

Asa Hoffmann and Greg Keener

The Czech Benoni in Action



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Introduction

One night at the Marshall Chess Club, I gave a lecture on a few of my recent victories in the Czech Benoni, some of which are contained in this volume. After the lecture, Greg Keener approached me with several questions about this defense, as well as for permission to photocopy the scoresheets that I had been using as notes for the lecture. Several days later he asked me again for book recommendations that covered some of the lines that I had discussed in my lecture, and I mentioned that I only knew of some games by Yasser Seirawan and Tony Miles that had apparently been forgotten. To date, not much has been published on the Czech Benoni other than some unannotated pamphlets and Richard Palliser's *How to Play Against 1.d4*, though even that neglected to cover the lines that I favor. After further investigation, it seemed that a lot of the recent books that have been published on 1.d4 repertoires – including Boris Avrukh's highly acclaimed two-volume tome, as well as Larry Kaufman's ambitious (if gimmicky) repertoire book – give short shrift to the Czech Benoni, failing to mention the best resources for Black and instead focusing on lines where White achieves an edge without a fight. At this point, it was Greg who had the idea that if the book he wanted to buy didn't exist, then we should write it ourselves by compiling some of the best Czech Benoni games ever played.

As you play through these games, you will notice that we have paid more

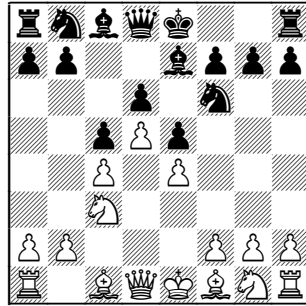
attention to the ideas in the games than to the names of the players who played them. However, you also will find the names of top players trying their hand at the Czech Benoni, from GM Seirawan to Mihail Marin and yes, even Magnus Carlsen.

While this book is the work of two authors, our intention is for “I” and “me” to refer to FM Asa Hoffmann, particularly when he is one of the players named in the game header. There is only one exception to this, and that is in the game Sturt–Keener in Chapter 3, in which “I” clearly refers to G. Keener. As to our collaboration, it has taken several years to gather and refine the game collection that you are holding in your hands. It has expanded and contracted again and again like an accordion as we collected games, ruled out those that were not interesting enough, and delved further into those that were. It contains many bristling ideas, sharp gambits, and oddball knight moves that are both par for the course in the Czech Benoni and the signature of my offbeat style.

The Czech Benoni has helped prolong my chess career during the last four decades! In my primitive (non-master) period, I had some successes with the Dutch Defense and the Albin Countergambit, but when I faced some strong, strategy-oriented players, these openings usually failed me. Next, I switched to the Modern Benoni,

thoroughly analyzed in *Shakhmatny Byulleten* though barely mentioned in the English-language chess literature of the time. Again, I was able to achieve some good results until a few strong opponents turned up armed with sharp tactical variations. In 1969, I began to play the Czech Benoni. To tell you the truth, I do not recall how I first discovered it. Being a 1.e4 player in those days, no one would have had a chance to play it against me, though once I took it up I basically stopped losing! It seemed that only grandmasters were able to beat me then. Among those painful losses, I recall playing it against GMs Gulko, Kaidanov, S. Polgár, I. Ivanov, and an 18-year-old Vishy Anand. Unfortunately, after losing I have a tendency to carefully file my scoresheets away in the nearest trash can, so many of those games – which would no doubt have been instructive – are lost forever.

After the moves 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 e5 4.♘c3 d6 5.e4 ♕e7, White now has no fewer than 15 reasonable moves! We can see that now the next few moves can produce nearly as many possibilities as the starting position for the game of chess itself. With so many choices and a lack of forcing lines, writing an encyclopedic manual for the Czech Benoni may be impossible. Therefore, this volume is presented as a game collection, showcasing common variations and thematic motifs in the Czech Benoni. So many opening books these days claim that their opening is an “ideas opening,” but the Czech Benoni truly is one, and here you will find a treasure trove of ideas for both sides in this dynamic defense.



This structure, featuring a fixed pawn center, is ideal for the player who likes to maneuver in closed positions. White will try for pawn breaks with f2-f4 or b2-b4 while Black tries for ...f7-f5 and ...b7-b5. We think of Czech Benoni games as, usually, long endgame struggles. We will see, however, how Black can get mating attacks on the kingside with active piece play.

