

The Polish Defense

**Systems for Black
Based on ...b5**

**Jerzy Konikowski
and
Marek Soszynski**

Foreword by Vassilios Kotronias



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by
Jerzy Konikowski & Marek Soszynski

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Introduction

Once computer chess engines started getting seriously good (in the 1990s) it was assumed that their undoubted tactical superiority would refute the lesser openings, reducing the stock of viable defenses. That widespread assumption missed something obvious. An engine will see tactics in the service of defense as much as in the service of attack. The number of humanly playable openings has not gone down in the age of engines. Correspondence players are not finding their games ending more quickly in victorious tactical explosions – quite the opposite. In short, sub-optimal lines and difficult-looking positions are proving surprisingly durable when properly analyzed.

Which brings us to the subject matter of this book, principally the Polish Defense (1.d4 b5) but also the very closely related early ...b7-b5 systems like Baker's Defense (1.e4 a6 2.d4 b5), the St. George (e.g., 1.e4 e6 2.d4 a6 3.♟f3 b5), and 1.♟f3 b5, which may all coalesce.

First, some naming history. In 1914 the Polish theoretician, Aleksander Wagner (1868-1942, based in what is now Ukraine) published an article on 1.d4 b5 entitled (in German) *The Polish Defense*, and that name has persisted, no doubt reinforced by its mirror opening, 1.b4, being occasionally referred to as the Polish Attack.

And way before that, in London, in the year of Wagner's birth, John Baker used the previously unknown 1.e4 a6 2.d4 b5 to defeat Wilhelm Steinitz and Joseph Blackburne in a couple of blindfold exhibition games. Hence "Baker's Defense."

The Polish Defense

Fast forward to the 1980s and English IM Michael Basman, openings experimenter extraordinaire, issues his *Play the St. George* book in which he analyzes various ...b7-b5 systems, including his preferred 1.e4 e6 2.d4 a6 (then 3...b5), which he himself had been playing since the late 1970s. But why did he name it for the patron saint of England? Partly because in the European Team Championships of 1980, the English GM Tony Miles famously employed 1.e4 a6 2.d4 b5 to beat the Soviet Union's top board, Anatoly Karpov, and thus help England earn an unlikely draw against the tourney favorites – which brought to mind the legend of St. George and the Dragon, in which the hero... and you can guess the rest.

So, moving to more recent times, who actually plays ...b7-b5 on move one, two or three? Frankly, we abandoned trying to compile a list even restricting ourselves to the strongest most frequent players. It would be a very lengthy A to Z. From the Belarusian GM Aleksei Aleksandrov (over 30 games) to the Lithuanian IM Antanas Zapolskis (about 50 games). However, the best players certainly do not rely on ...b7-b5, and they avoid and generally disparage 1...a6. Do not imagine that this book covers a mainstream widely-accepted defensive system! Nevertheless, these pages are sprinkled with the names of outstanding and world-class players who have one way or another, for one reason or another, occasionally found themselves, very early in a game, with a black b-pawn of theirs on b5. And lived happily ever after.

What about the theoretical merits? Well, that will be revealed in the chapters that follow. Here it's appropriate to make a comparison with another early queenside fianchetto. The defenses with ...b7-b5 have been described as *inferior* versions of the English Defense (1.d4 b6) or Owen's Defense (1.e4 b6) because at least in the latter two the b-pawn is secure on b6 and doesn't have to advance or be protected by ...a7-a6 when attacked. In other words, the Polish Defense takes two moves (1.d4 b5 followed by 2...a6) to achieve a stable queenside fianchetto whereas the English Defense achieves it in one, not requiring another pawn move.

The defenses with ...b7-b5 have also been described as *superior* versions of 1...b6. The point is that a black pawn on b5 deters c2-c4, a desirable move if there's already a white pawn on d4. And if there's no white pawn on c4, Black can play ...g8-f6-d5 if required (after White plays e4-e5, for example).

