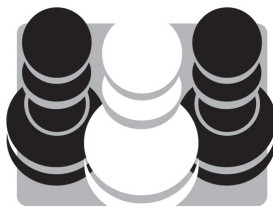


# Positional Chess Sacrifices

By

**Mihai Suba**



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**Oleg Korneev – Mihai Suba**

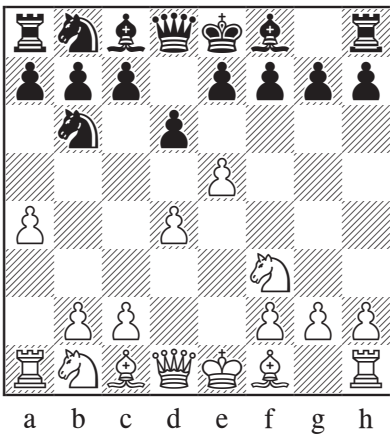
Orense 2000

**Points to look for in this game:**

- ◆ An overrated pawn move – 5.a4
- ◆ A pawn sacrifice to undermine the centre – 15...c5!
- ◆ The wrong exchange sacrifice – 21.♖d5?

The most critical moment of this game came at move 21, when White had to choose between sacrificing an exchange immediately, and taking a different path which would have led to a different kind of exchange sacrifice in the near future. The second option was more or less satisfactory, but fortunately for me it remained in the background. My opponent went for the ill-fated option, which was overoptimistic and led to a swift downfall. It provides a good counter-example to the theme of this book, showing a tempting sacrifice whose positive features are outweighed by other more salient factors.

1.e4 ♖f6 2.e5 ♘d5 3.d4 d6 4.♗f3 ♘b6? 5.a4



It is a mystery to me why this move with such lamentable consequences is on top of the popularity chart in this variation, and

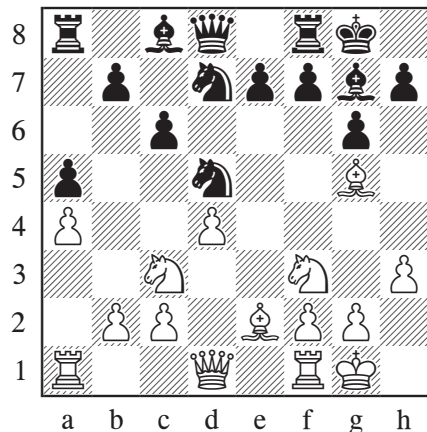
why Theory has cherished it for so long. The weakness of b5 is less important than that of b4 in the Alekhine. If you do not believe me, I call a horse to testify about its possible hippety-hoppety between d5 and b4. And in the event of the exchange of pawns on e5, another horse may bear witness to the secure stable on c5.

The explanation might be that White is afraid that a typical break with ...c5 will ruin his proud centre, and so he seeks compensation “in advance” by creating a hole on b5. Or it could be that White is anticipating an exchange of pawns on d6, and with the a-pawns fixed, he will feel safer against a minority attack by Black. Should an admirer of Nimzowitsch try to encourage you in this overly prophylactic prophylaxis, do not let him assault your ears. Just believe in me and equine testimonies!

**5...a5 6.h3**

Over the board, Korneev realized that the theoretical recommendation of 6.♘b5† c6 7.♘d3 ♘g4 was not exactly what he wanted. For example: 8.exd6 exd6 9.0-0 ♘e7 10.c3 ♘8d7 11.♗bd2 d5 12.♞e1 ♘h5 13.♗f1 ♘g6 14.♗g3 0-0 15.♗f5 ♞e8 16.♞c2 ♗f8 17.♗f4 ♗c4 18.b3 ♘xf5 19.♘xf5 ♗d6= led to a draw in 61 moves in Rodriguez Cespedes – Suba, Barcelona 2000.

6...dxe5 7.♗xe5 ♗8d7 8.♗f3 g6 9.♘c2 ♘g7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♗c3 c6 12.♘g5 ♗d5?!

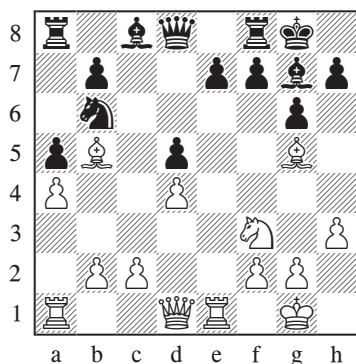


**13. ♖e4!?**

This is not best.

13. ♖e1 offers White a slight advantage.

