this before ...c7-c5 rules out any chances for dxc5, killing the game. The position looks increasingly like the ones examined in Chapter 6; it will become an identical one when White develops the knight to f3.

7.♗d3

This is the most played.

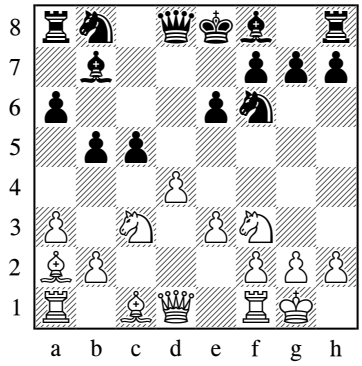
7.♗e2 ♗b7 8.♗f3 is an extra option White got from the quirky move order, but after 8...♕c8 followed by ...c7-c5 Black comfortably equalizes.

Another extra option is:

7.♗a2

This is a square that wouldn't be available otherwise. The positions resemble the 7.♗b3 line examined on page 72, but one might claim that the bishop is slightly better placed on a2. On the other hand, a2-a3 lost some time, so this isn't dangerous either. For example:

7...♗b7 8.♘f3 c5 9.0–0



9...♗d6!

An extremely rare move. On page 72, we play ...♗e7 in a similar situation. Here too we could go to e7, but since we can get away with this slightly more active move, I think we should do it.

In principle, what I am trying to avoid is 9...♘bd7 10.e4 cxd4 11.♘xd4, when White may have some ideas with a sacrifice on e6. This is still excellent for Black objectively, but it's a headache I'd rather not have.

10.♕e2

Also pleasant for Black is 10.dxc5 ♗xc5 11.b4 ♗d6 12.♗b2 0–0. The knight on c3 is in the way of the b2-bishop. In contrast, we will go ...♕e7 and ...♘bd7, with perfect harmony.

10...♘bd7

We have zero problems.

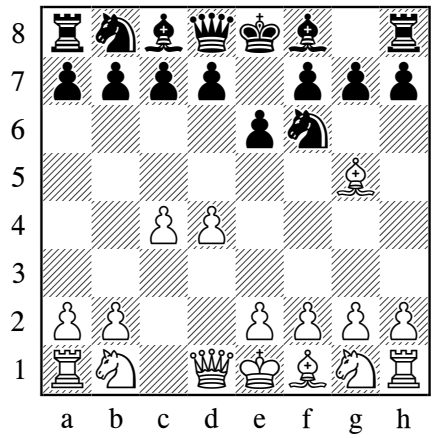
7...♗b7 8.♘f3 c5

We have reached a full transposition to Chapter 6, see page 76. As explained there repeatedly, the main problem for White in these positions is that the knight on c3 is misplaced, and the c1-bishop can't be developed as long as we keep the central tension. In that regard, the pawn on a3 doesn't help White's cause.

In conclusion, 3.a3 is not bad. However, Black can play in many ways, which come down to a matter of taste, so I just briefly presented an approach that is consistent with our repertoire.

I find it to be both solid and concretely challenging towards White's setup. Anyway, enough with this; on to the next one:

B) 3.♗g5



I found it quite funny that despite the aim of this move obviously being to transpose to ♗g5 variations of the QGD, many Black players in practice obliged. To me, that shows that they either never really studied this, or that they didn't want to show their preparation. I'm not talking about amateurs – even Magnus Carlsen played ...h7-h6, ...♗e7 and ...d7-d5 against Arjun Erigaisi. The world number one might not be bothered by a main line of the QGD, but we do: it's just not our repertoire!

3...h6! 4.♗h4

The most played and the most logical move, preserving the two bishops.

4.♗xf6 has been played a few times, but I refuse to take it seriously. In my mind, it's just a bad Trompowsky. For example: 4...♕xf6 5.♘c3 (5.♘f3 c5 is also great for Black.) 5...b6!? 6.e3 ♗b7 7.♘f3 g6 8.♗e2 ♗g7 9.0–0 0–0 10.♖c1 ♕e7 The engine gives its favourite zeroes, but I believe that humans would feel much more comfortable with the bishops than White's small and vague space advantage in the centre.

