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Foreword

This is a book about the Center Game, an old chess opening characterized by the moves **1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♖xd4**.

At the highest level, the Center Game has never been a popular answer to 1.e4 e5. But things are moving. The world's number four at the moment of writing, Arjun Erigaisi, is one of several top-rated players who employ it regularly these days, and some of the most advanced neural network chess engines evaluate 2.d4 (followed by 3.♖xd4) as almost equal to the alternative 2.♘f3. Interesting, isn't it?

My aim with this book is to show the reader why the Center Game is a great opening, how it evolved, which players were ahead of their time, and how it could, perhaps, become a more popular opening in the near future. It certainly deserves to be taken seriously as a dangerous surprise weapon. But this is not merely a theoretical exercise or a repertoire book. It is also a personal account and a declaration of love. I hope the reader will catch some of the enthusiasm and joy I still feel for this opening after playing it for almost 30 years.

I have played the Center Game in thousands of games, over the board and online, sometimes against very strong opposition. I have always scored well with it, but I have also suffered painful losses. My reason for playing this opening is not that I like memorizing theoretical lines. The Center Game (we largely use UK spelling in this book, but we make an exception for 'Center Game' since that is the generally accepted term) is a practical opening with a lot of room for creativity and inventiveness, and players from the past have used it as a competitive weapon to create relatively unknown positions from the first moves onwards. While writing this book, I realized once again how much there is still left to discover, and how many ideas are still unexplored.

Despite its rich history, only a handful of books on the Center Game have been written. In 2020, Marek Soszynski published the digital book *The Centre Game Re-examined*. In 2023, Chessable published an online repertoire course called *The Daring Center Game* by Michael Gorny. A third title well worth mentioning is Andrew Greet's extensive and excellent section on the Center Game in the Everyman chess book *Dangerous Weapons: 1.e4 e5* from 2008. There have also been a few titles in other languages, notably

Mario Ziegler's 2010 monograph *Paulsen Eröffnung* (in German), in which he also offers a historical perspective.

My own approach is somewhat different. I delve more deeply than these authors into the opening's ancient origins and its evolution over time: how did its ideas take shape, and how did players from the past handle the Center Game? How does this reflect on the way the opening is treated now? I will end by considering the plethora of new ideas for White that have been explored in the past few years, such as moving the queen not to e3, but to c4 or d3.

In the Introduction, I talk about my personal connection to the Center Game: how I came to study it, play it, and love it. Over the decades, I've had many interesting exchanges with Center Game fans and critics, and these encounters have strongly influenced my perspective on this opening. They have also shaped me as a chess player. I hope, and trust, that my search for a simple yet aggressive weapon against 1.e4 e5 will be familiar to many players. With the Center Game, we avoid having to reproduce long lines of theory, while we still obtain attacking chances. That's why I have always loved this opening.

Part I of the book is devoted to the history and evolution of the Center Game from past to present, celebrating its most important pioneers along the way. We will travel back in time to the end of the Middle Ages, when the queen (as a chess piece, that is) was given new powers. I will look at the most essential ideas and themes, and explain how these were assessed in their time. We will see some legendary players of the late 19th and early 20th century in action and then look how a new generation of Center Game proponents treated the opening at the dawn of the new millennium.

We will end this first part of the book with a game by Magnus Carlsen in which he played the Center Game. Throughout the book, I will be regularly referring back to this historical part. In my opinion, you can't learn to love the Center Game without understanding its history. It would remain just another interesting but ultimately random and anonymous opening, of which there are too many already.

Part II is the theoretical section. Illustrated by relevant games from all eras and all levels of play, we will look at the current state of theory of the Center Game. There are old lines to be revised (and refuted) and fascinating new ideas to be examined. We will first look at the Berger Variation (3...♘c6 4.♙e3 ♘f6), which takes up the vast majority of Center Game theory. There are two main ways to play this for Black: by developing the bishop to b4 (Chapter 3), or by developing it to e7 (Chapter 4). Next, in Chapter 5, we will check fourth move alternatives for Black. In

Chapter 6, we look at modern alternatives for White on move four. Many of these lines are still new, and I think this is one of the most exciting parts of the book. In the last game, we look at an encounter between Topalov and Anand from the Leon Masters, 2024, which was played just two days before my deadline for this book. In the Epilogue, I draw some final conclusions.

I didn't want to write a typical 'repertoire book', in which a limited and one-sided view of the opening is given, presenting it to the reader as a cure-for-all. **The Center Game is a great surprise weapon, but it is objectively equal.** If you're thinking of incorporating it into your repertoire with White, my most important practical advice is to **vary your approach.** Don't just play the traditional lines and hope for the best, but also give the new ideas a try. The good news is that many variations can be played on the basis of the knowledge of just a few basic concepts. (Experienced Center Game players might need to 'un-learn' many of their old habits and routines when playing these new lines.) On the Black side of this opening, my general recommendation is never to go for passive development and hope for the best. **Play as actively as possible in the centre or on the queenside.**

So, who am I to tell you all this? I'm a FIDE Candidate Master, and my national rating has been close to 2300. My own games are hardly interesting to the general reader, but I have taken a few liberties in this book, quoting from my practice. This is my first chess book, but I am not new to chess writing. I was a regular columnist and book reviewer for the Chessvibes website, and later for Chess.com. As you can read in the Introduction, I am fascinated by many different episodes in chess history. But I am not a chess historian, if such an occupation exists at all.

I hope this book will inspire readers to take a closer look at the Center Game.

Arne Moll
Weesp, August 2024

INTRODUCTION – HOOKED ON THE CENTER GAME

In search of a practical answer to 1...e5

*Well there have been better plans
But none that I could ever understand
The Sisters of Mercy, Lights*

All chess players, except one, grow up.

When I was about ten years old, I learned the rules of chess. Around that same time, my dad took me to the cinema to see the movie *Amadeus*, which awakened a life-long passion for music in me. Soon, I was so busy practising the piano that I pretty much forgot about chess. At the age of thirteen, I started to get interested again, but I didn't really know how one was supposed to study chess, nor did I ask anyone. It didn't occur to me to join a club. Instead, I went to a local bookstore and bought a cheap Dover version of *Morphy's Games of Chess (1957)* by Philip W. Sergeant. The life story and games of Paul Morphy made a lasting impression on me. Morphy's playing style greatly appealed to me, but I was mainly intrigued by his openings, particularly the romantic variations in the Open Games after 1.e4 e5. Studying Morphy's games and obsessing over forgotten gambits – what a way to start a chess career!

One of the first chess events I visited was the 1988 Hoogovens tournament in Wijk aan Zee. By this time, I had actually joined a chess club, and was playing more seriously. Excited to finally see some famous grandmasters in action, my father and I entered the playing hall. I looked to the left, I walked to the right. And then I nearly bumped into Mikhail Tal. 'Watch out for the World Champion!' someone joked to me. I was starstruck. Later that day, a friend of my dad's, also a member of my chess club, told me some anecdotes about the 'Magician from Riga', who wasn't just uncompromising behind the board, but also in life. Tal was my second chess hero. It was now clear that I was going to be an attacking player myself.

Not so long after that chance encounter with Tal, I heard about the 'Latvian school of chess'. It consisted of chess players from Latvia with a specific playing style: attacking, imaginative chess, not just following the trodden theoretical paths but exploring original ideas early on in the game, a bit like Morphy had done in his day. There was Tal himself, of course, and his trainer Alexander Koblencs. There was the old master

Alvis Vitolinsh, and then there were the young stars Alexander Shabalov and Alexei Shirov. I studied their games and, unoriginally, copied many of their openings.