After 13. ♖xd5!? cxd5 14. ♖b5 ♖b6 15. ♖e1 Black has to play well to keep the balance:



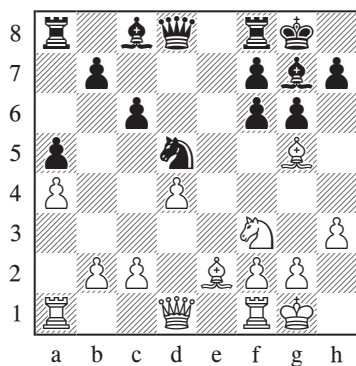
15...f6! 16. ♖f4 ♖d7 17. ♖e2 ♖e8 18. b3 e6 19. ♖d3 ♖c6! 20. ♖e2 ♖d7 21. ♖ae1 ♖xb5 22. ♖xb5 ♖xb5 23. axb5 ♖f7= and Black intends ...a4 next.

**13... ♖7f6 14. ♖g3**

Without central domination or a clear attacking idea, White simply amasses pieces on the kingside. However, he has nothing better, as the alternatives give Black comfortable play:

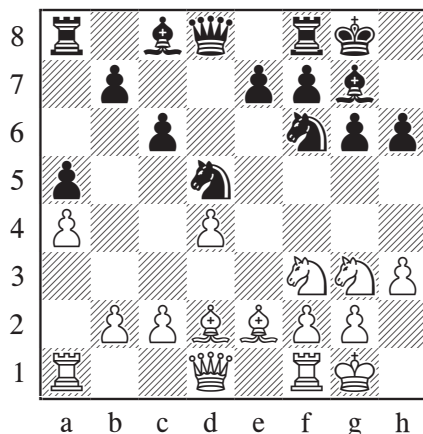
14. ♖c5 b6 15. ♖d3 ♖e4 16. ♖c1 ♖b7 17. ♖de5 c5 18. ♖d3 ♖b4†

14. ♖xf6† is well met by 14...exf6! when I prefer Black, for example:



15. ♖d2 ♖e8 16. ♖e1 ♖f8 17. c4 ♖b4 18. ♖b3 ♖f5 19. ♖ac1 ♖e4 20. ♖e3 ♖d6 21. ♖d2 ♖f5 22. c5 ♖c7 23. ♖c4 ♖d7†

**14...h6 15. ♖d2**



White’s position looks favourable due to the opponent’s apparent lack of counterplay. His plan is simple: with ♖c1 he will provoke ...♖h7. Then, by c3 and ♖d3 he will pin the g-pawn, threatening h4-h5 and provoking ...h5. Once the square g5 is conquered, the queen will be transferred to the b1-h7 diagonal, with various sacrifices in the air.

Is it really that simple? I only omitted one detail – the duty of Black to play moves in the meantime!

**15...c5!**

As in all hypermodern defences and most semi-open games, Black must undermine the white centre. Of course, he could have prepared this by 15... ♖c7 or 15... ♖b6, but offering some bait is not bad either. You never know...

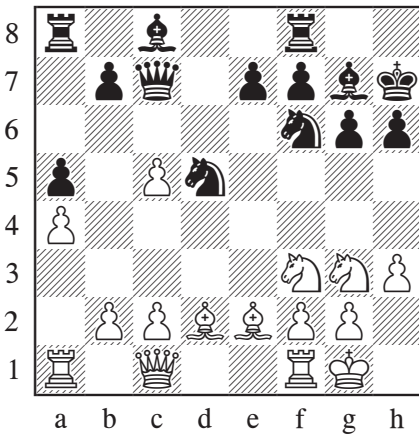
**16. dxc5?!**

This move is not in itself bad; the “dubious” symbol refers to White’s intention to keep the captured pawn.

Against 16.c3, I intended 16...b6!? accepting an inferior pawn structure in exchange for play in the centre and on the b-file. For example: 17.dxc5 bxc5 18.♖c1 ♔h7 19.♙b5 ♙b7 20.♞d1 ♞c7 21.♞e1 e6 22.♜e5 ♞fd8=

Another possibility for White is 16.c4 ♘b4 17.d5 e6 18.dxe6 ♙xe6 19.♖c1 ♔h7 20.♙c3 ♞e7 21.♞f4 ♞ad8 22.♞fd1 b6 23.♞h4 ♜g8=.

