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6 The Winawer Variation

(3 c3 b4)

We come now to the richest section of the French Defence, which brings together numerous different variations. This method of forcing White to clarify the centre became popular in the 1930s. Under the influence of the Hypermoderns, especially Nimzowitsch, the classical approach of just trying to equalize as Black gave way to a new idea – piece control of the centre and the attempt to create maximum counterplay and disruption of the equilibrium. This gave rise to the emergence of new opening systems. By strengthening his pressure on e4, Black tries to force his opponent to close the centre. Not that White has any great objections to this – the move 4 e5 contributes to the battle for the dark squares, which will be weakened by the likely exchange of Black's king's bishop.

The lines after 4 e5 c5 will be considered in the next two chapters, but in this chapter, we shall look at other possibilities, either those with which White refuses to close the centre (**Games 16 and 17**), or where after 4 e5 Black avoids the reply 4...c5 (**Game 18**). These variations are not so popular today, but they have a rich history and still have their adherents amongst players of all levels. In such lines, a deep understanding of the nuances of the opening is often more important than obtaining an objective advantage.

Game 16 [C01]

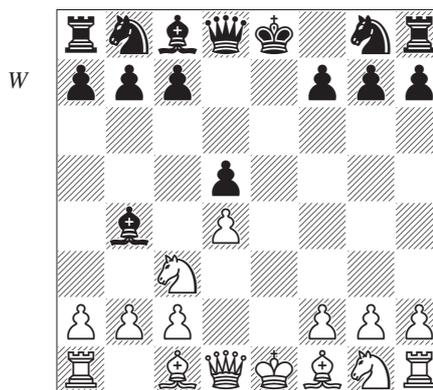
Nikola Mitkov – Stelios Halkias

Vidmar Memorial, Terme Zrece 2003

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 c3 b4 4 exd5 exd5 (D)

For a fuller picture, we should mention the existence of the more experimental 4...xd5 (or in a different form, 3...dxe4 4 xe4 d5 5 c3 b4).

So far, we have not considered the Exchange Variation in this book (in general, quite rightly), but now there are some grounds to say a little about it. The pawn exchange 3 exd5 exd5 takes the strategic content out of the position, and all that remains for White is his extra move, which is not very significant. In its present form, however, there is the additional prospect of being able to force the exchange on c3, or gain further time (as, for example, in the variation 3...f6 4 g5 b4 5 exd5 exd5 6 f3 bd7



7 0-0-0 e7, mentioned in the previous chapter).

5 ♗d3

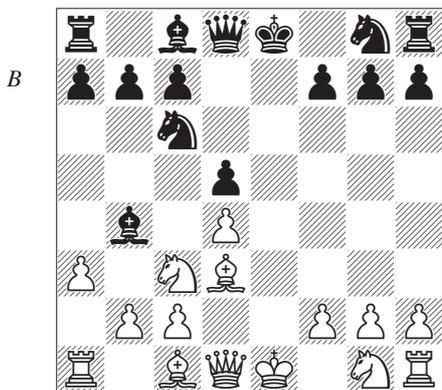
In the well-known game Larsen-Portisch, Amsterdam Interzonal 1964 Black suffered a fiasco after 5 ♖f3 ♖c6 6 ♗b5 ♗e7 7 ♗f4 0-0 8 0-0-0 ♗a5?! 9 ♗ge2. Later, the improvement 5...♗e7+ was found, but the idea of the queen coming out to f3 or h5 remains one of the bases of the modern interpretation of this whole variation.

5...♗c6

Black has no shortage of continuations, but he should think about a convenient development of his light-squared bishop. White, for his part, will usually try to prevent this, which typically leads to variations such as 5...c6 6 ♖f3!? (6 ♗f3) 6...♖f6 7 ♗f4 ♖xd4 (7...♗e7 8 ♖g3) 8 ♗e2, 5...♗f6 6 ♗e2 0-0 7 0-0 ♗g4 8 f3 ♗h5 9 ♗f4 ♗g6 10 ♗xg6 hxg6 or 5...♗e7 6 ♖h5 ♗bc6 (6...♗d7 7 ♗g5) 7 ♗f3 (7 a3). Again, we have given just the bare bones of these lines, so that the interested reader can more easily investigate the matter in greater depth.