Early on in my chess career, I discovered that my capacity to remember opening variations was far from impressive compared to some of my peers who seemed able to memorize entire opening books. I developed a slight phobia for 'mainstream' opening theory after 1.e4 e5, which required concrete knowledge. There were endless lines in the Ruy Lopez, the Italian and the Petroff to be learned by heart, and I found out that I simply wasn't able to. I needed something more practical and tried to follow a piece of advice from Tal, who once said that 'young players are very fond of trying to catch their opponents in prepared variations'. I experimented with some offbeat gambits, but there were just too many ways for my opponents to deviate from my prepared lines.

In the 1990s, my attention swerved away from chess as I became interested in Victorian children's literature. I was especially fascinated by Lewis Carroll (1832-1898), Oxford don, logician and author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll also liked chess and included a chess problem in the Alice sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which Alice meets several chess pieces. My favourite character was the White Queen, who told Alice she could believe 'six impossible things before breakfast'. I also got involved in music again. This time, I dived into a different musical rabbit-hole. I wore black T-shirts of Queen, Metallica and The Sisters of Mercy, the last one being my favourite band. The group had been founded in the late 1970s by lead singer Andrew Eldritch, an elusive figure with a deep voice who was always dressed in dark clothes and wore large sunglasses, even in dimly-lit and smoke-filled concert halls. His band was supported by a legendary drum machine called Doktor Avalanche and it was particularly popular at 'gothic' music events and parties. In those years, I attended a lot of them.

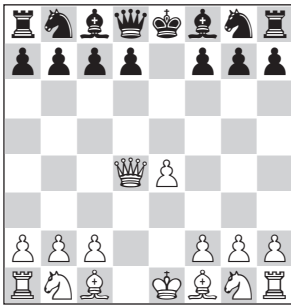
One day, I was browsing through a *New in Chess* magazine when an interview with Alexei Shirov caught my attention. At some point, the interviewer asked him what he thought was the difference between World Champion Garry Kasparov and himself. Shirov explained how his thought process was different: '(...) Sometimes during the game I don't think about the position I have. I think about other things, even when it's my move. I may think about anything. I may recall some songs of Sisters of Mercy or things like that. That's one of my favourite groups.'

The Sisters of Mercy? What a curious coincidence, I thought. I was even more surprised when, sometime later, I learned that it had been his compatriot Shabalov who had drawn Shirov's attention to the band. Two of my favourite chess players liking the same music as I did: that felt a little special.

In the summer of 1996, I visited the Donner Memorial Chess Tournament in Amsterdam, where I happened to witness the conclusion of a game of Shabalov, who was one of the participants. When he stood up, I decided to ask him whether he was still into the music of The Sisters of Mercy. He said he was, and we got talking. During the rest day of the tournament, I took him to downtown Amsterdam to visit some record stores in search of new music. We also talked about chess, of course, and I told him I still hadn't found a good way of playing against 1.e4 e5.

'You should try the Center Game,' he said casually, and he told me the first moves:

1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♔xd4



'It's a very easy opening to play, always underestimated by Black. You castle queenside, your queen goes to e3 and then to g3, your knight goes via e2 or h3 to f4, you push your kingside pawns and ultimately you mate Black on g7.' He showed me some lines, mentioned a few games I should study and shared some novelties with me. I felt like Salieri, assisting Mozart to compose the Requiem.

After this conversation, I feverishly started studying this wondrous opening in which White's queen enters the centre as early as move 3. Perhaps my fondness for the White Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass* made me take a liking to this opening right from the start. Using early computer programs such as Fritz and ChessBase, I created my first digital opening preparation. I found it surprising how little was known about this opening – and how little I knew about it myself. Most commentators

seemed to be prejudiced against it, giving harsh verdicts on White's early queen adventures.

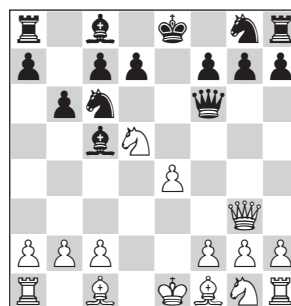
I tried the opening in blitz and rapid games at my local chess club, in Amsterdam chess cafes and on the Free Internet Chess Server (FICS), which was the go-to place for online chess back then. As I gained my first successes with it, I got more and more confident that this was the line that solved all my problems against 1...e5. It was astounding, beyond belief: many of my opponents simply had no idea. Here is an early rapid game I played with the Center Game, against one of the strongest players of my club. (The game doesn't do this outstanding player justice, but he was the first to laugh about it afterwards.)

Arne Moll

Roy Dieks

Amsterdam rapid 1996

**1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♔xd4 ♘c6
4.♔e3 b6?! 5.♘c3 ♙c5?! 6.♔g3
♔f6? 7.♘d5 1-0**



I remember the thrill I felt when I played the Center Game for the first time in an important league match. I pushed my d-pawn in response to 1...e5, then brought my beloved White Queen out on the very next move. Some of my team members, strong veterans with a classical chess education who had decades of experience at the highest national level, shook their heads at such naivety. But for once, I persisted, and gradually even my most sceptical teammates had to admit that there was something to this unorthodox opening.

First studying it with members from my club, Max Euwe Amsterdam, I later also had the honour to analyse the Center Game with grandmasters. The strongest of them was Alexei Shirov, fellow admirer of The Sisters of Mercy and former number two in the world. I talked to him a couple of times during tournaments in the mid- and late 1990s and sometimes played blitz games against him on the Internet Chess Club. Despite having played the Center Game once himself (see Chapter 1) and trying to keep an open mind, Shirov was very critical of it. I learned a lot from him about the opening – especially that Black should never be afraid to sacrifice material for counterplay.

Because of Shirov's sceptical views, I came to believe at the time that the opening actually had more flaws than perks, and that it was too risky to play in serious games. In March 1999, I wrote a critical article about the most problematic lines for White in Kaissiber, the German chess opening magazine edited by Stefan Bucker. For lack of suitable alternatives to 1...e5, I continued to play it from time to time until the mid-2000s, and in blitz and rapid games, it was still an excellent weapon. But I didn't really trust it anymore. There were new developments, for sure, but I'd somehow lost interest. And so it was with my musical tastes. The Sisters of Mercy had long stopped making studio albums, and my interests turned to other genres, and other aspects of life. I got married and became a father.

In the summer of 2009, my attention was drawn to the opening again. Someone emailed me the score of a game with the Center Game played by the young Russian player Ian Nepomniachtchi. I felt a pang of nostalgia. Inspired, I wrote a piece called *Finding Nepo (on an Old Laptop)* for the Chessvibes website, in which I recounted my earlier experiences with the opening and took a look at Nepo's contributions. 'After all those years,' I wrote, 'I finally feel like I don't have to be ashamed anymore of my preference for this crazy opening, even if in the end it turns out to be incorrect.'

For many years, I avoided the Center Game in my serious games. Only during the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in early 2020, did I change my mind for good. While the whole chess world was forced to stay at home and play from behind a screen or on their smartphone, I realized that there were still so many impossible things to discover 'before breakfast' in this beautiful opening that I should finally stop caring about whether it was correct or not. I was hooked on the Center Game, and it was time to embrace it once more. And so I did. I rediscovered the joy of playing it again and found that a new generation of grandmasters had started to experiment with new interpretations. I was beginning to think this development might be a great reason to write a book to present a new view on this old opening.

