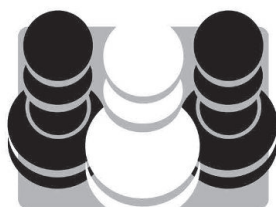


Grandmaster Repertoire

The Berlin Defence

By

Michael Roiz



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Preface

I was delighted when Jacob Aagaard and John Shaw offered me the opportunity to write a book advocating the Berlin Defence, which arises after the opening moves **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5** (the Ruy Lopez) **3...♗f6**.

My favourite weapon against the Ruy Lopez has tended to be the Breyer System in the old main line, which I have employed in nearly forty tournament games, including several victories over strong grandmasters. However, I always had the feeling that the Berlin would also perfectly suit my playing style: it offers Black solidity along with the flexibility to choose between various set-ups. Also, since I was seconding top players such as GM Pavel Eljanov for many years, I had a chance to analyse various Berlin lines in depth, and I will be glad to share my experience and understanding of this opening with the readers.

The Berlin was regarded as something of a second-tier response to the Ruy Lopez for a long time, but that all changed when Vladimir Kramnik famously employed it in the 2000 World Championship match to neutralize the fearsome opening preparation of Garry Kasparov, eventually going on to win the title. Since then, the Berlin has become Black's most popular and reliable response to the Ruy Lopez at the highest levels, and almost all of the world's leading players have incorporated it into their repertoires. In the following pages you can find a breakdown of the chapter structure and the main theoretical battlegrounds of the Berlin, including: the famous Berlin Endgame; the relatively quiet positions with a symmetrical pawn structure (mostly after 5.♙e1); and strategically complex middlegame positions which can arise after 4.d3.

The aim of this book is to enable players at various levels to feel comfortable enough to use the Berlin successfully in competitive play. Despite the Berlin's reputation for solidity, this book contains a whole host of tactical and other remarkable ideas, many of which arise at a surprisingly early stage. I hope that every reader will enjoy the book and find success with the Berlin.

Michael Roiz
Rishon LeZion, July 2021

If you are unable to get comfortable with the black side of this position, then the Berlin is not for you. If, on the other hand, you can become proficient from this position, you need never fear the Ruy Lopez again. (True, White has some other ways of playing, as mentioned below, but none of them are as theoretically challenging.)

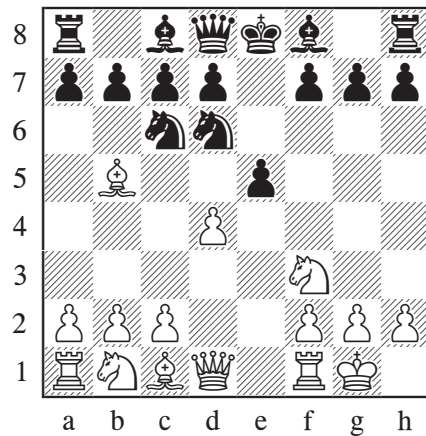
By the way, I have described the above position as the “Berlin Endgame” because it seems to be the most commonly accepted term, but it would be more accurate to think of it as a queenless middlegame. There are many pieces remaining on the board, while the unbalanced pawn structure and Black’s slightly exposed king ensure that there will be no shortage of dynamic possibilities.

As tournament practice shows, White players often seem to overestimate the value of the kingside pawn majority, and in many games Black’s doubled pawns on the queenside have proved the decisive factor. Chapter 1 will briefly cover White’s rare 9th moves, before focusing on the natural and popular developing move **9.♘c3**. The modern continuations **9.♞d1†** and **9.h3!?** will be analysed in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

Avoiding the Endgame

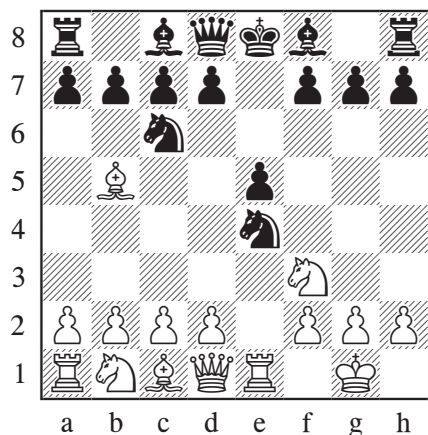
The book’s second section starts in the position after **1.♠e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4**, and deals with all of the plausible ways in which White may deviate from the Berlin Endgame sequence shown earlier.

