

Play the Semi-Slav

David Vigorito

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Introduction

This is a repertoire book on the Semi-Slav defence to 1.d4. While there is deep theoretical coverage when necessary, this work is not meant to cover all variations of the Semi-Slav comprehensively. When possible, at least two possibilities are given against White's main lines. The relatively solid Moscow variation is covered, as is the exciting but risky Botvinnik variation. Even within these systems there are options available. In the main lines of the Meran only 8...♗b7 is included, although after 9.0–0 both 9...a6 and the more solid 9...b4 receive attention. Even within the solid confines of the Exchange Slav, Black is given options whenever possible. Because this book utilizes the Slav move order (1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6) there is a lot here that would be useful not only to those who want to play the Semi-Slav, but to players of any Slav system.

Why the Semi-Slav?

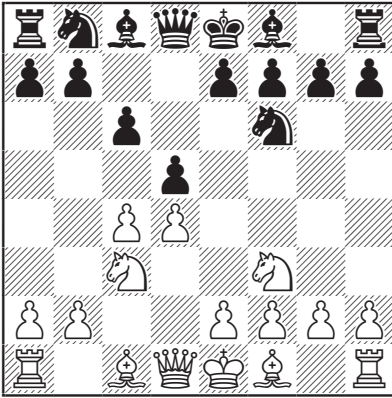
Choosing a defence to 1.d4 can be a difficult practical matter. Black's sharpest defences to 1.d4 are the Indian defences. The King's Indian is a fun opening, but it gives up a lot of space, and almost every white line against it poses Black certain problems. The Benoni and Benko are very dynamic, but they are not very move-order friendly – they can only be essayed against the 1.d4, 2.c4 move order, and their theoretical reputations are not the best. The Grünfeld requires a tremendous amount of work because almost every variation is a theoretical minefield. Personally, my brief dabbles in this opening showed that it just did not suit me.

Then there are the more classical defences. Let's start with the popular Nimzo-Indian. I cannot say that there is anything at all wrong with the Nimzo. In fact, I would not mind playing most lines of the Nimzo with either colour, because it is a strategically rich opening. I am discouraged from playing the Nimzo because White can avoid it. This may sound odd, considering I wrote a book on the Nimzo-Indian for White, but not everyone wants an interesting game with both colours! If White avoids the Nimzo with 3.♘f3 then there are several choices available to Black, but I am not thrilled with any of them. The Queen's Indian is very theoretical and can be difficult to win. The Bogo-Indian may give Black better winning chances, but it tends to concede a lot of space to White, and it is also only playable from a "pure" 1.d4, 2.c4 move order. Black could aim for a Benoni with 3...c5, but White is not forced to oblige, as he can head for the English Opening with 4.g3 or 4.♘c3. We could play 3...d5, when White can allow various Queen's Gambit Declined systems with 4.♘c3 (or the Semi-Slav after 4...c6) or head for a Catalan with 4.g3. More on this later.

If Black does not want to give White a space advantage, the most logical move is 1...d5. After 2.c4, Black has to make a choice. The Queen's Gambit Accepted is quite sound, but in many of the lines it is very difficult to play for a win. The Queen's Gambit Declined is extremely solid and provides several lines for Black to choose from, but here, too, it can be difficult to play for a win. And again, there is the prospect of

the Catalan opening, which I would prefer to avoid.

So then we come to the Slav systems. The main lines start after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♗c3.



One thing I love about the Slav is that it makes it easy to expand one's repertoire. In this position 4...dxc4, 4...e6, and even 4...a6 are all very playable and lead to different types of positions. Of these three moves, 4...e6 is the sharpest, and it is this move that constitutes the Semi-Slav defence. The Semi-Slav is a very rich opening that can lead to many different types of positions. It is also a very flexible defence, so Black can switch up lines without completely revamping his opening repertoire.

White's sharpest and most principled move is 5.♙g5. If Black plays passively (say, with 5...♗e7) he will end up in a Queen's Gambit Declined where ...c6 has been played prematurely. 5...♗bd7 is solid enough, heading for the Cambridge Springs variation. Some grandmasters play this way, but Black has two more interesting options within the realm of the Semi-Slav and we will stick to those. The Moscow variation (5...h6) forces some sort of concession from White. 6.♙xf6 is the traditional main line.

White has free development and more space, but in return Black has the bishop pair. The Moscow became much more popular when after 6...♗xf6 7.e3 ♗d7 8.♙d3 dxc4 9.♙xc4 the move 9...g6! was proven to be a viable option for Black. Because of Black's resilience in this variation, the gambit 6.♙h4 became popular. After 6...dxc4 7.e4 g5 8.♙g3 b5 Black has managed to grab a pawn, but his position on both flanks is somewhat compromised. There is an interesting symmetry in this position, because White's main breaks are a2-a4, h2-h4, d4-d5, and e4-e5. The theory of this gambit is developing rapidly and both sides have the chance to display a lot of creativity.

