

opening repertoire

# Nimzo-Indian and Queen's Indian defences

Nigel Davies

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# About the Author

Nigel Davies is an International Grandmaster and FIDE Senior Trainer. He is the author of numerous books and DVDs on the game and is known for the clarity of his explanations.

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# Introduction

The Nimzo and Queen's Indian Defences are normally introduced via the moves 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6, the Nimzo-Indian arising after 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 and the Queen's Indian coming about after 3 ♘f3 b6. These two defences are viewed by many as being the best way for Black to play against 1 d4, combining soundness and the potential for playing to unbalance the game and win.

Although I dabbled with these defences throughout my playing career, they became a regular part of my repertoire from the early 1990s. I adopted them after conducting an inventory of my games in which I discovered that my results as Black were quite poor against very strong players and decided to prepare something more solid than my habitual Modern and Pirc Defences.

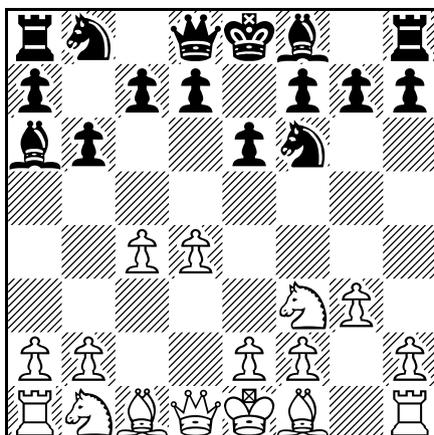
With some informal guidance from former Soviet Champion Lev Psakhis, I put together a simple repertoire with the Nimzo and Queen's Indian. I still remember him showing me the following vibrant battle when we were neighbours in Herzliya in Israel, explaining that Black does not need to play ...c7-c5 immediately in this line, but can first play preparatory moves such as ...♗d7 and ...♞d8.

## *Game 1*

**E. Magerramov-L. Psakhis**

Nimes Open 1991

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 b6 4 g3 ♙a6



### 5 b3

This was the standard reply at the time. One of the reasons I do not recommend 4...♟a6 as part of the repertoire is because of the sharp line 5 ♖c2 c5 6 d5 exd5 7 cxd5 ♟b7 8 ♟g2, when White gets a dangerous initiative for the pawn. It is not that this is necessarily bad for Black, I just prefer to give lines that are harder to pin down with engine analysis and can be played based on understanding and common sense.

**Question:** What do you recommend instead?

**Answer:** I give the older and natural 4...♟b7.

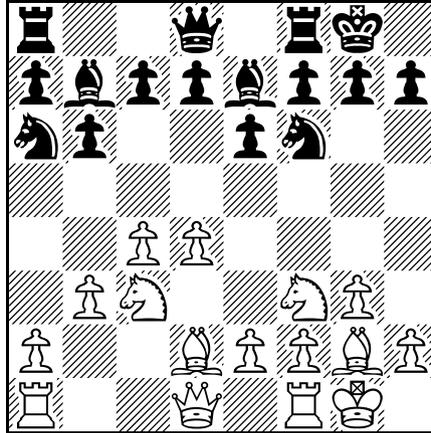
**Question:** You say that this is one of the reasons, what is the other one?

**Answer:** The other reason is that playing 4...♟b7 means we do not have some move order issues: for example, after 1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♘f3 e6 3 g3 b6 4 ♟g2 would make 4...♟a6 pointless because there is no white pawn on c4. There is also an issue with flank opening move orders, such as after 1 ♘f3 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 g3 b6 4 ♟g2 when Black can again play 4...♟b7 and 4...♟a6 would not be right.

### 5...♟b4+ 6 ♟d2

Pretty much forced, though with the bishop on d2 the move 5 b3 is less than useful. 6 ♘bd2 ♟c3 7 ♖b1 ♟b7 leaves White threatened with the loss of his d-pawn (8...♟xd4), and the exchange (8...♟e4), and it is difficult to see how he can stop both.

### 6...♟e7 7 ♟g2 0-0 8 0-0 ♟b7 9 ♘c3 ♘a6



This is a set-up we will reach for Black, but without White's extra moves b2-b3 and ♖c1-d2.

**Question:** Is it not useful for White to have these extra moves?

**Answer:** No, not really. The pawn on b3 can interfere with the transfer of White's queen to a4 and the bishop on d2 would now prefer to be on b2.

**10 ♘e5 d5!?**

Surprisingly Psakhis refuses the exchange of light-squared bishops. 10...♙xg2 11 ♖xg2 c6 would have been another way to handle the position.

**11 cxd5**

White could consider bringing his bishop to b2 at this point with 11 ♖c1 followed by 12 ♖b2.

**11...exd5 12 ♖c1 ♗c8**

When I first saw this move I was very surprised. Psakhis explained that the queen was well placed on e6 and that it could be transferred there via either c8 or d7. Meanwhile the rook on f8 will come to d8 to support the d5-pawn when Black plays ...c7-c5.

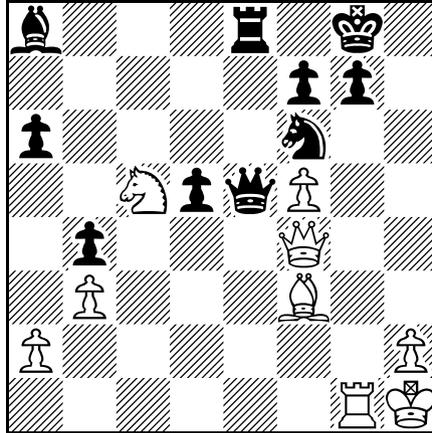
**13 ♙g5 ♖d8 14 f4**

The more restrained 14 e3 is a possibility here: for example, 14...h6 15 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 16 ♗h5 ♗e6 17 ♘d3 c6 18 b4 gave White some pressure in S.Irwanto-E.Van den Doel, Turin Olympiad 2006.