The position after **5.d4 ♘d6** provides the starting point for Chapter 4:



White has several gambit or pseudo-gambit tries, such as **6.♙g5**, **6.♙a4** and **6.dxe5 ♘xb5 7.a4**. Finally, after **6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5** White can avoid the queen exchange with **8.♞e2**.

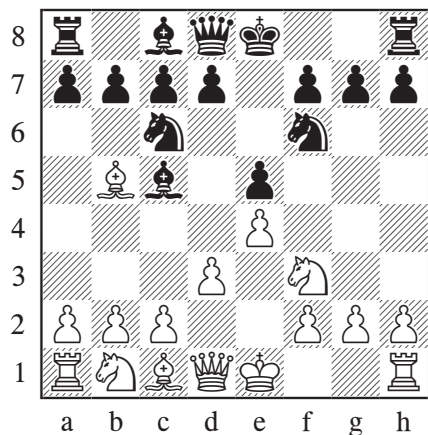
Chapter 5 continues the theme by analysing **5.♞e2** followed by the more theoretically significant **5.♞e1**, which reaches the following position:



White will pick up the e5-pawn and attempt to generate some initiative in the ensuing position with a symmetrical pawn structure. Black is in good shape though, as we will see.

Closed System

After the opening moves **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6**, White can also preserve the central pawn with **4.d3**, when **4...Bc5** is our choice, reaching the following position:



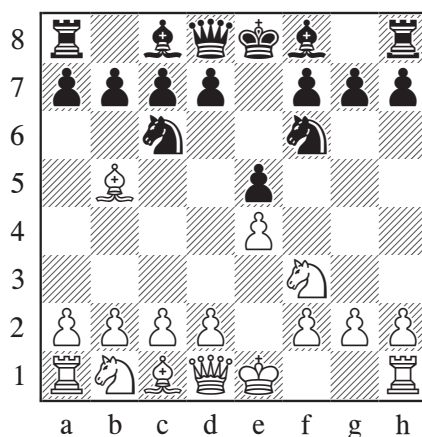
Given the chance, I generally want to follow this active bishop development with **...Nd4** to trade a pair of knights.

5.c3 is the most popular continuation, and is analysed in Chapter 6.

The other main possibilities are **5.Nc3**, **5.Nbd2**, **5.0-0** and **5.Qxc6**, all of which can be found in Chapter 7.

Other Lines

The final section deals with White's remaining possibilities after **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6**:



Aside from the main options of **4.0-0** and **4.d3**, White does not have all that many reasonable moves available:

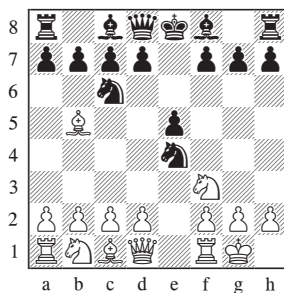
4.Nc3 is a significant option, transposing to the Four Knights Game. This will be the sole focus of Chapter 8.

Finally, **4.Qe2**, **4.Qxc6** and **4.d4** will be covered in Chapter 9.

Now that we know what lies ahead, I invite you to turn the page and we'll get started.