Structure of the book

The book is organized as follows. The first two chapters deal with the Polish Defense in its pure form, which is 1.d4 and now 1...b5 straight away. This move ought to come as a shock to most players and as a particular annoyance to all those Whites who expect to be able to play 1.d4, 2.c4 semi-automatically; likewise Veresov Opening players who play 1.d4, 2.♗c3.

In Chapter 1 White replies 2.e4. This is certainly the best move. On the other hand, White has been tempted away from a queen-pawn opening to a king-pawn sort of opening.

In Chapter 2 White replies more modestly with 2.♗f3. Now Black can stop e2-e4 with 2...♗f6, which is our main line.

In Chapter 3 we investigate the “Polish Pawn” (on b5), against 1.♗f3. Plus a section (3F) on 1.f4 b5 at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 4 we show a plan against the English Opening (1.c4) that involves the Polish Pawn. 1.c4 b5 is obviously dubious, so the b-pawn should be moved much later than move one.

In the last four chapters, 5 to 8, we present a black system against 1.e4, as well as dealing with some transpositions from the Polish Defense that start with 1.d4 b5. We say “system” because a full-blown repertoire, which this is not, implies a higher degree of inclusivity and inflexibility.

In Chapter 5 we see 1.e4 a6 3.d4 b5, which we call Baker’s Defense. Certainly, starting a game with 1...a6 is anti-classical, literally eccentric (off-center) and provocative.

Chapter 6 shows the dubious 1.e4 e6 2.d4 b5, which is known variously as the Baeuerle Gambit, or the Franco-Polish.

The St. George Defense proper, 1.e4 e6 2.d4 a6, is the initial subject of Chapter 7 which goes on to cover 3.c4 b5, the Three Pawns Gambit.

We conclude the theoretical chapters with Chapter 8 on 1.e4 e6 without 2.d4, Black intending ...a6/...b5, concentrating on the King’s Indian Attack.

The Polish Defense

We were surprised at how many lines had few or no practical examples. At the same time, we were disheartened by how many lines had plenty of examples but reached positions by varying move orders. Indeed, very many of the quoted games arrived at the analyzed positions from move orders quite different from the orders in this book. Variations overlap and intertwine within and across the chapters and sections. We do try to signal these transpositions but no doubt we miss some or – rarely and worse – give different assessments to the same resultant positions. We did our best.

Finally, at the end of each chapter we present some fully annotated games; and at the very end of the book we add over a hundred unannotated games from recent practice. In many respects, these represent the most important part of the book. The examples will show what human players actually play, what moves they choose during matches and tournaments, and how much theory or what kind of preparation they have managed to remember rather than the instant opinion of a computer that is unavailable to them – we trust – in a “real” game. After all, a book’s refutation or an engine’s novelty counts for nothing if it isn’t played on an actual chessboard. Theory can only refute lines; defeats have to be inflicted by players.

Jerzy Konikowski & Marek Soszynski

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We thank in particular the worthy UK charity, the Braille Chess Association www.braillechess.org.uk whose aim is “to encourage and support the playing of chess at all levels by blind and partially sighted people.” The BCA provided us with access to some of Michael Basman’s old audio recordings which proved otherwise unobtainable.

Chapter 2

1.d4 b5 2.♗f3 (and others)

1.d4 b5

In Chapter 1 we studied 2.e4, which must be the best move objectively. However, a minority of white players reply with something else. Maybe they fear Black's preparation or familiarity with 2.e4; or maybe they are just so committed to their Queen's Pawn schemes that a potential Open game lookalike with an early e2-e4 is completely alien or repellent to them. In any case, Black is the beneficiary because the alternatives to 2.e4 score worse.

Of course transpositions back to Chapter 1 are possible. Three examples of this follow, though it is important (and reassuring for black players) to realize that these and others are infrequent in practice. White players who avoid 2.e4 generally avoid 3.e4 too.