**14...c5 15 e3 ♘c7 16 f5 ♗ce8**

A later Magerramov game varied at this point with 16...♖e8 and after 17 g4 ♙d6 18 ♙f4 h6 19 ♗f3 ♘e4 20 ♖fd1 ♗d8 21 ♘xe4 dxe4 22 ♗g3 he had strong pressure in E.Magerramov-K.Sakaev, St Petersburg 1992. This implies that Magerramov was quite happy with his position at this point and might even have had an improvement ready had Sakaev not varied himself with 16...♖e8.





### 35 ♔h6

In the heat of the moment White might have overplayed his hand. He should be OK after 35 ♔xe5 ♚xe5 36 ♘xa6 ♚xf5 37 ♚g2 because the b4-pawn is hanging.

### 35...♘h7 36 ♘d7?

In the last few moves before the time control White may have missed the reply. He had to play 36 f6!, after which 36...♔xf6 37 ♔xf6 ♘xf6 38 ♘a6 would probably see White hang on.

### 36...♔c3! 37 ♔f4 ♘f6

Apparently Black can play 37...♙c6 because 38 f6 ♙xd7 39 ♚xg7+ ♚h8 presents no danger to his king. I would have wanted to check that very carefully, and short of time I would not have wanted to risk it.

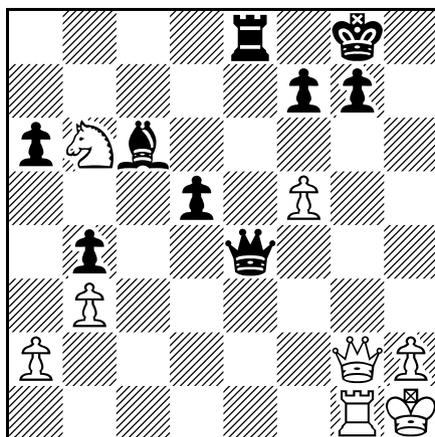
### 38 ♘b6

The engine prefers entering an endgame a pawn down with 38 ♘xf6+ ♔xf6 39 ♔g5, a line which was understandably rejected.

### 38...♙c6 39 ♔g3

39 ♘a4 ♙xa4 40 bxa4 a5 would consolidate comfortably for Black.

### 39...♘e4 40 ♔g2 ♔e5 41 ♙xe4 ♔xe4



A practical decision, entering an endgame with an extra pawn. From here on, White is fighting for his life.

42 ♖xe4 dxe4 43 ♜c1 e3+ 44 ♙g1 ♕f3 45 ♘c4 f6 46 ♜e1 e2 47 ♙f2 ♖h5 48 ♘e3 ♜e5 49 h3 ♙h7 50 ♜c1 ♙h6 51 h4 ♜e4 52 ♘g2 ♜e5 53 ♘e3 ♙h7 54 ♜e1 ♜c5 55 ♙g3 ♜a5 56 ♘c2 ♜xa2

56...♜xf5 was also good: for example, 57 ♘xb4 ♜f1 58 ♘c2 ♕g6 is winning.

57 ♘xb4 ♜a3 0-1

58 ♙f2 ♜xb3 59 ♘xa6 ♜f3+ 60 ♙g2 ♜xf5 wins easily for Black.

Despite a lack of expertise, my results as Black immediately improved, mainly because I stopped losing quite so often! Over the next few years, I gradually improved my handling so these defences would be my main weapons against 1 d4, playing a vital role in my gaining the grandmaster title.

From a historical perspective the main pioneer of both these defences was the famous thinker and strategist, Aaron Nimzowitsch, and this is how the Nimzo-Indian acquired its name. The 'Indian' part of the name is part of a quaint tradition by which all defences which involved a fianchetto were given this moniker which then expanded to lines beginning 1 d4 ♘f6. Philip Sergeant wrote this in the 1934 book, *A Century of British Chess*:

"The Indian Defences by P-K♘3 coupled with P-♙3, or P-Q♘3 coupled with P-K3, were largely taught to European players by the example of Moheschunder and other Indians, to whom the fianchetto developments were a natural legacy from their own game. The fondness for them of the present Indian champion of British chess, Mir Sultan Khan, is well known. But they are now so widely popular that Dr. S. G. Tartakover was able to declare, some years ago, that 'to-day fianchettoes are trumps.' A sequel hardly to have been anticipated from the discovery of Moheschunder in the Mofussil."

There are numerous problems with this nomenclature, not least of which is the fact that the Nimzo-Indian does not always involve a fianchetto. On the other hand a line of the Queen's Gambit Declined that was popular at the start of the 20th century went 1 d4 d5 2 c4

e6 3 ♖c3 ♗f6 4 ♙g5 ♙e7 5 e3 0-0 6 ♗f3 ♗bd7 7 ♚c2 and now the 'Indian' 7...b6. As both the Nimzo-Indian and Queen's Indian can feature this same kind of set-up for Black, we should probably just accept the names as tradition. Here, meanwhile, is one of the most famous Nimzo-Indians in which Black exchanged his dark-squared bishop and failed to fianchetto the other.

*Game 2*  
**P.Johner-A.Nimzowitsch**  
Dresden 1926

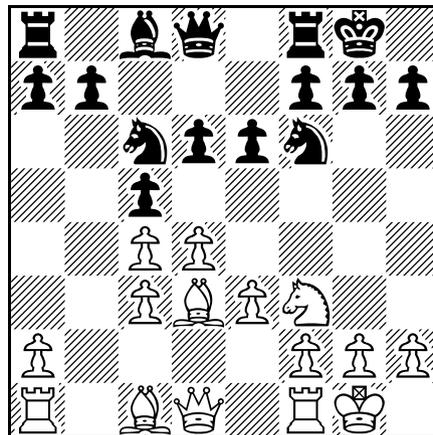
**1 d4 ♗f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♗c3 ♙b4**

Although this pin had been played in a few games in the 1880s it was Nimzowitsch who popularized it in the 1920s during the rise of the Hypermodern movement. This game would contribute considerably towards this popularization.