6 a3 (D)

The most appropriate moment to put the question to the bishop. The variation 6 ♗e2 ♗ge7 7 0-0 ♗f5 is mainly suitable as a basis for starting peace negotiations.

**6...♗xc3+**

In the event of 6...♗e7 7 ♗ce2!? (also not bad is 7 ♗f3 ♗g4 8 ♗e3 or the cunning 7 ♗f4!?) with the further c3, the problem of the c8-bishop remains unsolved, and the c6-knight is also not well-placed. If Black wishes to avoid obstructing the e-file with his minor pieces, he

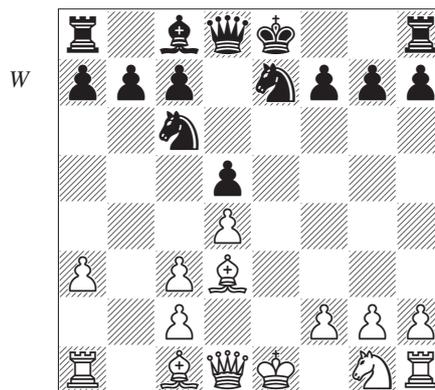
can probably equalize more easily with 6...♗a5, but it is far from clear that he has any reason to refrain from the exchange on c3.

7 bxc3

White's pawn-structure is spoiled, but his dark-squared bishop has no opponent and his influence in the centre (the h2-b8 diagonal) and kingside is increased. The rather dull symmetry no longer exists and it is now interesting to see whose positional advantages turn out to be the more important.

7...♗ge7 (D)

The variation 7...♖f6 8 ♖b1 b6 9 ♖h5 ♗ge7 10 ♗g5 ♖e6+ 11 ♗e2 ♖g4 12 ♗g3 leads to a development lag and a slightly worse endgame for Black, but 7...♗f6 8 ♗e2 0-0 9 0-0 ♗a5 (or 9...♖e8) looks solid enough. White's e2-knight and c1-bishop have a slight conflict of interests – one wants to go to g3, the other to g5, but it is hard to do both, because of the answer ...h6.



With the text-move, Black prepares to play 8...♗f5.

8 ♖h5

A second, and possibly more promising, way to prevent the bishop development is 8 ♖f3. While Black achieves his aim, White will develop his pieces to active positions, maintaining the initiative: 8...♗e6 9 ♗h3 (or first 9 ♖b1 b6; another continuation is 9 ♗e2 ♖d7 10 0-0!? ♗f5 11 ♗g3) 9...♖d7 10 ♗f4 (weaker is 10 ♗g5 ♗f5 11 g4?! ♗g6 12 h4 f6) 10...♗f5 11 0-0 and, whichever side Black castles, he remains with some problems.

8...♗e6

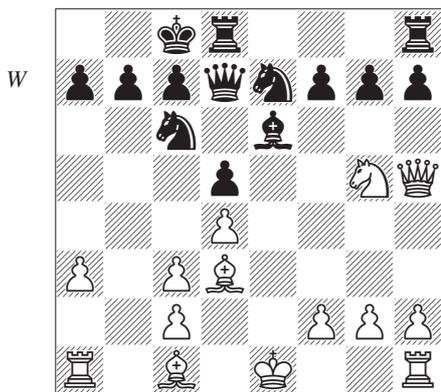
Passing up the chance to save a tempo by 8...g6 9 ♖f3 ♗f5, since then the dark-square holes on the kingside would be a significant weakness.

9 ♗f3

Again, the inclusion of the preliminary moves 9 ♖b1 b6 deserves attention. In any event, the attack by ♗f3-g5 clearly gives Black more problems than the line 9 ♗e2 ♖d7 10 ♗f4 (10 0-0 h6) 10...♗g4 – now he will probably have to acquiesce to the exchange of his other bishop for the white knight.