1.d4 b5 2.f3!? ♗b7 3.e4 a6 transposes to Section 1B.

1.d4 b5 2.♗d2!? ♗b7 3.e4 transposes to Section 1C.

1.d4 b5 2.♗f3 ♗b7 3.e4!? ♗xe4 4.♗xb5 transposes to Section 1D whose mainline move order is 1.d4 b5 2.e4 ♗b7 3.♗xb5 ♗xe4 4.♗f3.

The issue of move orders is more interesting when White plays an early ♗c1-f4. This pattern of development is all the more common with the increasing popularity of the London System, which is or was typically this kind of thing: 1.d4 ♗f6 2.♗f3 d5 (or 2...e6) 3.♗f4. Many systematized Londoners place the bishop onto f4 almost irrespective of how their opponent starts. Moreover, nowadays there are even some neo-London systems in which White delays playing his g-knight to f3 or plays it to e2. However, Black has no special problems with these when he uses the Polish Defense. With Black's light-square bishop pointing at the g2-pawn (after 1.d4

b5 2.♘f4 ♘b7 likewise 1.d4 b5 2.e3 ♘b7) White has few good options but to play ♗g1-f3 fairly quickly, which usually transposes within this chapter or is in any case relatively unchallenging.

2.♗f3

We just discussed 2.♘f4 (and 2.e3) in the paragraph above.

I. It is artificial for White to put off the development of his king's knight for very long. Having said that, 2.a4 b4 can take the game in different directions:

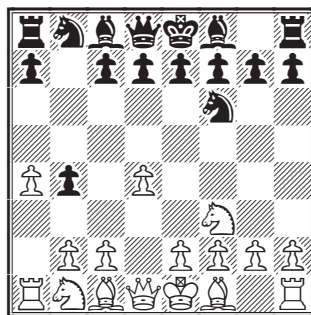
(a) 3.c4 (innocuous) 3...♗f6 (3...bxc3 4.♗xc3 e6 5.e4 ♘b4 6.♘d3, or 6.♗f3, 6...♗e7∞) 3.c4 ♗f6 and next ...d7-d6 intending a kingside fianchetto, with a very good game.

(b) 3.c3 e6 4.e4 ♘b7 5.♘d3 ♗f6 6.♖c2 c5 7.♘g5 h6 8.♘h4? g5 9.♘g3 c4! 10.♘f1 ♘xe4≠ Somorai-Baber, Hungary 2011.

(c) 3.e4 ♘b7 (3...c5!?) 4.♘d3 ♗f6 (not 4...f5?, because of 5.exf5 ♘xg2 6.♖h5+ g6 7.fxg6 ♘g7 8.gxh7+ ♖f8 9.♗f3! ♗f6 10.♖g6 ♘xf3 11.♖g1 ♖xh7 12.♘e3!+-, or 5.♗d2 ♗f6 6.♖e2±) 5.♖e2 a5 6.♗f3 e6 7.c4 (7.0-0 ♘a6 8.c3 bxc3 9.bxc3 ♘xd3 10.♖xd3 ♘e7 11.e5 ♗d5 12.c4 ♗b6 13.♗c3 0-0 14.c5 ♗d5 15.♗xd5 exd5 16.♖b3 [16.♘d2!?] 16...c6 17.♘d2 ♗a6 18.♖fb1 ♗c7

19.♖d1 ♗e6 20.♖e1 f6 21.♘c3 ♖c8 22.♖a2 ♖a6∞ Galliamova-Alexandria, Rostov on Don 1995) 7...bxc3 (7...d6!?) 8.bxc3 d5 9.e5 ♗fd7 10.0-0 (10.♗g5 ♘e7 11.h4!?) 10...♘e7 11.♗e1 c5 12.♗a3 ♗c6 13.♖g4 with the initiative, though Black won after his king managed to escape to the queenside, Rivera-Wan, Barcelona 2016.