16...♞c7 17.♖c1 ♔h7



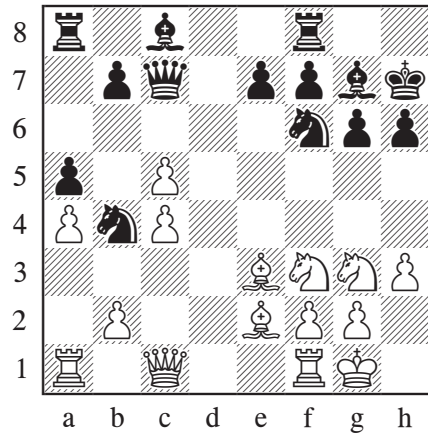
18.c4

This advance “kills” White’s majority on the queenside. As Korchnoi might say, “It is well known that pawns cannot go back.”

An alternative is 18.c3 ♞xc5 (18...♜d7?! 19.b4!±) 19.c4 ♘b4 20.♙e3 ♞c7 21.♜d4 ♙d7 22.♜b5 ♙xb5 23.axb5 ♜d7 24.♞d1 ♜c5 with equality.

18...♜b4 19.♙e3?!

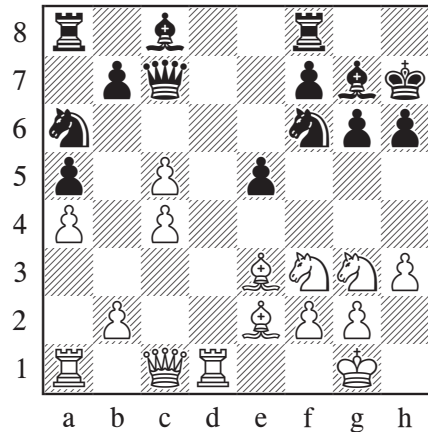
Defending the pawn is not good, but how else should White justify the heresy of his previous move? It is fashionable for football commentators to use chess terms like “strategy” and “tactics”. I shall pay them back by borrowing their terminology and saying that this was an *unforced error*, because 19.♜d4! ♞xc5 20.♙e3 ♞e5 21.♞d1 ♙d7 would still be a touch better for White.



19...e5!

Before getting his pawn back, Black occupies the centre and prevents a knight trip via d4 to b5.

20.♞d1 ♜a6



21.♞d5?

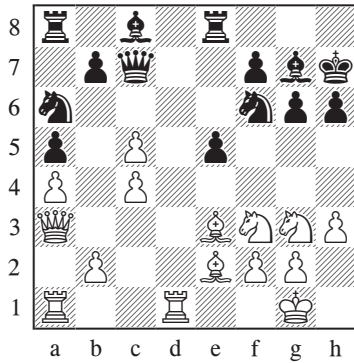
Although it may appear tempting, this exchange sacrifice is a mistake. It will quickly become clear that the text move helps Black to mobilize his strong centre against the tangled web of white pieces on the kingside.

The correct path was:

21.♞c3 ♞e8

21...♜d7 22.♜e4 ♜dxc5 23.♜xc5 ♜xc5 24.♞a3 b6 25.♜d2 ♙e6 26.♜b3=

22. ♖a3



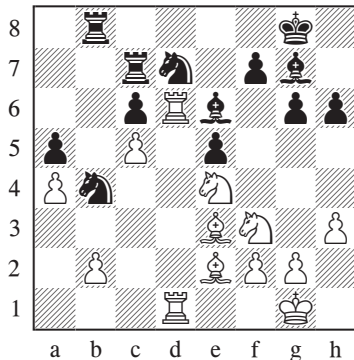
22... ♙e6

22... ♙f8?! 23. ♖d6! would be a much more desirable exchange sacrifice.

23. c6 bxc6 24. ♗d6 ♗xd6 25. ♖xd6 ♖ec8  
26. ♖d2 ♖d7 27. ♖e4

Threatening 28. ♖fg5†.

27... ♖g8 28. ♖d6 ♖ab8 29. ♖ad1 ♖c7 30. c5  
♖b4



31. ♖xe6!

This exchange sacrifice does not fully solve White's problems, but it is much better than the option seen in the game.

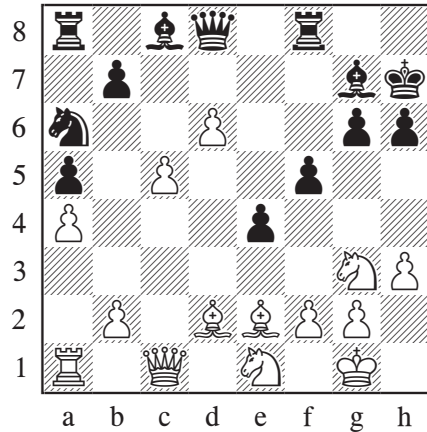
31... fxe6 32. ♙xh6 ♙xh6 33. ♖xd7 ♖d5!  
34. ♖d6 ♖xb2

White's compensation is not quite enough for equality, but at the same time it will not be easy for Black to convert his extra material.

