

The London Files

Defanging the London System

**Vassilios Kotronias
and
Mikhail Ivanov**

Foreword by Ian Harris



**2023
Russell Enterprises, LLC
Portsmouth, NH USA**

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Defanging the London System
by Vassilios Kotronias and Mikhail Ivanov

ISBN: 978-1-949859-69-0 (print)
ISBN: 978-1-949859-70-6 (eBook)

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Published by:
Russell Enterprises, LLC
P.O. Box 332
Portsmouth, NH 03802 USA

<http://www.russell-enterprises.com>
info@russell-enterprises.com

Cover by Molly Scanlon

Printed in the United States of America



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Signs & Symbols

1-0 White won	± White is clearly better
0-1 Black won	∓ Black is clearly better
½-½ draw	+− White is winning
! good move	−+ Black is winning
!! excellent move	+ check
? poor move	→ with an attack
?? blunder	↑ with the initiative
! ? interesting move	∞ with compensation
? ! dubious move	∞ unclear
= equal game	△ followed by
± White is slightly better	⇔ with counterplay
∓ Black is slightly better	□ only move

Introduction

The London System has many faithful supporters all over the chessplaying world, especially among its amateur ranks. That is not too difficult to understand: White switches to a kind of auto-pilot, with typical moves such as 1.d4, 2.♘f3, 3.♙f4, 4.e3, 5.h3, 6.♙e2 preparing to castle into safety and then start operations that can vary according to the set-up chosen by Black.

This system cannot be described as amorphous as the Réti or as complicated as a proper 1.d4/2.c4 enterprise, and this is where its appeal lies. White is able by simple and meaningful moves to get a position where he hopes to make good use of the ♙f4 to suffocate Black and deny him clear ideas. Control of the e5-square plays an important role in that as it assists both kingside and queenside ambitions. If Black contests that square by a ...d7-d6, ...e7-e5 strategy, then the bishop will retreat to h2, keeping the pressure on Black's pawn chain and preparing queenside operations which could eventually undermine it.

Although I have not met the London too often in my chess career, I always felt it is an annoying system that people tend to disrespect or underestimate, and undeservedly so. Thus, I have always wanted to present my thoughts on it, regardless of the defensive set-up chosen by Black, for two reasons: (1) to put matters into their right perspective; and (2) to make Black's task no less easy than White's by providing playable and easy-to-understand lines.

When Russell Enterprises gave me the opportunity to do so, I took up the gauntlet, aided by fellow GM Mikhail Ivanov whose contribution to this work has been important. The material has been divided in such a way that it will satisfy the needs of all levels of players, regardless they are KID, Benoni, Nimzo/QI, or 1...d5 lovers.

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Our orientation has been to provide systems of counterattack mostly based on the ...c7-c5, ...♖d8-b6, an idea particularly applicable in the Benoni and Orthodox Defence versions. It is essential anti-London strategy to exploit the slight weakening of the queenside that the bishop's departure entails. When playing Black against the London, bear in mind that White's annoying system does not prevent us from returning the favor by putting White's queenside under pressure.

For King's Indian fans, we chose a standard set-up based on reducing the scope of the ♗f4 and expanding on the kingside, while for Nimzo/QI devotees a system based on exchanging the light-square bishops was chosen.

To assist to you playing our recommended variations, you will find the special *QuickStarter!* section that will provide readers with everything they need to know to play the lines immediately. We hope that this will work well for those who do not have enough time to study, but will also encourage most of you to go through the main theoretical sections.

Closing this short foreword, I would like to point out that the London System is a sound opening, so there is no refutation of it. But respecting what we have to face is one thing and fearing it is another. The present edition is designed to eradicate the "London Fear" by pointing out the system's weaknesses and emphasizing our own assets.

And believe me, they are many...

Vassilios Kotronias
Athens
June 2023

Foreword

Few openings may be as widely employed as the London System, from novice players to yours truly, to famous legends such as Gata Kamsky and Magnus Carlsen utilizing it on a regular basis. The world's newest champion, Ding Liren, even used it to convincingly defeat Ian Nepomniachtchi in game six of their recent match for the title. Thus, it is undoubtedly an important topic of study for anyone developing or fine tuning their opening repertoire with the black pieces.