4...c5!

This is our weapon of choice. We accept a Benoni structure, but it's an excellent version for Black.

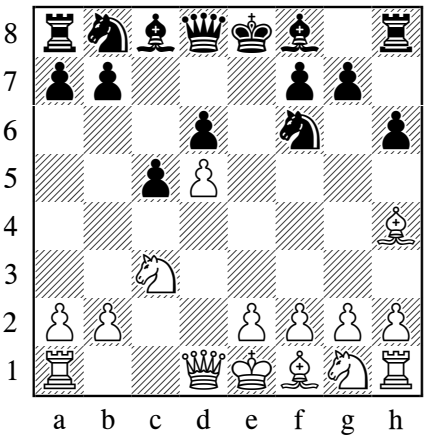
5.d5

As usual, only this is critical.

5.e3?! runs into 5...cxd4 6.exd4 ♕b6 and Black starts taking over.

5...exd5 6.cxd5 d6 7.♘c3

It makes no sense delaying this. There is no good alternative for the knight anyway, and the central squares need reinforcement.



7...a6!?

Threatening to grab space on the queenside with ...b7-b5 is one of the most common ideas for Black in this structure.

8.a4

This is an almost automatic reaction for 1.d4 players.

8.e4 isn't losing or anything, but after 8...b5 9.♗d3N ♗e7 White cannot exploit the two tempos spent on ...a7-a6 and ...b7-b5, which means that Black gets an excellent version of the positions examined below.

8...♗e7!

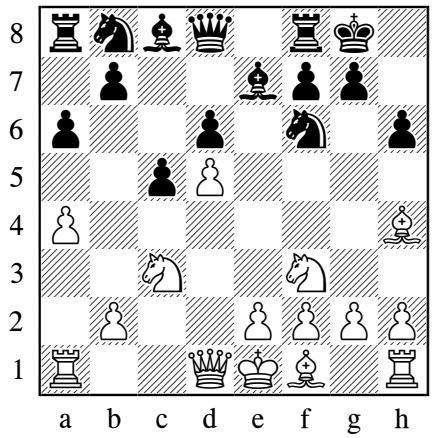
Aiming to use tactics against the exposed h4-bishop. We're already threatening ...♘xd5.

The typical 8...g5 9.♗g3 ♘h5 is also good, but we can grab this bishop while even avoiding weakening our kingside with ...g7-g5.

9.♘f3

Protecting the h4-bishop and stopping ...♘xd5.

9...0–0



10.♗g3!

The only way to avoid the tricks.

10.e3?! ran into 10...♘xd5! in Turgut – D. Gurevich, Chicago 1997. With the black king castled, there is no 11.♘xd5 ♗xh4 12.♘xh4 ♕xh4 13.♘c7, as the rook has the a7-square available. I wonder which genius suggested that we should include ...a7-a6 and a2-a4.

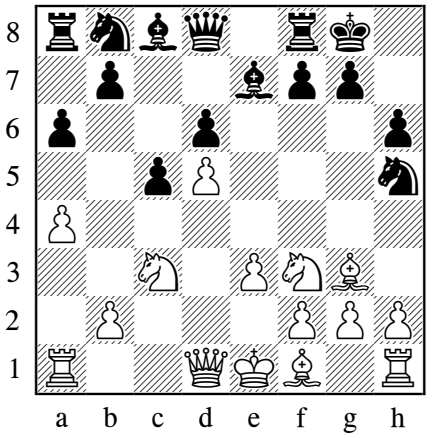
10.e4? is even worse, as it runs into 10...♘xe4!.

10...♘h5!

As promised, we grab the dark-squared bishop without ever weakening our kingside. Then, we can continue with ...♗f6, ...♘d7 and so on. The engine claims equality, but this is one of the best versions of the Benoni anyone has ever seen; an unopposed dark-squared bishop on the long diagonal is a massive feature. The game could continue:

11.e3N

11.e4?! was Stavrianakis – Csiszar, Szombathely 2009, and Black should have simply played 11...♘xg3 12.hxg3 ♘d7, followed by ...♗f6 with a large advantage.

