

# **The Modern Gurgenidze**

**A Counterpunching  
Repertoire for Black**

**Jaan Ehvest**

**Foreword by Alex Shabalov**



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The Modern Gurgendidze  
A Counterpunching Repertoire for Black  
by Jaan Ehilvest

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# Foreword

In open tournaments, there is usually a constant demand to win every game. And to win with the black pieces is a major problem. We want to play an opening that offers complicated positions and one that does not allow the opponent to make a quick draw. At the same time, we do not want to take too much risk so that our tournament standing is jeopardized. It should be an opening that cannot be quickly countered; an opening that works even if our opponent is aware of what we are doing.

The so-called Modern Defense has had an incredible rise in popularity in the last few decades. This has been quite a phenomenon in the otherwise very traditional world of modern chess theory. It has become such a standard opening in the international open tournament circuit that people have almost forgotten the names of its pioneers. The combination of the Caro-Kann with the fianchetto of the dark-square bishop bears the name of one of the most original minds in chess history, Georgian grandmaster Bukhuti Gurgeniidze (1933-2008).

“The most elegant man in Tbilisi” was a very likeable, sometimes almost comical person with whom I had the pleasure of meeting and talking. There are so many chess “folklore” stories attributed to him, while the compilation of his best studies still remains one of the best chess books ever written.

For some reason, the Gurgeniidze System of the Modern Defense has a reputation of being a “blast from the past,” an old school opening for people who are too lazy to learn “normal” Sicilian lines, or something that cannot be employed during modern chess warfare. Nothing could be further from the truth. We can witness how the Gurgeniidze was used by Magnus Carlsen himself in handful of games late in 2022. I hope that this book will also help to fix this misconception once and for all.

While I still vividly remember my childhood fears of the Gurgenzidze System – I had to face it so many times – I could have never imagined then that 40 years later, I would make this move order my main weapon as Black preparing for 2017 US Championship.

Jaan Ehlevest, famous author and top player whom I first met back in 1976 (at my first “international” tournament, as I traveled from my native Riga to Jaan’s Tallinn), was helping me with my preparations. Our work together has always been and remains very rewarding; my latest title, 2022 US Senior Champion, has confirmed that. I gladly accepted his proposal to prepare the Gurgenzidze in some depth for that tournament. Several training camps later – as well as a ton of training games – my confidence playing the line literally soared.

Most of the analysis and core ideas which made its way to these pages were done during that period. In general, during all these years when Jaan was helping me as a second, it was difficult for me to overestimate his ability to analyze and find the best solution to opening issues. I am happy to say that one of the best games of my life was played in a line covered in this book (game 16). Readers will have the opportunity to go through this game, along with many other gems, including the game that was the genesis of this legendary line, Honfi-Gurgenzidze, Kislovodsk 1968 (game 25), or the amazing exchange sacrifice followed by a quiet – but unstoppable – assault by black in Mnatsakanian-Minasian, Yerevan 1994 (game 10).

This book, the first one dedicated to the Modern Gurgenzidze in many years, consists of 10 theoretical Chapters and 31 sample games. Jaan carefully explains how Black’s plans may change depending on White’s move order, when exactly we should play ...c7-c6 followed by ...d7-d5 (Chapters 1-5) and when we would be better off with ...d7-d6 and ...e7-e5 (Chapters 6-10). You will be treated to Jaan’s insights on Hippo, Dutch, English, King’s Indian and even 1.b3, all through the eyes of Gurgenzidze system.

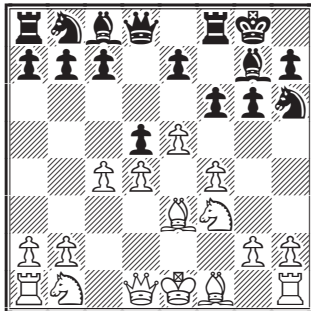
Best wishes on your new adventure!

Alex Shabalov  
Four-time US Champion  
2019 & 2022 US Senior Champion  
Gurgenzidze System Aficionado

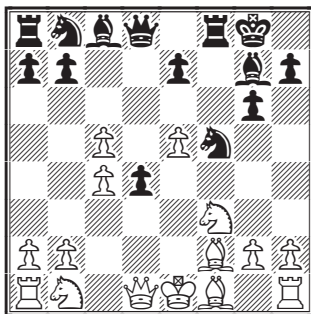


11.fxe5 ♖f7 (11...♗f5! 12.♗f4 b6! ♞ is even stronger) 12.0-0-0 and now Black could simply take on e5 with a good game. Instead, there happened 12...b6!? 13.♗e2 ♜e7∞, 0-1 (36) Jerkovic-Dizdarevic, Bosnjaci 2017.

(b) 7.c4?! belongs to the same dubious category as 7.♗d3?!.



This move has in fact been played in several games, but the engine refutes it with 7...c5! 8.dxc5 ♗f5 9.♗f2 fxe5 10.fxe5 d4!



11.♗xd4? (relatively better is 11.♗d3 ♗c6 12.♜e2 ♜c7♞) 11...♗xe5 12.♗xf5 ♜xd1+ 13.♜xd1 ♗xf5-+.

