111 Middlegame Crimes and Punishments

Alexander Galkin and Anastasia Travkina

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About the Authors

Alexander Galkin was born in 1979 in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. International grandmaster (1997). Russian junior champion in his age-groups (1989 and 1993). Russian under 20 champion (1999). Second in the Soviet junior championship in his age-group (1991). Second in the European junior championship in his age-group (1991). Member of the winning Russian team in the world junior olympiad (1994). World under 20 champion (1999). Member of the winning *Khimik* team in the Russian team championship (1999). Prize-winner in other Russian team championships for various teams (1996, 1998, 2003, 2008). Participant in two FIDE world championships (2000 and 2004) and the FIDE world cup (2007). Member of the Russian team in the European team championship (1999). Outright winner or prize winner in a number of international tournaments.

His pupils include outright winners or prize winners in Russian, European and world championships among juniors and junior girls across the age-groups. He was named Children's Trainer of the Year in 2016 by the Russian Chess Federation. Possesses three university degrees.

Anastasia Travkina was born in 1992 in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Woman International Master (2018) with a career high rating of 2304. Winning team member in Russian women's blitz team championship (2016). European universities women's blitz champion (2016). Winning team member in Russian students women's team championship (2017). Prize winner in many international tournaments. She has coached children since 2008.

Introduction

One of the most important success factors in chess is a player's ability to exploit their opponent's mistakes, both tactical and positional. Tactical mistakes encompass a miscalculation by one of the players of a variation as a result of which they lose material or get mated. Positional mistakes encompass situations where one of the players incorrectly assesses the position resulting from the analyzed variation, or has followed a plan that does not allow them to extract the maximum potential advantage from their pieces' position. In other words, one of the players could have played better than they did in the game.

The stronger the players, the lower the likelihood that they will commit a large number of serious mistakes capable of changing the game's outcome. Therefore, the game's outcome may even be settled by a player exploiting just one mistake by their opponent.

In the majority of cases, if we are not talking about material blunders or missed simple mates, the reason for mistakes is a failure to properly assess or anticipate the opponent's counterplay. For example, when calculating a variation, a player misses a move or series of forcing moves by the opponent that radically changes the position's evaluation and often leads to material losses. Therefore, a strong player not only needs to choose their moves carefully, but should also look at the position through the eyes of their opponent, trying to foresee their action in reply. When calculating variations they should ask themselves

if they have missed anything in their thinking. They should avoid any feeling of triumph at the beauty of the variation they have seen, and should not rush to demonstrate it on the board to please themselves or any watching spectators. They should remember the home truths: "more haste, less speed" and "chess isn't checkers, you aren't obliged to capture".

To illustrate these points, the authors present here three pertinent examples from their own play, when one player underestimated their opponent's counterplay.

GM Galkin, A (RUS) –
GM Najer, E (RUS)
Irkutsk 2010
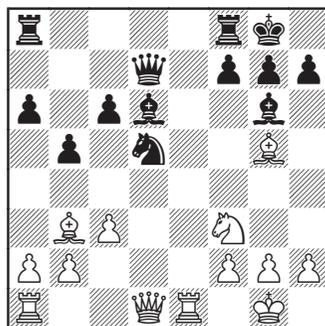
White to move. We had played a relatively quiet line of the dynamic and highly analyzed Marshall Attack of the Spanish Opening. White didn't attempt to hang on to the sacrificed pawn and returned the material, turning the game into a more positional battle. Obviously white cannot make a double capture on d5 here as the black bishop then

takes on h2 and wins white's queen. During the game white considered two ways of placing his knight on e5: either immediately or after exchanging the b3 bishop for the d5 knight. Well, without having got to the bottom of the right move order white continued **17.♗xd5 cxd5 18.♘e5?!** (18.♕d4 was far stronger) **18...♗xe5 19.♖xe5** counting on meeting 19...f6 with the tempo move 20.♖xd5. Neither can black protect the pawn: 19...♗e4? 20.♖xe4! and obviously the rook cannot be taken. However, white had failed to foresee the strong reply **19...d4!** After that move it transpired that the threat of moving the pawn to f6 was now real. Therefore, white cannot capture the black pawn: 20.cxd4? f6 21.♕b3+ ♗f7 and white loses material. While if white's rook attacks the queen with 20.♖e7 black replies 20...♕d5 with a tempo attack on the bishop, after which he can continue d4-d3. Therefore, white in the game retreated **20.♗d2** and after **20...f6! 21.♖e1 d3!** gained an advantage. Still, he was unable to increase it and the game ended in a draw.

Meanwhile, it should now be obvious that white needed to place his knight on e5 straight away if he wanted to move it there at all: 17.♘e5 ♗xe5 18.♖xe5 ♖fe8 (18...f6 19.♖xd5!) 19.♖xe8+ ♖xe8 20.a4!? with a small advantage for white.[1]

Therefore, in this example we clearly see how *underestimating one's opponent's counterplay* cardinally changes our evaluation of the position, and instead of

comfortable play with a small advantage white found himself having to defend an inferior position.