Chapter 5

Avoiding the Endgame



5.♔e2 & 5.♖e1

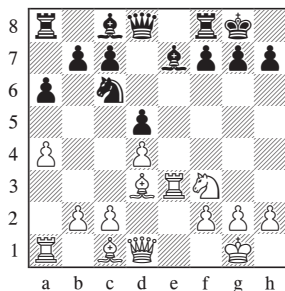
Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.♞f3 ♞c6 3.♙b5 ♞f6 4.0-0

4...♞xe4

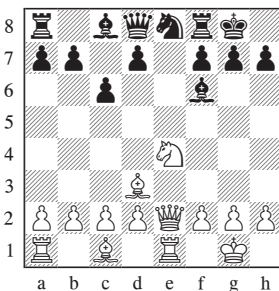
A) 5.♔e2	94
B) 5.♖e1 ♞d6	97
B1) 6.a4	97
B2) 6.♞xe5 ♙e7	99
B21) 7.♙d3	101
B22) 7.♙f1 ♞xe5 8.♖xe5 0-0	103
B221) 9.♞c3	103
B222) 9.d4 ♙f6 10.♖e1 ♞f5 11.d5 ♖e8	108
B2221) 12.♞d2	109
B2222) 12.♖xe8†	110

B1) after 12.♖e3



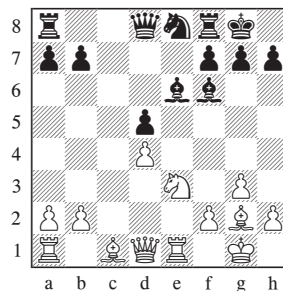
12...♙d6!N

B21) after 12.♞e4



12...♙d4!N

B221) after 17.♙g2

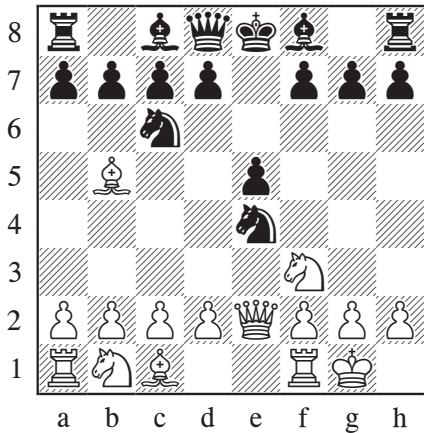


17...♖c8!N

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4

Aside from the main line of 5.d4, White has two credible options: **A) 5.♖e2** and **B) 5.♗e1**.

A) 5.♖e2



This is one of a few minor possibilities, which has been known for more than 150 years! White is aiming to regain the pawn without giving up the light-squared bishop.

5...♘g5!?

A somewhat unusual retreat that invites interesting complications.

5...♘d6 is the most common continuation by far.

6.♘xg5

The only way to fight for the initiative.

6.♙xc6?! is too simplistic, and 6...dxc6 7.♖xe5† ♘e6 8.♗e1 ♙e7 9.♘c3 0-0 10.d3 b6 gave Black a slight edge due to the bishop pair in E. Hansen – Dominguez Perez, Internet (rapid) 2018.

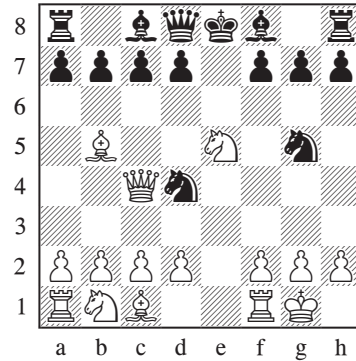
Another unfortunate choice for White is:

6.♘e5?! ♘d4! 7.♖c4?

7.♖d3N is the lesser evil, but 7...♘ge6 8.c3 ♘xb5 9.♖xb5 ♙e7 10.d4 c6 11.♖e2 0-0

offers Black some edge due to the bishop pair.

In I. Popov – Santos Ruiz, Moscow (blitz) 2019, Black could have refuted White's play with:



7...♘ge6!N

White will pay a high price for the loss of harmony. For instance:

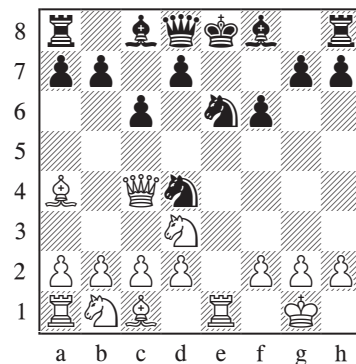
8.♙a4

8.c3? ♘c2 wins.