**4 e3 0-0 5 ♙d3 c5 6 ♗f3 ♗c6 7 0-0 ♙xc3!?**

Giving up the bishop-pair to double White's pawns. This concept would later be revived by the German Grandmaster Robert Hübner who used it via a 4...c5 5 ♙d3 ♗c6 6 ♗f3 ♙xc3 move order. That does have the slight advantage that Black can still castle on either flank.

**8 bxc3 d6**



Having exchange his dark-squared bishop Nimzowitsch establishes his pawns on dark squares. We will encounter this strategy in numerous lines in the repertoire presented.

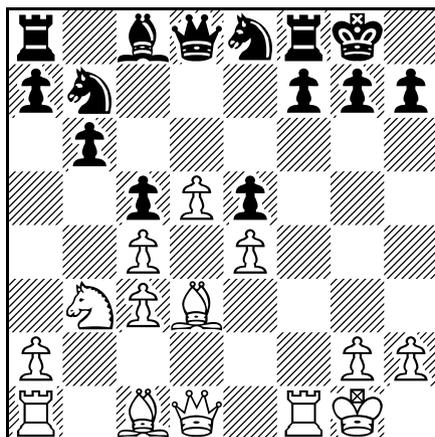
**9 ♗d2 b6**

White's previous move prepared to meet 9...e5 with 10 d5 ♗a5 11 ♗b3!, so Black would have to retreat his knight to e7 instead.

**10 ♗b3**

Instead of this White should have preferred an immediate 10 f4 when Nimzowitsch

gave the sequel 10...e5 11 fxе5 dxe5 12 d5 ♖a5 13 ♜b3 ♜b7 14 e4 ♜e8 with approximate equality.



**Question:** Does White's passed d-pawn not give him an advantage?

**Answer:** Not in this case; it will be firmly blockaded by a black knight, which then puts pressure on the e4- and c4-pawns.

**10...e5 11 f4**

In this position 11 d5 would have been strongly met by 11...e4!: for example, 12 dxc6 exd3 13 ♖xd3 ♜g4 14 f4 ♖c7 leaves White with a very weak pawn on c4 and weak light squares.

A more recent example of this line featured a better move in 11 f3, but Black's position was still OK. F.Olafsson-I.Csom, Bad Lauterberg 1977, continued 11...♙a6 12 ♜f2 ♜c8 13 ♙f1 ♜e7 14 ♜d2 ♖e8 15 e4 h6 16 a4 ♜c7 17 a5 ♙c8 18 axb6 axb6 19 ♜a8 ♖c6 20 ♜da2 ♙b7 21 ♜xf8+ ♙xf8 with approximate equality.

**11...e4 12 ♙e2 ♜d7!**

A brilliant non-standard move by Black which restrains a white kingside pawn advance. A simpler method would have been 12...♜e8 13 g4 (13 f5 is strongly met by 13...♖g5) 13...f5, but then 14 d5 ♜e7 15 g5 would block the position and leave Black with little in the way of winning chances. Nimzowitsch, being the stronger player, wanted to win.

**13 h3**

There have been subsequent attempts to improve White's play, but none of them have cast doubt on the soundness of Black's position and Nimzowitsch's 12...♜d7. For example:

a) 13 ♙d2 ♜e7 14 a4 ♙a6 15 d5 h5 16 ♙e1 ♜f5 17 ♙f2 g6 18 ♜d2 ♙g7 19 h3 h4 20 ♖e1 ♜h8 21 a5 bxa5 22 ♜xa5 ♙c8 23 ♖b1 ♖e7 24 ♜c1 ♜e8 25 ♜c2 a6 26 ♜b2 ♜a7 27 ♙d1 ♖f8 28 ♜b8 ♖h8 produced a tough struggle in the game P.Lukacs-I.Csom, Hungary 1974.

b) 13 a4 a5 14 ♜a2 ♖f5 15 ♜a1 h5 16 ♜c2 ♙d7 17 ♜a3 ♜a7 18 ♜b2 ♜ab8 19 ♖c2 ♜b7

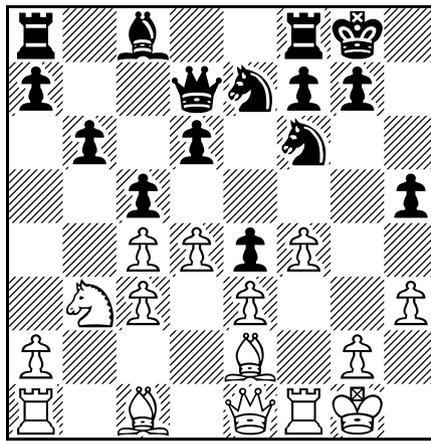
20 ♖d2 ♜fb8 21 ♖d1 g6 saw Black's position hold firm in V.Feldman-A.Allen, Gold Coast 2001.

**13...♞e7 14 ♜e1?!**

Various sources agree that this is a mistake by White because it allows Black to blockade the kingside.

From a strategic point of view the obvious move is 14 g4, but then Black can proceed with 14...h5 15 g5 ♜xh3 (15...♞h7 16 ♖xh5 ♜xh3 17 ♜f2 ♞f5 18 ♜h2 ♜g3+ 19 ♜g2 appears to be a draw by repetition) 16 gxf6 ♜g3+ with at least a draw. It is not clear whether he can play on for a win here, though the engine slightly prefers Black after 17 ♚h1 ♜h4+ 18 ♚g1 ♖h3 19 ♜e1 ♜xf6.

**14...h5!**



**15 ♖d2**

**Question:** Can White not play 15 ♜h4 here to attack the h5-pawn?

**Answer:** This is one of the tactical points behind Black's play. Nimzowitsch had seen he could meet this with 15...♞f5 16 ♜g5 ♞h7 17 ♜xh5 ♞g3, winning the exchange.

