



Squeezing the QGD

Semko Semkov

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Squeezing the QGD

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Queen's Gambit Declined, by Matthew Sadler, Everyman 2000

Play 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6!, by Alexei Kornev, Chess Stars 2018

Periodicals

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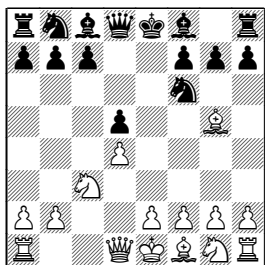
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The Week In Chess (www.theweekinchess.com)

Chess Publishing (www.chesspublishing.com)

Preface

This book is a logical follow up of my previous work on the Nimzo-Indian Defence. Having the Nimzo in our arsenal gives us a universal weapon against the Queen's Gambit Declined – the so-called Exchange Variation 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♙g5.



I believe that it is the best way to fight for a win against the QGD. Practice confirms my conviction, with 63% in White's favour. You might think that with the omnipotent computers and the contribution of the best grandmasters in the world Black should have discovered already well tested equalizers. Reality proves the opposite. We see Carlsen, Guker, Caruana, Aronian, Sarana and many others of the elite amassing point after point. It is very indicative that

there is no distinct set-up or move order that stands out between the multitude of Black's possibilities. I even observe that lately second players tend to deviate from the traditional main lines and resort to 3...a6, 3...h6, 5...♙b4 and other exotic set-ups.

Unlike the Ruy Lopez, the Petroff Defence, the Meran, which look exhausted on new ideas, the Exchange Variation is in constant development. There is not a trace of creative burnout.

Initially, the pawn structure on the diagram was generally associated with a minority attack, based on the advance b2-b4-b5. Then in the 80-90ies Kasparov championed the central approach with ♘ge2 and f2-f3. Later on plans with f2-f4-f5 and g2-g4 grew in popularity.

Nowadays everything is more complex than ever. White endeavours to be flexible and keep all the options open. Often the placement of one black piece tips the scales towards one or another

plan. For instance, until the black knight is on d7, we should commonly refrain from the minority attack as the opponent would be ready to meet it with ...♘b6. Or the early inclusion of ...h6 ♗h4 should prompt us to develop our knight on e2 instead of f3.

If you want to extract the maximum out of the opening, I advocate concrete approach. We should ditch old prejudices and open new debates if you want to keep up with modern times. Notably, I entirely shun the traditional early ♖c2, and always prefer the most aggressive plan with ♘e5 and f4 to the minority attack, whenever possible.

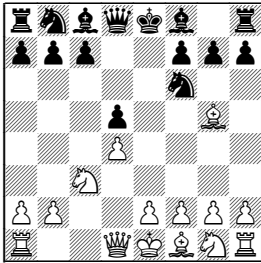
I have studied the available books on the Exchange Variation, only to discover that they are obsolete, rather chaotic, and omit crucial move orders. So I tried to systematize the abundance of plans and branches, to give clear answers to the questions my own experience raised.

The most important part of the book is the Overview. It is a must-read as I give there several important rules to follow. Then follows a move by move presentation of the proposed repertoire and annotated games.

Semko Semkov
August 2025

Overview

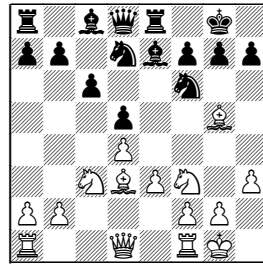
The main bulk of the book is devoted to the line **1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗g5**



I guess you have read that this pawn formation is called the Carlsbad structure, and it is widely associated with the minority attack, arising after White pushes b2-b4-b5. You might wonder why we should attack on the flank where we have less pawns. And you'll be absolutely right! In my opinion, the most logical and effective plan in White's possession is to assault the enemy king with ♘e5 and f2-f4! With this aim in mind, our main goal is to reach the following set-up:

5...c6 6.e3 ♗e7 7.♗d3 ♘bd7 8.h3 0-0 9.♘f3 ♖e8 10.0-0

Main goal

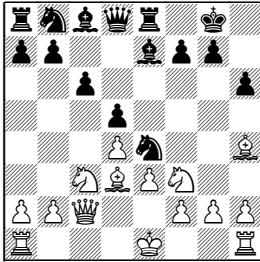


Our battle plan is ♖c2, ♘e5, f2-f4. If Black plays ...h6, we retreat ♗f4, avoiding multiple exchanges with ...♘e4. The bishop would not hamper f2-f4 since we can always play ♗g3 or ♗h2.

All that is very good, but on every move we face tons of problems with the different move orders Black might chose.