Or maybe my real reasons were less obvious, safely hidden in Mikhail Tal's deep dark forest 'where $2+2=5$ '. Elusive and abstruse, like the lyrics of The Sisters of Mercy. For nearly thirty years, I have treated the Center Game as my own private Neverland, the imaginary island of Peter Pan, where children don't grow up. But I was wrong.

The Center Game shouldn't remain a secret place, hidden from plain sight. It deserves to be seen in broad daylight.

This game was another blow to the reputation of the Center Game, and theoreticians spoke lowly of the opening in those years. Max Euwe, the fifth World Champion, wrote in Part 12 of his Dutch opening series

Theorie der Schaakopeningen (1939): ‘the Center Game was never a common opening and is only seen very rarely these days. The white queen comes out too early, and because of this, Black can easily equalize.’

The opening was rarely played in the next three decades and almost never by strong players. One anomaly was a game between Alexander Tolush and Mikhail Botvinnik, the sixth World Champion, played in Moscow in 1944. Tolush managed to outplay the future World Champion in an attractive game. Another World Champion-to-be, Boris Spassky, faced the Center Game in 1953, when he was still a teenager, against Octavio Troianescu in a tournament in Bucharest (see the notes to Game 16). He won.

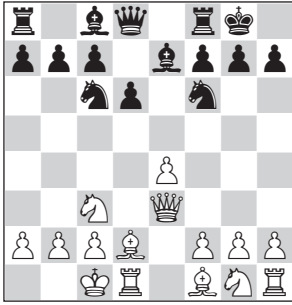
In 1970, **David Bronstein** published *200 Open Games* (the English translation appeared four years later) in which he discussed 1.e4 e5 openings. If Bronstein wrote about something, it was usually worth paying attention. His view on the Center Game was quite uplifting, and, as always, highly insightful. Bronstein was ahead of his time in understanding many hidden concepts in the Center Game, such as the unusual set-up with b2-b3, which we’ll see later in the book. He wrote: ‘The QP Attack, 2.d4, is a most dangerous opening. (...) The 2.d4 attack is in complete accordance with all the requirements of the positional school of chess: lines are opened up for a great number of White’s pieces and his whole position becomes straight away more refractory. It is also worth remembering that the queen’s pawn advance forms an organic part of almost any opening variation beginning with 1.e4 e5, since without d4 it is very difficult to create any initiative. Thus, it matters little on what move White plays his d-pawn to d4; the move makes its way imperceptibly into every opening of an open type, and we are fully justified in considering the QP Attack a most dangerous fighting weapon, dangerous that is, of course, for Black, not White.’

An unexpected boost for the Center Game came in 1972. The young Argentinian talent **Juan Carlos Hase** (born in 1948) had already experimented with the Center Game in the late 1960s and scored a notable result with it at the 1972 Chess Olympiad in Skopje.

Game 14
Juan Carlos Hase
Anatoly Karpov

Skopje Olympiad 1972

1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♔xd4 ♘c6
4.♔e3 d6 5.♘c3 ♗f6 6.♙d2 ♙e7
7.0-0-0 0-0

**8. ♖g3!**

The usual move, but a novelty at the time.

A) 8. ♖e2 ♜e8 9. ♖g3 was played in Chigorin-Przepiorka, Nuremberg 1906, and now 9... ♗d4! would have been fine for Black;

B) Not better was 8. f3 d5 9. ♖e1 d4 10. ♗f2 ♖c5! as played in the simul game Steinitz-Tresling, Haarlem 1896;

C) 8. f4 was once played by Gunsberg and by Miguel Najdorf (in a simul game), but also recently (via a different move-order) by Magnus Carlsen. The problem is that it again allows 8...d5! with the typical idea 9. exd5 ♗b4! =.

8...a6?!

A common but, here, unfortunately timed plan.

Better was 8... ♜e8 9. f4 and now Black can still go for 9...d5! even with loss of a tempo, though White is slightly better after 10. e5.

9. f4 b5?!

Here, too, it was better to accept the loss of a tempo in favour of opening up the position: 9...d5 10. exd5 ♗b4±.

10. e5! ♗d7

Or 10... ♗g4 11. ♗f3 ♗h6 12. ♖d3 when White is also doing great, for instance: 12... ♖f5 13. ♖xf5 ♗xf5 14. ♗f2 b4 15. ♗e4.

10... ♗e8 11. ♗f3 also favours White.

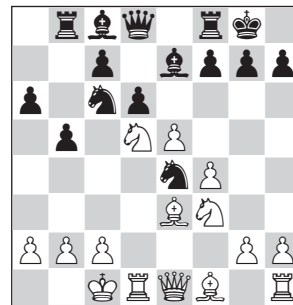
11. ♗f3 ♜b8

Best was 11...f5 when White should play 12. h4±.

Matanovic mentions 11... ♗b6 in Chess Informant 14, but White has an overwhelming advantage after 12. ♖d3.

12. ♗d5

12. ♖e3 and White is already at +1.5 according to the engine.

12... ♗c5 13. ♖e3 ♗e4 14. ♗e1**14...f5!**

Karpov grabs his chance. Though White is still better after this, the knight on e4 now has a stronghold. Hase now starts to play less confidently.

15. h3?!

15. g4 was possible right away.

15... ♖e6 16. ♜g1?!

Again, a bit slow.

16... ♗h8

16... ♖xd5 17. ♜xd5 ♗e8, intending ... ♗f7, would have been rather unclear.

17. g4 dxe5 18. ♗xe7

18. ♖xe5± was better.

18... ♖xe7 19. ♖xe5 ♖xe5 20. fxe5
♖bd8 21. ♖d3



21... ♖d5?

21... f4! would have equalized:

22. ♖xe4 ♖xd1+ 23. ♖xd1 fxe3

24. ♖xe3 and now the ‘Fischer-like’

grab 24... ♖xa2 would have been possible since, unlike in the first World Championship match game Spassky-Fischer from the same year, the bishop can’t be trapped.

In this position, a draw was agreed, but in fact White was winning. The game could have continued 22.gxf5 ♖xe5 and now even stronger than Matanovic’s 23. ♖h4 is 23. ♖d2! with the double threat of ♖g4 and ♖c3, hitting g7.

In spite of this, the Center Game was still rare in the 1970s and 80s, and this was reflected in opening books from those years. A minor exception was a booklet from Leonard Pickett called *Centre Game and Danish Gambit* (1976). But in an influential German chess opening series from the 1980s, Alexander Suetin wrote, familiarly: ‘The direct push in the center 2.d4 leads to rapid engagement of tactical battles. White, however, brings the queen into play much too early (in case of 3. ♖xd4)...’

But after an ice age of almost 80 years, a change was about to come at last.

Revolution in the 90s: the Shabalov Variation

In the early 1990s, commercial chess programs and databases established their position in the market. This meant that it was now much easier to find relevant games and analyse complex openings at home. The realization dawned that opening theory was not at all exhausted yet, and that there were many fascinating new ideas waiting in the depths of the silicon processing units.

From 1991 onwards, the Center Game was not only increasingly analysed and played by amateurs who wanted to surprise their fellow members at the local chess club or their opponents in a tournament, but also by strong players. The Peruvian grandmaster Julio Granda Zuniga tried the opening a few times in the 1990s (see Chapter 3 for an important game he played), and his young compatriot **Manuel Muñoz Pantoja** (born 1975) followed suit. Muñoz, now a grandmaster living in Spain, and well-known on the Catalan chess circuit, became one of the biggest and most loyal supporters of the Center Game, essaying a huge range of different ideas for White

over three decades. There were even stronger players looking into it more seriously now. For example, the British number one, Michael Adams, played the Center Game against Viswanathan Anand in their 1994 match in Linares.