8...f6

8...b5!?! is a good alternative, when 9.♙xb5 ♖b8 10.♘c3 ♙d6 gives Black an overwhelming initiative.

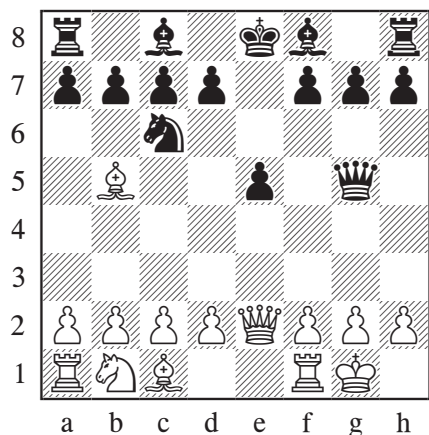
9.♘d3 c6 10.♗e1



10...♙f7!

Black will combine rapid development with threats to win material, and White's problems are already insurmountable.

6...♖xg5



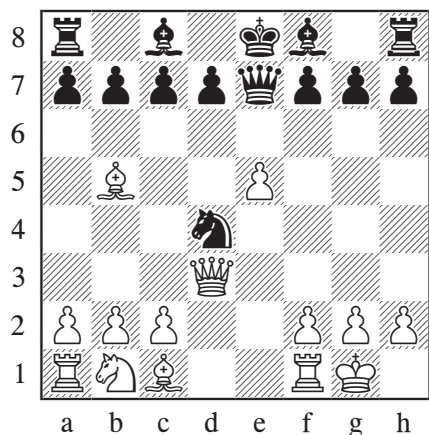
7.d4 ♗e7 8.dxe5

White has an obvious lead in development but the vulnerability of the e5-pawn provides Black with sufficient counterplay.

8...♘d4

Another interesting option is 8...a6!? 9.♙a4 (9.♙xc6?! dxc6 10.♘d2 was an inferior choice for White in Naroditsky – Kramnik, London [rapid] 2014, when 10...♙f5!N 11.♘b3 0–0–0 would have favoured Black) 9...b5 10.♙b3 ♙b7 with a complex, double-edged struggle in Arreaga – Jean, corr. 2017.

9.♙d3



9...♙xe5

Bravely accepting the challenge!

10.♘c3

This natural developing move has been tested in a few correspondence games.

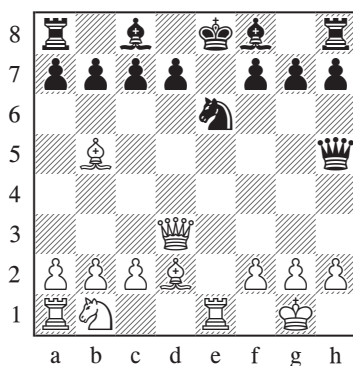
The only move to have been tested in over-the-board play is:

10.♙d2 ♘e6

Just as in the main line below, the knight performs a crucial role in blocking the e-file. 11.♖e1 ♗h5!

The queen is well placed here: it cannot be attacked by White's pieces and it keeps an eye on the h2-pawn.

11...♙d6?! feels awkward, and 12.♗h3 ♙e7 13.♙d3 c6 14.♘c3 left Black under strong pressure in T. Petrosian – Minasian, Yerevan 2006.



12.♘c3N

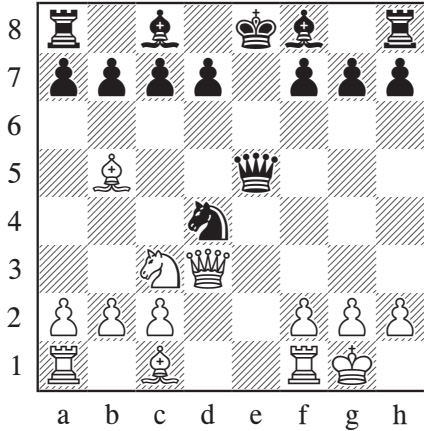
White needs to improve on 12.♙c4?!, as played in Laine – Nacer, email 2012, when 12...c6!N 13.♙xe6 dxe6 14.♗g3 ♗g6 15.♗c7 ♙c5 would have left White with no real compensation.