Black can also play the exciting Botvinnik variation (5...dxc4). The main line 6.e4 b5 7.e5 h6 8.♙h4 g5 9.♗xg5 hxg5 10.♙xg5 ♗bd7 leads to some of the most complicated, irrational positions in all of chess theory. The Botvinnik is a very risky opening to play, but it is a lot of fun and in my opinion it is worth studying some of the variations even if you prefer the more sober Moscow variation. In this book I have chosen to focus on the main line of the Botvinnik. Black has many sidelines to consider as well, and these will be indicated for those who want to further broaden their repertoire.

The other main branch of the Semi-Slav is 5.e3. This move avoids the chaos of some of the variations stemming from 5.♙g5, but it can also lead to very sharp play. After 5...♗bd7 White has another decision to make. 6.♙d3 leads to the Meran variation (6...dxc4 7.♙xc4 b5), which is similar in nature to the Queen's Gambit Accepted. One important difference is that White's queen knight is already on the c3-square, which gives Black the possibility of playing ...b4 with tempo.

White can also play 6.♖c2. Black usually responds with the active 6...♗d6. Traditionally this line has been a quiet positional variation, and White has continued with moves like 7.b3 and 7.♗e2. However, the emergence of the radical 7.g4 has made 6.♖c2 another sharp way of playing against the Semi-Slav.

There are other variations, of course, and all of these will be discussed. Most of these are relatively harmless compared to White's main lines. I know there is one question that everyone is dying to ask – "The Semi-Slav sounds great, but what about the Exchange Slav?" I only consider this a minor nuisance, and I have paid special attention to the Exchange variation. The problem with the Exchange is never held to be theoretical. It is always about its drawish tendencies, but I think these have been exaggerated, and I believe that if Black can overcome the common psychological issues in facing 3.cxd5, he can always play for a win.

Move Order Issues

There are three basic ways to reach the Semi-Slav. The least common of these is through a Nimzo-Indian move order – 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 and if 3.♗f3 d5 4.♗c3 c6. This is perfectly valid, but as this is not a book on the Nimzo, I have shied away from it. Black must also be ready for the Catalan (4.g3), which by now the reader has probably figured out I have a slight aversion to.

The second way to reach the Semi-Slav is through a Queen's Gambit move order – 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6. The main advantage to this move order is that it avoids the Exchange Slav. I strongly feel that this is a case where the cure can be worse than the disease. In my opinion White has many more annoying lines to play against 2...e6 than against 2...c6.

I know some will be sceptical of this notion, so I am prepared to back it up.

First, there is 3.♗c3. If Black wants to play the Semi-Slav then 3...e6 is absolutely mandatory, because 3...♗f6 allows both 4.♗g5 and 4.cxd5: in both cases White has his optimal version of Queen's Gambit Declined variations. After 3...e6 there is the Marshall Gambit, 4.e4 to contend with. After 4...dxe4 5.♗xe4 ♗b4† 6.♗d2 ♖xd4 7.♗xb4 ♖xe4† 8.♗e2 ♗a6 White has scored very well with both 9.♗a5 and 9.♗d6. After studying these lines I realized it would be much more fun to write a repertoire book advocating these lines for White. Okay, life is not always easy, and these lines are sharp at least, so if the Marshall was my only issue I probably would have had no problem with this move order. But there is more.

All right, let's take a look at 3.♗f3. Black has to make a decision. 3...♗f6 is the best move in my opinion. Then 4.♗c3 c6 is our Semi-Slav, and 4.♗g5 allows Black to steer the play towards the Moscow with 4...h6 or the Botvinnik with 4...dxc4. White can vary from the main lines, but I do not think any of it is too scary. My real issue, once again, is the Catalan (4.g3). Personally, if I was trying to win with Black, I would just as soon play the Exchange Slav. Covering the Catalan in a Semi-Slav book would have been difficult to do, especially if I had to show that Black could get good winning chances without taking undue risks.

Black can also play 3...c6 against 3.♗f3 to maintain the "triangle" theme. This move order also threatens to play the Noteboom variation (4.♗c3 dxc4) which scores very well for Black. Unfortunately White can avoid this in a couple of ways. 4.♖c2 is a bit of a headache, and it is more popular now because it has received some publicity. This move is recommended in recent repertoire

books by both Khalifman and Cox. Black's main problem is that it is difficult to prevent White from playing ♕c1-g5 . After $4...♗f6$ $5.♙g5$ White is threatening to head into a comfortable Queen's Gambit Declined with $6.e3$, so Black is compelled to play $5...dxc4$ (or $5...h6$ $6.♙h4$ $dxc4$). After $6.♗xc4$ $b5$ $7.♗c2$ it will not be so easy for Black to get in $...c5$, because White can play $♗b1-d2$ and possibly $♗d2-b3$. White may also take on $f6$ at an opportune moment, in order to deflect one of Black's minor pieces (a bishop on $e7$ or a knight of $d7$) from the important $c5$ -square. I would also find $4.e3$ annoying, and I will discuss this more below.