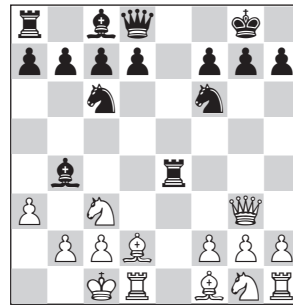
However, the player who stood at the forefront of the Center Game revolution in the 1990s was, without a doubt, Latvian-American grandmaster **Alexander Shabalov**. We already met him in the Introduction. Born in Riga (then part of the Soviet Union) in 1967, Shabalov emigrated to the United States in 1993 and became US Champion in the same year. Because of his attractive and enterprising style, Shabalov was a very popular player at the time (and still is).

The following game, played during the 1994 US Championship in Key West, Florida, didn't go unnoticed. In it, Shabalov introduced a novel idea which, it's fair to say, revitalized the entire opening.

Game 15

Alexander Shabalov 2600
Alexander Ivanov 2575

Key West US Championship 1994



**1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♖xd4 ♘c6
4.♗e3 ♚f6 5.♘c3 ♙b4 6.♙d2 0-0
7.0-0 ♜e8 8.♗g3**

Siegbert Tarrasch's old move, but Shabalov has something new in mind.

8...♜xe4

This was by now known to be the 'refutation' of 8.♗g3.

9.a3!?

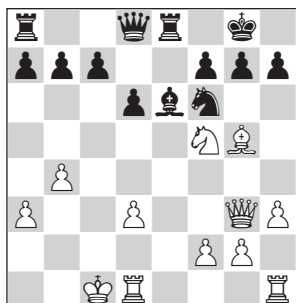
Shabalov's idea, forcing Black's hand. Where does the bishop go? 9.♙d3 ♜g4! 10.♗h3 ♘e5, as in Zinn-Sax, Baja 1971, is not what White wants.

9.♙g5! is actually more interesting than was thought at the time.

9...♙d6

One of many options at this point. 9...♜g4!? is a tricky move which Shabalov faced in the same year against chess computer Socrates. The calm retreat 9...♙a5 was discovered only the next year, and soon opened a can of worms as it proved to be a very annoying move for White. I have a personal connection to this line that I would like to mention here. When these variations were being discovered, I played a lot of online games on the Internet Chess Club. I also got to play it against Alexei Shirov, with whom I was chatting sometimes. One of these games went as follows: 10.h3! (preventing ...♜g4 and

preparing the slow ♖g3-h2 and g2-g4) 10...d6 11.♔d3 ♜e8 12.b4?! ♟b6 13.♟g5 ♞e5 14.♞d5 ♞xd3+ 15.cxd3? ♟d4 16.♞f3 ♟e6 17.♞xd4 ♟xd5 18.♞f5?! ♟e6? (18...♞h5!♣).



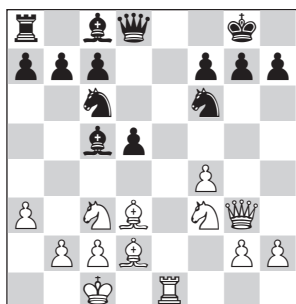
analysis diagram

Now I could have lashed out with 19.♞xg7! (I played 19.♞h6+ and was lost after 19...♟f8!, Moll-Shirov, ICC blitz 1998) 19...♟xg7 20.♞h4! (20.♟h4+ ♔h8 21.♞f3 ♟g7 22.♞g3+ is a draw, which wouldn't have been bad either against one of the best players in the world) 20...h5 21.g4! with a very strong attack for White.

10.f4 ♜e8 11.♞f3 ♟c5

The alternative is the more solid 11...♟f8!. Black is actually better here, but this wasn't the consensus when Shabalov introduced his idea.

12.♟d3 d5 13.♞de1 ♜xe1+ 14.♞xe1



White has sacrificed a pawn but has very nice development and active play.

14...♞e7 15.♞h4?!

The direct 15.♞e5 was better, leading to the game position after move 17.

15...♞g6 16.♞f3 ♞e7?!

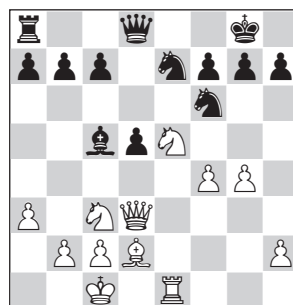
There was nothing wrong with solidifying the position by means of 16...c6 and Black is better.

17.♞e5! ♟f5?!

A natural exchange, but now White grabs the initiative in style.

17...♟d4! is a strong computer move, leading to a slight plus for Black.

18.♟xf5 ♞xf5 19.♞d3 ♞e7 20.g4!



Shabalov pushes the g-pawn and Black already needs to tread very carefully.

20...c6 21.g5 ♞d7?!

Instead, 21...♞e8, keeping an eye on g7, was more tenacious, though White can still play for an attack in that case with 22.h4 followed by h4-h5.

22.♞g4! ♞b6?

It's remarkable how quickly Black's position collapses in situations like these. Only very precise play could have saved him.

22...♖h8 23.f5 ♘g8 looks extremely passive but keeps things together for the moment.

23.f5! ♖d7

23...♗c4 24.f6 ♗g6 25.fxg7 ♗xd2

26.♖xd2 is also close to winning for White.

24.♖f1 ♗d6 25.♖h3!



Shabalov patiently puts his pieces on the right squares. The f5-pawn is taboo on account of ♗h6+.

25...♖h8 26.f6

Finally pushing through on the dark squares, a recurring theme. Shabalov finishes in style.

26...gxf6 27.gxf6 ♗g6 28.♗h6 ♗f8



Desperately defending against the pressure on g7, but...

29.♗g7+ ♗xg7 30.fxg7+ ♖xg7

31.♖h6+ ♖h8 32.♗f6 1-0

A model attacking game by White, highlighting once more the danger that awaits Black on the dark squares.

With the inauguration of the ‘Shabalov Variation’, a short period of enthusiasm for the Center Game began. Suddenly, the old lines with 8.♖g3, first played by Tarrasch, seemed like a promising way again to get a dangerous attacking position with White against 1.e4 e5. The young megatalent from Russia, Alexander Morozevich, played it at the Lloyds Bank Masters in 1994, crushing the experienced 1...e5 player Mark Hebden with it.

The following year, Shabalov produced another Center Game classic.

Game 16

Alexander Shabalov	2570
Igor Shliperman	2320
Newark 1995	

**1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♖xd4 ♗c6
4.♖e3 ♗f6 5.♗c3 ♗e7 6.♗c4**

An important move to fight against ...d7-d5.

6...0-0 7.♗d2

7.♗ge2 occurred in a game from 1953 involving the young Boris Spassky: 7...♗g4!? 8.♖d2? (8.♖f4 is unclear) 8...♗c5 9.♗d1 ♖e7 10.f3?! ♖h4+ 11.g3? ♗ge5 12.gxh4 ♗xf3+ 13.♖f1 d5! with a clear advantage in Troianescu-Spassky, Bucharest 1953.

7...d6

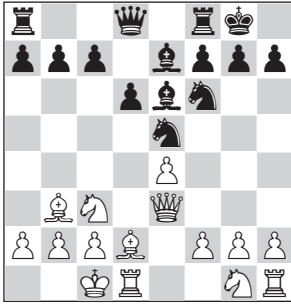
A small victory for White: Black has played ...d6 with his bishop still on e7.