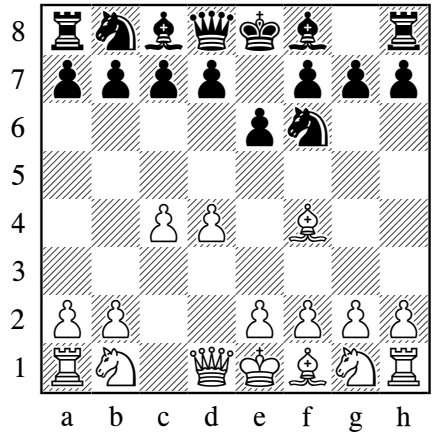


11...♘xg3 12.hxg3 ♘d7 13.♗e2 ♗f6

At least the e3-pawn keeps an eye on the dark squares, but I'd take Black every time. We have the two bishops, a potential break on the queenside and the semi-open e-file. It's just a dream for anyone that has ever played a "normal" Benoni.

In conclusion, when put under scrutiny, 3.♗g5 fails to impress. White not only doesn't gain an advantage, but also runs a significant risk of getting a worse position. I think it is enough to remember 3...h6!, 4...c5! and that if White goes for the Benoni with 5.d5 we won't hunt down the bishop with ...g7-g5 and ...♘h5 but use tactics against it with ...♗e7. The rest you should be able to figure out over the board.

C) 3.♗f4



As I said already, despite its logical appearance, this used to be exceedingly rare. However, due to the immense rise in popularity of the London System, people decided to give this a closer look as well.

3...d5

Our usual approach.

3...c5?! isn't good, as after 4.d5 the bishop on f4 is placed perfectly.

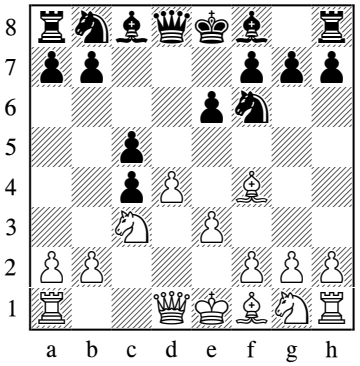
3...♗b4† is a logical option, as developing the knight to c3 transposes to a Nimzo-Indian where the bishop on f4 is misplaced. However, 4.♘d2! is the modern twist, which I thought was slightly annoying. There is room for creativity here, and you can explore it on your own if you wish.

4.cxd5!

This is the trendy approach. White wants to take the game into an interesting version of the Carlsbad structure.

4.♘f3 makes little sense. The threat to the c4-pawn shouldn't be neglected. After 4...dxc4! White needs to play 5.♕a4†, as otherwise we might get to keep the extra pawn. (For example, 5.e3?! b5 and 5.♘c3 c6!? are comfortable for Black.) But using the queen instead of the bishop to take back on c4 can rarely be challenging. After 5...♘bd7 6.♕xc4 c5 7.e3 a6 we're ready for ...b7-b5, with a slight edge.

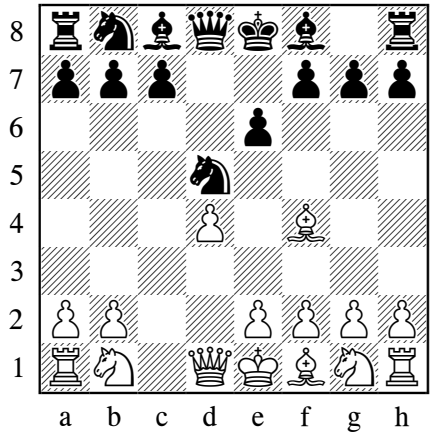
4.♘c3 is again best answered with 4...dxc4, continuing to play in the spirit of our repertoire. A possible continuation would be: 5.e3 c5!



6.♘f3 Trying to take back on d4 with a piece. (As we will mention again while studying the London (see page 214), an IQP and a bishop on f4 do not combine well. For example: 6.♗xc4 cxd4 7.exd4 ♘c6 8.♘f3 ♗d6! Black has already obtained full equality. The d6-square is better than e7, as swaps generally favour us, and the e7-square can be used by the knight on c6.) 6...cxd4 7.♕xd4 ♕xd4 8.♘xd4 ♗d7 Followed by ...♘c6. The endgame is level.