9...♖d7 10 ♗g5 0-0-0 (D)

With the queen on h5, the reply 10...♗f5 is not available, but an interesting line is 10...g6 11 ♖f3 0-0-0 (worse is 11...♗f5 12 g4) 12 0-0 (if 12 ♗xe6, then besides 12...♖xe6+, the move 12...fxe6 is also possible) 12...♗g4 13 ♖f6 h6 with sufficient counterplay, K.Müller-Rozentalis, Bundesliga 2006/7. Black instead prefers to castle queenside straightaway.



11 ♗xe6

A more radical try for advantage is bound up with the complications of 11 0-0!? ♗g4 (11...g6 12 ♖d1, Gershon) 12 ♖xf7 h6 (12...♖df8 13 ♖xg7 h6 14 ♗h7 ♖fg8 15 ♖f7) 13 f3 ♖df8 14 fxg4!? (14 ♖xg7 ♗f5) 14...♖xf7 15 ♗xf7 ♖e8 16 g5 hxg5 17 ♗xg5 with good compensation for the queen, Brendel-Yusupov, Stockholm 2002.

11...♖xe6+ 12 ♗e3

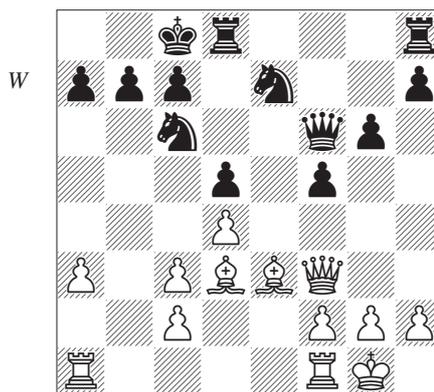
The thematic struggle between White's bishops and Black's knights can best be studied in the endgame after 12 ♖e2 ♖xe2+ 13 ♗xe2:

White stands actively, but Black gains counterplay via the manoeuvre ...♗a5-c4.

12...g6 13 ♖f3 f5

Black chooses an ambitious and strategically risky plan, aiming to seize the initiative. More natural and solid is 13...♗f5 14 0-0 (the capture 14 ♗xf5 gxf5 is not in White's favour) – and now either 14...♗d6 or the simplifying 14...♗xe3 15 ♖fe1 ♗e5 (a small tactical trick) 16 ♖xe3 ♗xd3 17 ♖xe6+ fxe6 18 cxd3 ♖d6, simplifying into an approximately equal endgame. It should be noted in passing that with the inclusion of the moves 9 ♖b1 b6, this defence is not available to Black, and he would need to choose between the following continuations: 16...f5 17 ♖xe3 ♖d6 or 16...♖d6 17 fxe3 f5 (move numbers changed to correspond with the extra moves).

14 0-0 ♖f6 (D)



Instead of exchanging off the e7-knight, or improving its position, Black prepares to mount a kingside pawn-storm, ignoring the open e-file.

15 ♖fe1

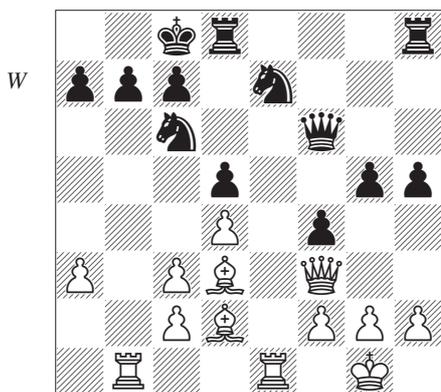
A logical reaction to Black's rather cheeky plan is to double rooks on the e-file, and penetrate to the e6-square: 15 ♖ae1 g5 16 ♖e2 ♖df8 17 ♖fe1 g4 18 ♖g3 h5 19 ♗f4 ♗g6 20 ♖e6 ♖f7 21 h4 with an obvious advantage for White, Ziatdinov-Apicella, Biel 1992. Of course, in this example there are several of Black's moves that can be questioned (we shall see a better example in the game) but all the same, it must be said that a poorly-prepared kingside pawn advance can rebound badly on Black.