For instance, 6...h6 forces a major change in our set-up as we have to retreat 7.♗h4. Then ♘f3 no longer works owing to ...♘e4, when we cannot answer ♗f4, keeping the bishop, e.g. 7...♗e7 8.♗d3 0-0 9.♘f3 ♘e4 or 9.♖c2 ♖e8 10.h3 (10.♘f3 ♘e4=) 10...♘bd7 11.♘f3 ♘e4=.

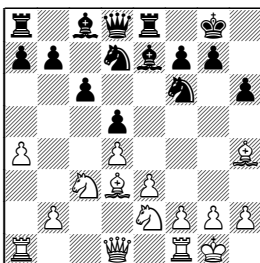
Anti-goal 1



When building our repertoire, we should take care to avoid this course of events. Note that Black was able to execute ...♘e4 to his advantage because he played ...c6 early and did not spend a tempo on ...♙bd7. Our solution of this problem is:

When we were forced to retreat ♙h4 after ...h6, we **always** lead out our knight on e2!

But then we do not rush with f2-f3 before preventing queenside counterplay with ...b7-b5! Chapter 2 deals with the following sequens: 5...c6 6.e3 h6 7.♙h4 ♙e7 8.♙d3 0-0 9.♙ge2! ♙e8 10.0-0 ♙bd7 11.a4!

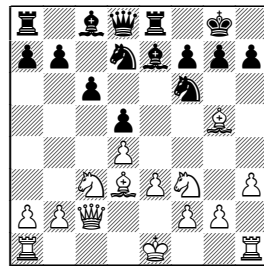


As in our Main goal position, we refrained from ♙c2. The queen is often more useful on d2, to defend the sensitive square e3.

I should add that the threat ...♘e4 rears its ugly head not only after ...h6 ♙h4. There is another important but little known sequence which we should avoid:

5...c6 6.e3 ♙e7 7.♙d3 0-0 8.h3 ♙bd7 9.♙c2 ♙e8 10.♙f3

Anti-goal 2



10...♙e4! 11.♙xe4

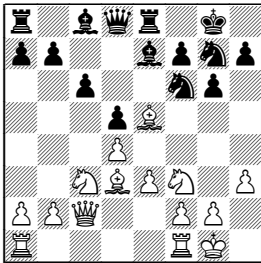
11.♙f4! is correct, but White does not have much under this particular move order with both h2-h3 and ♙c2 having been played.

11...dxe4 12.♙xe4 ♙xg5 13.♙exg5 ♙f8. The g5 knight has no retreat squares, and h4 weakens the kingside.

If we decide to ban ...♙e4 by retreating the bishop to f4 without Black having played ...h6, we lose a tempo, which Black could use to achieve the clever manoeuvre

...♖d7-f8-e6-g7, followed by ...♗f5. Note that the bishop trade through f5 is more effective when White has played ♖c2, which spends another tempo. Thus we reach our:

Anti-goal 3



This position might arise after 5.♗g5 c6 6.e3 ♗e7 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♖f3 ♗bd7 9.h3 ♖e8 10.♗f4 ♗f8 11.♖c2 ♗e6 12.♗e5 g6 13.0-0 ♗g7 or with other move orders.

The bad black bishop is perhaps Black's biggest strategic handicap in the Carlsbad structure, so if Black achieves to trade it without too many concessions, his life would be easier.

However, without the 2 tempi on ♗f4 and ♖c2, White would have achieved b2-b4-b5 to put pressure on c6. Then the absence of the light-squared bishops would only underline the weakness of the backward pawn.

Another major problem presents ...♗bd7 before castling. True, it

does not create the threat ...♗e4, but enables ...♗d7-f8-e6 OR ...♗d7-f8-g6. I would like to attack the latter with long castling and a pawn storm on the kingside but castle short if the knight goes to e6. So we should not define our king too early.

Finally, Black could delay ...c6. Then we should be careful not to be thrown out of our repertoire if Black returns to ...c6. For instance, we should not retreat to f4 after ...h7-h6 since Black would have ...c7-c5!=.

As you see, the pawn structure may be the same, but we face different challenges under different move orders.

Therefore, the most pragmatic approach to studying the Exchange Variation is to split the opening into two stages:

1. We make the first 8-10 moves led by concrete tactical reasons. They should be memorized! I prepared a memo table to help you. See it on the next page!

2. At the second stage we choose a strategic plan **according to the opponent's set-up**. The choice is generally between a minority attack, plan with f2-f4, and plan with f2-f3. The latter is mostly applicable to set-ups with ♗ge2.

