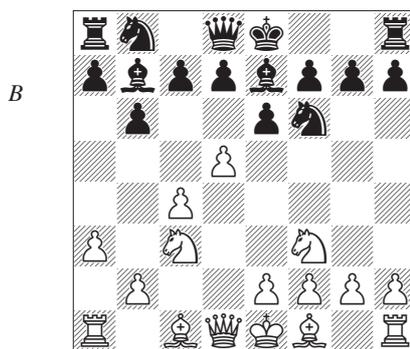
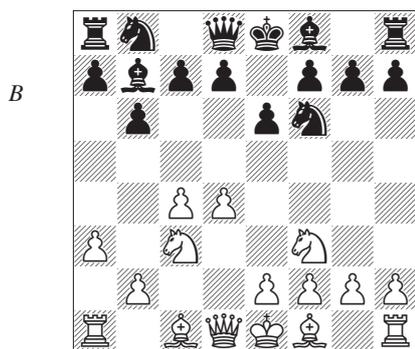


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4 4 a3: Introduction and 4...♗b7 5 ♘c3



It may seem strange for a non-developing move such as 4 a3 to achieve main-line status, but this inspiration of the great World Champion Tigran Petrosian has a formidable reputation and is second only to 4 g3 in popularity as a response to the Queen's Indian. On one level the move is a great tribute to the Nimzo-Indian – White wants to play ♘c3 without having this piece pinned and he is willing to pay for that luxury. It is also, and I make no apology for this emphasis, since it can scarcely be overstated, a reminder yet again of the degree to which the contest for the e4- and d5-squares is pivotal to this entire opening. It is this which makes an unfettered knight on c3 such a crucial piece, for there is no way a tempo could be given so lightly to secure a piece which would enjoy merely routine influence.

If the reader were to take only one fact away from this section, it should be that the knight wields sufficient clout to ensure that routine development for Black is not a viable option. In other words, from the above diagram after 4 a3 ♗b7 5 ♘c3, the move 5...♙e7?! constitutes a serious inaccuracy after which only the scale of White's advantage should be up for discussion! The point is that White plays 6 d5! (D).

This seizes space, blots out the b7-bishop, affords the e7-bishop no favours either, and prepares to follow up effectively with e4 or g3 according to taste. Suspend any hypermodern beliefs for just a moment. This is a secure centre, cramping the opponent while creating precious little by way of a target for him to enjoy. For one reason alone this point is worth accord- ing a special place in the discussion. MegaBase 2005 reveals, rather shockingly, that 5...♙e7?!, although virtually unseen in modern master play, is the second most common move in the position overall, perhaps encouraged by the relatively large number of white players who seem oblivious to the strength of 6 d5 in turn. I am no fan of opening statistics in general, but this deserves to change!

This crucial fact also obliges Black to find a strategy that will adequately contest the centre squares. Game 13 represents Black's attempts to find something a little radical – perhaps risk- ing a slight theoretical shortfall in exchange for original play and counter-chances. Somehow this seems, spiritually, to belong in Chapter 5! Still, the inescapable fact is that 5...d5 is by far the most trusted solution. In fact as we have

observed before, there may be a certain psychological aversion to this move among practitioners of the Queen's Indian, an opening which forms a neat repertoire package with the Nimzo-Indian in that they both emphasize *piece* control of the central light squares. Nonetheless, the strong case for the move here is widely accepted and it is only really with 6 ♕g5 in Game 14 that White can aspire to force something resembling a genuine Queen's Gambit structure. Even here there is the sense that the most dangerous lines are avoided and indeed in the main line of this game, the ball is all too clearly back in White's court. Otherwise, Black can meet 6 cxd5 with 6... ♖xd5 and continue to keep the centre fluid. This popular line is the subject of

Games 15-17 and the key debate is whether this determination to avoid a rigid pawn-structure really cedes the centre to White. Critical to this judgement is the formation where White organizes e4 and recaptures on c3 with a pawn. Whether his bishop is on g7 (Game 15) or e7 (Game 16), my feeling is that Black can create enough pressure on the centre to obtain reasonable chances. Game 17 suggests that at least some players with White agree with this assessment and are keen to recapture the knight on c3 with a bishop. Look carefully throughout at issues of move-order, especially at White's possibilities to change course with an early ♖xd5, and at the various symmetrical structures which can arise from a very quick ...c5.

Game 13

Roman Slobodjan – Jon Speelman

Lippstadt 2000

1 d4 ♖f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♗f3 b6 4 a3 ♕b7 5 ♗c3 g6

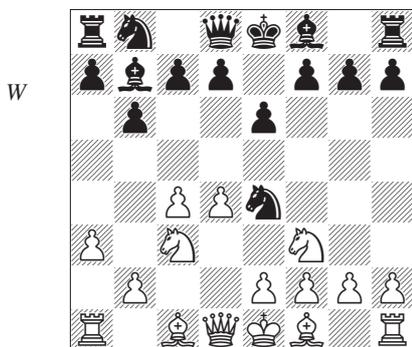
In my opinion, this is the most interesting of Black's various ways to avoid the main lines. The danger with this type of double fianchetto is that Black will cede too much ground in the centre and specifically that the focus of his counterplay will become blurred. If Black is really phasing in some play on the dark squares in the style of the King's Indian, it might be asked where ...e6, never mind a queenside fianchetto, fits in. Still, he can take solace that if he does alter the terms of the debate, he might succeed in making 4 a3 look something akin to a loss of tempo. Moreover, White needs to make further preparation before he can establish a pawn-centre, and the fianchetto does feel like a good preparation in the event that White advances his d-pawn.