The following game was played at the European championships in 2003.

GM Lputian, S (ARM) – GM Galkin, A (RUS)
Istanbul 2003
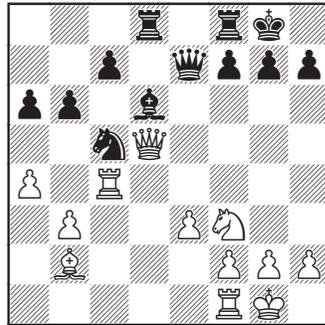
Black threatens to capture white's queen after sacrificing his bishop on h2. Therefore, white has to decide where to move his queen. The trappy 17.♕c6 with the idea of winning a piece after 17...♘xb3? 18.♖e4 ♕d7 19.♕c3 is parried by the move 17...♕e6. Now black has renewed his threat to capture on h2 and after 18.♘d4 ♕e5 19.g3 ♘xb3 white needs to prove compensation for the lost pawn. After some thought, mistakenly believing his pieces were sufficiently active, white attempted to attack on the kingside. The game continued **17.♕h5?! f5! 18.♖h4?! g6! 19.♕h6 ♘e4!** with ♖d7 to come, and it transpired that white had no attack whatsoever. His pieces were stuck in the mud on the kingside and risked becoming targets of attack by black. Black now has a big positional advantage, and he went on to convert it into a full point.

[1] Note that in this book the symbols "!?" after a move signify that the reader should focus in particular on analyzing that move

White should have considered 17.♕f5 and after 17...g6 (capturing the pawn loses spectacularly: 17...♘xb3? 18.♖h4 g6 19.♖xh7! and black gets mated) 18.♕c2 ♘d3 19.♕c3 (the simple retreat 19.♗a1 with a double-edged position is also good) 19...♘xb2 20.♕xb2 and the position is about equal.

Therefore, we saw in this example how overestimating your attacking opportunities and underestimating your opponent's counterplay led to big problems, which ended in defeat.

Our final example was played in the Russian club championship, against the former women's world champion.

**GM Ushenina, A (UKR) –
Travkina, A (RUS)**
Sochi 2016
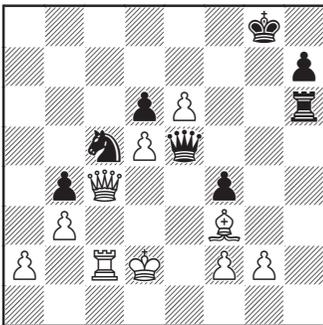
White had a big advantage throughout this game, but now, although she is two pawns ahead, the clouds begin to gather around her king. She should have remained vigilant and found a way to defuse black's initiative. For example, she could have played 39.g3, taking control of the rook's invasion square h1. Now, after 39...fxg3 40.fxg3 ♖h2+ 41.♔d1 ♕a1+ (41...♕xg3 42. ♖xh2

♕xh2 43.♕e2 with a won endgame) 42.♖c1 the checks run out, while white would meet 42...♕f6 with 43.♕f4+− with the inevitable exchange of queens. However, in the game the Ukrainian GM failed to appreciate the threats and grabbed another pawn **39.♕xb4?** The game continued **39...♖h1 40.♖c1?** (40. ♗e2!) **40...♕b2+ 41.♖c2 ♕a1** where black's pieces have set up camp on the back rank and white's position is now hopeless.

The above examples of battle are useful aids for improvers to develop their positional understanding.

How to use this book

In this book, aimed at strong tournament players (1900-2300 Elo or fast improving juniors), we introduce a wider approach to developing the middlegame tactical and positional skills that a strong chess player needs. Specifically, we present 111 positions from the games of grandmasters in which we first explain the mistake made by one of the players in underestimating their opponent's counterplay, then we analyze how the game progressed where punishment for the mistake is meted out. After that, we return to the starting position to demonstrate the correct or a more promising continuation.

Therefore, the text is structured so that each challenge contains the starting diagram twice − before the moves in the actual game, and then, on the page overleaf, before the solution. This is the "two-diagram principle" (or "method") as you may wish to call it.

Studying these key fragments from grandmaster games will help a player

to develop their middlegame skills. Firstly, the student analyzes why a move or series of moves by one of the players was erroneous. What counterplay by the opponent did the player making the mistake underestimate? Secondly, armed with this answer, the student can review the position to try and figure out the better move. If the student is working with a coach, then the coach should first set up the position on the board, demonstrate the erroneous move played, and ask the student to find the refutation to that bad move. After the refutation is found by the student, the coach should once again set up the critical position and ask the student to find the strongest continuation for the initial player. This may be one or more moves, depending on the position. Naturally, in the case of self-study the student can change their approach, either trying to figure out the refutation to the error by covering up the subsequent text, or simply studying the moves in the game before trying to find the better continuation, which is detailed overleaf together with the starting diagram.
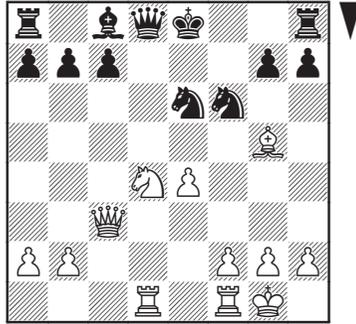
Finally, the reader may kindly note that a companion book *101 Endgame Crimes and Punishments* is being simultaneously published, authored by Alexander Galkin and edited by Anastasia Travkina.