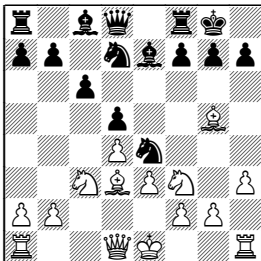
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♖c3 ♘f6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗g5
 5...c6 6.e3
 6...♝b6 7.♞d2!
 6...♗e6 7.♗d3 ♘bd7 8.h3!
 6...h6 7.♗h4 ♗e7 8.♗d3 0-0 9.♘ge2!
 6...♗e7 7.♗d3 h6 8.♗f4! ♘bd7 (8...0-0 9.h3) 9.h3
 7...♘bd7 8.h3 ♘f8 (8...0-0 9.♘f3) 9.♘f3 or 9.♗f4
 7...0-0 8.♘f3 ♗e8 9.♝c2!?
 8...♘bd7 9.h3 ♗e8 (9...♘e4 10.♗f4) 10.0-0
 5...♗e7 6.e3 0-0 7.♗d3 h6 8.♗h4! ♗e8 9.♘ge2
 7...♘bd7 8.♘f3
 7...♗e8 8.♘f3 h6 9.♗f4
 6...♘bd7 7.♗d3 ♘f8 8.♘f3

How do we meet ...♘e4

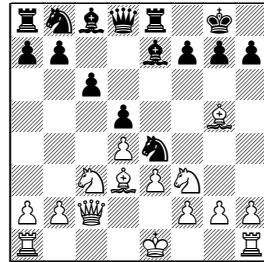
The exchange operation ...♘e4 is perhaps Black's most important resource in this opening. We design our move orders with it in mind.

1. The knight jump is impossible when Black played ...♘bd7 instead of castling as we simply grab a pawn with ♗xe4 and ♝g4.

2. The general plan is to answer ♗f4.



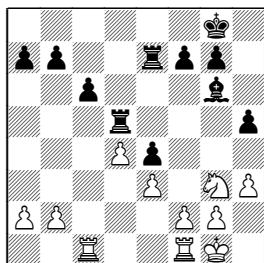
10.♗f4! ♘df6 11.♘e5! ♗d6 12.0-0. This is discussed in Chapter 6.



Here Black's knight has rushed too early to e4 and cannot be supported by ...♘df6. So he should answer 10.♗f4! with 10...♗f5 and cede the bishop pair after 11.0-0±, followed by ♘e5 and f2-f3 – Chapter 5.

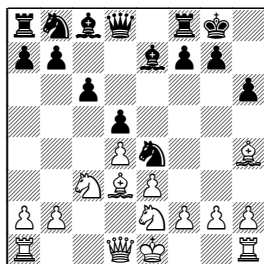
3. **When our knight is on e2**, we should always consider to capture on e4. As a rule, we take with the bishop. Our strategic goal is to get a knight vs bad bishop, as on

the following diagram (or without the c6- and d4-pawn if White had pushed d4-d5):



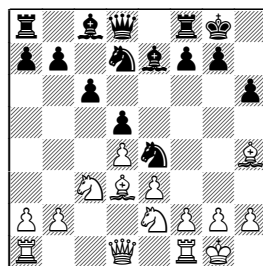
Here are some key positions you should remember:

In the first example the jump ... $\text{N}e4$ is too early as Black's queen's knight cannot support the e4-pawn:



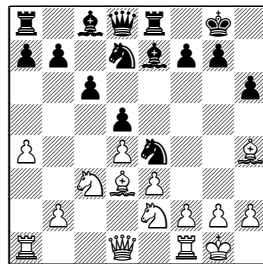
We manage to drag the pawn to f5 – 10. $\text{N}xe7$ $\text{Q}xe7$ 11. $\text{N}xe4$ dxe4 12. $\text{Q}c2$ f5. In this structure White could undermine e4 with f2-f3.

In the next example the knight is already on d7, so we cannot hope to provoke ...f5. Instead we wait for ... $\text{N}f5$ and display activity on the queenside:



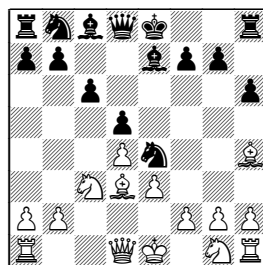
11. $\text{N}xe7$ $\text{Q}xe7$ 12. $\text{N}xe4$ dxe4 13.h3!? $\text{N}f6$ 14. $\text{Q}c2$ $\text{N}f5$ (14... $\text{N}fe8$ 15. $\text{B}fd1$) 15. $\text{N}g3$ $\text{N}g6$ 16. $\text{Q}a4$, aiming for b2-b4.

3. There is only 1 case when we take on e4 with the knight. It happens when our knight is on e2 **and** we have played a2-a4. The latter ensures pressure on the queenside and along the a2-g8 diagonal:



12. $\text{N}xe7$ $\text{Q}xe7$ 13. $\text{N}xe4!$ dxe4 14. $\text{N}c4$ $\text{N}f6$ 14. $\text{Q}b3$.