12...c6 13.♙f4

13.♙c4 ♙e7 leaves White with no compensation at all.

13...♙e7 14.♙d6 ♙xd6 15.♗xd6 ♗h4!

The queen will drop back to e7 next, and White will have to work hard to prove compensation for the pawn.



10...♙c5 11.♚d1!

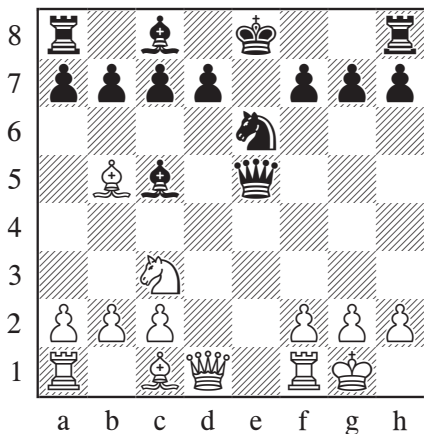
This is the only way of maintaining the tension.

After 11...♙e3?! 0-0 12.♖ad1 ♘e6 Black manages to fully consolidate.

11...♘e6!

A precise defensive move.

Instead, after 11...0-0? 12.♖e1 Black struggles to find a good square for the queen, as 12...♗f6 13.♘e4 ♗b6 14.♙d3 offers White a powerful attack.



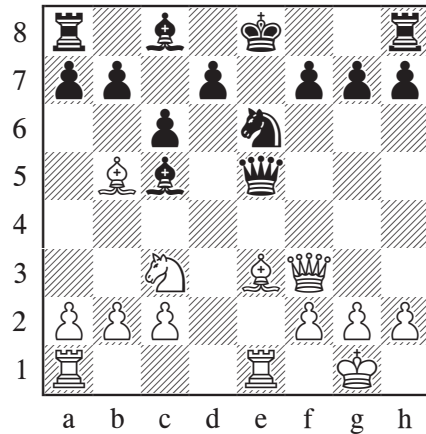
12.♖e1 ♗d4 13.♗f3

Obviously White has to avoid the trade of queens.

13...c6 14.♙e3

After 14.♙d3?! ♙e7 15.♘e4 d5 16.♘g3 g6 the activity of White's pieces is neutralized, so Black is simply a pawn up.

14...♗e5



15.♙d3?!

The logical continuation would have been 15.♙h6N ♗d4 16.♙e3 ♗e5 when White has nothing better than accepting a draw by repetition.

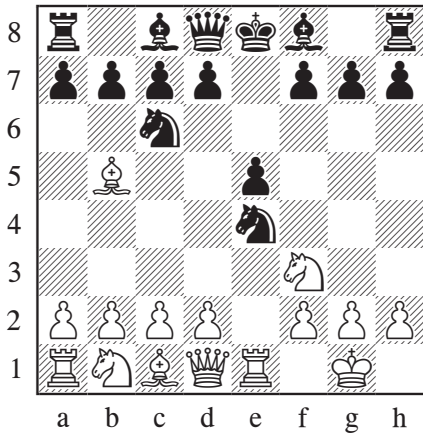
15...♙e7!

A cold-blooded move. White cannot make special use of the opposition along the e-file, and must settle for regaining the pawn.

16.♙xa7 ♗f6 17.♗e3 d5

Black enjoyed the superior pawn structure and piece coordination in Trofimov – Tyulenko, email 2014.

B) 5.♗e1



White intends to win back the pawn in simple fashion, hoping for active piece play.

5...♗d6

We will analyse the sideline **B1) 6.a4** followed by the normal **B2) 6.♗xe5**.

6.♗f1 ♗e7 has no independent value, as White has nothing better than transposing to the main line with 7.♗xe5 – see variation B22.