(d) 3.♗f3 ♗f6



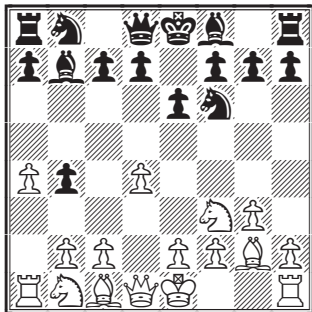
Another route to this position is 1.d4 ♗f6 2.♗f3 b5 3.a4 b4, which makes it all the commoner and thus useful to know. Black is safe enough, or more, in these representative continuations:

(d1) 4.c4 (most popular) 4.c4 e6 (...c7-c5 is a recurring option) 5.♘g5 ♘b7 6.♗bd2 h6 7.♘xf6 ♖xf6 8.e4 g5∞, which is more about a kingside pawn storm than fianchettoing another bishop.

(d2) 4.c3 e6 5.♘g5 bxc3 6.♗xc3 (6.bxc3 ♘e7=) 6...h6 7.♘h4 ♘e7 8.e3 0-0=.

The Polish Defense

(d3) 4.g3 ♖b7 5.♙g2 e6 reaches precisely the same, almost well-known, position after 1.d4 ♟f6 2.♟f3 e6 3.g3 b5 4.♙g2 ♖b7 5.a4 b4.



Play can continue 6.0-0 (6.c4 ♙e7 7.0-0 0-0 transposes) 6...♙e7 (our quiet preference over the immediate 6...c5) 7.c4 0-0 8.♟bd2 c5 9.dxc5 (9.e3 d6 10.b3 ♟c6!? aiming for a5) 9...♟a6 10.♟b3 ♟xc5 11.♙e3 ♖c7 12.♟xc5 ♙xc5 13.♙xc5 ♖xc5 14.♖d4 ♜ac8= Guenther-Schwing, Eppingen 2004.

II. 2.c3

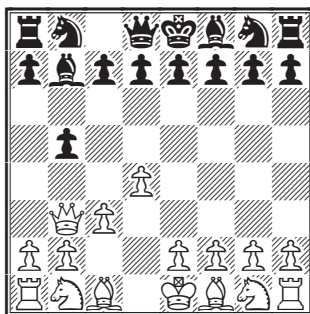
Although this looks like it's heading for a slowed-down Queen's Pawn system with ♟g1-f3, ♙c1-f4 or ♙c1-g5 (all Chapter 2 territory), 2.c3 opens up the possibility of a quick ♖d1-b3. (The Sokolsky has a corresponding line: 1.b4 c6 2.♙b2 ♖b6.) However, this is nothing for Black to especially worry about.

2...♙b7

If Black expects or fears 3.♖b3, Basman suggests 2...e6 making the

queen sortie dubious, e.g., 3.♖b3 a6 4.a4 b4 5.cxb4 ♟c6 and Black regains the pawn. The downside to 2...e6 is that Black doesn't prevent e2-e4, though that is then merely a more normal Polish Defense (as in Chapter 1).

3.♖b3 (3.e4 ♖b7 4.♙d3 c5 5.♟f3 transposes to the main line of Section 1A).



3...a6 4.a4 ♟f6 (4...e6 has the same idea behind it, namely ...♙b7-d5; unfortunately for Polonophiles [admirers of things Polish] most Blacks are panicked into 4...c6!) 5.axb5 ♙d5! (compare this to a sub-variation here in Chapter 2: 1.d4 b5 2.♟f3 ♟f6 3.♖d3 a6 4.a4 ♙b7 5.axb5 ♙e4 6.♖b3 ♙d5, etc.) 6.♖c2 (6.c4 ♙xc4! 7.♖xc4? axb5=) 6...♙e4 7.♖d1 (avoiding a repetition) 7...axb5 8.♞xa8 ♙xa8 9.e3 e6=.