In fact, 4.e3 is the most played move in my database. However, blocking the bishop's retreat to the queenside is a huge provocation. We are morally obliged to go 4...♗b4†!? 5.♘c3 c5 (or 5...0–0 followed by ...c7-c5 – the move order doesn't really matter). By transposition, we have reached a position we already examined in *Playing the Nimzo-Indian*. Black will just take on d4 and c4, giving White an IQP. The bishop on f4 will again be misplaced.

4...♘xd5!



The dynamic choice, gaining an important tempo against the bishop. Of course, the downside is that we surrender some of the centre, and White will be able to go e2-e4. On the other hand, we keep the option of ...c7-c5. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with recapturing on d5 with the pawn, apart from it being against the spirit of our dynamic repertoire.

5.♗g3

Nothing else makes any sense.

5...c5!

Immediately fighting for the centre.

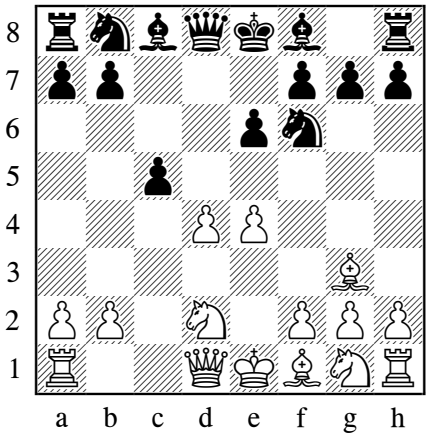
5...h5!? is an interesting alternative.

6.e4

Everything else is harmless.

6...♘f6 7.♘d2!

White plays in true gambit style. The d4-pawn is sacrificed, but some positional compensation is in order no matter which way we take.



7...cxd4!

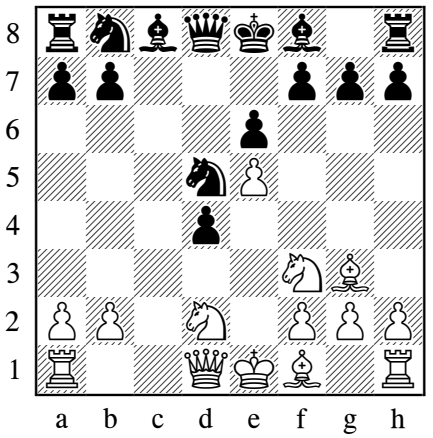
After closely studying both options, this is my preference. I like the fact that our pawn is passed, the a3-f8 diagonal open for our bishop and the c5-square is vacant, making it a nice potential home for one of our knights. Moreover, this looks similar to positions examined in Chapter 4 (see page 46). White has enough compensation for the pawn, and we should not underestimate the dangers. If we could give back our extra pawn to catch up in development, then that would be ideal.

8.e5

White cannot do without this push.

For example, 8.♘gf3 ♗e7!N is already a small win for Black, who is about to go to h5 with the knight instead of d5.

8...♘d5 9.♘gf3



9...♗e7!

A simple but clever new idea that has been played only once. We do not need to rush with developing the knight to c6, as then White can choose the d3-square for the light-squared bishop. But we shouldn't prematurely choose d7 for the knight either, as then White will know not to choose d3. This plan is not considered by the GM Alex Colovic in his *1.d4: Simplified* course for Chessable.

10.♗d3

After 10.♗c4N we can be happy that the bishop chose a suboptimal square and go for 10...♗d7! 11.0–0 0–0 12.♘xd4 ♘c6 with an equal position. Trades are often beneficial for Black, as in an endgame the pawn on e5 could be considered slightly overextended.

10...♘d7 11.0–0 ♘c5!

This is crucial. We need to eliminate this powerful bishop.