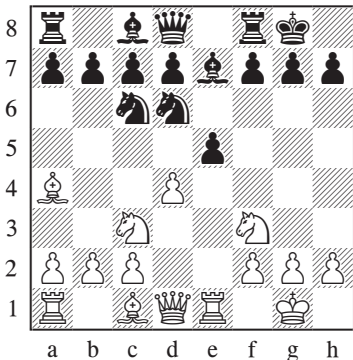
6.♗a4

This is a rare move which, like 6.a4, can be played in connection with a d2-d4 gambit.

6...♗e7 7.♗c3

7.♗xe5 ♗xe5 8.♗xe5 transposes to 7.♗a4 ♗xe5 8.♗xe5 in the notes to variation B2 below.

7...0-0 8.d4



8...e4

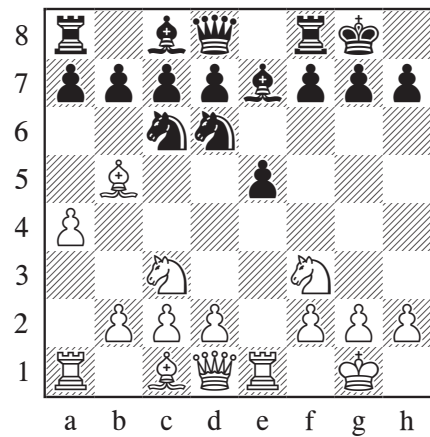
Simple and safe.

8...♗xd4N leads to a more complex type of position, when 9.♗xe5 ♗e6 10.♗d5 offers White long-term compensation for the pawn, in view of Black's difficulties with developing the c8-bishop.

9.♗xe4 ♗xe4 10.♗xe4 d5 11.♗e1 ♗d6 12.c3 ♗e7 13.♗c2 ♗f5

Black had fully equalized in Solodovnichenko – Malakhov, Chartres 2017.

B1) 6.a4 ♗e7 7.♗c3 0-0



8.d4

This is the only way of justifying the artificial 6.a4.

8.♗xe5N is met by 8...♗xe5 9.♗xe5 c6 10.♗f1 ♗e8 followed by ...d6-d5, reaching a normal type of position where a2-a4 is hardly the best use of a tempo.

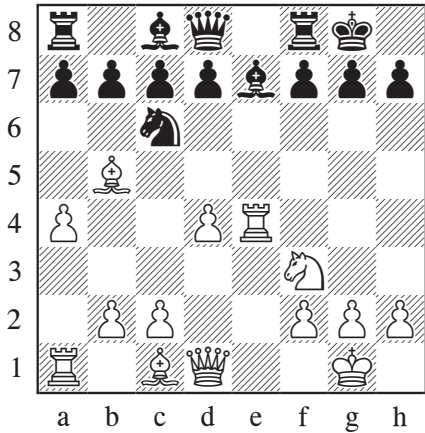
8...e4

A safe choice. Black doesn't mind returning the pawn in order to solve any development problems.

8...exd4 9.♗d5 gives White plenty of compensation, for instance: 9...♗e8 10.♗f4 ♗f8 (10...a6?! 11.♗d3 b6 12.h4! ♗b7 13.♗g5

left Black's king in big danger in Steinberg – Chen Qi, St Petersburg [blitz] 2018) 11.♖xe8 ♜xe8 12.♘g5 White had a promising initiative for the pawn in Osmanodja – Vrolijk, Internet (rapid) 2019.

9.♘xe4 ♜xe4 10.♖xe4



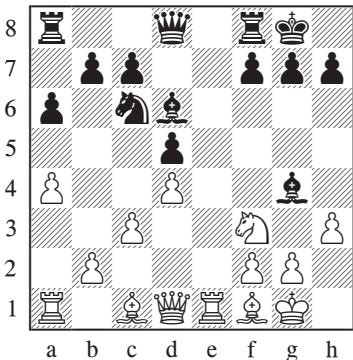
10...a6!

The most precise move. It makes sense to chase the bishop away before playing ...d7-d5.