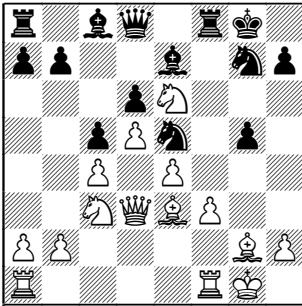
I learned my openings the old-fashioned way: playing over master games in *Shakhmatny Byulleten* and playing blitz for stakes with any grandmaster I could find. Also, I looked for published books or analysis on any of the openings that I played – which, as I mentioned above, were rather scarce when I first started playing. In blitz, I faced some famous Czech Benoni practitioners, including Miles, Seirawan, and Yukhtman. The latter was one of the first Soviet émigrés, arriving in the early '70s. Obviously a great talent, he seemed to have little interest in tournament chess, preferring blitz, backgammon, gin rummy, and the casinos in Atlantic City. In his heyday, Yukhtman had victories over some of the best players in the Soviet Union, but to me he will always be remembered for making the most spectacular move ever played in the Czech Benoni. In the following

game against Osnos (co-author of one of the best books ever written on the Richter-Rauzer), Yukhtman demonstrates the potential for a kingside attack in the Czech Benoni in swash-buckling style.

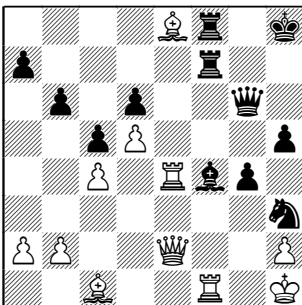
Osnos – Yukhtman

USSR 1969

1.d4 ♟f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 e5 4.♞c3 d6 5.e4 ♟e7 6.g3 0-0 7.♟g2 ♞e8 8.♞ge2 ♞d7 9.0-0 g6 10.♟e3 ♞g7 11.♞d3 f5 12.f3 f4 13.gxf4 exf4 14.♞xf4 g5 15.♞e6 ♞e5!



16.♞e2 ♞xe6 17.dxe6 ♟xe6 18.♞d5 ♟xd5 19.exd5 ♞g6 20.♞ae1 ♟f6 21.♞h1 ♟e5 22.♟h3 ♞f4 23.♟e6+ ♞h8 24.♞c2 ♞f6 25.♟g4 b6 26.♟c1 ♞ae8 27.♞e4 ♞g6 28.♞fe1 h5 29.♟d7 ♞e7 30.♟a4 ♞h3 31.♞f1 ♞ef7 32.♞e2 g4 33.f4 ♟xf4 34.♟e8



34...♟e3!! 0-1

34...♟e3 is a complex interference move, as it disrupts all of White's forces with a single sacrifice. White's best move is 35.♟xf7, though after 35...♞xe4+ 36.♞g2 ♞xg2 37.♞xg2 ♟xc1 Black is simply up a piece.

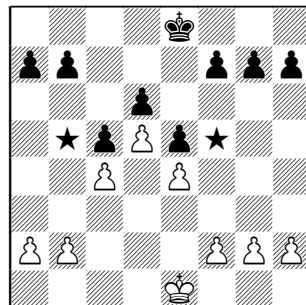
35.♞xe3 leads to mate after 35...♞xf1+ 36.♞xf1 ♞xf1+ 37.♞g2 ♟g1#.

35.♞xe3 also leads to mate after 35...♞xf1+ 36.♞g2 ♞xe4+ 37.♞g3 ♞8f3+ 38.♞h4 ♞xe3 39.♟xe3 ♞xe3 40.♟c6 ♞e7+ 41.♞xh5 ♟g5#.

35.♞xf7 leads to the same outcome after 35...♞xe4+ 36.♞g2 ♞xf7 37.♟xf7 ♞d3 38.♟xe3 ♞xe3 39.♞xh3 gxh3 40.♟xh5 ♞e1#.

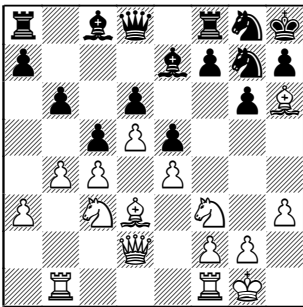
Common Themes

Perhaps the most common themes in the Czech Benoni are the pawn breaks that each side tries to achieve. Black would like to play ...b7-b5 and/or ...f7-f5, while White would like to get in b2-b4 and/or f2-f4. Much of the early middlegame is a struggle around the threat of these pawn breaks, and piece placement is often dictated by these breaks accordingly.



There are a number of ways for Black to achieve these two pawn breaks. On the queenside, he may force the issue with the moves ...a7-a6, ...♖b8, ...♗d7, and ...♘c7. White will often try to prevent the queenside pawn break with the constricting move a2-a4. Note that when this does occur, the b4 square becomes available as an outpost for a knight, though how useful this is depends on the specific position.

