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The
CENTER
A modern strategy guide



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The center. A modern strategy guide
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KEY TO SYMBOLS

=	Equality or equal chances
±	White has a slight advantage
∓	Black has a slight advantage
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+ -	White has a decisive advantage
- +	Black has a decisive advantage
∞	unclear
∞̄	with compensation
↔	with counterplay
↑	with initiative
→	with an attack
Δ	with the idea
□	only move
N	novelty
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
+	check
#	mate

EDITORIAL PREFACE

There is a blank spot in the huge world of chess literature: systematically presented middle- game. Therefore authors, both long-term chess trainers, decided to fill this vacuum. With a series of books about the middle-game, we would like to present different topics of chess tactics and strategy in a slightly different way. Books, which will be published in the coming years as part of the series, are planned to cover all frequently discussed themes, as well as many others topics — those about which chess players and also trainers usually do not think as deeply as they should in order to achieve better results.

We are starting our series with a book about the centre. We will take two different approaches to this topic: the classical one, which will help us to discover all fundamental knowledge about the centre. This study is crucial for good understanding of chess. The second approach is more modern: we will think about the centre more dynamically, through the eyes of a grandmaster, a practical chess player. We will try to copy this two-part structure in the future books, in which planning, analysing, move decisions, pawn structures and various other topics will be discussed.

The authors are not imagining that our book will cover every aspect of presented topic. Knowledge about the centre is so important and wide chapter that it is virtually impossible to explain every detail in a single book. Moreover, there are countless of different perspectives on particular problems or procedures in the centre and we could not take into the account every one of them. However, we have wished to write a book, which would offer us 360° view of the centre, enable an individual study to any aspiring student and help trainer in their work. Advices of the experienced coaches (we have boldly put ourselves into this category) are always welcomed for successful chess training.

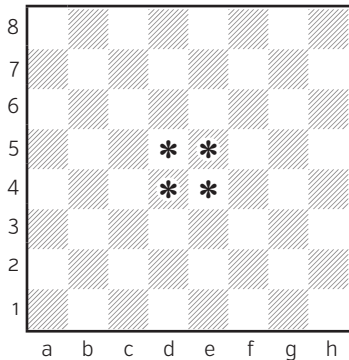
To fulfil our objectives, we will publish an additional workbook accompanying each book. It will contain many exercises, puzzles and practical questions, which will further your understanding of the presented topic.

Yours,
Adrian Mikhalchishin and Georg Mohr

THE CENTER – BASICS

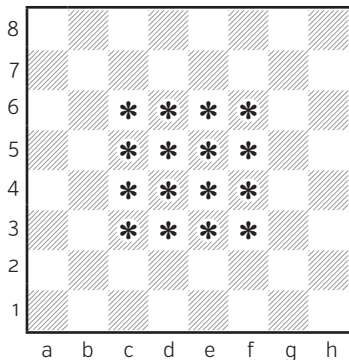
by Georg Mohr

One of the first concepts that a player comes across when learning how to play chess is the center, more accurately its role and its meaning. The name itself tells us that it has to do with something in the middle and in our case that represents the middle, or the center, of the board.



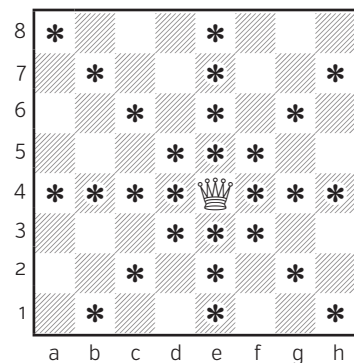
The small center

Sometimes we encounter the concept of the big center.