The final option is the traditional Slav move order $1.d4$ $d5$ $2.c4$ $c6$. As mentioned before, the downside to this move order is the Exchange Slav. However, *everything* else is an upside. It is no accident that this is the most popular move order amongst the world's top Semi-Slav practitioners. Many grandmasters will actually play the Slav after $3.♗f3$ $♗f6$ $4.♗c3$ with $4...dxc4$ and the Semi-Slav against $4.e3$. If $5.♙g5$ is too scary, this is a good option for Black. Again, the flexibility provided by $2...c6$ is another plus.

There are a couple of other reasons to prefer the $2...c6$ move order. One is not related to anything in this book, but it is an important practical consideration. After $1.d4$ $d5$ $2.♗f3$ we can play $2...♗f6$. Obviously, if we were married to a triangle move order, we could not play this, because after $3.c4$ we would be out of our repertoire. The reason I like $2...♗f6$ is that if White does not play $3.c4$, we will have extra options available because we have left the diagonal open for our queen's bishop (by omitting $...e6$) and we will be able to play $c7-c5$ in one move if we want (because we have omitted $...c6$). For example, after $3.♙f4$ we can play the aggressive $3...c5$ $4.e3$ ($4.c3$ $cxd4$ $5.cxd4$ is

an Exchange Slav!) $4...♗c6$ $5.c3$ $♗b6$ $6.♗b3$ $c4$ $7.♗c2$ $♙f5!$ and $3.♙g5$ can be met by $3...♗e4$ followed by a quick $...c5$ as well. The Colle ($3.e3$) can be met by $3...♙f5$ or $3...♙g4$, when $4.c4$ $c6$ will lead to the lines considered in Chapter 14.

The other reason I like the $2...c6$ move order is very important. After $1.d4$ $d5$ $2.c4$ $c6$ $3.♗f3$ $♗f6$ $4.e3$ we can develop our bishop with $4...♙f5$ or $4...♙g4$. My feeling is that an early $e2-e3$ is a concession that Black can "punish". After $1.d4$ $d5$ $2.c4$ $c6$ $3.♗c3$ $♗f6$ $4.e3$ the "concession" is White's $c3$ -knight, because after $4...e6$ the Meran plans with $...dxc4$ and $...b5$ are "on", because we will have $...b4$ with tempo (for example, in response to $a2-a4$) and because the knight is blocking the c -file, we will almost always be able to play the $...c5$ break.

However, after $1.d4$ $d5$ $2.c4$ $c6$ $3.♗f3$ $♗f6$ $4.e3$ the Semi-Slav move $4...e6$ gives White several options which I find rather annoying. $5.♗bd2$ is one possibility. This discourages $...dxc4$ because White can take with the knight. Official theory suggests that Black wastes a tempo with $5...c5$ because White's knight is more passive than it would be on $c3$, and Black can play $...♗c6$. This is a very reasonable way to play, but the positions that arise are more like a Tarrasch Defence, and these may not suit everyone.

A bigger concern to me is the sly move $5.♙d3$. If Black plays like he does in the Meran with $5...dxc4$ $6.♙xc4$ $b5$ $7.♙d3$, Black has a QGA position, but White's knight is still on $b1$. In a normal QGA Black would have played $...a6$ instead of $...c6$, which would be more useful because Black has to aim for $...c5$ anyway. Black is more vulnerable to $a2-a4$ ideas here than in the Meran, and $...c5$ may not be so simple to achieve. I think Black does best to save this kind of plan for positions where White's

knight is on c3. Black could play 5...♖bd7, hoping for 6.♗c3 dxc4 with a Meran, but White has other options. 6.♖bd2 transposes to a position normally reached after 5.♖bd2 ♗bd7 6.♙d3, but Black has lost the 5...c5 option. White could play 6.0-0, when 6...♙d6 7.♗c3 has tricked us into a line other than the Meran. This variation is playable for Black, but it is outside the scope of our repertoire.

6.b3 is another idea. I have always found this to be very annoying, and Kramnik has recently used this move. White's idea is to play 0-0, ♙b2, and ♖bd2. If we compare this to the positions reached in Game 32, we will see that the fact that White's knight is on d2 instead of c3 allows White to control the e5-square, because the b2-bishop is not obstructed. This gives White the extra possibility of playing ♗f3-e5. Perhaps Black could try 6...♗e4, heading for a Stonewall Dutch.

Honestly, I think that Black's best move after 5.♙d3 is 5...dxc4. After 6.♙xc4 c5, we have reached the main line of the Queen's Gambit Accepted, with each side taking an extra move (♙f1-d3xc4 and c7-c6-c5), which I cannot cover here for obvious reasons.

Because of all of these annoyances, I believe that Black should seek to punish White for the slow 4.e3 by developing his bishop actively. This idea is not so good after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.e3, because 4...♙f5 5.cxd5 cxd5 6.♖b3 pressures both b7 and d5, but with White's king knight developed there is no such problem. I think that after 4...♙f5 there is some onus on White to show that locking in his own queen bishop while allowing Black's to develop freely does not grant Black easy equality. Perhaps it is not so easy to equalize, but I think that Black has better chances to play for the full point than in some of the lines discussed above.