15...g5 16 ♖ab1

Clearly connected with the idea of playing c4. As well as 16 ♖e2 considered above, the moves 16 a4 (planning a5 or ♗c1-a3), 16 ♗h5 (blocking the enemy h-pawn) and 16 ♗d2 (e.g., 16...h5 17 ♗e3 ♖hg8 18 ♗e6+ ♗xe6 19 ♖xe6) are all worth considering.

16...h5 17 ♗d2

More consistent is 17 c4 f4 (17...g4 18 ♗f4 dxc4 19 ♗xc4) 18 c3 or even 17 h4 gxh4 18 c4. For some reason, White did not like these variations, but now his last move must at best be regarded as an insignificant loss of time, and in the worst case, as the start of an ill-thought-out regrouping.

17...f4?! (D)

The black pawn crosses the demarcation line, but without adequate support.

18 ♗e2?

Too passive. The advance 18 h4! was now strong, even though it is not usually recommended to make such advances in front of one's king. The white bishops need the space within which to operate: 18...gxh4 (18...♖df8 19 hxg5 ♗xg5 20 c4!) 19 ♗h3+ (stronger than 19 ♗xf4 ♗xf4 20 ♗xf4 ♖hg8) 19...♗b8 20 ♖e6 ♗g5 21 f3 with a subsequent ♗e1xh4.

18...♖h6 19 ♗b5 ♖f5

Why not 19...a6?

20 ♗d3 ♖fe7

The knight's to-ing and fro-ing creates an odd impression, but Black soon returns to a constructive path, whereas White continues to wander aimlessly around, as if in the dark.

21 ♗a4?! a6 22 ♖e2 ♗f7 23 ♖be1 ♗b8 24 ♗b3

One normally has to make considerable effort to drive an enemy bishop into such a dreadful post, whereas here, the bishop has gone there of its own accord.

24...♖f5

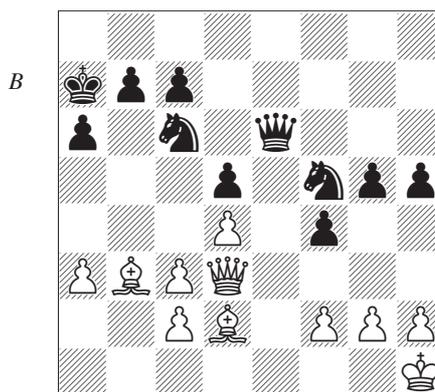
Parrying the threat of 25 c4.

25 ♗a4 ♗a7 26 ♗c1 ♖f6 27 ♗h1?!

It is hard to comment on this mysterious king move. It was high time to dispense with all the subtlety, and play 27 ♗xc6 ♖xc6, and then put the rook on e5 and the bishop on a3, after first playing a4.

27...♖g8 28 ♗b3 ♖d8 29 ♗a4 ♖dd6 30 ♗b3 ♖de6 31 ♖xe6?

Exchanging off all the rooks is tantamount to suicide. It was still possible to defend with 31 f3.

31...♖xe6 32 ♖xe6 ♗xe6 33 ♗d2 (D)

White's position is hopeless.

33...♖d6

The simplest way to win is by 33...b5, completely shutting the b3-bishop out of play, and practically ensuring himself an extra piece for the remainder of the game. Admittedly, to play this, Black had to convince himself of the favourable outcome of the variation 34 ♗f3 (or 34 a4 ♗b6 35 axb5 axb5 36 ♗f3) 34...♖h4.

34 ♗g1

Good or bad, 34 h4 was essential. Black continues to overlook the possibility of this counterblow over the course of the next few moves.

34...♖a5 35 ♗f1 ♖ac4 36 ♗c1 ♗b6 37 h4

At last.

37...gxh4 38 ♙xf4

White starts to breathe a little easier, although his position remains difficult.

38...c6 39 ♖e2 ♗f6 40 ♙e5 ♗g6 41 ♙xd6 ♜xd6 42 c4

The bishop escapes from its prison, at the cost of the a3-pawn.