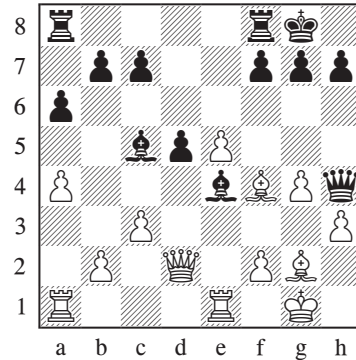
After 10...d5 11.♞e1 ♘g4 12.♙xc6 bxc6 13.♚d3 ♙xf3 14.♚xf3 ♘d6 15.♙f4 White obtained a slight edge due to his control over the e-file in Dubov – McShane, Netanya 2019.

11.♙d3

White also achieves nothing special with: 11.♙f1 d5 12.♞e1 ♘g4 13.c3 ♙d6 14.h3

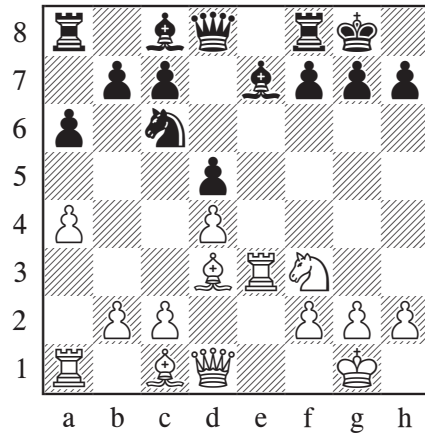


In Mamedov – Kozak, Moscow 2020, the simple 14...♙h5!N would have been best. Presumably Kozak was concerned about 15.g4 ♙g6 16.♘e5, but Black's chances are by no means worse after: 16...♚h4 17.♙g2 (17...♙f4 ♜xe5 18.dxe5 ♙c5 19.♚d2 ♙e4 offers Black good prospects for counterplay.) 17...♙e4 18.♙f4 ♜xe5 19.dxe5 ♙c5 20.♚d2



20...f5! The vulnerability of White's king starts to tell.

11...d5 12.♞e3



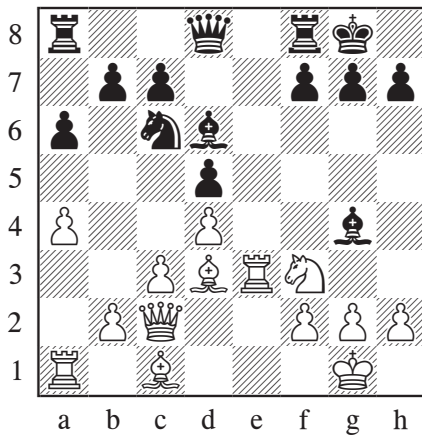
12...♙d6!N

This innovation is directed against the drawbacks of White's set-up. In particular, the rook is slightly misplaced on e3.

12...♘b4 has been played in the existing games, but 13.♙f1 ♙f5 14.c3! ♘c6 (14...♘c2? is refuted by 15.♗e5!) 15.♗e1 ♖d7 16.♙f4 yielded White slight yet long-lasting pressure in Kobo – Roiz, Tiberias 2016.

13.c3 ♙g4 14.♖c2

14.h3 ♙h5 15.♖c2 is safer, although 15...♙g6 is no problem for Black.



14...♙f4!

This is the logical continuation of Black's previous play.

15.♗e1 ♙xc1 16.♖xc1 ♙xf3 17.gxf3 ♘e7

White has enough activity to compensate for the fractured kingside pawn structure, but Black has no cause for dissatisfaction.

Abridged Variation Index

The Variation Index in the book is 5 pages long. Below is an abridged version giving just the main variations, not the sub-variations.

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1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0–0
♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5
♘f5 8.♞xd8† ♜xd8 9.♘c3 ♙d7

- A) 10.b3 14
- B) 10.♞d1 18
- C) 10.h3 30

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♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5
♘f5 8.♞xd8† ♜xd8 9.♞d1† ♜e8
10.♘c3 ♙e7

- A) 11.b3 40
- B) 11.♘e2 43
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♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5
♘f5 8.♞xd8† ♜xd8 9.h3! ♙e7

- A) 10.♞d1† 54
- B) 10.g4 56
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♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6

- A) 6.♙g5 78
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♘xe4

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- C) 4.d4 216