Back in the introduction, I stressed that 4 a3 was all about contesting d5 as well as e4 and that the most graphic illustration of this arises if Black proceeds with the routine and inadequate 5... ♕e7?!, which is powerfully met with the immediate 6 d5!. This does not require detailed analysis – just to note that after 6...0-0 7 e4 Black gains nothing by exchanging on d5, and

must even play 7...d6 prior to any challenging of the centre with his c-pawn. White has a genuine choice of good squares for his light-squared bishop, but 8 ♕e2 looks most flexible. In many games Black eventually succumbs to playing ...e5, but in such a structure his only real source of potential counterplay is to effect the advance ...f5 and to this end his bishop would clearly stand better on c8, never mind the two wasted tempi putting it on a worse square! 8...c6 looks more logical, but just waiting with 9 0-0 seems strong when 9... ♗bd7 10 dxe6! fxe6 11 ♗g5 is embarrassing, and even if Black first exchanges twice on d5, he has a serious space deficit and few chances of increasing the pressure against d5. All in all, Black is really struggling after 6 d5!.

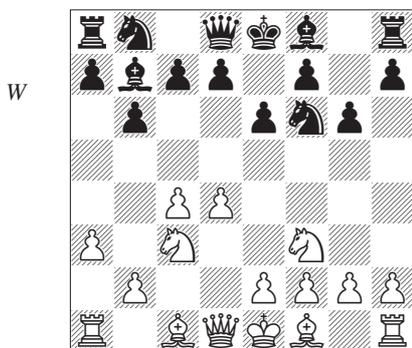
There is though one respectable alternative here in 5... ♗e4 (*D*), initiating an exchange of pieces both integral to the struggle for both e4 and d5.

However, in my view there are both practical and theoretical drawbacks to this move. Practically, it has none of the unbalancing excitement we find in the main game here. If after 6 ♗xe4 ♕xe4, White settles for the simple 7 e3 and 8



♙d3, Black will have no better chances to create special tension and imbalance than he enjoys in the main 5...d5 lines. More seriously though, I am sceptical about his position after the logical 7 ♘d2! ♙b7 (if 7...♙g6 the bishop is palpably missed on the long diagonal; 8 g3! ♙e7 9 ♙g2 d5 10 e4! is unpleasant for Black, Stohl-Romanishin, Kaskady 2002) 8 e4. Now if he fianchettoes with 8...g6, White is just in time to organize tidily with 9 ♙d3 ♙g7 10 ♘f3 d6 and 11 ♙g5!/? seems likely to provoke further concessions. There seems to be no compensation for White's pleasant spatial plus here. The one real attempt to interfere with this smooth flow is 8...♗f6, which does pretty much force 9 d5. However, this is rather a Pyrrhic victory since 9...♙c5 10 ♘f3 ♗g6 11 b4!/? ♗xe4+ 12 ♙e2 ♙e7 13 0-0 offers excellent compensation for the pawn. The exposure of Black's queen is likely to cost further development time and opening the e-file is fraught with unacceptable danger.

We now return to 5...g6 (D):



6 ♗c2

One for lovers of paradox: this position is regarded as quite respectable for Black with his pawn on g7 (it will merit two games in Chapter 5!), but here it is slightly frowned upon despite there being an extra developing move, 5...g6, in the bank. The reason is twofold. In Chapter 5, the claim that ♗c2 does not fit well with White's set-up and that it might even be worth expending a tempo to provoke it is not of a general nature. *It is very specific to the immediate attack on White's centre with ...c5.* Unfortunately, this move does not mix well with 5...g6 – the fianchetto is liable to leave d6 intolerably weak. Moreover, while theory in general admits to a number of valid set-ups in which a double fianchetto tackles a broad pawn-centre, here the black knight is not optimally placed on f6. With this piece on e7, White would always have to bear in mind that trying to smother one bishop would tend to liberate the other, but here there may according to circumstance be a reasonable case for either d5 or e4-e5.

Indeed, 6 d5!/? is a valid alternative immediately. After 6...♙g7 White often continues with 7 g3, but 7...0-0 followed by ...c6 to put pressure on White's centre seems reasonable. I feel more sympathy with 7 e4!/? 0-0 8 ♙d3, when theory seems to endorse the unpretentious 8...d6. However, while the g7-bishop is well placed, its colleague on b7 is not, and a lot of store is being placed on ...c6 again to keep the balance.

6 ♙g5 is also a decent try. I quite like the idea of meeting 6...♙g7 with 7 e3, and after 7...d6, either 8 d5!/? or perhaps 8 h3!?. The former sees White initiate play on the light squares in the centre to counteract his opponent's intention to chase his dark-squared bishop with ...g5 and ...♘h5. With the latter he simply preserves it. However, perhaps 7...0-0!/? first keeps White guessing a bit.

6...♙xf3!/?

Black's logic is quite comprehensible. In the lines where White is able to play e4, Black's bishop on b7 risks being smothered, a typical example being 6...♙g7 7 e4 0-0 8 ♙g5 h6 9 ♙e3 d6 10 h3 ♘bd7 11 ♙e2 d5 12 cxd5 exd5 13 e5 ♘e4 14 ♙d3!, as in Dreev-Sorokin, St Petersburg Zonal 1993. By making this exchange immediately, he avoids this scenario