<div align="right">
Grandmaster **Alexander Galkin**
Woman International Master
Anastasia Travkina
Rostov-on-Don, 30 April 2020
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Challenge #1

### GM Melkumyan, H (ARM) – GM Stevic, H (CRO)
Zagreb 2019

White has tried an interesting opening idea, sacrificing a piece for the initiative. The black king has already made moves and so is unable to castle. He now awaits a tough time, but can still defend. **1...♘xg5?** This attempt at a counter sacrifice to extinguish white's initiative fails.

2.♘c6! bxc6 After 2...♕xd1 3.♖xd1 bxc6 4.♕xc6+ ♔f7 5.♕xa8+− the three black pieces cannot compensate for the queen when the king is so exposed and black has two fewer pawns.

3.♖xd8+ ♔xd8 4.♕d2+! ♔e8 Black is in big trouble after 4...♗d7 5.♕xg5 ♖g8 6.e5 h6 7.♕h4 g5 8.♕xh6 ♘d5 9.h4!?+−

5.♕xg5 ♔f7 6.♕f4+− While material is approximately equal white continues with his deadly attack, and black's disorganized forces are unable to stop him.

Position for analysis
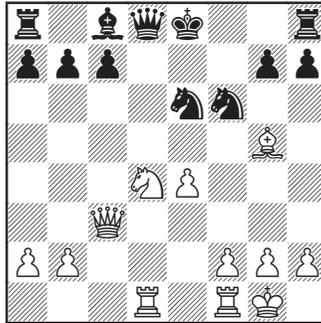
He loses with 1...♘xe4? 2.♘xe6 ♕xg5 3.♘xg5 ♘xc3 4.♖fe1+! ♗e6 (4...♔f8 5.♖d8#) 5.bxc3+−.

Black's position is also tough after 1...♘xd4?! 2.♖xd4 ♕e7 3.e5 ♘e4 4.♖xe4 ♕xg5 5.e6! ♕e7 6.♖d1;

The right continuation was: **1...♕e7!? 2.♘f5** (Not 2.e5? ♘e4!; neither does white create threats after 2.♘xe6 ♗xe6 3.e5 ♘e4!)

2...♘xe4! 3.♗xe7 (Not 3.♘xe7? ♘xc3 4.bxc3 ♘xg5−+) **3...♘xc3 4.bxc3 g6!? 5.♗f6 ♖f8 6.♘g7+ ♔f7 7.♘xe6 ♗xe6 8.♗g5=** and the endgame is approximately equal.

Challenge #2

GM Mikhalevski, V (ISR) – Bjerre, J (DEN)
Gibraltar 2019
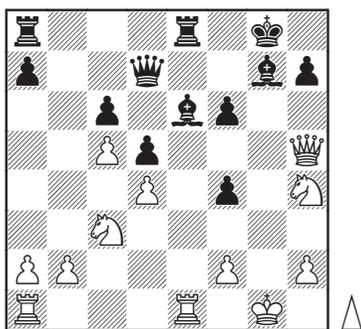
1.♖xe6? In sacrificing the exchange, white clearly overestimates the attacking potential of his knight from the f5 outpost.

1...♖xe6 2.♘f5 ♕f7!∓ Black strives to exchange white's active queen.

3.♕g4 The queen exchange is unfavorable for white: 3.♕xf7+ ♔xf7 4.♔g2 ♔g6!? 5.♘h4+ ♔h5 6.♘f5 ♗f8 7.♔f3?! ♔g5. After 3.♕h3 ♔h8!? with the idea ♖g8 black starts to harass the white king.

3...♕g6 Another good continuation was the immediate 3...♔h8!? 4.♔h1 (4.♔g2 ♖g8 5.♔f3 ♗f8 6.♕h3 ♕e8−+) 4...♕g6!?

4.h3 Not 4.♕xg6? hxg6−+

4...♔h8!? 5.♔g2?! ♖g8 6.♔f3 ♕e8!? A good alternative was 6...♗f8 7.♖g1 a5 8.♔xf4 ♗h6+ 9.♔f3 ♗d2.

7.♖g1 He loses after 7.♕xf4 ♗f8 8.♘g3 f5!?−+ 9.♔g2 ♗h6 10.♕xf5 ♖f8 11.♕h5 (11.♕g4 ♖f4!?) 11...♕b8 12.b3 ♕f4 with a decisive attack; definitely not 7.♔xf4? ♕b8+ 8.♔f3 ♕xb2−+.

7...♖e1∓ with a big advantage for black.