So, if we can overcome our fear of the Exchange Slav, there is a very strong argument to be made for the 2...c6 move order. We must remember that almost every opening has its drawish variations. In fact, often times the sharpest openings can be the most drawish of all. Openings like the Botvinnik variation of the Semi-Slav and the Poisoned Pawn variation of the Najdorf have many drawing lines because the theory has been worked out so deeply. At least in the Exchange Slav there are not really any *forced* drawing lines. In the U.S. alone, die-hard Semi-Slav practitioners such as Alex Shabalov, Alex Stripunsky and Julio Becerra use the 2...c6 move order all of the time and routinely win in the Exchange Variation against weaker players. The most important thing is to not be too discouraged. Years ago I found the 2.c3 Sicilian to be extremely annoying, because I thought that Black had a lot of difficulty creating winning chances without taking too many risks. Once I embraced the fact that I should be pleased that it was not so difficult to equalize, my results improved tremendously. After all, in the Exchange Slav there are still thirty bits of wood (or plastic, or computer-generated pieces) left on the board and that should give us reasonable scope to outplay a weaker or less experienced opponent.

This book was a great challenge to write and I learned a lot. I would like to thank John Shaw for his great patience (especially with my move-order obsessions), Jacob Aagaard, Dean Ippolito, Bill Kelleher, and Jim Rizzitano for his never-ending support.

David Vigorito
Andover, Massachusetts
June 2007

Chapter 1

Main Lines with 7.e3

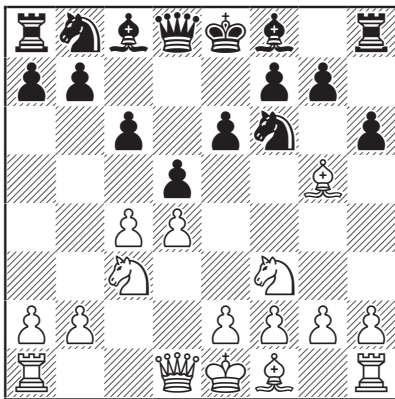
Game 1

Ehlvest – Atalik

Philadelphia 1995

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 e6
5.♙g5

This is the sharpest way of meeting the Semi-Slav. White refuses to lock in his c1-bishop with e2-e3 and pins Black's knight. 5...h6

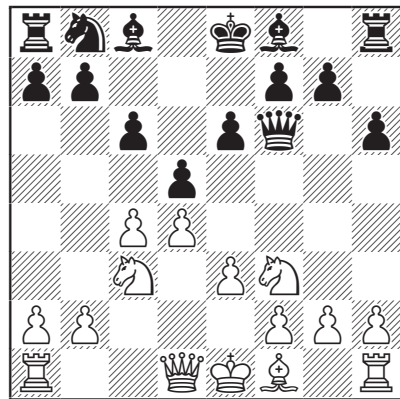


not considered a Semi-Slav and it also gives White the option of playing 6.cxd5, which gives a normal Queen's Gambit Exchange Variation, where it is not easy for Black to develop his c8-bishop.

6.♙xf6

The alternative 6.♙h4 is the Anti-Moscow Gambit, and this will be considered in Chapter 3.

6...♗xf6 7.e3



If Black does not want to go into the irrational complications of the Botvinnik Variation, he can either play 5...♗bd7 6.e3 ♗a5 with a Cambridge Springs Queen's Gambit Declined, or 5...h6, which is the Moscow Variation of the Semi-Slav. We will not consider the former variation, as it is

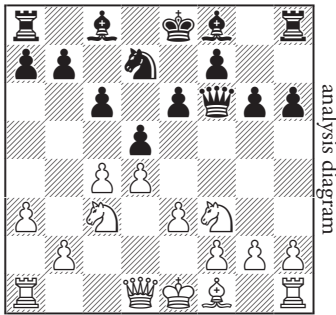
This is by far the most common move. White simply gets on with his development. The alternatives are covered in Chapter 2.

7...♗d7 8.♙d3

This is the main move, but sometimes White delays this to keep the option of playing cxd5:

a) 8.♖c2 g6 9.cxd5 exd5 10.♔d3 ♘g7 (10...♔d6, aiming at White's kingside, is logical in this structure) 11.0-0 0-0 12.b4 ♗d6 13.♞ab1 ♘b6 (13...a6 14.♞fc1 b5!? 15.♘e2 ♔b7 16.h4 h5 17.♘f4 ♔h6 18.g3 a5 19.a4 axb4 20.axb5 ♞fc8 was about equal in Kramnik – Vallejo Pons, Paris 2002) 14.♞fc1 ♔e6 15.a4 ♘d7 16.♘e2 ♞fc8 17.♘d2 ♘f6 18.h3 ♞c7 19.♘f4 ♔d7 20.♘f3 ♔e8 21.♞b3 b6 22.♞b1 c5= Sorokin – Dreev, Moscow 2004. White's minority attack is not too dangerous and, if the position opens up, Black's bishops may have their say.