As often in this opening for Black, a more active approach was called for: 7...g4!, which will be examined in Chapter 4.

8.0-0-0 e5

8...e6 9.xe6 fxe6 was already seen in the old game Soloviev-Levenfish, Gorky 1950, and now 10.f4! would have been somewhat better for White.

9. b3 e6



10.f4

A typical push, not fearing 10...c4.

10...c4 11. xc4

White prefers to keep his dark-squared bishop.

11...xc4 12. f3 c6

Shabalov had faced 12...e8 the year before against a computer engine. He should have continued 13.!!he1! with an edge (13.h3?! b5!?, Shabalov-Comp WChess, 1994).

13. d4 e8 14. g3?!

e3-g3 is a key manoeuvre in this opening, but here the queen would have been better placed on f3, not hindering the g-pawn's advance.

For example, 14. f3 f8 15.!!he1 followed by g2-g4.

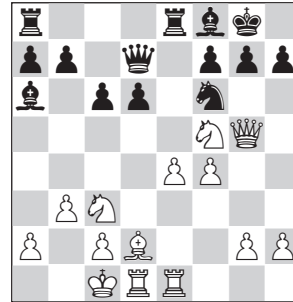
14.b3 would also have been strong.

14...f8 15.!!he1 c7?

Too meek.

15...b5! would have led to a sharp but balanced position. In general, Black should strive for counterplay as fast as possible in the Center Game.

16.b3 a6 17. f5 d7 18. g5!



The white queen never tires of running along the dark squares.

18...e6 19. e3 h8

Stepping out of any pins on the g-file, but there is still the h-file to think about.

20. h3! e8 21. e3 g8

If 21...xe4 22. hxe4 xe4, 23. xd6! wins the house.

22. d4 g6 23. h4

Completing the journey. White is winning.

23...h6 24.g4

Finally, the g-pawn advances with deadly impact.

24...e7

24...d5 25.g5 h7 26. h6 gxh6 27.f5 d6 28.e5! is a beautiful winning line.

25.g5 e6



26. **Nc7!**

The g7-point marks the spot.

26... Nc7 27.f5 Qd7 28.gxh6

A nice queen sac to finish it off.

28... Qxh4 29.hxg7+ Kh7 30.Nxh4+ Qh6 31.Ng1

Black is powerless against White's pieces on the dark squares.

31... Ng8 32.Qf6 d5 33.Nxh6+

Black resigned as mate with g1-g4-h4 can't be prevented.

Not everyone was convinced yet. In a Survey for *New in Chess Yearbook 34*, Dutch grandmaster Paul van der Sterren wrote: 'Honestly speaking, I do not believe that an opening like the Center Game can be good. (...) But as is so often the case, the weakness of a variation may also be its strength. The resulting positions may be good for Black but they are not easy and a well-prepared (or a very strong) opponent may be able to set Black many practical problems. In the game Morozevich-Hebden, Black was probably caught by surprise, avoided the sharpest line and found himself outplayed in a complicated middlegame.'

Avoiding the sharpest lines was precisely what some strong players did with success. In the 1995 Dos Hermanas tournament, Shabalov's former compatriot **Alexei Shirov** tried the Center Game against the best 1...e5 player in the world: Anatoly Karpov.

As we saw above, Karpov had barely saved the draw against Hase in 1972, but he showed himself older and wiser this time.

Game 17

Alexei Shirov 2710

Anatoly Karpov 2780

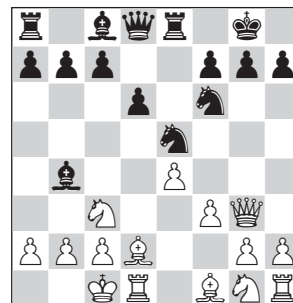
Dos Hermanas 1995

**1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.Qxd4 Qc6
4.Qe3 Qf6 5.Qc3 Qb4 6.Qd2 0-0
7.0-0 Re8 8.Qg3 d6**

Karpov doesn't aim for complications and instead chooses a quiet but healthy set-up.

9.f3 Qe5

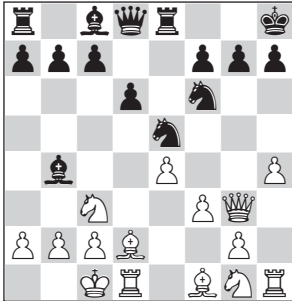
It was still possible to play 9...d5!?, even with the loss of tempo.



10.h4 Qh8

A novelty at the time, and a strong one.

Stepping away from the g-file is a common idea for Black. 10...c6?! 11.h5± was played in Morozevich-Hebden, London 1994. Karpov also analysed 10...h6, when 11.♙xh6? (11.h5!; 11.♖h2!?, intending g2-g4) isn't advisable due to 11...♘h5 and Black is slightly better.



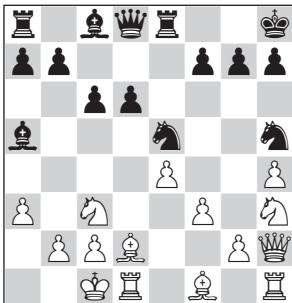
11. ♘h3

11.a3 ♙a5 12.♖e1 is an instructive way of playing the position. White intends, of course, g2-g4.

11... ♘h5?!

11...c6 with the idea ...b7-b5 was better.

12. ♖h2 c6 13.a3 ♙a5

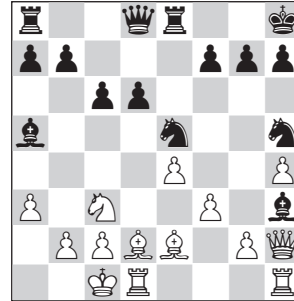


14. ♙e2

This move, though it may look perfectly natural to the untrained eye, is often too slow in the Center

Game. In his analysis, Karpov gives it a question mark, but White is still slightly better even after this. The best move for White was 14.♘f2! (or 14.♘g1, as indicated by Karpov). White intends to play g2-g4 and has a good game.

14... ♙xh3!



A very pleasing move, disrupting the coordination of the white pieces.

15. ♖xh3?

Only this was the real mistake.

Now Black does take over.

After 15.gxh3! ♖xh4 16.♖hg1 h6, Karpov gives Black a clear advantage. In fact, the engines say White is clearly better after 17.f4! with a strong initiative. If 17...♙xc3 18.bxc3 ♘d7 19.♖df1 ♖xe4 White has 20.♖g2!.

15... ♙xc3!

Also giving up the second bishop.

16. bxc3

16.♙xc3? loses a piece to 16...♘f4: the bishop is unfortunately placed on e2.

16... ♘f6?!

16...f5! was stronger, although Black is objectively only slightly better.

17.c4?!

Karpov only analyses the immediate 17.g4, but after 17.h5!, followed by g2-g4, White is still in the game.

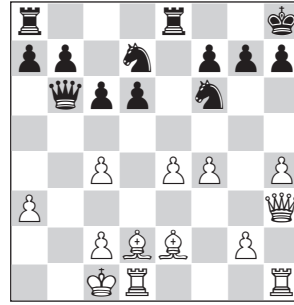
17... ♖b6

17...b5! gives Black a dangerous attack.

18.f4?

Shirov should have gone for the other pawn push: 18.g4!. Now, Black could play 18...♗d4 and Karpov thought this was good for Black, but the engines still see sufficient compensation for White after 19.♖b1 ♗xc4 20.♙xc4 ♖xc4 21.g5, when Black should probably give perpetual check.

18... ♗ed7



Black's knights are superior to White's bishops. More importantly, White's king isn't safe.

19. ♙d3

Better was 19.♙c3 ♗xe4 20.♙d4.