(c) 7.♜d2!? c5! 8. dxc5 fxe5 9.fxe5 ♗g4 10.♗c3 ♗xe3 11.♜xe3 ♗g4 12.♗d4 e6 13.♗e2 ♗c6!?∞.

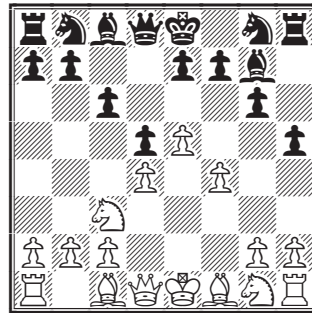
Let us return to 7.♗d3?!:

7...c5! 8.h3 (8.c3 ♗c6 9.h3 fxe5 10.fxe5?! ♜b6!-+) 8...♗c6 9.dxc5 fxe5 ♞.

The white center has collapsed and having the better development as well, Black has the upper hand.

It is time to examine the positions with the knight on c3:

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♗g7 3.♗c3 c6 4.f4 d5 5.e5 h5



With this move, Black wants to blockade the kingside. Then the only active counterplay he will have will be with ...c6-c5.

6.♗f3

The main move. White has also played 6.h3!? and 6.♗e3:

## The Modern Gurgenidze

(a) In the event of 6.h3!? ♖h6 7.♙e3 (after 7.♗f3 ♗f5 8.♗e2?! [8.♙d3! is best, transposing to 6.♗f3 ♖h6 examined later] Black can fix White's pawn structure with 8...h4≡) the most logical move is 7...♗f5.

Instead, Popov-Shvedchikov, Moscow 2012 saw 7...b6.

This is the other idea in these positions: Black can in some lines develop his bishop to a6. When the second player cannot exchange this bishop for a white knight on f3 he must find some way to bring it to play and this is a logical one.

The game continued 8.♙f2 ♗f5 9.g3 e6 10.♙g2?! ♗f8 11.♙d2 ♙e7 12.0-0-0 ♗d7 13.g4 ♗g7 14.♗f3 b5 ≡, 1-0 (56). White may have a small edge, but such strategically complicated games can go either way.

Back to 7...♗f5: 8.♙f2 e6 9.♗f3 ♗f8 10.♙d3 h4

Fixing the pawn structure; once again the other plan is 10...b6!?: 11.♗e2 ♙a6 12.0-0 ♙e7 13.b3 ♙xd3 14.♙xd3 h4 15.c4 0-0 (Black king's position is safe now.) 16.♙h2 ♙g7=, ½-½ (46) Klinova-Petursson, Oslo 1994.

Returning to 10...h4, there can follow 11.0-0 ♙e7 12.♙e2 ♙f8 13.♗d1 ♙g7 14.♗e3 ♗d7 15.b3

and White has a space advantage, but Black is very solid, ½-½ (77) Korneev-Nurkic, Asti 1997.

(b) 6.♙e3 ♖h6 7.♙d2. The idea is to avoid a pin with ...♙g4 without weakening the structure.

If 7.♗f3, there follows 7...♙g4 8.h3 ♙xf3 9.♙xf3 h4 10.♙d3 e6 11.♗f2 ♗f8! 12.♗e2 ♙e7 13.0-0 a5! 14.b3 ♗a6!∞ and Black has achieved a good version of the Botvinnik formation where it is very hard for White to advance on the queenside.

7...♗g4 8.♗f3 ♗xe3 9.♙xe3 ♙g4 10.♙e2.

Or 10.♗d2 e6 (More active is 10...c5!, attacking the center.) 11.♙d3 h4 12.0-0 ♗d7 13.h3 ♗h5 14.b4 ♗f8∞ (the standard transfer of the bishop, leading to an unclear game), 0-1 (30) Winants-Galkin, Playchess.com INT 2007.

Back to 10.♙e2: 10...e6 11.0-0 ♗f8 12.♗g5 ♗d7!.

Better is 12...♙e7! 13.♙xg4 hxg4 ≡.

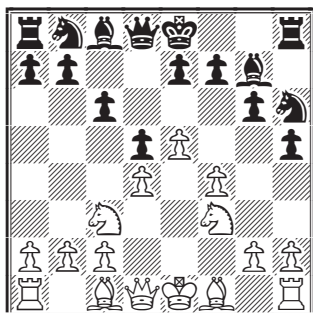
13.a4

White could have obtained an advantage with 13.♙xg4! hxg4 14.♗d1 ±.

13...♙e7 14.h3 ♗f5 15.♙d2 ♙b4 (15...c5≡) 16.♙c1 h4=, ½-½ (35) Van Enk-Arnold, ICCF email 2007.

Let us now focus on **6. ♖f3: 6... ♗h6**

If you ask me, **6... ♗g4!**? is not out of the question and is the most thematic choice. After **7.h3 ♗xf3 8. ♖xf3 e6 9. ♗e3 h4 10. ♗d3 ♗f8**, Black is once again heading for the favorite version of the Botvinnik setup, where he will put his ♖ on a5 and ♗ on a6. This should hold. However, White can choose the **6.h3!**? move order, possibly reaching by force the position examined under **7.h3!**? Below.