21... ♖xd5 22. cxd5 f5!†

Highlighting the awkwardness of White's cluttered kingside pieces.

23. d6 ♗d8 24. ♙d2 e4 25. ♖e1



The strength of the mobile centre has pushed back White's forces. It is now time to deal with the passed pawns.

25... b6!

The rest is simple.

26. ♙xa6 ♖xa6 27. c6 ♗xd6 28. ♙f4 ♗e7  
29. ♗c4 g5 30. ♙b8 ♗c5 31. ♗b5 ♖a8 32. ♙c7  
♙d4 33. ♖e2 ♙xf2† 34. ♖f1 ♙a6 35. ♗xc5  
♙xc5 36. ♖d1 f4 37. ♖d7† ♖g6  
0-1

### Post-game reflections

In a book mostly filled with inspirational examples of glowing positional sacrifices, we should keep our feet on the ground and remember that a tempting sacrifice will not always have the desired effect. In the above example certain elements of the position favoured the exchange sacrifice, such as the correcting of White's pawn structure and the advanced c- and d-pawns. Unfortunately for Korneev, his minor pieces were poorly placed, and he had to waste valuable time moving

them while my kingside pawns roamed forwards. Once that happened, White's prized pawns were devoid of support, and it was easy to undermine and capture them.

We will conclude the chapter with a game from super-GM praxis.

*Some part of a mistake is always correct* – Savielly Tartakower

### Veselin Topalov – Magnus Carlsen

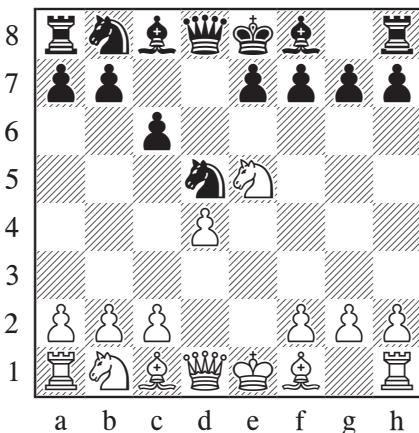
Morelia/Linares 2008

#### Points to look for in this game:

- ♦ Small but significant inaccuracies from White – 6.♘d3, 9.♘d2, 11.♞e1 and 12.c3
- ♦ Ambitious play from Black – 12...c5!
- ♦ A positional pawn sacrifice to fight for a draw – 15.h3! in the notes

Casual play in the opening by Topalov leads to some problems for White. Black takes over the initiative, and after again failing to choose the more promising options, Veselin finds himself in a difficult endgame.

1.e4 ♘f6 2.e5 ♘d5 3.d4 d6 4.♘f3 dxe5  
5.♘xe5 c6



#### 6.♘d3

This is not the best square for the bishop; instead both 6.♘e2 and 6.♘c4 are sound choices.

It should be noted that the aggressive 6.c4?! is hasty here due to 6...♘b4! (threatening 7...♙xd4!) 7.♘e3 ♘f5 8.♘a3 (8.♘d3 e5!) 8...♘d7 with a slight advantage for Black.

#### 6...♘d7 7.♘xd7

This is not bad, but more in the spirit of the position is 7.♘f3 ♘7f6 8.h3 (or 8.c3±) 8...♘b4 9.♘c4 ♘f5 10.♘b3 a5∞.

A less ambitious approach for White is 7.0–0 ♘xe5 (7...g6 is also possible) 8.dxe5 ♘e6! with a balanced position.

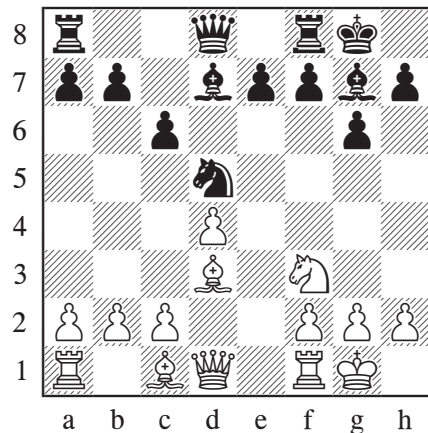
#### 7...♘xd7 8.0–0 g6 9.♘d2

This move is a bit 'flat' and cannot promise any real advantage.