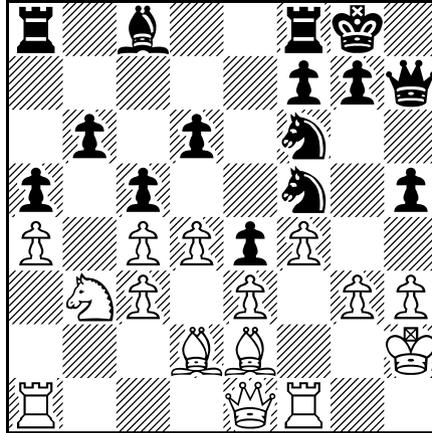
**15...♜f5**

Continuing the plan of a kingside blockade. The engine is enthusiastic about 15...♜a4, though to the human eye it looks strange to send the queen over to this side of the board after playing 14...h5.

**16 ♚h2 ♜h7**

Completing his plan of restraint after which White is unable to find an active plan. White may already be lost because he can only watch Black improve his position and prepare a decisive breakthrough with an eventual ...g7-g5.

**17 a4 ♞f5 18 g3 a5**



**Question:** Does that not leave the b6-pawn very weak?

**Answer:** It does, but it also stops White from exchanging his weak a-pawn with a4-a5, and a4 proves to be a more serious weakness than b6.

**19 ♖g1 ♘h6 20 ♙f1 ♚d7 21 ♙c1 ♜ac8**

Getting ready to force d4-d5 by playing ...♙d7-e6. White decides to do this voluntarily, after which even dxc5 is ruled out.

**22 d5 ♙h8 23 ♘d2 ♜g8**

Finally getting ready to start an attack based on the ...g7-g5 lever. There is not a lot White can do about it because his position has been rendered so passive.

**24 ♙g2 g5 25 ♘f1 ♜g7 26 ♜a2 ♘f5 27 ♙h1**

Johner has done a decent job of organizing his defence, but it is not enough to hold the position.

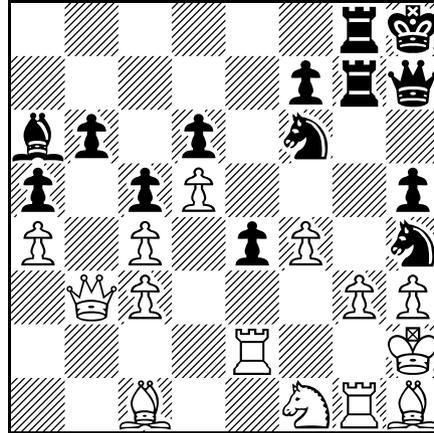
**27...♜cg8 28 ♚d1 gxf4**

This would have been a harder decision than might first appear; although Black opens the g-file, he also opens the e-file for White.

**29 exf4 ♙c8**

The engine points out that Black already has a winning combination with 29...♘g4+! 30 hxg4 h4!: for example, 31 ♜g2 hxg3+ 32 ♙g1 ♜xg4 leaves White helpless. However, there was no need for these heroics when Black can win by safer means.

**30 ♚b3 ♙a6 31 ♜e2 ♘h4**



### 32 ♖e3

Nimzowitsch was expecting 32 ♘d2 and had planned a nice queen sacrifice with 32...♙c8 33 ♘xe4?? (or 33 ♙xe4 ♘xe4 34 ♘xe4 ♖f5, etc) 33...♗f5 34 ♘f2 ♗xh3+!! 35 ♘xh3 ♘g4 mate.

### 32...♙c8 33 ♖c2 ♙xh3! 34 ♙xe4

34 ♙xh3 leads to mate after 34...♗f5+ 35 ♙h2 ♘g4+ 36 ♙h3 ♘f2+ 37 ♙h2 ♗h3 mate.

### 34...♙f5 35 ♙xf5 ♘xf5 36 ♖e2 h4 37 ♖gg2 hxg3+ 38 ♙g1 ♗h3 39 ♘e3 ♘h4 40 ♙f1 ♖e8 0-1

White is defenceless against the threat of 41...♘xg2 followed by 42...♗h1+: for example, 41 ♙e1 ♘f3+ 42 ♙d1 ♗h1+ leads to mate.

Besides the fianchetto stuff, another common misconception about the Nimzo is that Black exchanges his dark-squared bishop. Sometimes he does so, and it can be very useful to double White's c-pawns; this deprives White of a b2-b4 pawn lever and can leave him with long-term pawn weaknesses. At the same time, there are many lines in which Black retains his dark-squared bishop having extracted some form of concession from White: for example, 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 e3 shuts in White's queen's bishop. Here is one game in which my dark-squared bishop became a monster:

### Game 3 B.Halldorsson-N.Davies Reykjavik 1998

### 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 f3

The Kmoch Variation, which is one of White's sharpest answers to the Nimzo. It is also quite fashionable, having been adopted by Vishy Anand amongst others.

**4...♞c6**

I thought this was a good idea at the board; in retrospect I am not so sure. I hope that my lack of preparation does not disappoint the reader too much. I tend to prefer general understanding over memorizing variations and will try to improvise at the board.

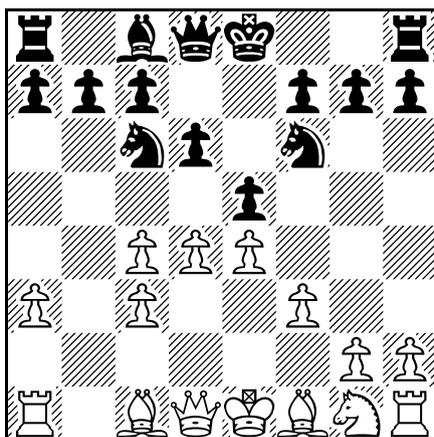
The repertoire line is 4...c5 5 d5 d6 6 e4 ♟xc3+ and will be covered in Chapter Four.

**5 e4**

White can also transpose into a Sämisch Variation with 5 a3, after which 5...♟xc3+ 6 bxc3 b6 can be followed by targeting the c4-pawn with ...♟a6 and ...♞a5. Normally this line would be reached after 4 a3 ♟xc3+ 5 bxc3 b6 6 f3 ♞c6.