**7. ♗e3**

Or: (a) **7.h3!**?. This is annoying.

I originally thought that then there comes **7... ♗f5 8. ♗d3 ♗g3 9. ♖g1 h4** and in all lines Black has an excellent game, however there is an interesting improvement for White:

**10. ♗e3.**

Natural, but not best. **10. ♖f2!**? ♗f5 **11.b4!** is a possible improvement.

After **11... ♗f8 12. ♖b1**, there are two possibilities:

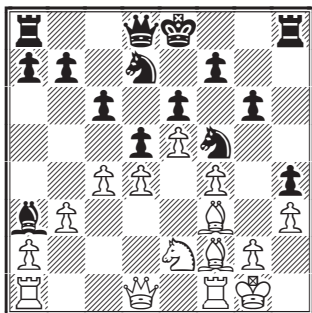
(a1) **12... e6!**? looks passive. After **13. ♗xf5 gxf5 14.g4! hxg3+ 15. ♖xg3 ♗e7 16.a4 ♗d7 17. ♖g1! ♗h4 18. ♗xh4 ♖xh4 19.a5!±**, White is much better. There is a striking difference in the activity of the bishops.

(a2) This leaves **12... ♗g7!**? as the most challenging option. Then **13. ♖e1! a6 14. ♗a4 ♗f5 15. ♗xf5 gxf5 16.e6! ♗xe6 17. ♗c5! ♖c8! 18. ♗xe6 fxex6 19. ♖d3 ♗d7 20. ♖xe6 ♗c5 21. bxc5 ♖xe6 22. ♖xb7** leads to a position which, albeit not hopeless for Black, is certainly hard to defend over the board. Perhaps some correspondence game will solve the riddle here.

Returning to **10. ♗e3** (Tratar-Banovac, Griesheim 2000) Black has no problems if he adopts the following improvement: **10... ♗f5! 11. ♗f2 ♗xd3 12. ♖xd3 ♗f5 13. 0-0 e6=.**

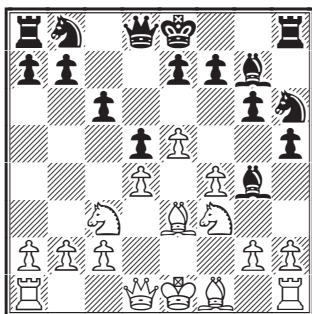
(b) The other option is **7. ♗e2 ♗g4! 8. ♗e3 ♗f5 9. ♗f2 e6 10. 0-0 ♗d7 (10... ♗h6!?)=) 11.h3 ♗xf3 (again 11... ♗h6!)= was excellent) 12. ♗xf3 h4**. Now we have reached a position in which the white bishop is on f3 instead of d3; this favors Black a little, yet he remains worse: **13. ♗e2 ♗f8 14.b3 ♗a3 15.c4±**

## The Modern Gurgenzidze



Black has a solid, but very passive position, 0-1 (42) Duda-Nakamura, Chess.com INT 2019; however, the improvements on move 10 and 11 take the sting out of this idea by White.

We will return now to **7...Qe3**:  
**7...Qg4**



Here is what Black needs to do in this position: First he needs to blockade the kingside and then find counterplay against White's center, which can be done only with the help of ...c6-c5. However, if White is able to prevent this, Black will be on the defensive and will have difficulty executing any active plan. White, on the other hand, will still

have the plan of pushing forward his queenside pawns. This was worked out by Botvinnik and was very well known in Soviet Chess School circles. The only way Black can attempt to counter this idea is to play ...♖b6 instead of the more solid text, trying to disrupt White's setup.

If 7...♖b6, the most principled move is 8.♘a4. However, the pedestrian 8.♞b1 will also do: After 8.♞b1 ♘g4 9.♙e2?! (better is 9.h3! ♗f5 10.♙f2 ♙x3 11.♖x3 ♘a6 12.♖d1 h4 13.♙d3 e6 14.0-0± and White gets the Botvinnik setup under fine circumstances) 9...♗d7 10.0-0 the position is not as easy for White as most people expect: 10... ♗f8!?

Too passive. Better is 10...♗f5! 11.♙f2 ♗h6! 12.♖d2 f6! and Black has very good counterplay.

11.♘a4

Stronger is 11.♗h4!±.

11...♖c7 12.♗c5 ♗f5 13.♙f2 ♗h6 14.♗h4 ♙x4?!

A better try is 14...♗xh4 15.♙xh4 ♖c8 16.h3±.

15.♙xg4 ♗e3 16.♖f3 ♙xh2+ 17.♗xh2 ♗x1+ 18.♞x1 hxg4 19.♖xg4 b6 20.♗d3±. Here White is clearly better, 1-0 (52) Duda-Jobava, Chartres 2017.

Returning to 8.♘a4: 8...♖a5+ 9.c3 ♙g4