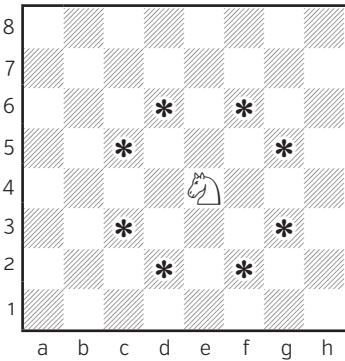


The big center

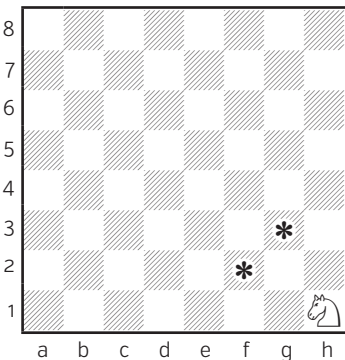
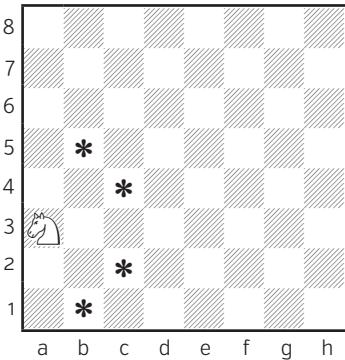
Most of the rules can be used for both centers, but we need to be careful! If a certain rule can be used in most of the cases, it certainly does not mean that we can definitely use it in all our own positions. Beginners usually do not know why the center so important. It is not like we can win the game there. The kings are not in the center and logically there are no mates. A material advantage can be achieved in every part of the board and it is also true that the center is not directly connected with the result at the end of the game. Its importance is tactical and strategic. Control over the center leaves a player with a positional advantage and this book will show you how to use that kind of advantage properly. The meaning of the center will be easier to understand if we get to know the power of the pieces in different parts of the board. For example, the queen in the center controls 27 different squares.



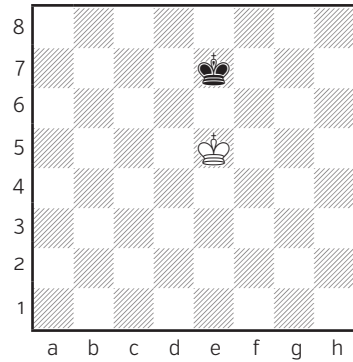
On the contrary, on the edge of the board or in the corner (the a3 square) the queen controls only 21 squares. An even more illustrative example is the knight, which controls eight squares in the center:



On the edge (a3) four squares and only two from the corner (h1).



The center represents the part of the board from where the pieces can reach other, more distant parts. We can see that especially with the knight, and even more so with the king — which usually comes to a dominant position in the center in the endgame. That kind of dominant position can be decisive due to the space advantage (because the opposing kings cannot touch each other and the other king is automatically located outside of the center).



Control over the center leaves a player with the space advantage even earlier — in the middlegame. The pieces in the center are putting pressure on the opponent's pieces, which are forced to move backwards or defend themselves from positions which are usually distant from the center.

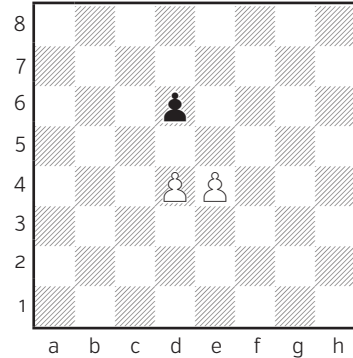
The fight for the center begins already in the opening. There are many ways of doing it: the usual way is that both players put their pawns in the center and then try to control it with them. Around 100 years ago that was the only known way and the only way that was accepted (1.e4 e5; 1.d4 d5).

The first World Champion Wilhelm Steinitz taught that having control over the center meant a big or even a decisive advantage and his lessons were popularized by German Dr. Siegbert Tarrasch the “teacher of the nation”. Steinitz later on found another possibility, some kind of a ‘pawn & pieces’ center, where pawns and pieces help each other to reach the goal.