b) 8.a3 g6 (8...dxc4!? 9.♔xc4 g6 10.0-0 ♔g7 could also be considered – White's extra a2-a3 is hardly fatal for Black)



White has tried:

b1) 9.cxd5 exd5 10.b4 ♔d6! This is the best place for the bishop in this Exchange Queen's Gambit structure. 11.♔d3 ♗e7 12.0-0 ♘f6 13.b5 c5 14.dxc5 ♔xc5 15.♞b3 ♔e6 16.♘d4 0-0 17.♘xe6 ♞xe6= Van Wely – M. Gurevich, Germany 1996.

b2) 9.e4 Now there is no ...♔b4†, but 8.a3 still costs time. 9...dxe4 10.♘xe4 ♞f4 and here:

b21) 11.♞e2 ♔g7 12.g3 ♞c7 13.♔g2 0-0 14.0-0 e5 15.♞ad1 exd4 16.♘xd4 ♞b6 (16...♘f6, as in Bonin – Stripunsky, Nassau 1999, is also fine) 17.♞d2 ♘c5 18.b4?! ♘xe4 19.♔xe4 ♔h3 20.♞fe1 ♞ad8 21.c5 ♞c7± was Nikolic – Kramnik, Monte Carlo 1996.

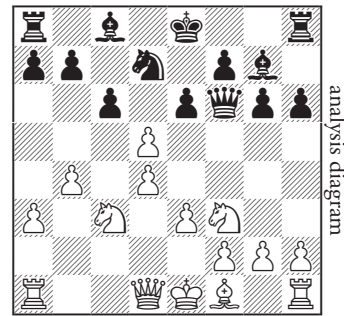
b22) 11.♔d3 ♔g7 12.0-0 0-0 13.♞e1 c5! Black strikes in the centre immediately. White has:

b221) 14.dxc5 ♔xb2 15.♞b1 ♔g7 16.♔f1 ♞c7 17.♞d6 ♞xd6 18.cxd6 b6 gave Black good counterplay in Petursson – Serper, Oslo 1994.

b222) 14.♘xc5 ♘xc5 15.dxc5 ♔xb2 16.♞b1 ♔c3 17.♞c1 ♞xc1 18.♞exc1 ♔f6 was about equal in Cvitan – Chernin, Bern 1995. White still has some initiative, while Black has the bishop pair and a solid position.

b223) 14.♔f1 cxd4 15.g3 ♞c7 16.♘xd4 a6 17.♞d2 and instead of 17...♘c5 18.♘xc5 ♞xc5 19.♞ad1± as in Beliavsky – Pavasovic, Krsko 1997, both 17...♞d8 and 17...♘f6 look fine for Black.

b3) 9.b4 ♔g7 10.cxd5



Both recaptures are acceptable for Black:

b31) 10...exd5 11.♔d3 0-0 12.0-0 ♘b6 13.♞b3 ♞d6 and now:

b311) 14.a4 ♔e6 15.♘d2 ♘d7 16.♞ab1 a5 17.bxa5 ♞xa5 18.♞c2 b6 19.♘b3 ♞aa8 20.♞d2 c5± I. Sokolov – Dreev, Hastings 2000.

b312) 14.♞fc1 ♔e6 15.♘d2 ♞fb8 16.♞ab1 a5 17.bxa5 ♘d7 18.a4 ♞xa5 19.♞c2 gave White a slight initiative in Piket – Dreev, Wijk aan Zee 1996.

b32) 10...cxd5 This is very solid. 11.♔d3 0-0 12.0-0 ♞e7 13.♞b3 ♘b6 14.a4 ♔d7 and then:

b321) 15.♘d2 ♘c8 16.♞fc1 ♘d6 17.b5 ♞fc8 18.a5 ♚d8= Van Wely – Gelfand, Tilburg 1996.

b322) 15.a5 ♘c8 16.♞ac1 ♘d6 17.♞c2 ♞fc8 18.♞fc1 b5! gave Black good play in Ki. Georgiev – Gelfand, Belgrade 1997.

8...dxc4 9.♙xc4 g6!

This is Black's usual method of development in the main lines of the Moscow Variation. Black adopts a Grünfeld-like set-up. Other moves are possible, but they lead to passive positions and we will not consider them. The text move is the modern interpretation and is rightfully the most popular way of playing Black's position.

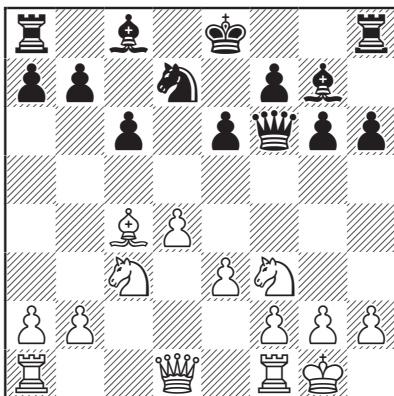
10.0-0

The immediate 10.e4 attempts to disrupt Black's position before he can castle, but Black has no problems after 10...e5 (10...♙g7 11.e5 ♚e7 12.0-0 0-0 is considered in the note to Black's 11th move) 11.♘xe5 ♘xe5 12.dxe5 ♚xe5 13.♚b3 and now:

a) 13...♚c7 14.0-0 ♙g7 15.f4 ♚b6† 16.♚xb6 axb6 17.e5 ♙f5= E. Kahn – Milov, Buenos Aires 1992.