19... ♗c5 20.e5 ♗a4 21. ♙b4 dxe5 22.c5 ♖c7 23. ♙c4?! a5 0-1

From a public relations perspective, this game felt like a disaster for the Center Game. Shirov never played it again and was still suspicious of it when I spoke to him about it a few years later. Indeed, from Karpov's analysis in *Chess Informant 63*, one got the impression that life was good for Black even in the non-critical lines. And more bad news was underway. Theoreticians gradually started to understand how Black should respond to Shabalov's 9.a3. By the end of the decade, the Tarrasch Gambit had been abandoned once again by almost everyone except a few true diehards.

So where does this leave us, as we approach the year 2000 in our historical odyssey? Was White's early queen excursion to be considered a beginner's mistake after all? Some players refused to believe it. John Emms still judged the opening mildly in his book *Play the Open Games as Black* (1999), writing that '(...) it would be dangerous to dismiss the Centre Game as merely trash.'

In the next chapter, we will see how theory developed in the decades that followed the short period of hope for the Center Game. We will see how Judit Polgar paved the way for a new generation of grandmasters who weren't shy of experimenting in the opening, and how neural network chess engines changed everything.

CHAPTER 6

New alternatives for White and minor black moves

All of my words are secondhand and useless in the face of this.

The Sisters of Mercy, *Some Kind of Stranger*

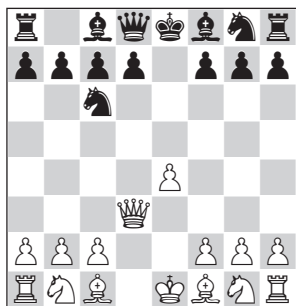
We will now – finally – consider the alternatives for White on the fourth move. In the last five years, players have come to realize that the Paulsen Variation has drawbacks for White that are hard to overcome. To recap:

- The old Tarrasch Gambit is dubious at best. Both 8...♖xe4 and 8...♗xe4 lead to pleasant positions for Black with correct play.
- Polgar's 8.♗f4 is playable, but requires deep knowledge from White as well, resulting in double-edged positions that may well be better for Black in the end.
- The old 8.♙c4, although offering interesting options if Black is in for a fight, allows a move repetition with 8...♗a5 and 9...♗c6.
- White can get an equal game after 5...♙e7 but, with perfect play from Black, not more.

Alternatives to the Paulsen Variation open up an exciting and largely brand-new area of investigation with lots of concrete lines, novel ideas and unfinished discussions. I believe most future research will be focused in this direction. Even after writing this book, I feel I have only scratched the surface. Many of these lines have not been popular in the past, and therefore there is very little or no established theory on them. Let's dive into them without fear!

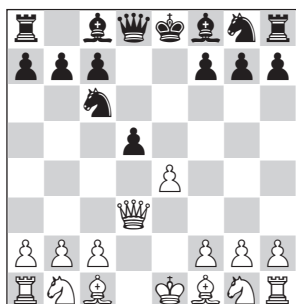
The De Jouy Variation and the Vienna Hybrid

In the last three games of the book, we look at what in my view is the most interesting (and surprising) new variation in the Center Game: De Jouy's old idea of playing the queen to d3 instead of e3. In one sense, this is 'just a move': on d3, the queen isn't placed badly, but also not fantastically. It can still go to g3, but it blocks the bishop on f1 and also stands in the way of the rook on d1 in the case of 0-0-0.



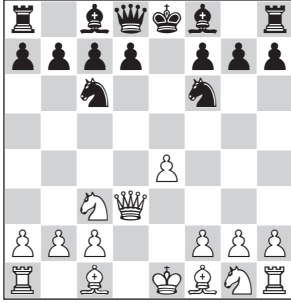
position after 4. ♕d3

What does this remind you of? Another reversed Scandinavian! But this time, it's the one with the queen on d6 (1.e4 d5 2.exd5 ♕xd5 3.♘c3 ♕d6 – often referred to as the Tiviakov System, after the Russian-Dutch grandmaster Sergei Tiviakov). With an extra tempo compared to this, White would like to go for the same set-up by playing the traditional 2.d4 followed by 3.♕xd4 and 4.♕d3, but there is a slight problem as Black can immediately equalize with 4...d5!



After White takes on d5, Black quickly plays ...♘b4 and wins back the pawn, exchanging queens along the way and achieving an easy endgame. The modern way to reach the desired positions is to go 2.♘c3 first and only after 2...♘f6 3.d4! exd4 4.♕xd4 ♘c6 to drop the queen back: 5.♕d3.

(see diagram next page)



With a knight on c3, White can castle quickly in case of ...d5. Still, things are not clear at all after, for instance, 5...♙c5, attacking f2 in case White wants to castle. Perhaps more fundamentally, the move 2.♘c3 introduces another opening, namely the Vienna Game, which requires White to prepare for moves like 2...♘c6 (stopping d2-d4) as well.

There are so many ideas left to discover in the ‘Vienna Hybrid’ that I can only encourage readers to follow the top players in the coming months and years and also undertake their own original research.

Game 43

Artem Bardyk

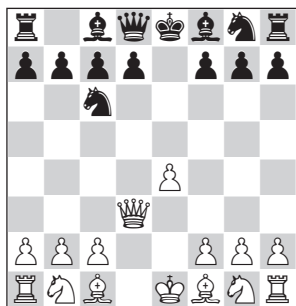
2238

Melih Yurtseven

2333

Titled Tuesday blitz 2024

1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.♙xd4 ♘c6
4.♙d3



De Jouy's move. On d3, the queen still eyes the d5-square, whilst not stepping into a potential pin on the e-file, and flirts with ideas such as ♙g3. Moreover, the e3-square is now available to the bishop. There is only one downside:

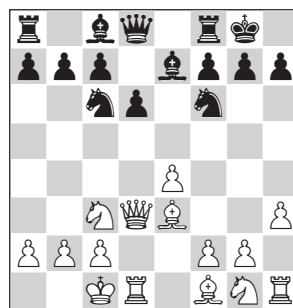
4...d5!

This move, not often played in practice, spoils the fun for White here, as it gives Black an simple and equal game. Still, there are some things to know for both players.

A) 4...♘f6 5.♘c3 transposes to the next game (5.♘f3?! ♙c5! is already slightly more pleasant for Black);

B) Let's look at some positions in which Black plays an early ...d6: 4...d6. As usual, this is an unambitious but common and solid set-up. Simplest is 5.♘c3 ♘f6 (here, too, fianchetto set-ups are possible: 5...g6 6.♙e3 ♙g7 7.0-0-0 followed by f2-f3 with an easy game for

White. Because the dark-squared bishop is on e3 here, the white queen can go to d2 and from there re-route to f2 and h4 if needed, or threaten to exchange bishops on h6). Now, I like 6.♙f4 (6.♙e3!? is virtually new but possibly even better. Some sample lines: 6...♙e7 (6...♙e6 7.0-0-0 ♘g4 8.f4 and White has a lot of space and a pleasant position) 7.0-0-0 0-0 8.h3±

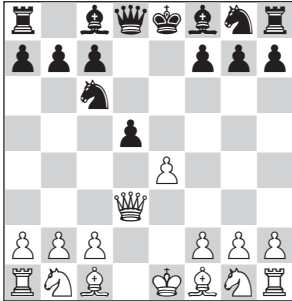


analysis diagram

followed by ♙d2 and g2-g4. This type of position is what makes the 4.♙d3 line rather attractive for White) 6...♙e7 7.0-0-0 0-0 8.h4 (8.h3!?) 8...♙e6 and now White should go for the space-grabbing 9.h5! with a pleasant advantage (unnecessarily slow was 9.a3? ♘e5, Durarbayli-Shankland, St Louis blitz 2023). Familiar ideas like ♙g3 or f2-f3 and g2-g4 are in the air;

C) 4...♙c5 is also a good move here, of course. Now the simplest is 5.♘c3 (5.♙g3!? looks nice but 5...♘f6! 6.♘c3 ♘b4 is irritating. See the note to move 6 in Game 45. There are many transpositions here) 5...♘f6 6.♙f4, which transposes to a line we will examine in the next game;

D) 4...g6 is actually dubious here on account of the surprisingly strong 5.♘f3! (5.♘c3 is also possible, of course) 5...♙g7 6.♙g5! when White already has a steady advantage, e.g. 6...♗ge7 7.♘c3 h6 8.♙e3 d6 9.0-0-0 when 9...0-0?! 10.♖d2! ♕h7 11.♙d3 is simply bad for Black.