Another move deserving the same epithet, or worse, is 9.♞e1 ♘g7 10.c3 0–0 11.♘g5 ♙b6 and Black already has some initiative.

The forthright 9.c4± is best.

9...♘g7 10.♘f3 0–0



Topalov now starts to play a bit carelessly.

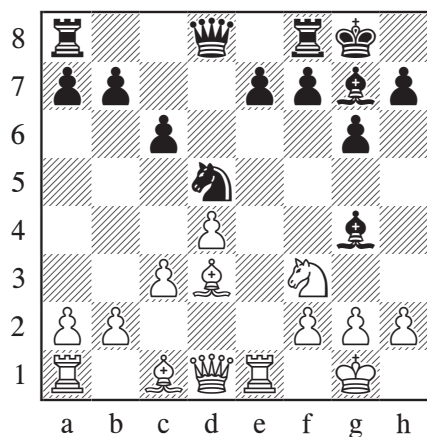
### 11. ♖e1

In order to have h2-h3 available as an immediate answer to ...♗g4, a good preparation for the text move would be 11.c3!

### 11...♗g4 12.c3

Another negligent move.

White might still hope for a tiny advantage after 12.♗e2 ♗f5 13.c3 ♖e8 14.♗d3.



### 12...c5!

The Norwegian prodigy does not miss the opportunity to free his game and seize some initiative, both real and psychological. Beyond the pawn sacrifice looms the spectre of a further offering on the c3-square.

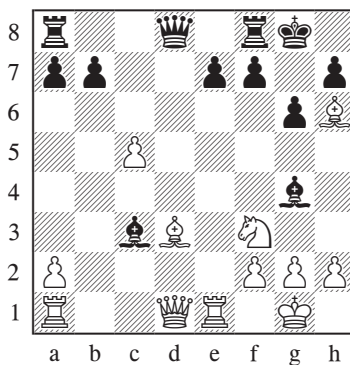
### 13.♗e4?

Steinitz said that the best way to refute a sacrifice is by accepting it. In the present case White could hardly hope to refute the sacrifice, but he could have equalized by accepting it.

### 13.dxc5 ♗xc3!

It looks like Topalov overestimated this sham sacrifice.

### 14.bxc3 ♗xc3 15.♗h6



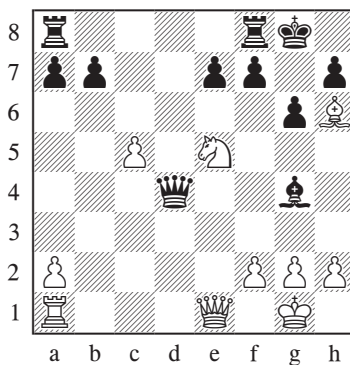
### 15...♗xe1

The only good option, as 15...♖e8? 16.♖e3 and 15...♗xa1? 16.♖xa1 are both winning for White.

### 16.♖xe1 ♖xd3 17.♗e5

17.♖e5? f6 18.♖xe7 ♖f7+

### 17...♖d4



### 18.c6!

Probably the move that Topalov missed.

Worse is 18.♗xf8 ♗xf8 19.♗xc6 ♖xc6.

### 18...bxc6 19.♗xc6 ♖f6 20.♗xe7 ♗h8 21.♗d5 ♖d4 22.♗c7!

More accurate than 22.♗xf8 ♖xf8 23.♗e3 ♗e6 24.♖d1 ♖e5 25.♖b4 ♗g7 26.h3 ♖c8 27.a3 a5.

### 22...♖ac8 23.♗xf8 ♖xf8 24.h3 ♗e2 25.♖c1 ♖b2 26.♗d5 ♗g7 27.♖b1

The position is equal.