**5...e5 6 d5**

After 6 a3 I would have played 6...♟xc3+ 7 bxc3 d6 and then hope to convince White to close the centre with d4-d5.



**Question:** Would closing the centre like that be a good idea for White?

**Answer:** Not at all; Black would get the c5-square and f3-f4 by White would give him the e5-square.

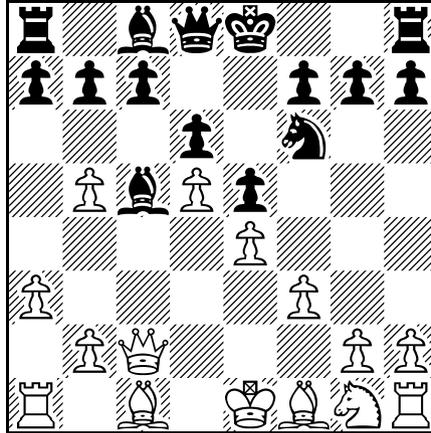
**6...♞d4 7 a3**

Before playing 4...♞c6 I had calculated the line 7 ♞ge2 c5 8 dxc6 dxc6, when the knight on d4 is not just adequately protected, but also rather handsomely placed.

**7...♟e7 8 ♞b5**

8 ♟d3 was a better move, after which 8...c5 9 ♞ge2 d6 leads to a complex and difficult middlegame in which both sides would need to look for pawn levers. Now Black obtains a very comfortable game.

**8...♞xb5 9 cxb5 ♟c5 10 ♚c2 d6**



This position may surprise those who think that the Nimzo necessarily involves the surrender of Black's dark-squared bishop; he can often keep it on the board, especially if his pin on White's c3-knight has extracted a concession.

**11 ♕d3 ♖h5**

Threatening ...♗h4+ followed by ...♘g3.

**12 ♘e2**

An earlier game that I did not know about (L.Krizsany-A.Kogan, Budapest 1994), had gone 12 g3 0-0 13 ♕d2 c6 14 bxc6 bxc6 15 dxc6 ♗b6 16 ♘e2 ♕f2+ 17 ♖d1 ♕h3 with sharp play and an eventual draw. This might have been better than Halldorsson's choice as he now finds himself in difficulties.

**12...♗h4+ 13 g3**

13 ♖d1 was not an attractive alternative, but it might have been somewhat better.

**13...♗f6 14 ♘g1**

An ugly retreat but what else is there? After 14 f4 there would follow 14...exf4 15 ♘xf4 ♘xf4 16 ♕xf4 g5 17 ♕c1 ♕h3 18 ♗e2 h5, with all sorts of problems for White.

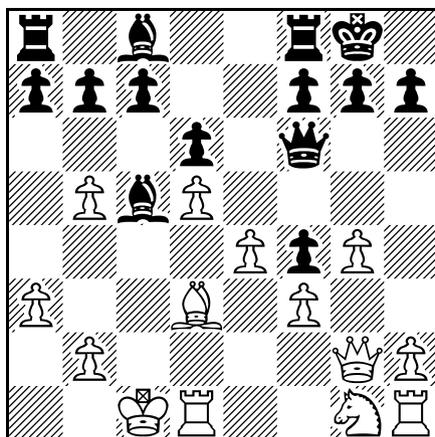
**14...♗g6**

Black should play the immediate 14...0-0, which is what I resort to when White tries to repeat the position. Meanwhile he could now have tried 15 g4 instead of his 15 ♘e2.

**15 ♘e2 ♗f6 16 ♘g1 0-0! 17 ♗g2 ♗g6**

Getting ready to open the f-file with ...f7-f5. White rightly prevents this, but in doing so allows my knight into the f4-square.

**18 g4 ♘f4 19 ♕xf4 exf4 20 0-0-0 ♗f6**



In some ways this now looks more like a King's Indian than a Nimzo. Black has a powerful dark-squared bishop and can try to smash open files in front of White's king. The difference is that a King's Indian would have featured 2...g6 and Black's g-pawn is still on g7.

**21 ♖b1 a6! 22 ♛c2 axb5 23 ♙xb5 c6 24 ♙c4 ♙d7**

Had I not been so fond of my dark-squared bishop, I might have considered 24...b5 25 ♙b3 ♙xg1! 26 ♜hxg1 c5!, which gets Black's queenside pawns rolling.

**25 ♞e2 ♙e3 26 h4**

After 26 ♛c3 I would have avoided the exchange of queens with 26...♛e7 to maintain my attacking chances on the queenside.

**26...♝fc8 27 dxc6 bxc6**

Opening the b-file and preparing to break open the position with a ...d6-d5 lever. The engine prefers 27...♝xc6, which feels quite wrong to me.

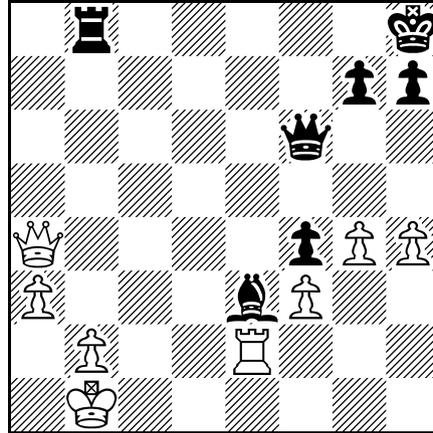
**28 ♛c3 ♛e7 29 ♛d3 d5!? 30 exd5 cxd5 31 ♙xd5 ♜ab8 32 ♙xf7+ ♛xf7 33 ♛xd7 ♛f6!?**

According to the engine, this is a mistake. It seems I should have forced a draw here with 33...♝xb2+ 34 ♙xb2 ♜b8+ 35 ♙a1 ♜b1+ 36 ♙xb1 ♛b3+ 37 ♙a1 ♛xa3+ 38 ♙b1 ♛b3+, etc.