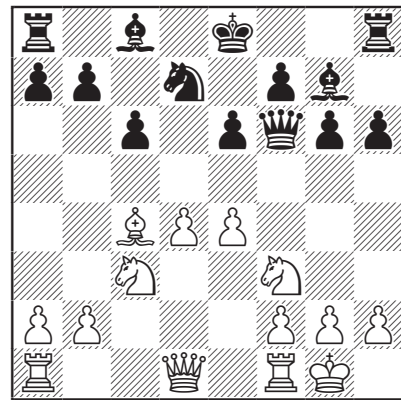
b) 13...♚e7 14.a4 ♙g7 15.0-0 0-0 16.a5 ♞b8 17.♞fe1 b5 18.axb6 axb6 19.♚c2 b5 20.♙b3 Beliavsky – Vallejo Pons, Germany 2003. Beliavsky suggests 20...♞d8!.

10...♙g7



This position is the starting point for the main lines of the Moscow variation. White enjoys a space advantage and better central control. Black has a very solid position and good long-term prospects with the bishop pair. Often Black will fianchetto his queen's bishop as well and aim for an eventual ...c5. White has several plans available. He can play in the centre immediately with 11.e4, as in this game, or on the queenside with 11.b4 (Game 2), or he can manoeuvre a bit first. The most popular method of doing this is with 11.♞c1 (Game 3).

11.e4



This is the most direct move. It looks very logical for White to seize the centre, but Black is ready for this, and for this reason White usually prefers the queenside plans of Game 2 or the manoeuvring plans of Game 3.

11...e5

This is the theoretical antidote and leads to an endgame that is pretty even. If Black wants to avoid the ending, he can play 11...0-0 although the position after 12.e5 ♚e7 is considered to favour White because he has not committed his rooks and can set up his pieces in an ideal fashion. White has a couple ways to play:

a) 13.♞e1 ♞d8 14.♚c2 (instead 14.♚e2 b6 15.♞ad1 a5 16.♙d3 ♙b7 17.♙e4 b5 18.h4

♠b6 19.♙b1 c5 gave Black counterplay in Kramnik – Svidler, Mexico City 2007, but 14.♖c1! is considered in e22 in the note to White's 12th move in Game 3) 14...b6 15.♖ad1 ♙b7 16.a3 This position could also arise from 11.♗c2, which we look at in the notes to Game 3. Black can try:

a1) 16...a6?! 17.♙a2 ♖ac8 18.♗e4! ♙a8 19.h4 b5 20.♗f4 c5 21.d5 c4 22.d6 ♗e8 23.♜e4± Sharavdorj – Stripunsky, Philadelphia 2004. White has consolidated his centre.

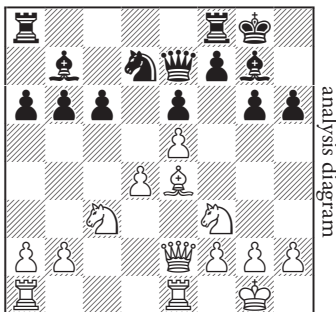
a2) 16...a5!? Instead of preparing ...b5 and ...c5, Black wants to play ...b5-b4 and then ...c5. This idea worked out well after 17.♙a2 b5 18.♖e3?! b4 19.♜e4 c5 20.d5 exd5 21.♙xd5 ♜xe5 22.♙xb7 ♜xf3† 23.♖xf3 ♖xd1† 24.♗xd1 ♗xb7 25.♜xc5 ♗e7± Fang – Ippolito, Budapest 1998.

a3) 16...♖ac8 17.♙a2 and here:

a31) 17...c5 18.d5 exd5 (18...c4!?) 19.♜xd5 ♙xd5 20.♙xd5 ♜f8 21.♗e4 ♜e6 22.♙c4 ♖d7 23.g3± was Anand – Dreev, Hyderabad 2002.

a32) 17...♜f8!? I usually do not like this manoeuvre, but it is reasonable if Black can quickly double rooks on the d-file. This worked out well for Black after 18.♗e2 ♖c7 19.♖d2 ♖cd7 20.♖ed1 g5! 21.h3 ♜g6 in Dautov – Slobodjan, Germany 1997.

b) 13.♗e2 b6 14.♖fe1 a6 This move is played to stop ♙c4-a6 exchanging one of Black's bishops. 15.♙d3! ♙b7 16.♙e4