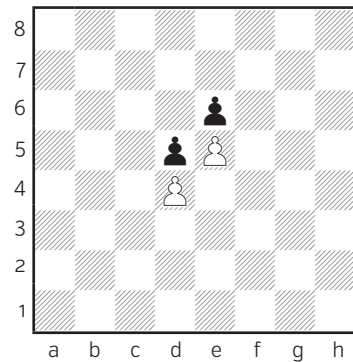
Only after the breakthrough of the small group of free-minded chess players (nowadays we call them hyper-modernists: Aron Nimzowitsch, Richard Reti and others) the wider knowledge about the center was produced. Hyper-modernists said — and also theoretically and practically proved — that there exist other possibilities of fighting for the center. The best-known is “control from a distance”, where we control the central squares with the pieces (for example the e4 square in closed openings: after 1.d4 both moves 1...d5 and 1...♘f6 have the same effect, they both take control over the e4-square). An even more drastic possibility is to deliberately give up the center in order to later on restrain or attack it. The Grunfeld Defence and Alekhine’s Defence are the most illustrative examples of these new principles. White can use similar tactics in, for example, the Reti opening.

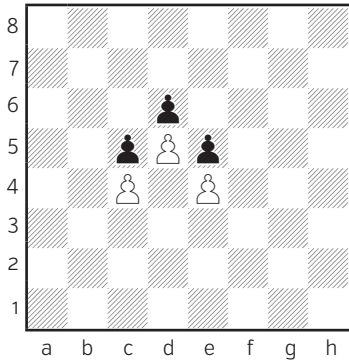
There are many classifications of the center. The classic one concerns itself with center ‘types’: which vary with different pawn constructions. The mobile (moving) center, where one of the players has a pawn more

in the center (usually one or two) and the opposing pawn cannot stop them from moving forward. The classical example is the e4 and d4 pawns against the d6-pawn.



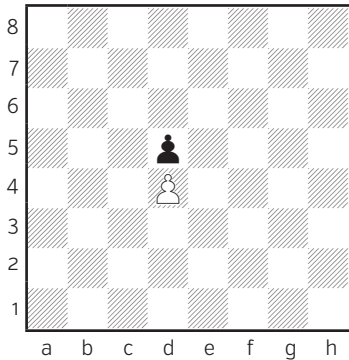
When and how to move forward? What does Black need to be careful of? The opposite represents the fixed (blocked) center, where the pawns cannot move forward and they can only disappear from the board (or capture away from the center). These kinds of positions are shown in the next two diagrams.





When we talk about the blocked center, the play is logically moved to the flanks and both players are trying to gain control over the center using a flank strategy.

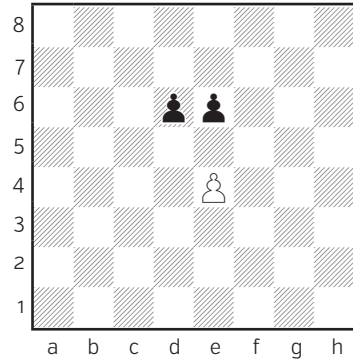
We know many other types of centers: **the symmetrical center**, where two pawns are standing in front of each other:



and the battle takes place on the other open central files. The **static center** means that the placement of the pawns has a specific shape and therefore every move with a pawn is extremely delicate and can even mean a material loss. **The dynamic center** (see next diagram) means that there is no direct contact between the pawns, but they are watching each other and they need to pay attention to any kind

of movement among them. And there is also **the open center**, where there are no pawns in the center and the main role is played directly (by placement in the center) or indirectly (with control from a distance) by the pieces.

Every type of center mentioned is marked by pawns. Their general placement and most of all their placement in the center is called the **pawn structure**. There are many types of pawn structures and we would probably need many books to study them all.



Dynamic center.

For each kind of structure there are typical and clear strategic plans, and pawn structures in the center are important mostly because they represent the result of the play in certain openings. The player, as a rule with his choice of the opening, also chooses a pawn structure and that is why knowledge of them and understanding of the subsequent play are so important.

Some of these rules have been known for decades (the position with an isolated pawn; the position with

hanging pawns: the Carlsbad pawn structure), some of them were discovered in modern chess and that does not make them any less important (the Scheveningen structure; the Maroczy pawn structure; the structure with a backward d-pawn; structures with doubled pawns). In this book we will not look at them specifically, but the basic information about them will be found in the chapters on the different kinds of centers.