5. ♖xd5

A) I don't like 5.exd5 ♗b4 6.♖b3 ♖xd5 when the endgame can only be better for Black;

B) The same is true of 5.♗f3 dxe4 6.♖xe4+ ♖e7;

C) 5.♙f4? was played in the game Savitha Shri-Ju Wenjun, Kolkata blitz 2023, perhaps confusing the move with a possibility for White after ♗c3 and ...♗f6 have been included (see the next game). But it failed to 5...♖f6! and Black already had a huge advantage;

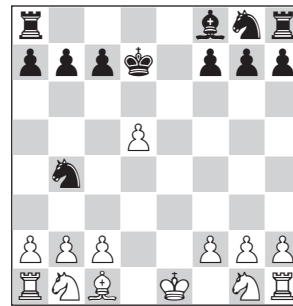
D) After 5.♗c3 Black can profit with 5...♗b4! 6.♖e2 d4 7.a3 dxc3 8.axb4 cxb2 (8...♖d4) 9.♙xb2 ♙xb4+, which is not what White is after.

5... ♖xd5

5...♙e6? 6.♖xd8+ ♗xd8 7.♙b5± doesn't give enough compensation.

6.exd5 ♗b4 7.♙b5+

The only move to keep the game going; if 7.♗a3 ♗xd5 8.♙c4 ♗gf6. **7...♙d7 8.♙xd7+ ♕xd7**



This can be considered a tabiya if White insists on playing the 4.♖d3 variation without including ♗c3 and ...♗f6. The endgame is actually more interesting than it looks, and can become quite sharp – but only Black can hope for an advantage, as he becomes active fast. In the game, we will see how quickly White can stumble here.

9. ♕d1

Better than 9.♗a3 ♗e8+ 10.♙e3 (10.♗e2? ♗xd5) 10...♗f6 (10...♙c5!?). 11.♗f3 (11.0-0-0 ♗xa2+) 11...♗bxd5 12.0-0-0 ♕c8 and Black has the better game.

9... ♗xd5

Perhaps 9...♗f6!? is even more subtle (9...♙c5 10.♗f3 is unclear). In the case of 10.c4 Black has 10...♗d3 11.♗h3 ♗e8 (11...♗e4 is a draw: 12.♕c2 ♗b4+ 13.♕d1 ♗d3) 12.♗c3 ♙b4 and now the typical computer line 13.♕c2 ♗e1+! 14.♕b3 ♙xc3 15.♕xc3 ♗e4+ 16.♕b3 a5 when 17.♙g5! is the only move to keep the balance.

10. ♗f3 ♙d6

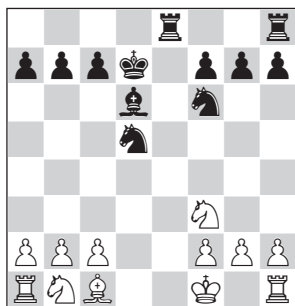
I think 10...♖d8 (10...♗e8 11.♗e1=) is Black's best practical try. The position is still equal but White needs to be accurate: 11.c4 (11.♙d2!? ♘c8 12.♗e1 ♙c5 13.♗e5 ♙d4 forces White to find 14.♗d3! ♙f6=) 11...♗b4 12.a3 ♘c8+ 13.♙d2 ♗c6 14.♘c2.

11.♘e2?!

The wrong direction.

Better was 11.c4 ♗df6 12.♗c3 ♗e8 13.♘c2 and the position is balanced.

11...♗e8+ 12.♘f1 ♗gf6



Now, Black is better, of course, due to his lead in development and the poor position of the rook on h1.

13.c3 ♗e7?!

13...a5! was a good move, grabbing space on the queenside just as if it was a middlegame position in the Paulsen Variation.

14.♙g5 ♗he8 15.♗bd2 ♙f4 16.♙xf6 ♗xf6 17.g3 ♙xd2?!

Black should have kept pieces on the board: 17...♙h6!♣.

18.♗xd2?

A careless recapture. Stronger was 18.♗d1! and White's troubles would have been nearly over.

18...♗e2

Of course. Now Black is winning.

19.♗d1 ♘c8 20.♘g2?

The inhuman 20.♗g1! ♗g4 21.♗g2 would have been more tenacious.

20...♗g4

The rest of the game needs no commentary.

21.♗hf1 ♗e3+ 22.♘f3 ♗xd1

23.♗xd1 ♗e1 ... 0-1 (54)

Game 44

Georgios Souleidis 2419

Vahe Baghdasaryan 2257

Titled Tuesday blitz 2023

In this game, we will see how the German chess streamer Georgios Souleidis, also known as 'The Big Greek', conducts one of the critical and currently most popular lines in the Vienna/Center Game. He recently published an online course on this line and told me in an email: 'For me [this] is just a blitz weapon but I think it can be played also in classical games as a surprise weapon and for players up to around 2200 regularly.'

1.e4 e5 2.♗c3!?

An attempt to get a favourable version of the De Jouy Variation, which we saw in Chapter 2. Of course, White actually plays a Vienna Game now, so he needs to be prepared for sidelines on move 2.

2...♗f6

This move is by far the most popular against the Vienna. White does need to have something against 2...♗c6, against which, for the love of chess history, I will recommend the Steinitz Gambit:

3.f4 exf4 4.d4!? (4.♘f3 is the normal move) 4...♙h4+ 5.♚e2, which is a lot of fun, not as bad as it was once thought, and has been played by strong players such as Mamedyarov, Howell and Durarbayli.

3.d4

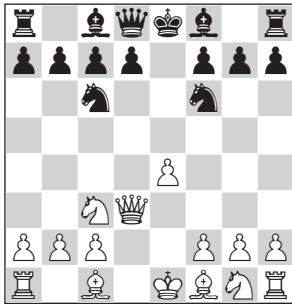
Of course!

3...exd4

3...♙b4? is just bad: 4.dxe5 ♘xe4 5.♙g4! and White wins.

3...♘c6 4.dxe5 ♘xe5 allows White to transpose back with 5.♙d4!? (5.f4!) 5...♘c6 6.♙d3.

4.♙xd4 ♘c6 5.♙d3

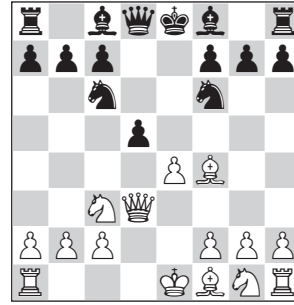


The starting position of the Vienna/De Jouy Hybrid System.