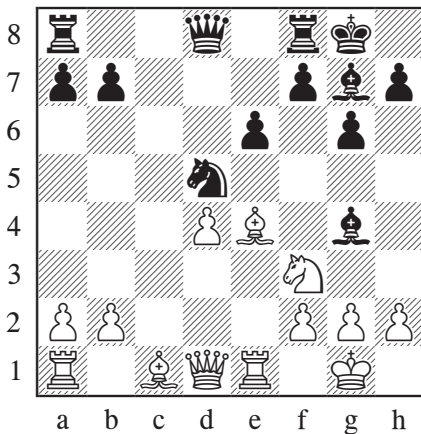
If White preferred to avoid the above complications, he could also have maintained



the balance by simple means: 13.♙e2!? cxd4 (13...♙xf3 14.♙xf3 cxd4 15.cxd4= gives White an improved version of the game) 14.♘xd4 ♙xe2 15.♘xe2=

### 13...cxd4 14.cxd4 e6

Black has a dream version of an IQP position, with a solid blockade on d5 and easy play against the weak d-pawn. Now it is White's turn to think in terms of making a positional sacrifice. His objective is to give up the d4-pawn in a way that will enable him either to regain the pawn in a few moves, or to obtain enough activity to hold a draw.



### 15.♙b3?

This is a waste of time, as it turns out that Black can ignore the threat to the b7-pawn.

Attempting to keep the d-pawn with 15.♙e3?! leads to trouble after 15...♘xe3 (15...f5!? is also strong) 16.fxex3 f5! 17.♙xb7 (17.♙d3 f4!) 17...♙b8 when Black has a clear advantage.

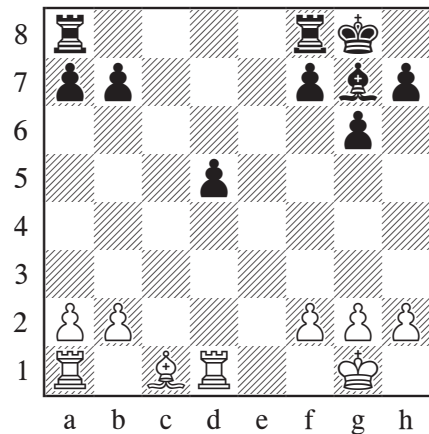
In the absence of a useful developing move, White should have forced simplifications with 15.h3!. Compared with the game continuation this provides a crucial bolthole for the king. Play continues 15...♙xf3 16.♙xf3 ♙b6 17.♙xd5 exd5 18.♙e3 ♙xb2 19.♙d3 ♙b6 20.♙ab1 ♙c7 21.♙b5 ♙fd8 22.♙b3

when White succeeds in regaining the pawn. His position remains somewhat worse, but his drawing chances are much higher than in the game.

### 15...♙xf3 16.♙xf3 ♙xd4 17.♙xd5

It is possible that Topalov had been intending 17.♙xb7?!, but only now realized that 17...♙a5! 18.♙d1 ♙ab8 would allow Black to develop both rooks with tempo, followed by capturing on b2 with an extra pawn and a dominant position.

### 17...♙xd5 18.♙xd5 exd5 19.♙d1 ♙g7



### 20.♙f1

20.♙g5!? may be a better defensive try.

In the event of 20.♙xd5? ♙fd8! 21.♙xd8† ♙xd8 22.♙e3 (22.♙f1 ♙d1† 23.♙e2 ♙h1) 22...b6 23.♙b1 ♙xb2 Black's advantage is obvious. This is where the weak back rank comes into play, and explains why 15.h3! would have been an improvement earlier.

### 20...♙fd8

Black is a healthy pawn up, and the presence of the bishops improves his winning chances. The technical part of the game is less relevant to our main subject, so I will refrain from commenting on it.

21.♙g5 ♖d7 22.♗d2 h6 23.♙e3 d4 24.♗d3  
 ♜c8 25.♙d2 ♜c2 26.♗b1 ♖e7 27.a4 f5 28.b3  
 ♜ec7 29.♙e1 ♜f7 30.♗d2 ♜c1 31.♗xc1  
 ♜xc1 32.♜e2 ♗b1 33.♗d3 ♜e6 34.h4 ♜d5  
 35.♙d2 ♜e4 36.♗g3 f4 37.♗d3 ♙e5 38.f3†  
 ♜d5 39.♙e1 ♙d6 40.♙d2 g5 41.hxg5 hxg5  
 42.♙e1 g4 43.fxg4 ♜e4 44.g5 ♜e5  
 0-1

### Post-game reflections

Topalov conducted the opening and early middlegame with an uncharacteristic lack of drive, and Carlsen quickly obtained the initiative. The outcome of the game rested on some form of sacrifice by either side. Carlsen's 12...c5! echoed the 15...c5! from the previous game, although this time the active pawn break was not a true sacrifice as Black had the means to maintain material equality through tactics. White's 13.♙e4? was a weak reaction, but even after that mistake he could still have obtained good drawing chances with 15.h3!, a strong defensive sacrifice.