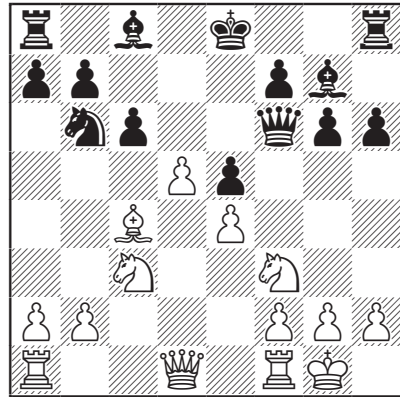


This position has been considered to be better for White, but recently Dreev was found on the black side. Practice has seen:

b1) 16...♖a7 17.♖ac1 b5 18.♗e3 c5 19.d5 ♜xe5 20.♜xe5 ♙xe5 21.dxe6 ♙xe4 22.♜xe4 ♙xb2 23.♖xc5 ♙g7 24.♖c6! was indeed good for White in the well known game Kamsky – Kramnik, Luzern 1993.

b2) 16...♖fd8 17.♖ac1 b5 18.h4 ♖ab8 19.♗e3 ♖dc8 20.♜e2 c5 21.♙xb7 ♖xb7 22.♜f4 c4 23.d5 exd5 24.♜xd5 ♗e6 gave Black a reasonable position in N. Pert – Dreev, Gibraltar 2005.

12.d5 ♠b6



Black attacks White's bishop, pressures d5, and introduces the possibility of playing ...♙g4.

13.♙b3

This maintains control of the d5-square but allows Black to use the active position of his queen to enforce a pin on White's f3-knight. White has tried other things here as well:

a) 13.♙e2 relinquishes piece control of d5 and is rather passive. 13...0–0 and then:

a1) 14.dxc6 bxc6 15.♜a4 ♖b8 16.♜c5 ♖d8 17.♗c2 ♙g4 18.♖fd1 ♙f8 19.b4 ♜d7= Br. Thorfinnsson – Thorhallsson, Iceland (ch) 1998.

a) 14.♖b3 cxd5 15.exd5 ♕f5 16.♞ad1 ♞fd8 17.a4 ♞ab8 18.♜d2 ♜c8 19.♜c4 ♜d6 was comfortable for Black in Finegold – Kuczynski, Groningen 1992.

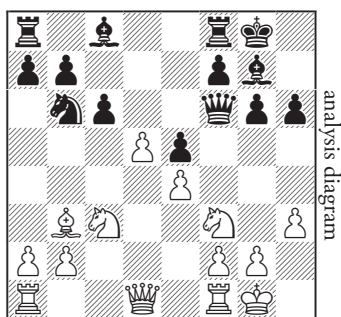
b) 13.♜d2 White attempts to control the centre with his knights. Piket has tried this move a couple of times, but it has not been seen much since, probably because of Sadler's logical suggestion of the immediate 13...♜xc4. In practice Black has tried:

b1) 13...♞g5 14.♞e2 0–0 15.♞fd1 ♕h3 16.f3 ♞ad8 17.♕b3 ♕c8 18.♜c4 ♜xc4 19.♕xc4 was a little better for White in Piket – Van der Wiel, Rotterdam 1998.

b2) 13...0–0 14.a4 ♞d8 15.a5 ♜xc4 16.♜xc4 ♞g5 17.♞b3 ♕h3 18.♜e3 ♞ab8 19.♞ac1 ♕f8 is about equal, although the bishop pair makes Black's position more pleasant to play, and Black won in Piket – Kramnik, Linares 1997.

13...♕g4

Instead 13...0–0 is supposed to give White an edge after 14.h3, preventing the ...♕g4 pin.



In practice this has heavily favoured White, but the position is probably playable for Black.

a) 14...♕d7 15.♞e2 ♝h7?! Black's play is too passive. 16.♞fd1 ♞ae8 17.a4 ♞e7 18.a5 ♜c8 19.dxc6 bxc6 20.♞d2 f5 21.♞ad1± Benjamin – Blatny, Chicago 1995.

b) 14...♞d8 15.♞e2 ♕d7 (15...♕f8 16.♞ac1

♕d7 17.♞fd1 ♕e8 18.a3± Ehlvest – Kharlov, Novosibirsk 1995) 16.♞fd1 and:

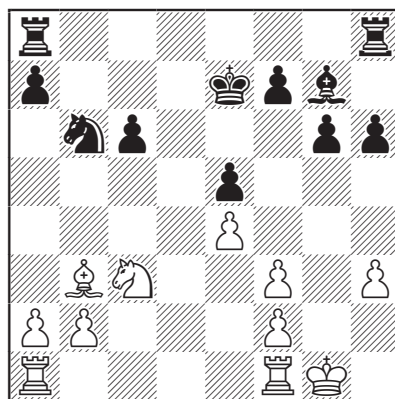
b1) 16...♕e8?! 17.a4 cxd5 18.♕xd5 ♞d7 19.a5 ♜xd5 20.♜xd5 ♞a6 21.♞c2 ♞ad8 22.b4± Vigorito – Schoonmaker, Phoenix 2005.

b2) 16...♞ac8 17.a4 cxd5 18.♕xd5?! (instead 18.♜xd5 ♜xd5 19.♕xd5 is equal; while 18.exd5 a5 19.♜e4 ♞e7 is unclear) 18...♜xd5 19.♜xd5 ♞e6 20.♞d3 f5 21.♜c3 ♕c6 22.a5 ♞xd3 23.♞xd3 ♞b3 gave Black the initiative in Shulman – Ippolito, Linares 1997. This looks like a reasonable way to play if Black wants to keep more tension in the position.