I have often seen the London criticized for being boring and too formulaic, but, and especially at the hands of well-prepared players, it can lead to spectacular fighting chess and even swift victories for White. Indeed, on many occasions I have successfully lulled my opponents into a false sense of security only to spring a decisive attack. Therefore, it is irresponsible for Black to enter a game without a strategic plan to effectively combat the system. Luckily there is now a very comprehensive resource – this book! – that will give you everything you need to battle successfully against the London System.

Unfortunately for the London aficionados of the world, the ideas presented by Kotronias and Ivanov are powerful, with many new and convincing concepts. Furthermore, the book is divided into four parts, each focusing on a different setup available to Black. This enables the reader to pick and choose which system they prefer, simultaneously necessitating White to take on the monumental task of preparing for the many options at Black's disposal.

The book begins with a comprehensive look at how to handle the London System from the point of view of the King's Indian. From my own experience, I know that the authors' recommendation of 6...c5! in chapter two is a particularly difficult line for White to face. In addition, the discovery of 7...e5!! in response to the slightest inaccuracy by White in one mainline is a devastating novelty for unsuspecting Londoners to face.

For Benoni players, there are exciting possibilities with the authors' recommended 3...d5!?, a move I have yet to face in all my years of playing the opening. While those complications present serious challenges for

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White, for those that prefer a variation that is less involved, the authors give you flexibility by presenting an equally good alternative that is more manageable for Black to learn.

Players seeking a safe and positional style against the London, will prefer the recommended strategies in the Nimzo/Queen's Indian section. The plans for Black, including actively seeking to exchange the light-square bishops, are relatively easy to remember and, once again, headache-inducing for Londoners. The next part of the book examines what happens when White attempts to avoid mainlines of the Benoni or Indian variations. Here too, the reader is presented with very interesting lines with novelties and various options depending on their preferred style.

Finally, for players meeting 1.d4 with 1...d5, the final part of the book is for you, with most lines featuring an early queen foray to b6 to target the b2-weakness. The chapter culminates in a close examination of a pair of games between none other than Levon Aronian and Magnus Carlsen, with each player probing lines from both sides. This is a must see analysis!

Throughout, Kotronias and Ivanov are objective and do not overpromise, which I believe the readers will find reassuring. There are lines they suggest which lead to equality according to the computer, but in most of these cases they successfully make the case that objectively Black gets good play. When play peters out into a complicated middlegame or endgame, they give detailed examples to back up their claims.

The London Files presents Black many good and flexible options for neutralizing White, while also giving us Londoners many new problems to contend with. I recommend that you focus on the sections of the book that most closely align with systems most familiar to you. Without a doubt, this book will give Black players highly effective means to deal with the London System for a long time to come and may even have players completely rethinking their approach with the white pieces.

Ian Harris *
Norwalk
June 2023

* Connecticut master Ian Harris is a full-time chess instructor with over ten years teaching experience. A graduate of the University of Maryland, he is a three-time Connecticut State Champion. The London System has been his weapon of choice for many years.

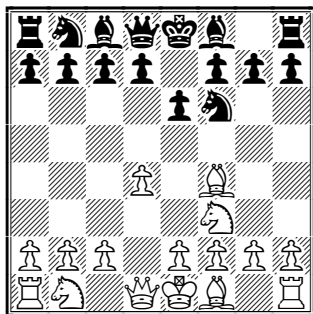
Part III

The London Nimzo-Indian and Queen's Indian

Chapter 8

White Does Not Play c2-c4

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♗f3 e6 3.♕f4



In our repertoire against the London for King's Indian players, we witnessed a hard fight in the center and on both flanks, with the tactical element intensified and marches of pawns on both sides of the board. Here we are going to witness quite the opposite. The large majority of Nimzo/QI devotees opt for a positional game where the motto "Safety first" dominates the play, and in the London Variation against their system they could hardly be looking for anything else. We only had to choose which positional

treatment would suit them best, and we think we have found it.