42...dxc4 43 ♙xc4 ♗g5 44 ♙d3 ♖c1+ 45 ♖e1 ♗xa3

Suddenly White has real drawing chances, but for this he should advance his passed f-pawn as soon as possible.

46 ♔g1?!

46 f4 is indicated.

46...a5 47 f4 a4 48 ♔h2?!

Again delaying 48 f5 without good reason.

48...♗b2 49 ♖e5 ♗b4 50 c4 ♜xc4 51 ♙xc4 ♗xc4

Now it is all over, and the remaining moves could have been dispensed with.

52 ♗d6 ♖c3 53 ♗d8+ ♔b5 54 ♗d7 a3 55 ♖xb7+ ♔a4 56 d5 a2 57 ♗a6+ ♔b3 58 ♖b6+ ♔a3 59 ♗a7+ ♔b3 60 ♖b6+ ♔c2 61 ♗f2+ ♗d2 62 ♖c5+ ♔d1 63 ♗g1+ ♔e2 64 dxc6 ♖xf4+ 65 ♔h1 ♗f1 0-1

Game 17 [C15]

Igor-Alexandre Nataf – Sergei Shipov

Montreal 2005

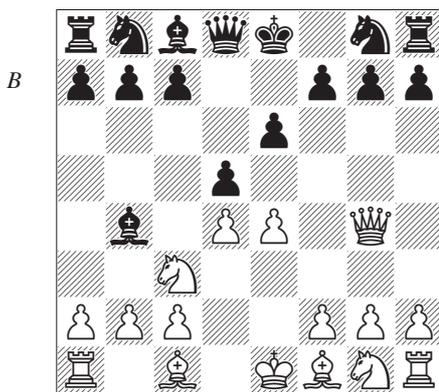
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♜c3 ♙b4 4 ♜e2

Apart from the exchange on d5, seen in the previous game, the other alternatives to 4 e5 may be divided into three groups:

- 1) the immediate attack on g7 – 4 ♗g4;
- 2) defence of the e4-pawn – 4 ♙d3, 4 ♗d3 or 4 ♗f3;
- 3) refusal to defend the pawn – 4 ♙d2, 4 ♙e3, 4 a3 and the game continuation.

We shall now examine several of these moves in some depth.

- a) 4 ♗g4 (D).



White immediately attacks the g7-pawn, which has been weakened by the bishop move.

It is not really possible to defend it conveniently, but Black can use the time spent by White in capturing it to launch a counter-attack in the centre: 4...♜f6 (the other, more rarely-seen, set-up is 4...dxe4 5 ♗xg7 ♗f6 6 ♗g3 ♜c6 7 ♙b5 ♜e7 8 ♜e2 ♙d7 9 ♙g5 ♗f5 10 ♙xe7 ♙xe7 11 ♗xc7 and it is not clear if Black has sufficient compensation, Miladinović-Rozentalis, Montreal 2000) 5 ♗xg7 ♗g8 6 ♗h6 ♗g6 (the immediate 6...dxe4 is less convincing after 7 ♜e2 b6 8 ♙g5, but 6...c5 7 e5 cxd4 8 a3 ♙f8 9 ♗xf6 ♗xf6 10 exf6 dxc3 11 ♜e2 ♜d7 12 ♜xc3 a6, with a subsequent ...♜xf6, looks perfectly satisfactory, Campora-Rustemov, Dos Hermanas 2003) 7 ♗e3 c5 8 ♙d2 ♜c6 9 ♜ge2 and now Alekhine recommended 9...♜g4 10 ♗d3 cxd4 11 ♜xd4 ♜xf2 with interesting complications.

- b) 4 ♙d3 (D).

This is one of the ways to defend the e4-pawn, but it involves some loss of time, since the bishop will come under attack. Black can choose between the central counterattack 4...c5 and the temporary surrender of the centre, to gain time for development.

b1) In the first case, White can offer a pawn sacrifice: 4...c5 5 exd5 ♗xd5 6 ♙d2 ♙xc3 7 ♙xc3 cxd4 8 ♙xd4 ♗xg2 (if he does not wish to take the pawn, the usual way of declining is