5...♙b4

This is the most popular move. Black naively assumes there is no difference with the Paulsen Variation.

A) Here, too, 5...d5 is possible. Play may become drawish if both players know what they're doing: 6.♙f4!? (6.exd5 is nothing much: 6...♘b4! 7.♙e2+ ♙e7 was equal in Balog-Urkedal, Durrës 2023; 6.♙d2?? shows one of the downsides of having the queen on d3: 6...♘b4 and Black wins):



analysis diagram

A1) 6...dxe4 7.♙xd8+ ♘xd8 8.♙xc7 ♙b4 (8...♘e6!? 9.♙e5 with an interesting, roughly equal endgame) 9.0-0-0 and White had a tiny edge in Dubov-So, Lindores Abbey rapid 2020;

A2) Black's best move is 6...d4, which leads to extremely messy and rich positions after 7.♘b5 ♙b4+ 8.c3 dxc3 (8...♙a5!? 9.0-0-0 ♙e7! 10.♘xd4 ♘xd4 11.♙xd4 ♙b6! with mutual chances) 9.♙xd8+ (9.bxc3!?) 9...♙xd8 (Bellahcene-Erdős, Abu Dhabi blitz 2021), when White has several attractive options, all leading to unclear play. Least messy is 10.bxc3 ♙a5 11.0-0-0+ ♙d7 12.f3 Gavrilescu-Erdős, Douglas 2021;

A3) Also possible is 6...♙b4 7.0-0-0 dxe4 (7...d4? 8.♘b5 occurred in a recent game Pranav-Puranik, Dubai 2024. White was already much better here. After 8...0-0, the most accurate move is 9.♘f3!) 8.♘xe4 and now Black must find 8...♙e7! (8...♙xd3? 9.♘xf6+ gxf6 10.♙xd3 with a clear advantage, Souleidis-J.Heinemann, Titled Tuesday blitz 2023) 9.♘xf6+ ♙xf6 10.♙e4+ ♙e7 11.♙b5 with an edge.

B) 5...d6 was examined in the previous game under 4...d6;

C) 5...♙e7 is less strong here than in the Paulsen Variation, e.g. 6.♙f4! 0-0 7.0-0 d6, which transposes to variations examined in the previous game. White can either play 8.h3± or 8.h4!?, which was tried in 2023 by Durarbayli;

D) 5...♙c5! will be the subject of the next and final game.

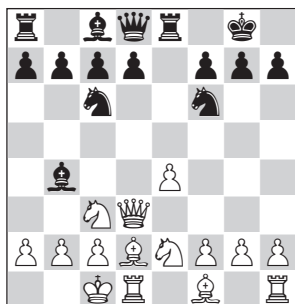
6.♙d2

6.♙f4!? is entirely new. After 6...0-0 White should first play 7.♘ge2 (7.0-0-0? ♙xc3), when 7...d5 8.0-0-0 ♘xe4 9.♘xe4 dxe4 10.♙xe4 is interesting.

6...0-0 7.0-0-0 ♖e8

7...d6 8.♙g3! transposes to lines in the Paulsen Variation where Black plays ...d6, and which are fine for White (see the game Morovic Fernandez-Garcia Padron, Las Palmas 1991, in Chapter 3). Here, unlike in the Paulsen Variation where the queen is on e3, White can play:

8.♘ge2!

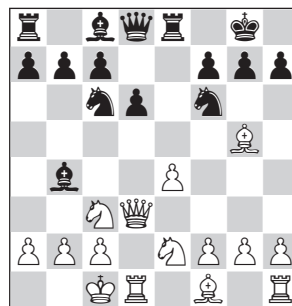


This is the difference: Black can't play ...d7-d5.

8...♘e5

The best move, chasing the queen away.

8...d6 9.♙g5! (9.h3 a5 – 9...♖b8! is the engine's choice – 10.a3 ♙c5 11.f4 b5 12.♙xb5 led to a wild game in Indjic-Rasulov, Titled Tuesday blitz 2024) is unpleasant for Black.



analysis diagram

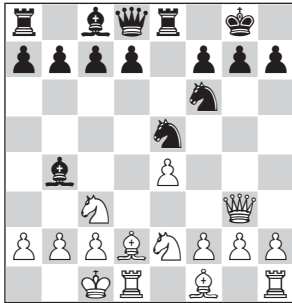
White's plan is simply to go f2-f4 and h2-h4 and start putting pressure on the kingside. We will look at some sample games in this very topical position:

A) 9...♙e6 10.f4 h6 11.♙h4 (11.h4!? was played by Souleidis in an online game, and is also interesting) 11...♙g4 12.♘d5±;

B) 9...h6 10.♙xf6 ♙xf6 11.♘d5 ♙d8 12.♘xb4 ♘xb4 13.♙d2 a5 (less accurate is 13...♘c6 14.f3!± D.Horvath-Tarasova, Titled Tuesday blitz 2023) 14.a3 (14.♘c3 ♙e6 15.a3 ♘a2+! 16.♘xa2 ♙xa2 Souleidis-Travadon, Titled Tuesday blitz 2023, when trapping the bishop with 17.b3? (17.♙d3=) is not good due to 17...a4 18.♙b2 axb3 19.cxb3 ♙xb3! 20.♙xb3 ♖xe4 with a dangerous attack) 14...♘a6 15.f3!. The most accurate move. White had a slight plus here in De Winter-Cnejev,

Mamaia 2022; if 15.♖c3, 15...♗c5 is equal, Mamedyarov-Koneru, Chessable Masters rapid 2021.

9.♖g3



9...♗h5!

The only good move here.

A) 9...d6? 10.♗g5! is already pretty terrible for Black, e.g. 10...c6 11.f4 ♗g6 12.a3! followed by e4-e5, and White is close to winning;

B) 9...c6 10.♗g5 is not much better;

C) After 9...♗c4, White again plays 10.♗g5.

10.♖g5

Forcing a trade of queens is usually not what White has in mind in the Center Game, but there was no choice. In any case, the resulting position is slightly easier for White to play in my view.

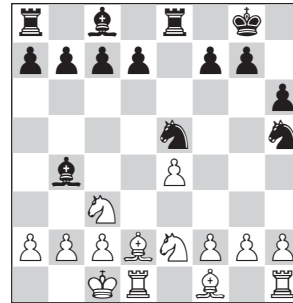
A) 10.♖e3 was the alternative. Black's best is 10...♗f6, when White can repeat or insert the moves 11.a3 ♗f8 before going 12.♖g3 ♗h5 13.♖g5, analogous to the game. There's no great difference, I think;

B) 10.♖h3! looks risky but is playable, e.g. 10...g6 11.f4 (11.g4!?) 11...d5 12.f5.

10...♖xg5

10...♗f6? 11.f4! is horrible for Black.

11.♗xg5 h6 12.♗d2



12...c6

If Black plays 12...♗c4?!, then White has the nice retreat 13.♗e1 as in the game.

13.h3!±

Souleidis rightly remarks in his course on this line that White's position is slightly easier to play.

13...♗c4?!

Better was 13...♗f6 when Black is close to equality.

14.♗e1 ♗c5?!

14...♗f6 15.♗f4±.

15.♗d4

The standard of play in this blitz game has so far been very high, but now Black makes a big mistake:

15...♗d6?

15...♗e5 16.♗b3.

16.f3?!

16.♗b3! ♗b4 17.f3! with a2-a3 to follow, and the knight on d6 is close to being trapped in the middle of the board!

16...♗f4?

16...b5! provides an escape square for the knight on b7.

17.g3

17.♗g3! was winning.