**34 ♞d4 ♙h8 35 ♜h2**

It seems that the refutation of Black's speculative play is 35 ♞b5 ♜d8 36 ♛f5 ♛c6 37 ♜xd8+ ♜d8 38 ♜f1, but Black has very active play and it is very difficult for White to consolidate. I would say that Black has reasonable compensation for the pawns, especially in a practical game.

**35...♜d8 36 ♛a4 ♜xd4 37 ♜xd4 ♙xd4 38 ♜e2 ♙e3**



The anchoring this bishop on e3 signals the beginning of the end for White.

**39 h5 ♖d6 40 ♔a1?! ♜c8 41 ♞e1 ♜d8 42 g5 ♜d5 43 h6**

Trying to expose Black's king in the hope of gaining some tricks.

**43...♜xg5**

The engine assures me that the cold-blooded 43...♜xf3 is the better choice, but even had I known this, I would not have played it.

**44 hxg7+ ♜xg7 45 ♜h1?**

45 ♜b5 would have been more tenacious, but White is lost in any case.

**45...♜b8 46 ♜c2 ♔d4 47 ♜b1 ♜e5 48 ♔a2 ♜d5+ 49 b3 ♜xf3 50 ♜d1 ♔g7 51 b4 ♜e3 52 ♜d3 ♜e6+ 53 ♔b1 ♜f6 0-1**

This kind of flexibility, both in the pawn structure and piece deployment, can be challenging even for experienced players. It also represents an opportunity for outplaying the opponent, which may be at the heart of why the Nimzo and Queen's Indian Defences have been the repertoire choice of so many great players.

It is difficult to think of a world champion who has not included at least one of these defences in their repertoire during the last century. Even Bobby Fischer, who was so closely associated with the King's Indian Defence, switched to 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 in his 1972 world championship match against Boris Spassky. Admittedly he just played the Nimzo in one game and then used 3...c5 and 3...d5 after 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3.

The way I have written this book is so that it can be read from cover to cover, explaining the plans and presenting a wide variety of structures and plans, meaning the reader can gain an insight into the strategic breadth of these defences. This may come as an unpleasant surprise for those expecting a telephone directory of game references and engine analysis, but I would urge you to bear with the approach that is offered.

Getting a good general feel for an opening makes it easier to learn any variations that are needed, or improvise if the opponent fails to cooperate with your preparation. If more

engine analysis is required, and I should add that it is not necessary, I would recommend getting the electronic format of the book and adding analysis and game references to it yourself in a chess database program. This is much better than getting 'off the shelf' analysis, as you will be engaged in the development process rather than using passive and obedient repetition.

Please note that unlike the Queen's Gambit Declined, the Nimzo and Queen's Indian do not automatically furnish Black with a defence against Queen's Pawn Games, the Catalan (3 g3) and flank openings with 1 d3 and 1 c4. In order to address this I have included chapters with recommended ways of meeting these openings, suggesting treatments for Black which are strategically compatible with the overall repertoire.

### **Acknowledgements**

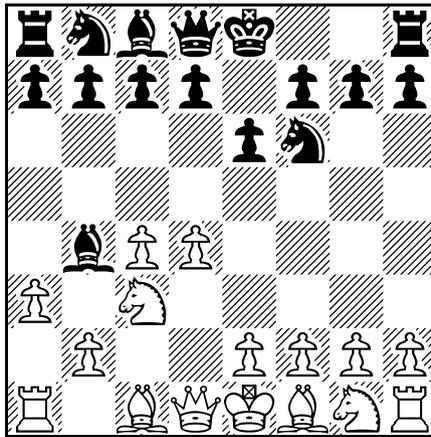
My thanks go to Byron Jacobs of Everyman Chess for his support and encouragement throughout this project.

Nigel Davies,  
St. Helens,  
October 2021

# Chapter Three

## Nimzo-Indian: Sämish Variation, 4 a3

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 a3



The Sämisch Variation, which is one of the most ancient and direct enemies of the Nimzo. White immediately forces Black to surrender the bishop-pair and hopes to use the doubled c-pawns to facilitate the formation of a broad pawn centre. Black meanwhile can try to attack the weak c4-pawn.

**4 a3 ♙xc3+ 5 bxc3 b6**

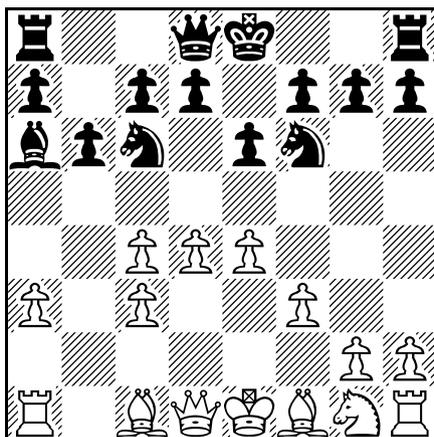
The repertoire approach, looking to attack the c4-pawn with ...♖c6, ...♙a6 and ...♘a5. This plan could also be initiated with 5...♘c6.

**6 f3**

The most logical move, aiming to build a broad pawn centre with e2-e4. 6 e3 can be met by 6...♙b7: for example, 7 f3 ♖c6 8 e4 d6 9 ♙d3 ♘a5 10 ♘e2 ♙d7 11 0-0 ♙a6 12 ♘g3 ♙xc4

13 ♕xc4 ♖xc4 won a pawn in S. Gligoric-P.Keres, Zurich Candidates 1953.

6...♖c6 7 e4 ♕a6



8 ♕g5

Again, this is the critical move, pinning the f6-knight and intending e4-e5. Meanwhile White can damage Black's pawn structure with ♕xf6 should Black unpin with 8...♖c8. Besides 8 ♕g5, White has two other possibilities that are covered in separate games:

- a) 8 e5 ♖g8 9 f4 ♖a5 10 ♖a4 ♖e7 11 ♖f3 ♖c8 gave Black excellent counterplay in Zilberman-Sakharov (Game 21).
- b) 8 ♕d3 ♖a5 9 ♖e2 ♖b3 10 ♖b1 ♖xc1 11 ♖xc1 ♖e7 12 ♖h3 d6 saw Black eliminate one of White's main trumps, the two bishops, in Boyer-Bauer (Game 22).