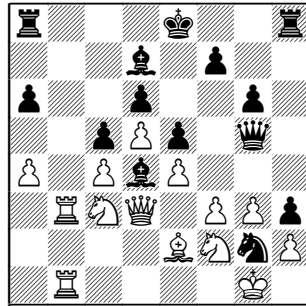
Over on the kingside, Black sometimes plays ...g7-g6 in order to place his knight on the g7 square. This odd knight placement is common in the Czech Benoni: one of its main purposes there is to support the ...f7-f5 advance as in the following diagram. This setup can be played against many of the different variations from which White may choose, and so we have dedicated a chapter to this setup from Black's point of view.



The d4 Outpost

Another key square that Black may utilize is the d4 square. With pawns on c5 and e5, d4 is an ideal place to put a piece, as if it is captured it will be replaced with a protected passed

pawn, which may serve as a valuable insurance policy in any ending.

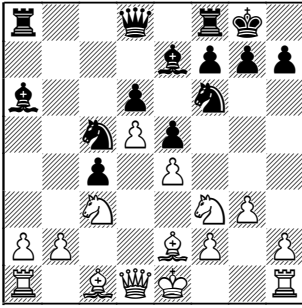


Here, the dark-squared bishop has managed to arrive on d4, from where it exercises annoying control over the dark squares in White's camp. This is not as uncommon as it appears, as often Black will play ...♗g5 at some point to offer an exchange of his "bad bishop" for White's "good bishop." Because Black begins the game by handing White a space advantage, exchanging off the dark-squared bishop both frees up more squares for Black's remaining pieces and gets rid of a bishop that is largely obstructed by the central pawns. For these reasons, White often declines this exchange offer, preferring to vacate the c1-h6 diagonal with his own dark-squared bishop and leaving Black with his bad bishop in a cramped position. However, this naturally opens the door to the possibility of this bishop rerouting to the d4 square via e3 at some point, as in the above diagram.

It goes without saying that putting a knight on the d4 outpost can also be very good for Black. Utilizing d4 is therefore a key strategic aim of the Czech Benoni, and is the kind of middlegame goal that you should constantly be trying to achieve, especially if your opponent hands it to you.

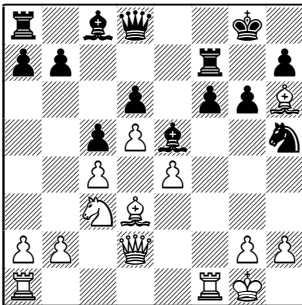
The c5 Square

If Black is able to clear the c5 square by pushing his pawn forward to c4, then often this can be a very useful post for a knight, which in turn may threaten to hop into the d3 square. This is a particularly potent strategy when used together with the Benko-style gambit discussed in Chapter 4.



The e5 Square

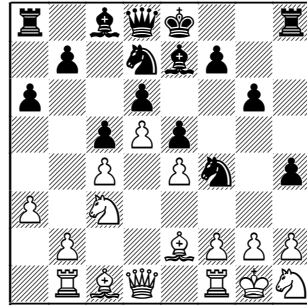
Should it become available, the e5 square can be a very useful staging area for an attack. This usually occurs in the lines where White plays an early f2-f4 as in the following diagram.



Here, White has traded off his f-pawn for Black's e-pawn, leaving a vacancy on the e5 square. Black was

quick to take advantage of this free square, putting his bishop there and then reinforcing it with a pawn.

When Black gets to place a knight on f4 early in the game, as in the following diagram, it is also possible that the e5 square may become available for the other knight.



In this position, Black has managed to plant a knight on the f4 square early on, from where it is harassing White's pieces. If White were to now play $\text{♟}xf4$, then Black would simply recapture with his e5-pawn, which would in turn vacate the e5 square for his other knight to enter the fray. This is a very common theme in the Czech Benoni as well. Thus, despite the fixed nature of the pawns in the center, there is some room for the position to become fluid and open. It's important to recognize these moments and to make the most out of the squares vacated by the pawns in the center when this does happen.

How This Book Is Organized

As we mentioned above, it is difficult to untangle the intertwining variations of the Czech Benoni, as so many transpositions are possible and very few of the lines are forcing.

Czech Benoni

Accordingly, we have selected games according to various setups that White may try against our system, organizing the chapters around these thematic tries by White.

In the back of the book, you will find a collection of typical tactics

that arise out of Czech Benoni pawn structures. I first encountered this idea in Valeri Beim's wonderful book *Understanding the Leningrad Dutch*. Use these tactics as refreshers for common themes, weaknesses, tricks, traps, and positional mistakes to look out for.