3...b6!

Our reasoning for choosing this move is fairly simple: Exchange the light-square bishops whenever you have the chance! Since White will most probably build a center with pawns on c3, d4 and e3 to support his enterprise in typical London fashion, exchanging those bishops can offer Black a long-term positional advantage, as the light squares around these pawns can become weak. Things of course are not that simple in practice, as in order to achieve the bishop exchange the second player will have to accept a slightly displaced knight on a6 and perhaps reduced control over e4. However, our research has indicated that it is possible to gradually overcome these disadvantages. So let us see how things can develop if Black

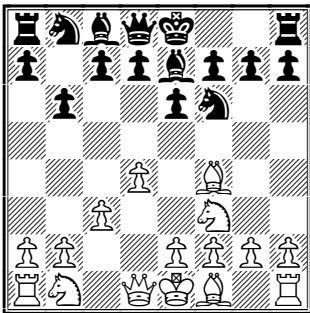
adopts our chosen strategy for him, switching to “light-square mode”:

4.e3

If White instead plays 4.c4, we have a transposition to the normal Nimzo theory. This could have been considered outside the scope of this book, but we nevertheless decided to provide readers with some ideas for the sake of completeness. 4.c4 is examined in the chapter that follows this one.

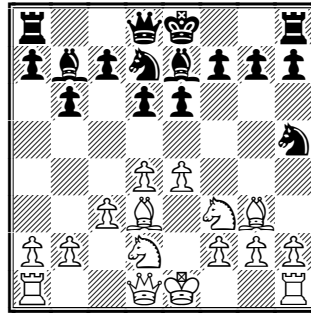
But now, let’s look at other white alternatives, (1) **4.c3** and (2) **4.h3**.

(1) After **4.c3** White may be considering ♖bd2 followed by e4, but we can apply similar strategies to those witnessed later in the main line: **4...♙e7!** Now we are ready to gain the bishop pair in case of 5.♖bd2. The position is interesting, but not better for White:



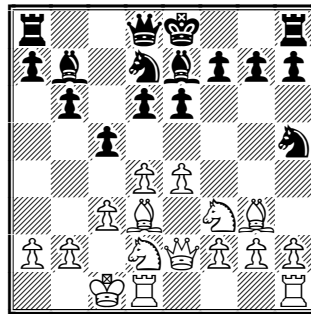
(1a) After **5.♖bd2!? ♖h5!** **6.♙g3**, we should not take the bishop immediately; better is **6...d6** **7.e4 ♙b7** **8.♙d3 ♖d7**, keeping

all options open. White now has to finally decide whether to castle long or short:



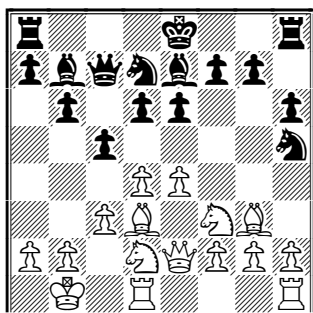
The engines prefer going long. Instead, 9.a4 a6 10.0-0 c5 11.♙e2 0-0 is harmless for Black. A computer line is 12.♙fd1 cxd4 13.cxd4 g6 14.♙ac1 ♖df6 15.♙c3 ♖xg3 16.hxg3 ♙b8!? 17.♙dc1 ♙a7=.

Therefore, we mainly consider **9.♙e2 c5 10.0-0-0**

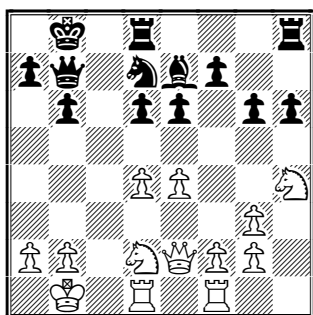


when it is imperative to follow suit with **10...♙c7!** (Weaker is 10...a6?! 11.♙b1! b5 12.e5 dxe5 13.dxc5 ♖xc5 14.♙c2 ♖xg3 15.hxg3 ♙c7 16.♖xe5 ♙xg2 17.♙he1 ♙d5 18.♖b3! ♙, and the opening of the position favors White, who already

has a dangerous initiative. Even if the position is defensible for Black, this is a bad practical choice.)
11. ♖b1 h6!