The positions will be studied based on whole games, because only in this way will you be able to understand the importance of the center, the pawn structures and their direct link with the openings, the middlegame and the endgame. The chosen games will be, in most cases, classical: the games of the old masters are as a rule clearer and easier to understand regarding the basic principles. In mod-

ern chess and in games that are being played today there are too many factors that are influencing them.

I hope that the basic knowledge about the center and about the most representative pawn structures will encourage you to study chess more deeply. The book is appropriate for chess beginners and much of the advice could also be used by more qualified chess players. I recommend to you to go through the book alone — it is easy to understand, and the best way to learn how to play chess is to study it by ourselves.

Overall I recommend the book to all trainers: the knowledge about the center is basic for the successful playing of chess. Many different examples and detailed descriptions of what is happening on this the most important part of the board will definitely come in handy with their work.

ABOUT STRATEGIC PLAY IN THE CENTER

1

IGNORING THE CENTER

It was said in the introduction that control over the center is one of the most important strategic elements in chess. Usually both players face this problem of the center responsibly and with varying tactics. They put their pawns in the center and use them to control the central squares, or one of the players gives up his control of the center and leaves it to the opponent — and then tries to weaken the opponent's pawn structure or even destroy it. Every square in the center is important, because even if you control only one square it could leave you with the advantage. The placement of a certain piece in the center, knowing that it cannot be driven away by any of the opponent's pawns, is beneficial for the development of the game. But it doesn't bring you an automatic advantage as we will see later on.

In any case, control over the center is of great importance. It is not important if we control it with the pawns or with the pieces, but what is important is to control it. The next example will demonstrate the dangers present if we give up the center.

▷ **Botvinnik**
▷ **Capablanca**

Amsterdam 1938 [E49]

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♕b4 4.e3 d5
5.a3 ♕c3 6.bc3 c5 7.cd5 ed5

Nowadays we are familiar with the fact that White has an advantage in this kind of position due to the good chances of advancing with his pawns in the center. In 1938 players did not know that — the Nimzo-Indian Defence as well as knowledge about the center had only started to develop.

8. ♕d3 o-o 9.♗e2 b6 10.o-o ♕a6

It looks like Black's position is great. He has a good pawn structure, no special weaknesses and his development is easy and simple. After the exchange of the light-squared bishops he will reach the most important strategic goal: the exchange of White's best placed piece.

11. ♕a6 ♗a6 12. ♕b2?

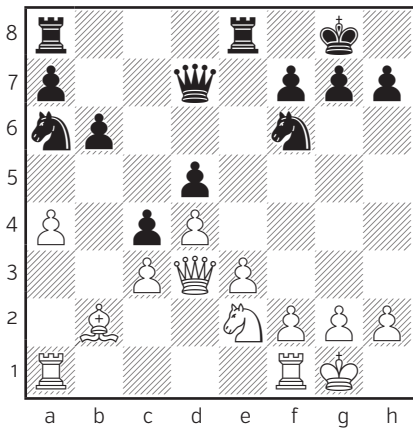
At first sight this is a very strange move, but it is fighting for the center! What is White's plan? Definitely the e3-e4 move in the center (after the f2-f3 move). The move will be difficult to perform without an appropriate defence of the d4 square, where

Black's pressure is focused. So both of the plans are clear and simple: first of all White needs to strengthen the d4 square and after that prepare the e3–e4 move. In the meantime Black will be putting pressure on the d4 square and will be placing his pieces on their optimal squares.

12... ♖d7 13.a4 ♜fe8?!

Black can also put pressure on the d4 square indirectly, that is why the exchange of the pawns is necessary. After 13...cd4 14.cd4 ♜fc8 and 15... ♜c4 the e3–e4 move would not be so easy to perform. The bishop on b2 would have a mainly defensive role.

14. ♖d3 c4??



This is a very serious positional mistake and it represents a moment which needs to be examined more closely. It is known that White wants to play the e3–e4 move, and that Black is making his work harder with the pressure that he is putting on the d4 square. After the move played

by Black — and White did not force him to play it — he has voluntarily released the pressure and subsequently left White with no obstacles. Black could choose from different plans, for example ... ♖a6–b8–c6–a5–b3 or 14... ♖b7.