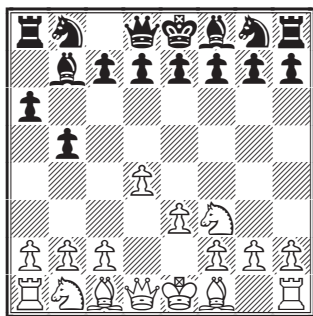
III. 2.c4 bxc4 3.e4 c6 (simpler than the determined 3...♙a6!?) 4.♙xc4 (4.e5!? d5 5.exd6 exd6 6.♙xc4 ♟d7=) 4...d5 5.exd5 cxd5, etc., is level.

2...♟f6

Should Black go ...♟g8-f6 first or ...♟c8-b7 first? In practice, Black will play both moves soon, so it's not a genuine dilemma. Actually Black usually chooses 2...♟b7, so let's look at some independent lines after that:

(a) 3.♟d3 a6 4.e4 e6 5.♟e2 ♟f6 6.♟bd2 c5 7.c3 d5 (an improvement is 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 d6 9.0-0 ♟e7=) 8.e5 ♟fd7 9.a3 ♟c6 10.0-0 b4 (10...♟e7!?) 11.axb4 cxd4 12.♟xd4 ♟dxе5 13.♟xc6 ♟xc6 (13...♟xd3 14.♟xd8 ♟xc1 15.♟fxc1 ♟xd8 16.♟b3±) 14.♟b3 ♟d6 15.♟e3 ♟c7 16.h3± Welin-Hodgson, Copenhagen 1983.

(b) 3.e3 a6



(b1) 4.c4 (most popular but too simplistic to fight for a plus) 4...bxc4 5.♟xc4 e6 (a simple precaution against any ♟d1-b3 tricks) 6.0-0 ♟f6 7.♟c3 d5 (7...c5 8.d5!) 8.♟d3 with a level position from which White, surprisingly, scores less than 50%. Black can

continue 8...♟bd7 9.b3 (9.♟a4 ♟c6!?) 9...♟d6 10.♟b2 0-0 11.♟a4 ♟c6 12.♟c3 ♟e4 13.♟c2 f5= Cheremnova-Ermakov, Kemerovo 2011.

(b2) After 4.♟d3, a typical pattern of deployment is 4...e6 5.0-0 ♟f6 6.♟bd2 c5 7.c3 ♟c6 8.♟e2 ♟c7=.

(b3) 4.a4 b4 5.♟d3 (5.♟bd2 ♟f6 6.♟d3 e6 7.0-0 transposes) 5...e6 6.0-0 ♟f6 7.♟bd2 c5 8.e4 cxd4 9.e5 ♟d5 10.♟e4 (10.♟xd4 ♟c6 11.♟xc6 ♟xc6 12.♟c4 f5? [12...h5!]) 13.exf6 gxf6 14.♟h5+ ♟e7 15.♟h4 ♟c7 16.♟e1± Levenfish-Dus Chotimirsky, Leningrad 1925) 10...♟c6 11.♟e1 ♟c7 12.♟g5 ♟xe5?! 13.♟xe5 ♟xe5 14.♟f6+ gxf6 15.♟xe5 fxe5= Pimenov-Karasev, St. Petersburg 2011. [Historical note: Leningrad became St. Petersburg in 1991.]

(b4) 4.b3 e6 5.♟b2 (5.c4 c5 6.d5?? ♟f6--) 5...♟f6 6.♟bd2 b4∞.

3.♟g5

The popular Torre Attack usually starts 1.d4 ♟f6 2.♟f3 e6, or 2...g6, then 3.♟g5. Here we have White doing the same (1.d4, 2.♟f3, ♟g5), never mind that Black has gone off script with an early ...b7-b5. In truth, 3.♟g5 versus the Polish is commoner than 3.♟f4 and scores better too.