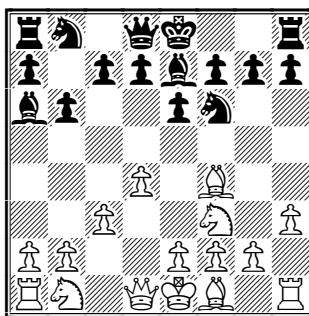


12. ♘h4 (12. ♘e1 offers White nothing, as shown by the line 12... ♖xg3 13. h×g3 a6 14. f4 b5 15. ♘ef3 c4 16. ♙c2 0-0-0) **12...g6! 13. ♗hf1 ♘xg3 14. h×g3 0-0-0 15. ♙a6 ♙x a6 16. ♗x a6+ ♗b7 17. ♗e2 c×d4 18. c×d4 ♗b8=.**



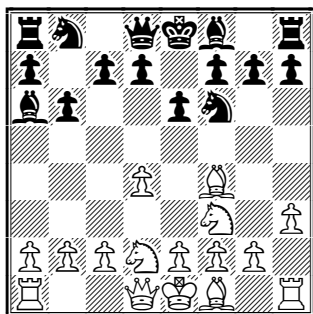
Black's pieces are confined to his first three ranks, and yet he faces no problems. They are all good long-term units and coordinate well. In addition, the black king is safe. Consequently, we may conclude that the opening has been a success for the second player.

(1b) Against **5.h3**, providing the bishop with a retreat square on h2, we proceed with **5...♙a6!** Although this has not been played much, it fits in very well with our general scheme: Exchange bishops, obtain control over the light squares, slowly outplay the opponent. In addition, the engines approve the move, so all omens are good.



6. ♘bd2 (6.g4!? has not been tried but belongs to the group of playable ideas. There could follow 6...0-0 7. ♘bd2 d5 8.g5 ♘h5 9. ♙h2 c5 10.h4 ♙d6 11.e3 ♙x f1 12. ♘x f1 ♘c6 13. ♗e2 g6 14. ♘g3 ♘g7∞ and Black does not look any worse.) **6...c5! 7.e4 ♙x f1 8. ♗x f1 0-0 9. ♗e2.** So far we have followed Wang-M.Ivanov, Richmond Hill 2022. Black should have now seized the light squares with **9...♗c8! 10.g4 ♗b7 11. ♗g2 ♘c6=**, obtaining a very good game. Black tends to win such types of positions thanks to a safer king and concrete play on the light squares, whereas for White the onus of showing something for his overextension usually proves unbearable.

(2) A more refined way for White to apply his plan is **4.h3**, keeping both the c- and e-pawns untouched. This keeps Black guessing, but we decided to stick to our usual recipe with **4...♙a6!**? and try to make the position work. After **5.♘bd2**, a critical moment in the game has already been reached:

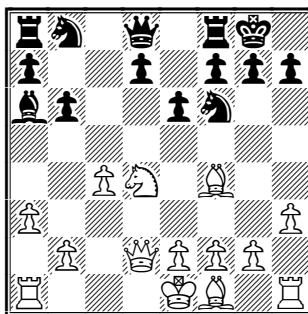


5...c5!

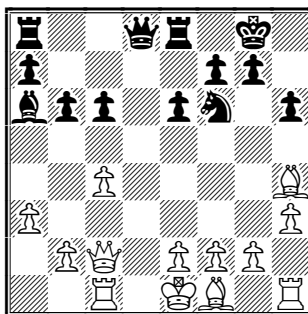
Striking before White has the chance to play c4. The engines also like 5...d5 6.c4 ♗e7 (6...♗d6 7.♗xd6 ♖xd6 8.♖a4+!± was better for White in Fernandez-Bradbury, Hull 2018.), however after 7.e3 0-0 8.♖c1 c5 9.dxc5 bxc5 10.♗d3 ♖b6 11.♖c2 h6 12.0-0 ♗d8 13.♖fe1 ♘c6 14.a3 ♖ac8 15.b3±, the ensuing position with hanging pawns looks hard to play with Black. It is difficult to find a constructive plan here, so we do not recommend this line.