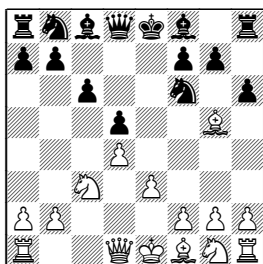
4. While our knight is still on g1:



9.♙xe7 ♖xe7 10.♙c2 ♘xc3 11.bxc3.
The pawn structure has changed,
and White obtains a new resource
– c3-c4.

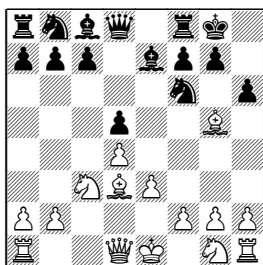
How do we meet ...h6?

We always aim to retreat the bish-
op to f4. I recall only 2 cases when
that does not work:



7.♙h4. Obviously, 7.♙f4 allows 7...
♙f5.

When Black omits ...c6 – 5...♙e7
6.e3 0-0 7.♙d3 h6:

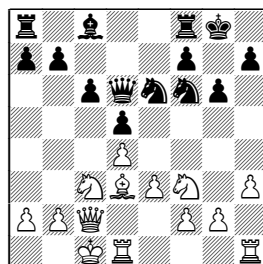


8.♙h4!

The problem with 8.♙f4 is that 8...
c5 equalizes.

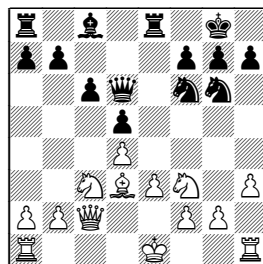
When to castle long

Quite a few players think that it is
easy to attack the black king with
a long castle and a pawn storm
using the g- and h-pawn. Unfor-
tunately, the counter-strike in the
centre is often enough for Black to
get adequate chances:



14...c5! =.

I recommend castling long **only**
when Black has completed the
manoeuvre ...♘b8-d7-f8-g6.



The annotated **Game 12** Carlsen-
Mamedyarov featured 14.0-0-0!.
The 2 knights on f6 and g6 give
White tempi to win the race after
14...b5 15.♙b1 a5 16.g4.

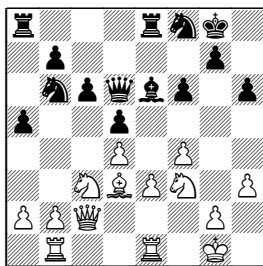
Second stage of the opening

So let's assume that both sides have completed development and castled short. Then we already have some freedom of choice, although we could extract the maximum out of the opening if we adapt our plan to Black's set-up. Most important factors to consider are the placement of Black's queen's knight and the inclusion (or absence of ...h7-h6). Let's consider separately the 3 major plans in the Carlsbad structure.

Plan with f2-f4

It commonly takes place after ♖e5 and f2-f4, but we could also enable it with ♜fe1, ♖d2:

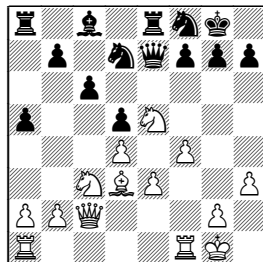
M.Yilmaz-Yaran
Kemer 2022



The general plan should be to prepare g4-g5, but many variants are possible, depending on the concrete weaknesses in Black's camp. Perhaps the best way to develop the initiative here is 19. ♖f2 ♖f7 20. ♖h4.

Sometimes we do not even need to protect the e3-pawn:

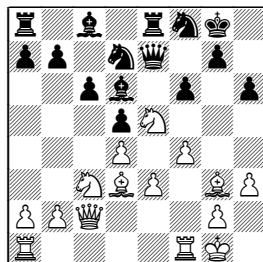
analysis



14...f6?! 15. ♖g4 h5?! 16. ♖f2 ♖xe3 17. ♜ae1, and the queen guarantees a powerful (even winning!) attack.

In the next example White had played ♖f4-g3 and f2-f4. In most cases the retreat to g3 is better than to h2 as we could pin the queen from h4:

Divya-Viani
Sharjah 2024



16. ♖h4!! g5 17. ♖g4 ♖g7 17...gxf4 18. ♖xf4 ♖h8 19. ♖f5 gives a tremendous attack – 19... ♖e6 20. ♜ae1 ♖b6 21. ♖d1 ♖e7 22. e4. 18. ♖g3 h5

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7.♖f3! 27

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♗bd7 126 (10...♙d6 126)

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