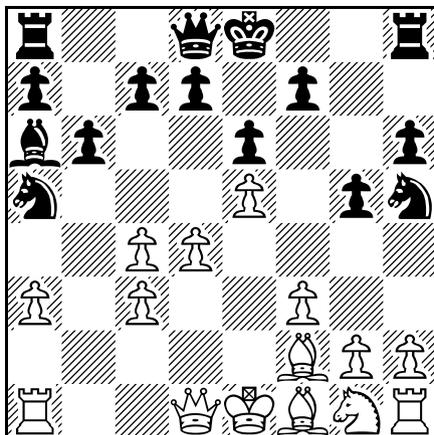
8...h6

Preparing to break the pin with ...g7-g5 should White push on with e4-e5.

9 ♕h4 ♖a5 10 e5

The critical move which forces Black to compromise his kingside pawn structure. Instead, 10 ♖a4 ♖c8 11 ♕xf6 gxf6 12 ♖h3 ♖b7 was fine for Black in Hoffmann-Harikrishna (Game 23).

10...g5 11 ♕f2 ♖h5



**12 c5**

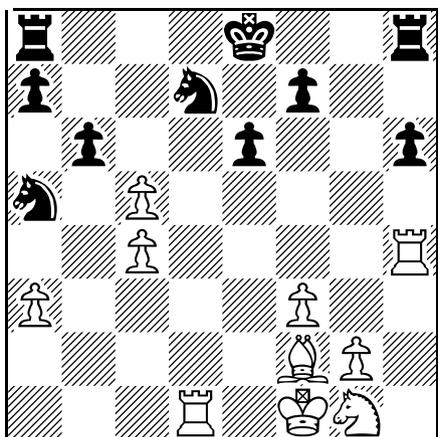
This is all known from opening theory, so this would have been prepared before use by Carlsen and his team.

**Question:** What about 12 h4, attacking Black's kingside pawns?

**Answer:** That is a logical move, but Black has a good answer in 12...f5, after which 13 exf6 ♖xf6 14 c5 ♗xf1 15 ♔xf1 g4 was good for Black in Simagin-Petrosian (Game 24).

12...♗xf1 13 ♔xf1 d6 14 exd6 cxd6 15 h4 gxh4 16. ♖xh4 ♘f6 17 c4 dxc5 18 dxc5 ♖xd1+ 19 ♗xd1 ♘d7

0



We have been following Game 25, Carlsen-Ding. Chances were about equal here.

Game 21

**N.Zilberman-Y.Sakharov**  
Ukrainian Championship, Kiev 1966

**1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 a3**

The move that distinguishes the Sämisch Variation, one of the oldest and sharpest lines at White's disposal. White immediately takes the bishop-pair and argues that the doubled c-pawns will help support the goal of building a centre. On the other hand, the pawn on c4 is very weak.

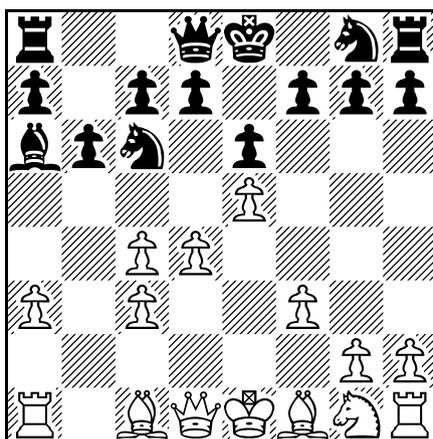
**4...♙xc3+ 5 bxc3 b6!**

The repertoire line, playing to immediately attack the c4-pawn with ...♙a6 followed by ...♘c6 and ...♗a5.

**6 f3 ♙a6 7 e4 ♘c6 8 e5?!**

8 ♙g5 h6 will be covered in the last three games of the chapter.

**8...♗g8**



**9 f4**

After 9 ♗h3 Black can adopt a similar set-up to the main game with 9...♗a5 10 ♖a4 h6 (the immediate 10...♗e7 also seems fine) 11 ♗f2 ♗e7: for example, 12 ♗e4 0-0 13 ♙f4 ♗f5 14 ♙f2 d5 15 exd6 cxd6 with a nice game for Black.

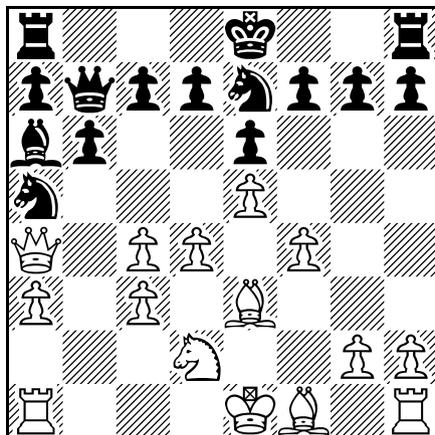
**9...♗a5 10 ♖a4 ♗e7 11 ♗f3 ♖c8**

With White's queen over on a4 it makes sense to play 11...0-0 here: for example, 12 ♙e3 d6 13 ♗d1 ♖e8 14 ♖b4 ♖c6 15 ♗d2 ♗ae8 16 ♗g1 d5 17 c5 ♙xf1 18 ♗xf1 ♗c4 19 ♗xc4 dxc4 20 ♗f3 b5 gave Black a good game in I.Argandona Riveiro-N.Ninov, San Sebastian 2008.

**12 ♙e3**

Or 12 ♙d3 ♖b7 13 0-0 ♖c6 14 ♖xc6 ♗exc6 15 ♗d2 d5, with a fully equal game.

**12...♖b7 13 ♗d2**



**Question:** Why did White defend the c4-pawn again?

**Answer:** Black was threatening ... $\text{dxc4}$  followed by ...b6-b5: for example, 13  $\text{cxf2}$   $\text{dxc4}$  14  $\text{cxc4}$  b5 15  $\text{cxb5}$   $\text{cxb5}$  16  $\text{cxb3}$   $\text{cxc6}$  is nice for Black.