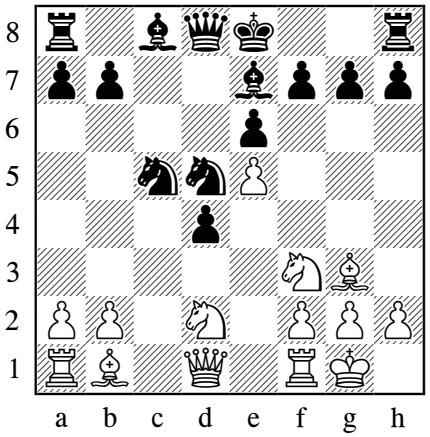
12.♗b1?!

Naturally, White tries to preserve it, but now the rook on a1 feels trapped.

12.♗b5†?!N ♗d7 is simply a bit better for Black.

More sensible is 12.♘e4N, but after 12...♘xd3 13.♕xd3 0–0 we anyway reach comfortable equality. The c8-bishop has a nice home available on c6.

12.♘c4N ♘xd3 is similar.



12...d3!N

We're the ones asking questions by this point. How is White going to regain the pawn on d3? Our next moves are possibly ...♗d7 and ...♗c6, but ...h7-h5 is also on the cards, harassing the g3-bishop.

Our practical example saw 12...♗d7, and Black eventually won anyway in Bora – Minzer, Alicante 2024.

A possible continuation would be:

13.♘b3 ♘xb3 14.♕xb3 ♕b6!? 15.♗xd3 ♗d7

Black has a slight but stable edge. We have caught up in development, there is no attack to speak of against our kingside, and the g3-bishop is a bit passive.

In conclusion, 3.♗f4 is a trendy and interesting line for White to use as a surprise weapon. A few years ago, our approach could be regarded as conservative; we don't look to punish White's approach. That's because when checked with modern engines, 3.♗f4 turns out to be a serious move that we should respect.

On the other hand, it seems like the variation we presented with 7...cxd4! and 9...♗e7! gives Black an easy game. What we need to

remember is to keep our king in the centre if we see a bishop on d3, and instead prioritize the development of our queenside with ...♘b8-d7-c5.

Conclusion

As we learnt in this chapter, White has three rare but sensible alternatives that deserve to be briefly looked at.

3.a3 is the least logical of the three moves, at it doesn't have any purpose other than stopping ...♗b4. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate White's modest try. Our suggestion of 3...d5 and ...d5xc4 is a level-headed, practical solution. We either transpose to what we examine in Chapter 6, or White gets a worse version where a2-a3 isn't useful.

3.♗g5 is more of a challenge, and one of the few points in the book where our approach isn't ...d7-d5 and ...d5xc4. Instead, we go for a Benoni structure with 3...h6! and 4...c5!. In the resulting positions, the bishop on h4 is misplaced, as we can exploit it by developing our own bishop to e7. To avoid our tactics on the h4-d8 diagonal White needs to go for an unprompted ♗h4-g3 retreat, but that allows ...♘h5, grabbing the bishop without the need to weaken our kingside.

Of the three moves we studied, 3.♗f4 is both the trendiest and the most dangerous. That being said, we have a simple recipe to defuse it:

1) We go for our usual 3...d5, threatening to grab the pawn on c4.
2) After 4.cxd5!, we go for the dynamic 4...♘xd5!, winning a tempo against the f4-bishop and aiming to go ...c7-c5 next.
3) When faced with the dilemma regarding the capture on d4, we opt for 7...cxd4!. Our next move is going to be ...♗e7.
4) Against 8.e5 ♘d5 9.♘f3, we choose 9...♗e7! waiting for White to choose a square for the f1-bishop before we choose a square for our b8-knight.

Before we move on, I want to leave you with a final thought on these sidelines, which I have faced myself a few times: there is no way to outright punish White's approach. The best way forward is just to try to equalize first and play a scheme that you are comfortable with. Many players tend to react to such provocations by falling straight into the trap of thinking that, after such irregular play, they *deserve* to win.

Falling into such a psychological trap means that White's attempt to surprise us has already partly succeeded. In my view, staying composed is more important than knowing any theory at all.

Abridged Variation Index

The Variation Index in the book is six pages long. Below is an abridged version giving just the main variations, not the sub-variations.