The great Cuban was of course aware of the fact that he was giving up on the center with the move played, but he hoped that swift action on the queenside would bring him success.

15. ♖c2 ♜b8 16. ♜ae1

White follows his strategic plan — he moves his pieces to the squares which control the e4 square.

16... ♖c6 17. ♜g3 ♜a5

After 17... ♖e4 there would follow 18. ♜h1! (with the idea f3, and ♜f2, or back again ♜g3) and White would continue peacefully with his plan. For example: 18...f5 19.f3 ♜d6 20. ♙a3 g6 21. ♜g3 and there is no defence against the e3–e4 move. (Kasparov)

18.f3 ♜b3 19.e4 ♖a4 20.e5 ♜d7

Both players have realized their strategic plans. We can easily see that White has the positional advantage: he is threatening ♜g3–f5–d6 or an advancement of the f-pawn. Black will have to pass several tests before realizing the pawn-up advantage which he won on the queenside.

21. ♖f2

We need to be careful when it comes to realization of the plans. Black

threatens, with the tactical ♖b3–c5 move, to save his knight which is currently stranded on the queenside.

21...g6 22.f4 f5!

After this blockage White has no choice: he needs to take and open the e-file, where the exchange of the rooks will occur.

23.ef6 ♘f6 24.f5 ♖e1 25.♖e1 ♖e8
26.♞e6!

26.fg6 hg6 27.♞e8 ♘e8.

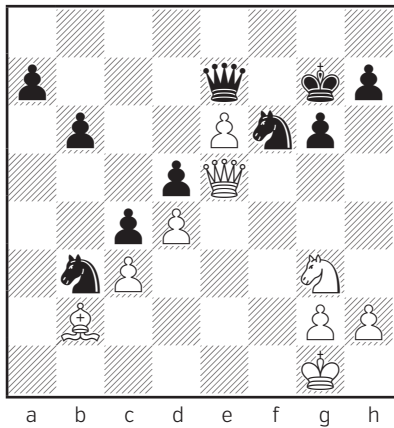
26...♞e6

After 26...♙g7 27.♞f6! ♙f6 28.fg6 White will lead out a strong attack; 26...♙f7 27.♞f6! ♙f6 28.fg6.

27.fe6 ♙g7 28.♞f4 ♞e8

29.♘f5 gf5 30.♞g5 was threatened.

29.♞e5 ♞e7



In front of us is one of the best-known positions in all of chess history, the highlight of White's entire strategy.

30.♙a3!!

A glorious sacrifice based on deflection.

30...♞a3 31.♘h5 gh5 32.♞g5 ♙f8
33.♞f6 ♙g8 34.e7

Care is required as White could still fall for the trick: 34.♞f7 ♙h8 35.e7? ♞c1 36.♙f2 ♞d2 37.♙g3 ♞g5 38.♙f3 ♘d4! 39.cd4 ♞g4 and it's only a draw because of the perpetual checks.

34...♞c1 35.♙f2 ♞c2 36.♙g3 ♞d3
37.♙h4 ♞e4 38.♙h5 ♞e2 39.♙h4
♞e4 40.g4 ♞e1 41.♙h5 1:0

WEAK SQUARES IN THE CENTER

Weakening the central squares can have fatal consequences. That is why we need to be careful when it comes to moving the pawns in the center: every movement leaves behind — and all around — weakened squares, which an experienced player can exploit quickly.

Let's take a look at two practical examples from the former World Champion Alexander Alekhine. In both games the players were incautious when it came to advancing the f-pawn — the movement of which left behind weak squares all along the e-file.

1

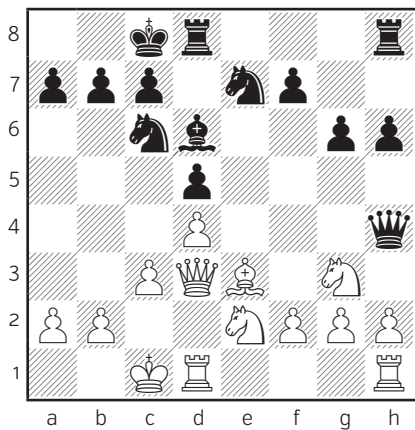
▷ Winter
▶ Alekhine

Nottingham 1936 [C01]

1.d4 e6 2.e4 d5 3.ed5 ed5

The Exchange Variation of the French Defence promises a symmetrical center with equal play. The development plan is simple for both players and they have no weaknesses.