After 5...c5!, White has a choice, but all moves except one allow Black to have an easy ride towards equality:

(2a) **6.c4** is not out of the question, but Black does get a satisfactory game by means of **6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♗b4 8.a3 ♗xd2+ 9.♖xd2 0-0**, when his advantage in development seems to outweigh the enemy bishop pair.

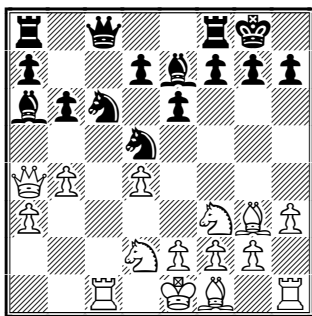


For example, **10.♖c1** (10.e3 d5 11.♖c2 ♖e8! 12.♗g5 ♘bd7 13.cxd5 ♗xf1 14.♖xf1 ♖c8 15.♖d1 exd5 16.g3 h6 17.♗xf6 ♖xf6 18.♖g2 ♘e5= or 10.g4!? ♗xc4 11.♖c1 ♗d5 12.f3 ♘c6 13.♗d6 ♘xd4 14.♖xd4 ♖e8 15.e4 ♗b7 16.♗e2 e5! 17.♗xe5 d5 18.♗b5 ♖e6= do not present Black with any problems) **10...♖e8 11.♗g5 h6 12.♗h4 ♘c6 13.♘xc6 dxc6 14.♖c2** (14.♖xd8 ♖axd8 is at least equal for Black)



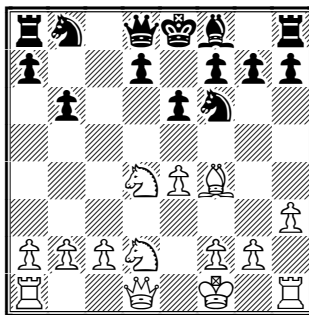
14...b5!?, and Black even has chances to obtain the initiative.

(2b) 6.c3 is what the London routiniers will automatically play, but at the same time we should be happy to see this move. One example from here continued 6...cxd4 7.cxd4 dxc6 8.a3 Qe7 9.Qa4?! (White should prefer 9.e4 Qxf1 10.Qxf1 0-0 11.g3 Qc8 12.Qg2 Qb7=) 9...Qc8! 10.Rc1 0-0 11.b4 d5 12.Qg3 (Burnett-Azarov, ICC INT 2020), and at this point Black missed the following stunning possibility:

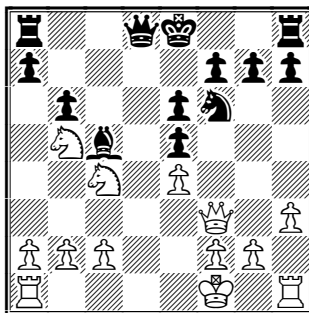


12...f5!! 13.b5 dcb4!! 14.Rxc8 Rxaxc8 15.axb4 Rxc1+ 16.Qd1 Rxd1+ 17.Qxd1 Qxb5±, and despite being a piece up White has such a horribly exposed king in this queenless position that his chances of saving the game are minimal.

(2c) The critical move is the untried 6.e4!? In the type of position that arises after 6...Qxf1 7.Qxf1 cxd4 8.dxd4



Black would be normally better. But here, the weakness of his d6-square gives rise to practical problems. Eventually they can be solved as follows: 8...d6 9.Qf3! Were it not for this move Black would be better, but now a tense fight begins. 9...dxd7 10.dxb5 dxe5 11.Qxe5 dxe5 12.dxc4 Qc5



Now White can continue in two ways:

(2c1) 13.dxe5 allows Black fine counterplay by piling on the soft spots in the white camp, e4 and the c-file. A plausible continuation is 13...0-0 14.d3 Qc8! 15.Re1 (other moves don't succeed either: