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Introduction

One of the great attractions of chess is that the game spreads its wings to cover the whole social ladder. No matter where a person is from, what age they are, or even where they are going, chess can be shared as a tool for entertainment and knowledge. Children, adults, men, women, lawyers, politicians, prisoners, accountants, Napoleon, etc, can all enjoy a good game of chess.

When the battle commences the outside world is forgotten and the players can drift off into their own world of the imagination. The one thing that I find most intriguing about the game is the way in which a person's personality can come across in the way that they play. My own style of play is stereotyped as being extremely attacking and rather gung-ho. A classic opposite is that of the English Grandmaster Keith Arkell. Keith is known for his love of the endgame and the 'nibble'. Indeed, Danny Gormally described Keith as the 'Grinder' and myself as the 'Gambler' in his entertaining book, *Play Chess like the Pros*.

To me this is what makes the game

of chess so exciting. Two equally strong players can have two completely different ways of looking at the same position. Individual personality really does come through when you're playing the game.

Now you may be wondering what on earth has this to do with the French Defence? Well, let me try to explain. Throughout the history of chess, the French Defence has had the reputation of being a rather solid opening where White has most of the attacking opportunities. It has been considered to be a fairly safe and solid reply to 1 e4, with Black often relying on his solid pawn formation to push the advantage through in the middlegame or even the ending.

Wilhelm Steinitz once said of the opening: 'I have never in my life played the French Defence, which is the dullest of all openings!'

This is where I beg to differ. I have always considered the French to be an exciting opening that offers Black very good counterattacking possibilities. Steinitz had obviously not looked at the opening in the same way that I have!

Indeed, in the context of chess, I am not even sure if the word 'Defence' is appropriate when muttering the word 'French'! The title of this book rather gives away what we are going to be aiming for. I have tried to pick the most aggressive, exciting and sound variations that are playable for Black in the French Defence. I have personally played most of these variations mentioned and they have often led to some great encounters.

If you really want to get to grips with the French Defence then I would recommend that after studying this book you also take a look to see what the top grandmasters are playing in the French, such as Berg, Korchnoi, Lputian and Morozevich. This will help you obtain an even better understanding of the opening as a whole. You must also try to get into the habit of working out what typical middlegame plans you should be aiming to execute and even what type of endgame structures benefit Black and White. Saying that, this book is hardly geared towards reaching an endgame!

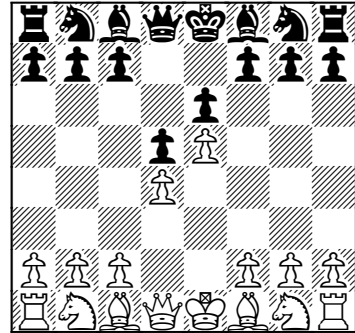
I often think that the most important thing when learning any opening is to understand the main concepts behind the moves that both sides play. Thus unlike certain books we won't be diving head first into the variations. Instead we will begin by considering various key concepts, aiming to understand the various plans and aims on offer to both sides.

The French from Black's Perspective

1. The ...c5 pawn break

You will find it very hard to play a game in the French Defence without playing this advance. The move ...c5 is often used as a lever by Black, a lever that aims to attack White's pawn centre.

By the nature of the opening moves White normally gains a space advantage and without any pawn breaks Black would be left with a horribly passive position. This is just one reason why it is so important to chip away at White's centre.



Here we have a typical French Advance pawn structure and in this position Black should play **3...c5!** This is such an important pawn break to remember! Without this break White would have a very solid grip over the centre.

In the French Black must do his best to keep attacking White's centre.

Later on we will see that the Ad-

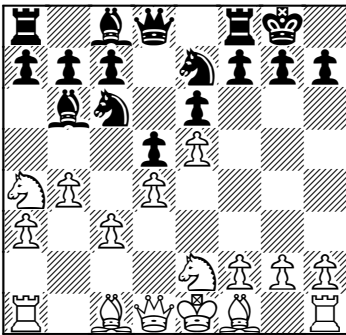
vance Variation of the French can often develop into a game of ping-pong. Black attacks the centre, White defends the centre, Black attacks the centre...

2. The ...f6 pawn break

You will often find that one of the main assets that White has in the French is his pawn on e5. This pawn cramps Black's position and gives White a basis to develop an attack from. Thus it is often a good idea to attack the bridge-head with the break ...f6.

J.Hector-E.Berg

Swedish League 2005



By playing the undermining **9...f6!** Black was able to generate some action in the centre and on the kingside. It is worth noting that the break ...c5 was ruled out here due to White having pawns on b4 and d4, so Black really had to rely on the ...f6 break in order to avoid being suffocated. This was a great game and I recommend that you take your time going over it later on in Chapter Three.

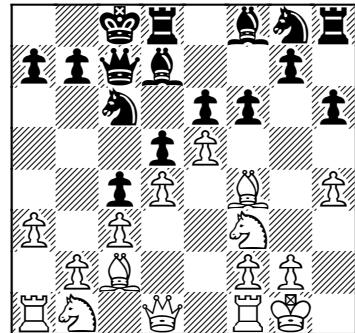
3. Activating Black's light-squared bishop via d7 and e8

With the move 1...e6 Black voluntarily cages in his light-squared bishop. This minor piece can easily remain a bad one throughout the game. For this reason Black should always keep his eyes open for the chance to give it some life.

One common way of bringing a little bit of joy to this piece is by the manoeuvre ...♗d7-e8-g6/h5. It is worth noting that this is only possible after Black has played ...f6. Take a look at the following example:

M.Adams-V.Epishin

Tel Apel 1992



After **11...♗e8!** Black's light-squared bishop finds an active post on h5. From h5 the bishop puts White's knight on f3 in an unpleasant pin and helps to increase the kingside pressure.

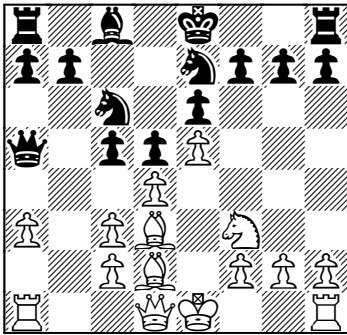
Just compare the two possible squares for Black's bishop, d7 and h5. On d7 the bishop is basically a big pawn, but on h5 it obtains a whole new lease of life.

4. Closing the position with ...c4

At a number of points throughout this book I am going to suggest plans based on 'controlled aggression'. In a lot of cases this will mean that Black's first aim is to stop White from gaining good attacking chances and only then will Black go on to the offensive himself. The next position is an example of this:

C. Briscoe-S. Williams

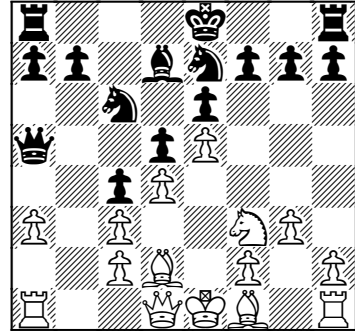
British Championship,
Great Yarmouth 2007



Black has to be a bit careful here as White's light-squared bishop is positioned on an active diagonal. 9...0-0? would be a mistake as it would allow White the chance to play 10 ♖xh7+! gaining a dangerous attack through the use of the Greek Gift. For that reason I decided to first play **9...c4!** This forces White's bishop to a passive square and closes the centre.

One word of warning though: *do be careful when playing the ...c4 advance, as Black can often lack counterplay after it.*

This case was an exception though, as after the natural sequence **10 ♖f1 ♗d7 11 g3** I was able to employ another typical French idea.



Here the pawn break **11...f6!** gave me plenty of counterplay in the centre and on the kingside, as we'll see in Chapter Five.

5. Good and bad minor pieces

Whenever you start to play an opening you should be aware of which pieces tend to be useful and which pieces can hinder you. Basically you must be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your position.

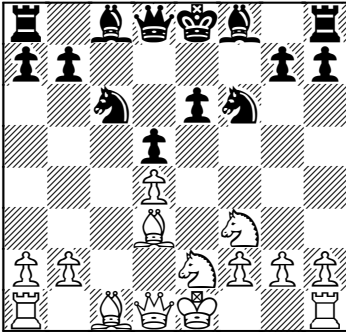
In general the dark-squared bishop is often one of Black's best minor pieces. This will obviously depend on the particular variation, but take the following position as an example.

J. Emms-S. Williams

British League (4NCL) 1999

This is one of main positions in the Tarrasch Variation. Black has already

played his two main breaks, ...c5 and ...f6.

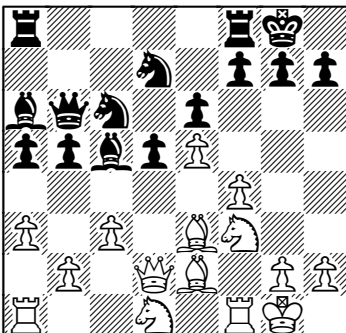


He should now play **10...♗d6**. This is a very good square for the bishop, taking aim at the white king and covering the all-important e5-square. In actual fact White often spends three tempi trying to exchange the dark-squared bishops with ♗g5-h4-g3.

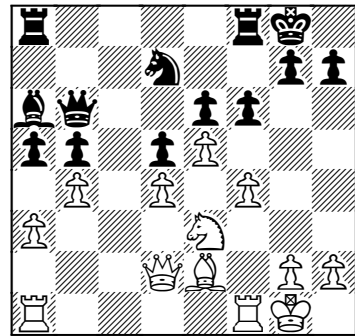
We have already mentioned that Black's light-squared bishop can become a bad piece. Let's just take one look at an example of this.

E.Alekseev-Ni Hua

Ningpo 2008



Black is getting ready to play the queenside advance ...b4 when he would be able to exchange off his passive light-squared bishop. Unfortunately for Ni Hua it was White's move and Alekseev was able to play **15 b4!**. After the sequence **15...♗xe3+ 16 ♖xe3 f6 17 ♘d4 ♗xd4 18 cxd4...**



...Black was left with a shockingly bad bishop on a6 and White went on to win quickly.

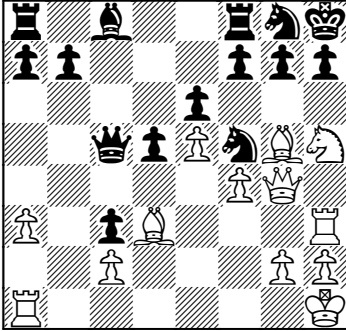
The French from White's Perspective

1. Exploiting the space advantage

The nature of the opening gives White a space advantage and his pawn centre on d4 and e4/e5 is often a good basis to build an attack around. This is why it is so important in the French to play actively as Black. Black must try and attack the white pawn formation as quickly as possible. If Black fails to do this then something along the lines of the following nasty accident can happen.

E.Gullaksen-S.Williams

Oslo 2004



In this game I had done nothing to tackle White's strong pawn on e5. The pawn on e5 can often be the bane of a French player's existence. In this position I tried to strike out with **17...f6**, but White had already massed his forces too near to my king and was able to finish me off by playing **18 ♖xf5 exf5 19 ♕xf6!** when I had no choice but to resign.

2. Let's start an attack with ♖g4!

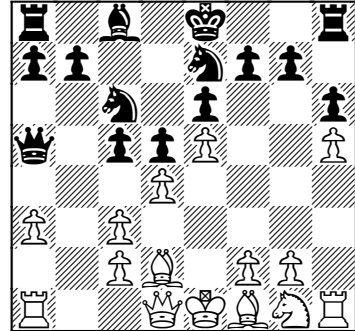
Black's g7-pawn will often become a target in the French. This is especially true in some of the double-edged systems that I am going to recommend. One of the best ways for White to start an attack against Black's kingside is by playing the move ♖g4.

J.Tomczak-E.Toth

Szeged 2008

This is a fairly standard type of structure and one that we are going to

come across quite often in the course of this book. Black has weakened White's queenside by exchanging on c3, but he has also left his kingside open to attack.



White now played **10 ♖g4!** which is the only way that he can hope to gain an advantage from the opening. You will find that this is the case in a number of instances. White must play actively otherwise he will pass the advantage over to Black.

3. The f4-f5 breakthrough

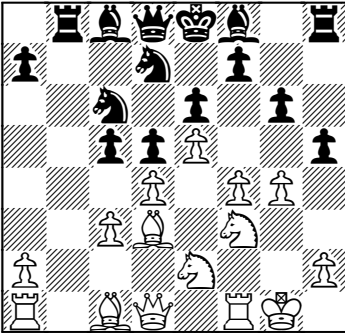
White will often attempt to support his pawn on e5 with the move f4. This constructs a big pawn centre that Black has to keep an eye on. Take a look at the following position.

S.Williams-M.Jeanne

Uxbridge 2010

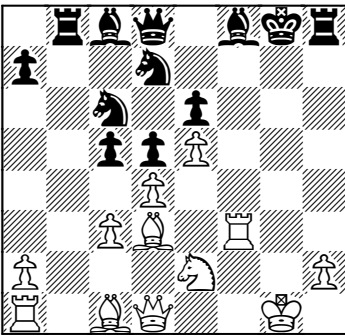
(see following diagram)

Black has just played the move 12...h5.



This was a bit careless as it allowed me to play **13 f5!** which began a devastating attack. Black will often leave his king in the centre of the board in the French, but this can carry some risk. For a start, Black must always watch out for any breaks that will open up his king. This is a classic example.

After **13...hxg4 14 fxg6 gxf3 15 gxf7+ ♔xf7 16 ♖xf3+ ♔g8** Black's king had been ripped clear of all protection.

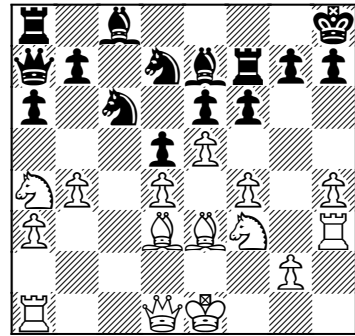


There is no defence to the onslaught of White pieces flooding in. Following **17 ♖g3+ ♗g7 18 ♘g5 ♔e8 19 ♘f4** White's attack was overwhelming and the game was soon over.

4. Good and bad minor pieces

In general White's best minor piece is quite clearly his light-squared bishop. This piece is often of the utmost importance when starting an attack, as we can see here.

C.Bauer-E.Berg
Internet (blitz) 2004



The opening has been a disaster for Black. He has been left with a passive and cramped position. White now played **18 ♘g5!?**, starting an attack against the black king. This is only possible due to the strength of White's light-squared bishop. The bishop on d3 is a monster of a piece which aims directly at Black's king.

White is often advised to try to hold on to his light-squared bishop for as long as possible. Losing the bishop will often mean losing the possibility to attack.

Acknowledgements

I would just like to say a quick thank you to everyone who has helped me

Attacking Chess: The French

put this book together. My main praise goes to John Emms for his continued patience and generosity in handing out extended deadlines.

If you ever get around to reading this book, Gary O'Grady, you will have

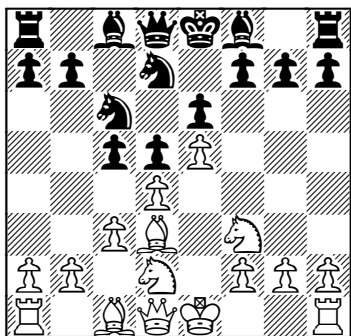
an opening that you can play. No more playing the Alekhine!

Simon Williams,
Farnham,
March 2011

Chapter 9

The Tarrasch Variation: The Universal System

In this chapter, the last to deal with the Tarrasch, I am going to concentrate on the increasingly popular Universal Variation, **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 ♗f6 4 e5 ♗fd7 5 ♙d3 c5 6 c3 ♖c6 7 ♗gf3.**



This is a dangerous system which has been adopted by a number of top grandmasters. I have even noticed that England's no.1 player, Michael Adams, has stopped playing the other Tarrasch variations in favour of this. Incidentally, the system has obtained its 'Universal' name tag because White can play in a similar manner and try to engineer a transposition after both 3...c5

and 3...♙e7.

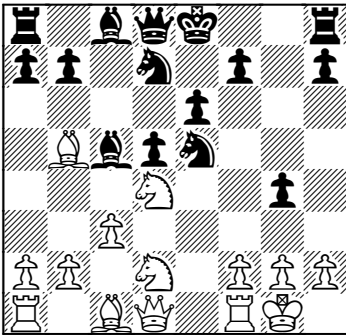
White's knight is aggressively placed on f3 and Black can often find himself on the receiving end of a nasty attack. In keeping with the nature of this book I will be recommending the super-aggressive move 7...♙e7 8 0-0 g5!?. This used to be a favourite of mine, but then I stopped playing it after a couple of bad results. However, after a fair amount of new analysis, I am expecting a rebirth of this variation in my future games!

In this variation I believe that it is more important for Black to be aware of White's main ideas and that is what I am going to concentrate on here. In general Black's plan is fairly straightforward – he simply wants to destroy White's centre. The main problem that Black faces is his king position. After playing the move 8...g5 Black will find it hard to ever castle kingside. Thus he will often have to play the game with his king in the centre or attempt queenside castling.

1. White opens things up with f4!

White will often lose a pawn in the centre, but this is of little concern to him as he normally obtains good attacking chances in return. White will often start his attack with the move f4.

Z.Veroci-L.Gyorkos
Budapest 2007



Here **12 f4!** was an obvious and dangerous way to start the attack when the position after **12...♘c6 13 ♙xc6 bxc6 14 ♚xg4** was pretty unclear.

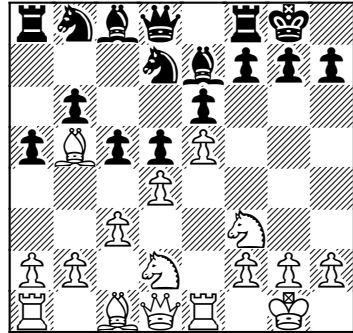
2. The white knight dance: ♘f1-g3-h5!

In the Universal System this can be an extremely effective plan as White's knight is already on d2. If White is given time, he can move this knight around to a more effective square. Take a look at the following game:

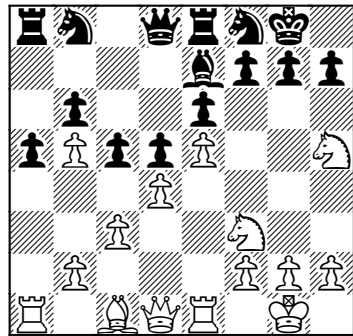
G.Kasparov-N.Short
(Zurich rapid) 2001

Kasparov gave a model display of the attacking possibilities that White

has available in the French.



He now played **10 ♘f1!** As well as bringing the knight around towards Black's king, this move also releases White's dark-squared bishop which will shortly play an important role. After **10...♙a6 11 a4 ♙xb5 12 axb5 ♖e8 13 ♘g3! ♘f8 14 ♘h5!** the knight had reached a very dangerous attacking square.



Indeed, Black's position quickly went downhill: **14...♗bd7 15 g3 ♘g6 16 h4 ♘df8 17 ♙g2 ♚d7 18 ♙h6!!** and Black's king did not last much longer.

This is one reason why I am suggesting that Black plays **8...g5!?** He un-

balances the position from an early stage and White is not given time to pull off such extravagant knight manoeuvres.

Game 48
S.Rublevsky-S.Volkov
European Championship,
Ohrid 2001

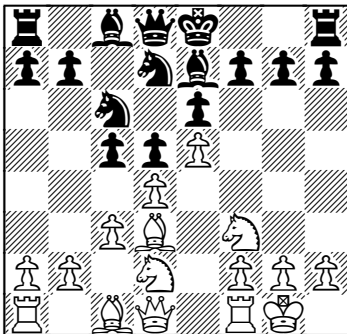
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 ♙e7

We reach the Universal System via an interesting move order. Our usual move order would be 3...♗f6 4 e5 ♗fd7 5 ♙d3 c5 6 c3 ♗c6 7 ♗gf3 ♙e7.

4 ♗gf3 ♗f6 5 e5 ♗fd7 6 ♙d3 c5 7 c3 ♗c6

This is the starting point of the opening. The first thing you should notice is that Black does not play the move ...f6 in this particular line. This is due to the aggressive placement of White's knight on f3. The problem is that ...f6 can often run into tactics based around the move ♗g5.

8 0-0



How should Black continue now? The move 8...0-0 looks very risky as White's bishop on d3 is ideally lined up against the h7-pawn and White has a number of ways that he would be able to start an attack against Black's king.

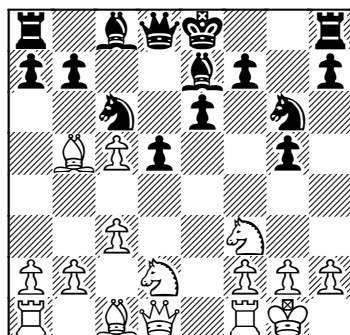
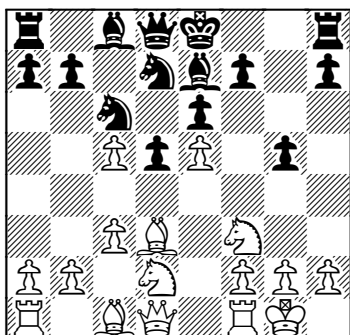
Let's first think about what is wrong with White's set-up. The main thing that we notice is the position of his knight on d2. At the moment it is blocking in the dark-squared bishop and it will take a while to get this knight into the game. Having a knight on d2 will also make it harder for White to defend his d4-pawn, so it makes sense for Black to aim for White's d-pawn.

There are two main ways that Black can do this: one is by playing 8...♗b6 and the other is the approach chosen here. The main problem with the immediate 8...♗b6 is that White gains an attack after 9 ♙e1 cxd4 10 cxd4 ♗xd4 11 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 12 ♗f3 ♗b6 13 ♗a4. I do not enjoy defending such positions, which is why I have gone for a more counterattacking option in this book.

8...g5!

By playing this move Black plans to chase White's knight on c3 away with ...g5-g4. It will then be possible to capture the pawn on d4. However, this is a very double-edged approach as Black cannot really consider castling kingside anymore because his g-pawn has marched up the board. Indeed, the game can become very wild and messy after this aggressive lunge.

9 dxc5!



This is White's best response to Black's pawn push. He wants to open up the centre as much as possible, so that he can try to exploit the slightly exposed nature of Black's king.

Other options will be looked at in Giplis-Savchenko towards the end of the chapter.

9...♞dx5

The knight grabs a central pawn. This makes sense, but it can leave the black king open to attack along the e-file.

Black actually has a number of options here and we will look at 9...g4 and 9...♞xc5 later on.

10 ♙b5?!

Black should be fine after this move. White should play 10 ♞xe5! which we will look at next in Rublevsky-Morozevich.

10...♙d7

A move that I used to experiment with was 10...♞g6!?. My plan was to give some extra protection to my king so that I could castle kingside. I also wanted to combine this with ...e5.

I still think that this move is underrated here. For example:

a) 11 b4 0-0 (11...a5!?) 12 ♞d4 ♙d7 13 a4 and now in A.Holst-S.Williams, Aarhus 1998, I now played 13...e5, which was okay, but even better would have been 13...a5! when Black is slightly better.

b) 11 c4 0-0 12 cxd5 ♞xd5 13 ♞b3 g4 14 ♞xd5 exd5 15 ♙xc6 bxc6 16 ♞fd4 ♙d7 was fine for Black in K.Zalkind-S.Williams, Witley 1999. The two bishops should come into their own later on in the game.

11 ♞e2?!

Too passive. White had a second chance to capture on e5 and he should have played 11 ♞xe5!, transposing to our next game.

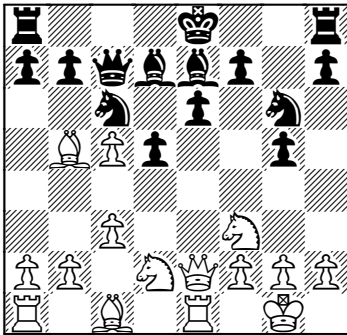
11...♞c7

Black is getting ready to castle queenside when his strong centre and advanced g-pawn will give him very good chances.

12 ♞e1

This may also be a slight waste of time.

12...♘g6



I prefer Black's position. He has ideas such as ...g4, ...♗f4 and ...e5 all ready to happen.

13 ♖b3 g4 14 ♗fd4 e5

The opening has gone very well for Volkov. He has a massive pawn centre, whilst White is lacking any way to attack on the queenside. If only we could get this position every time we played the French!

15 ♗c2

White could have tried 15 ♗xc6 bxc6 16 ♖a6, but now Black can castle the other way, 16...0-0, when he is ready to launch another pawn up the board, this time the f-pawn, with a good position.

15...a6 16 ♖a4

A rather strange square for the bishop, but the white pawn on c5 will always make it hard for Black to ever achieve ...b5.

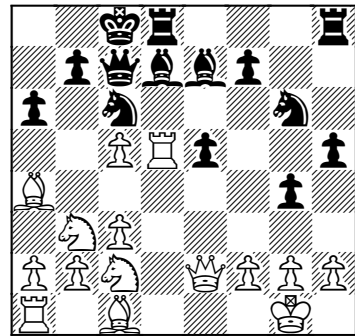
16...h5 17 ♗d1 0-0-0!

Black relies on a little tactical point to defend his centre.

Instead 17...♖e6 18 ♗b4 ♗d8 19

♗xc6 bxc6 20 ♗xa6 ♗c8 would have left Black with some compensation for the sacrificed pawn; he just needs to get either his f- or h-pawn moving quickly up the board. I expect that White is better though, as he can generate good play on the queenside with ♗a5 and then b4.

18 ♗xd5



This is pretty much forced as otherwise Black has time to play ...♖e6 on his next move with a good position.

18...♗d4

Another option was 18...♖f5!? which should give Black pretty decent compensation: for example, 19 ♗xd8+ ♗xd8 20 ♗b4 ♗xb4 21 cxb4 ♖d3 22 ♗e3 ♗f4 with a complicated game ahead.

19 ♖xd7+ ♗xd7 20 cxd4?!

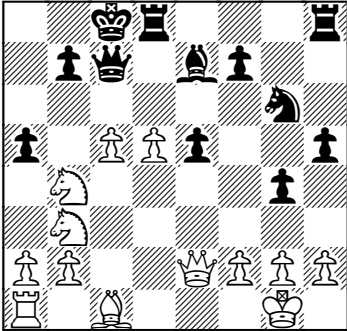
This is a mistake. White should have played 20 ♗xd4 which would have led to a roughly equal position after 20...exd4 21 cxd4 ♖f6. If White can ever manage to play d5 then he will be doing well, but in the meantime Black has ideas of playing ...h4, ...♗e7 and ...♗f4

with counterplay against White's king. This is certainly an interesting position.

20...♖xd5 21 ♘b4 ♕dd8 22 d5

White was relying on this move to give him good chances. The main problem is...

22...a5!



...which favourably liquidates the position for Black.

23 d6

Otherwise d5 drops.

23...♗xd6 24 cxd6 ♖xd6 25 ♗g5

This is pretty much forced as 25 ♘c2 allows 25...♗d1+ with a winning position for Black.

25...axb4 26 ♗xd8 ♖xd8

The dust has settled and Black is a pawn up. Just as important is his control over the d-file. Moreover, if Black can manage to exchange queens then White will have a hopeless defensive task ahead.

27 g3 ♖b8

Another option was the immediate 27...♗d3 which would force White's queen to a bad square with 28 ♖c1+ ♖b8 29 ♗e1.

28 ♗b5?

This is another error. White's queen is needed around the centre and king-side in order to defend the light squares.

28...h4!

Black is simply threatening to play ...h3 and then ...♗d5.

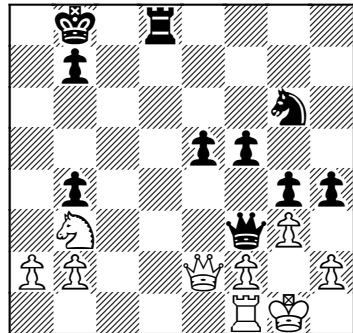
29 ♗e2

29 ♘c5 allows a number of exchanges after 29...♗d1+ 30 ♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 31 ♗f1 (not 31 ♖g2?? h3 mate) 31...♖xf1+ 32 ♖xf1 when White would have had a tough job to hold the ending.

29...f5

The rest is pretty easy for Black.

30 ♖e1 ♗d5 31 ♖f1 ♗f3



Black decides to take no risks. A typically Russian way of finishing off the game!

32 ♗xf3 gxf3

The ending is easily winning for Black. His central pawn formation will prove to be too strong for White.

33 ♖e1 e4 34 ♖f1 ♗e5 35 gxf4 ♗d3 36 ♖d1 ♖g8 37 ♗d4 ♖g2 38 ♖d2 ♗f4 39 ♖c2 ♖xh2 40 ♖e1 ♗d3+ 0-1