4. ♖d3 ♘c6 5. ♘e2 ♖d6 6.c3 ♔h4
7. ♗d2 ♙g4 8. ♚c2 o-o-o 9. ♗f1 g6
10. ♙e3 ♗ge7 11.o-o-o ♙f5 12. ♗fg3
♙d3 13. ♚d3 h6



The position is more-or-less equal, although Black may have a slight initiative due to the more active placement of his pieces and a better bishop. When we try to decide which bishop is better and which one is worse, it helps to look at the pawn structures, especially with fixed pawns. In the center there are two fixed pawns, the d4-pawn and the d5-pawn. White's bishop is restricted by his pawn and

Black's bishop is attacking the opponent's pawn. White wanted to destroy the co-ordination of Black's pieces and so he decided to play:

14.f4?

This move is bad, because it weakens many squares along the e-file (e.g. e3, e4). The soon to be again World Champion will exploit that with the maneuver of his knight to an eternal base (this represents a square from which the knight cannot be attacked by any of the opponent's pawns) and with the occupation of the e-file.

14... ♚g4 15.h3 ♚d7 16. ♖hf1 h5
17. ♗g1 h4 18. ♗3e2 ♗f5

The first part of the plan is fulfilled; the knight has moved to a wonderful square. Next follows a systematic conquest of the e-file.

19. ♗f3 f6 20. ♗h2 ♖de8! 21. ♙d2
♖e6! 22. ♗g4 ♖he8! 23. ♖de1 ♖8e7!
24. ♙d1 ♚e8! 25. ♚f3 ♗a5

The position is so good that Black is able to aid his strategy with a nice tactic.

26.b3

26. ♚d5 ♖e2 27. ♖e2 ♖e2 28. ♚a5 ♗g3
29. ♖f3 ♚e4! with a decisive attack.

26... ♗c4! 27. ♙c1

Bad would be 27.bc4, because of 27... ♚a4 28. ♙c1 ♙a3 29. ♙b1 ♖b6 30. ♙a1 ♚c2. Here you can see how easy it is to bring centralized pieces into play.

27...♘ce3 28.♙e3 ♘e3 29.♘e3 ♖e3
 30.♚f2 ♚b5 31.♘c1 ♖c3 32.♖e7
 ♙e7 33.♚e1 ♙d7 34.f5 ♖e3 35.♚f2
 g5 36.♖e1 ♖e4 37.♖e4 de4 38.♙d2
 ♙d6 39.♙c2 ♙f4 0:1

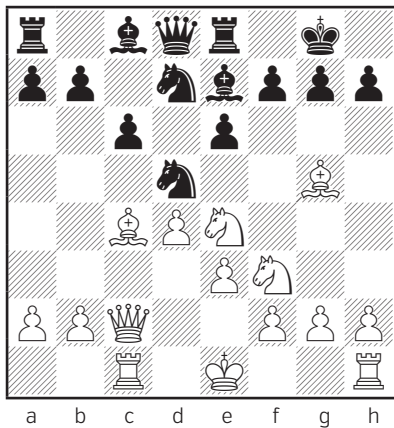
2

▷ Alekhine

▷ Yates

London 1922 [D64]

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3
 ♙e7 5.♙g5 o-o 6.e3 ♘bd7 7.♖c1 c6
 8.♚c2 ♖e8 9.♙d3 dc4 10.♙c4 ♘d5
 11.♘e4



In this entirely normal position, with a still undefined center, Black wanted a little bit too much:

11...f5?