14.h3 ♕xf3 15.♞xf3 ♞xf3 16.gxf3 ♜e7

With the queens off, there is no reason for Black to castle.

17.dxc6 bxc6



An endgame has been reached with both sides having pawn weaknesses. Although Black's weak pawn is on an open file, which favours White slightly, Black really has no problems. The pawn can be protected easily enough, and it controls the d5-square. White's kingside pawns are not really vulnerable, but because they are doubled White lacks flexibility on that side of the board.

18.♞ac1

White has also tried 18.♞fc1 ♞hd8 19.♜d1 ♞d6 20.♞c3 a5 21.♜e3 h5 22.♞ac1 a4 23.♙d1 ♜d7 24.♞f1 ♙h6= Khalifman – Akopian, Yerevan 1996.

18...♞ab8

Another option is 18...♞ac8 19.♞fd1 ♞hd8 20.♜g2?! h5 21.♞xd8 ♞xd8 22.♜a4 ♞d6= Century – Junior, Cadaqu 2000.

19.♜e2

White can also play 19.♞c2. Black should prepare to activate his bishop via h6 with 19...h5!. White has tried:

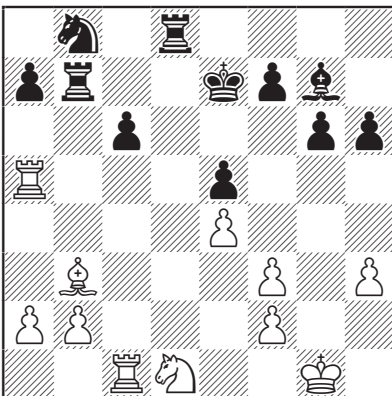
a) 20.♜a4 ♞hc8 21.♜c5 a5 is given by Atalik. After 22.♞d1 ♙h6 23.♞c3 (Pedersen) White is a little better, but instead 21...♞d8 holds the balance.

b) 20.♞d1 ♞hd8 21.♞f1 (21.♞xd8 is better, but still equal) 21...♞bc8 (21...♞d4 would give Black counterplay) 22.♞xd8 ♞xd8 23.♜a4 was Vigorito – Ippolito, San Diego (USA ch) 2006. Now the simplest is 23...♜xa4 24.♙xa4 ♞c8 25.♙xc6 (25.♞xc6 ♞xc6=) 25...♜d6 with a drawn ending. This is the only time I have tried this endgame with the white pieces, and I really felt like I was trying to get blood from a stone.

19...♞hc8 20.♞c5 ♜d7 21.♞a5

White has a slight initiative, but it is easily neutralized.

21...♞b7 22.♞c1 ♜b8 23.♜c3 ♞d8 24.♜d1



The knight heads for the c4-square.

24...h5

This is a typical move. Black needs to activate his bishop.

25.♜e3 ♞f6

This also gives Black the option of ...♙f8, but it was simpler to protect the e-pawn with 25...f6.

26.♜c4 ♙h6 27.♞d1 ♞xd1† 28.♙xd1 a6

Black intends ...♞b5. Atalik gives 28...♙f4 29.♙a4 when White maintains slight pressure. The f4-bishop is actually out of play because the fight is on the queenside. However, 28...♜d7 29.♙a4 ♞c7, intending ...♙f8, looks okay for Black.

29.♙e2

Not 29.♜xe5? ♙d2 30.♞c5 ♙b4+.

Instead 29.♞xe5 ♞b2 is given by Atalik, although I still prefer White after 30.♙b3!.

29...♞b5

Now Black has little to worry about.

30.♞a4 c5 31.b3 ♞b4 32.♞a3 ♙c1 33.♞a5 ♞b5 34.♞xb5 axb5 35.♜d6 b4 36.♜b7 ♜d7

Instead 36...♜c6 37.♜xc5 ♜d4 is better: Black should not lose.

37.♙b5 ♜f8 38.♜xc5 g5 39.♙d7!

White has chances again because Black is so passive. It is still very difficult for White to exploit his extra pawn though.

39...♜g6 40.♙f5 ♜h4 41.♜d7† ♜g7 42.♜xe5 ♙f4 43.♜c6 ♙d6 44.♞f1 ♜xf3 45.♞e2 ♜e5 46.♜d4 ♙c5 47.♜c2 ♜c6 48.♜e3 ♞f6 49.♙d7 ♜e5 50.♜d5† ♜g7 51.♙f5 g4!

Black sacrifices a pawn to exchange knights.

52.hxg4 hxg4 53.♜e3 ♞f6 54.♜xg4† ♜xg4 55.♙xg4 ♞g5 56.f3 ♙d4 57.♞d3 ♙b2 58.♞c4 ♙a3 59.♞c5 ♞f4 60.♙h5 f6 61.♙g4 ♞e5

1/2-1/2