**13...f6**

13... $\text{dxc4}$  was still quite possible: for example, 14  $\text{dxc4}$  b5 15  $\text{cxb3}$  (15  $\text{cxc2}$  was probably best, but still attractive for Black after 15...bxc4 16  $\text{cxb1}$   $\text{cxc6}$ ) 15...bxc4 16  $\text{cxb7}$   $\text{cxb7}$  17  $\text{cxc4}$   $\text{cxc2}$  18  $\text{cxc1}$   $\text{cxc4}$  19  $\text{cxc7}$   $\text{cxc6}$  followed by ... $\text{dxf5}$  traps the rook.

**14  $\text{cxe2}$**

14  $\text{dxf3}$  is met by 14... $\text{dxc4}$ : for instance, 15  $\text{cxc4}$  b5 16  $\text{cxc2}$  bxc4 17  $\text{cxb1}$   $\text{cxd5}$ , dominating the light squares.

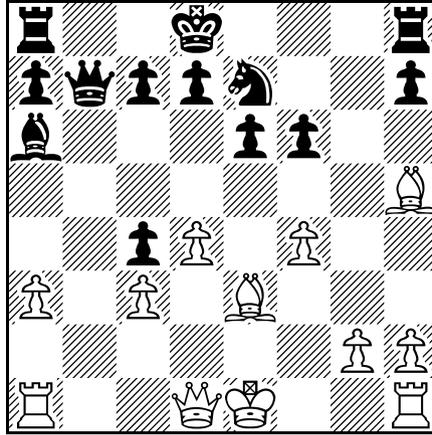
**14... $\text{dxc4}$ ?**

This has been a major theme for Black, though in this particular position it may not be the best because White can control the h1-a8 diagonal. 14... $\text{cxc2}$  15  $\text{cxc1}$   $\text{cxc3}$  looks much stronger.

**15  $\text{dxc4}$  b5 16  $\text{cxd1}$**

An even better line is 16  $\text{cxc2}$ : for example, 16...bxc4 17  $\text{exf6}$   $\text{gxf6}$  18  $\text{cxb1}$   $\text{cxc2}$ ? (18... $\text{cxc6}$  is best, but then White still has an attractive position after 19  $\text{cxc5}$   $\text{cxc8}$  20  $\text{cxf3}$ ) 19  $\text{cxc5}$   $\text{dxc6}$  20  $\text{cxc2}$  wins the queen.

**16...bxc4 17  $\text{exf6}$   $\text{gxf6}$  18  $\text{cxc5}$   $\text{cxc8}$**



19 ♖f3 d5

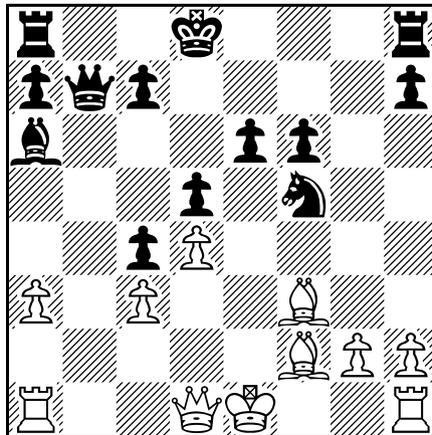
There is a case for playing 19...c6 here to keep the d5-square for the knight.

20 f5?!

It looks as if White started overestimating his position hereabouts and this continues to the end of the game. 20 ♖b1 would have been a sensible move, when it looks quite nice for White.

20...♞xf5 21 ♖f2?!

Surely 21 ♖f4 must be the logical follow-up after throwing the f-pawn on to the bonfire?



21...♞c6

**Question:** Is there a reason Black did not go after the c-pawn with 21...♞b2?

**Answer:** That would be fraught with risk after 22 O-O ♖xc3 23 ♙g4 because the position is opening up and there is no obvious place for Black's king.

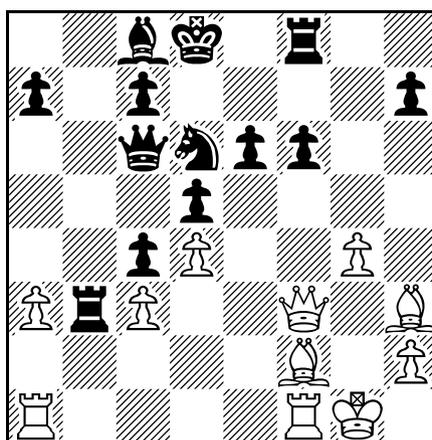
22 O-O ♖b8 23 ♙g4 ♜b3 24 ♖f3

Still rating his chances very optimistically. 24 ♙xf5 seems sensible to me followed by attempting to exchange major pieces and blockade on the dark squares. Letting the knight live for too long will see it land on e4.

24...♙c8 25 ♙h3 ♜f8 26 g4?

Turning a bad position into a lost one. White should have tried 26 ♜ae1 when he keeps practical chances, and some of us would have wanted to eliminate the knight with 26 ♙xf5.

26...♘d6



27 g5

This move doesn't help either. White should play 27 ♙g2, when it is more difficult for Black to establish a knight on e4.

27...f5 28 ♙h4 ♜e8 29 ♙h1 ♙d7 30 ♙g4 ♘e4

White is busted, largely thanks to the dominant position of this knight. The rest only takes a few moves.

31 ♙h5 ♜e7 32 ♜g2 h6 33 ♙d1 hxg5 34 ♙xb3 cxb3 35 ♙g3 f4 36 ♙e1 ♙a6 0-1

White faces a ruinous loss of material after 37 ♜f3 (or 37 ♜g1 f3, etc) 37...g4 38 ♜xg4 ♙e2.

### Game 22

**M.Boyer-C.Bauer**

Cappelle-la-Grande Open 2019

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 a3 ♙xc3+ 5 bxc3 ♘c6 6 f3 b6 7 e4 ♙a6 8 ♙d3