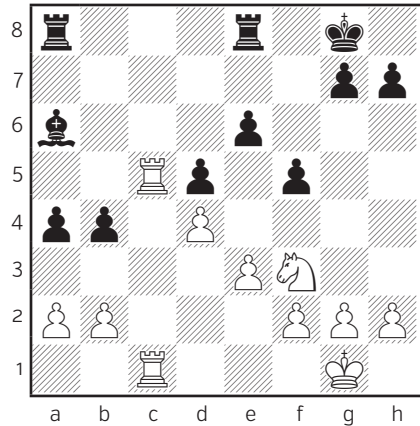
This move of the pawn weakens numerous squares along the e-file and the f-file.

12.♙e7 ♚e7 13.♘ed2 b5?

And now additional weaknesses appear. Black wanted to develop the

bishop on c8 at any cost. It would have been wiser to play 13...♘5b6 14.♙d3 g6, with the gradual preparation of the liberating ...e6-e5 move.

14.♙d5 cd5 15.o-o a5 16.♘b3 a4
 17.♘c5 ♘c5 18.♚c5 ♚c5 19.♖c5 b4
 20.♖fc1 ♙a6



21.♘e5

The centralized knight on the eternal outpost puts pressure on Black's fortifications.

21...♖eb8

It is not possible to play 21...♖ec8 22.♖c8 ♖c8 23.♖c8 ♙c8 24.♘c6.

22.f3!

White's king will become involved in the play.

22...b3 23.a3 h6 24.♙f2 ♙h7 25.h4
 ♖f8 26.♙g3 ♖fb8

White is the master of the open file, which means that he has the positional advantage. Next follows the penetration of the rooks to the seventh rank.

27. ♖c7 ♘b5 28. ♖1c5 ♘a6 29. ♖5c6
 ♗e8 30. ♖f4 ♖g8 31. h5 ♘f1 32. g3
 ♘a6 33. ♖f7 ♖h7 34. ♖cc7 ♗g8
 35. ♘d7 ♖h8 36. ♘f6 ♗gf8 37. ♗g7
 ♗f6 38. ♖e5 1:0.

THE WEAK SQUARE AS A TRUMP!

As with every rule, this one also has exceptions. One of them was demonstrated by Emanuel Lasker, who shocked — in one of the most famous games of all time — Jose Raul Capablanca with a seemingly irrational move. A premature move or a deep strategy?

1

► **Lasker**

► **Capablanca**

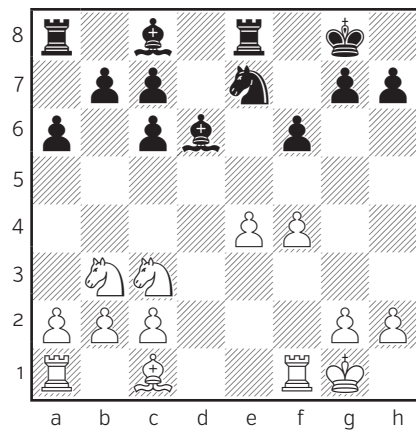
St. Petersburg 1914 [C68]

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♘b5 a6 4. ♘c6

The Spanish Exchange Variation is a very special opening, and helped Lasker to some nice victories. Later on it was forgotten but some decades later it was brought back to life by Robert Fischer who used it to beat many unprepared opponents. Nowadays the variation is chosen by many players, even ones with high ratings. The exchange on c6 defines the pawn structure. After 4...dc6 and a later d4-ed4 White's superiority will be shown on the kingside, where he

has four pawns against three pawns. On the other hand on the queenside Black has the same advantage, but he has troubles with the double pawns. Black, though, has other compensation.

4...dc6 5. d4 ed4 6. ♖d4 ♖d4 7. ♘d4
 ♘d6 8. ♘c3 ♘e7 9. 0-0 0-0 10. f4
 ♗e8 11. ♘b3 f6



In the diagram we can see the famous position in which Dr. Lasker shocked his opponent with the following move:

12. f5!

Against all respected principles at the time! The movement of the f-pawn gives up its only advantage — the potential passed pawn on the kingside. “The careless advance” also leaves Black with the important central e5-square, but Lasker had foreseen a bit more. With his move he achieved three things: he opened the way for his dark-squared bishop, simultaneously he restricted Black's knight which wanted to settle down on g6