

Winning Chess Middlegames

Shortlisted for The Guardian Chess Book of the Year Award

Runner-up for the English Chess Federation Book of the Year Award

Honourable Mention, CHESS Magazine Best Book of the Year

Praise for Winning Chess Middlegames:

“This structured approach is quite instructive as often players choose their opening repertoire according to quite haphazard criteria, randomly picking up lines without giving serious consideration to how the resulting middlegames would suit them.”

GM Michael Adams

“Sokolov covers his material deeply, offering not glib generalities but very specific insights and explanations. Great games, marvellous analysis.”

Dennis Monokroussos, ChessToday

“I recommend this book to everyone who, coming out of the opening more or less ok, doesn't know how to proceed.”

Martin Rieger, FreeChess

“The author skilfully unearths the main ideas and pivotal moments in structures that continuously recur. I like his verbal notes which tend to be very clear and, indeed, instructive.”

Former British Champion GM Jonathan Rowson

“A pioneering effort from Ivan Sokolov that will benefit players of all levels, including masters.”

IM David Vigorito, ChessCafe

“The lucid and informative explanations convey a large amount of genuine Grandmasterly wisdom. This is easily one of the best middlegame books of recent times.”

Sean Marsh, CHESS Magazine

“Using 45 model games, which includes a nice balance of analysis and prose, Sokolov explains the pros and cons of each structure. A great book.”

IM John Donaldson

“A major achievement by Sokolov. Where opening books stop, this book continues.”

Johan Hut, Gooi en Eemlander

“Excellent!”

Henry Tanner, Suomen Shakki Magazine (Finland)

“I recommend it to anyone interested in Nimzo-Indian and Queen’s Gambit pawn structures – which should be pretty much everyone interested in chess, of course. The book contains fantastic, personal and sincere views of chess and game analysis.”

Arne Moll, ChessVibes

“An extraordinarily instructive book and indispensable instruction material for d4-players.”

Max Euwe Center, Amsterdam

“Sokolov’s appreciation of the nuances of pawn play provides much useful material for aspiring club players, since a structured approach helps resolve many dilemmas which recur regularly in practical play.”

IM Bernard Cafferty, British Chess Magazine

“Sokolov is extremely objective in his appraisals, and explains excellently the middlegame ideas and plans, while taking the specific aspects of the pawn structures into account.”

KARL Magazine (Germany)

“The author has worked quite thoroughly and with great precision.”

Dr W.Schweitzer, Europa Rochade

“If you like heavily analyzed games, this is one of the best collections to be published in recent years.”

Andy Soltis, Chess Life

“Not only a book you should own, it is one you should use.”

Mark Donlan, Chess Horizons

“Sokolov, who writes clearly and directly, shows the kind of tactical and strategic play appropriate to a wide range of middlegame pawn positions.”

The Judges of the ECF Book of the Year Award

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Introduction

I started working on this book in March, 2007. As usually happens, due to different reasons, it took me longer than my publisher and me had planned and I finished my work in August 2008. In this book I wanted to explore the – in my opinion – four most important types of pawn structure in chess.

Quite a number of books on pawn structures have been published, and one may rightly wonder what makes this book different.

Well, I have tried, as much as possible, to

1. systematize the thematic plans used and give clear explanations of them, and
2. incorporate the ideas of the featured opening variation into the pawn structure that ensues.

The latter is actually quite important. In the pre-computer era players normally polished their opening repertoire over the years, and even though opening preparation did not go nearly as far as today, years of theoretical and practical experience brushing up one's repertoire would normally result in a reasonably good strategic understanding of the positions arising from the openings played.

In the past 15 years, the involvement of computer programs and databases has made it considerably easier to prepare a particular variation for a particular opponent. However, thorough study and good strategic understanding of the positions still remains a must in order to capitalize successfully on your opening preparation. I still remember watching one of Anatoly Karpov's post-mortems, when he had won from some initially inferior Ruy Lopez with black. His opponent, slightly annoyed, remarked: 'Here, after the opening, you were definitely worse', to which the 12th World Champion calmly replied: 'Yes, but soon after I was better'.

Indeed, Karpov has won from quite a number of inferior positions (his encounters with Garry Kasparov included), due to his superior strategic understanding of the openings he was playing. Kasparov has won many Najdorfs and King's Indians not only because he had the best novelties, but because he fundamentally understood those positions better than his opponents. On the other hand he was too stubborn to admit that the Berlin Variation of the Ruy Lopez was not 'his cup of tea', which ultimately cost him his World Championship title against Vladimir Kramnik in 2000.

Kramnik, on the other hand, being devastating in Catalan-type systems with white and Meran Slavs with black, at some stage started to opt for sharp Sicilians with white and King's Indians with black. That adventure did not last very long. Nowadays he is a merciless killing machine with his Catalans again, squeezing out the smallest of microscopic advantages, while the King's Indian with black is a long-forgotten voyage.

Winning Chess Middlegames

If such mistakes are committed by the world's very best, then what are we to expect from lesser gods? Throughout my own career, I have also scored reasonably well in the positions I understood and paid the price for being too stubborn to stay away from position types that did not suit me.

So the reasons why I have tried in this book to incorporate the strategic middlegame ideas and the games which I view as important into the four different types of pawn structure discussed in this book, were:

1. to provide a complete guide for the club player;
2. through a process of serious analysis of the material in this book, to also give the club player a reasonably accurate feeling as to which particular positions suit him and which do not; and
3. to give the club player who takes his time for a thorough study of this book, new strategic and also practical opening knowledge, after which he will definitely see a clear improvement in his results.

In the introductions to the four different chapters, I will further explain the distinguishing types of position, games and variations featured.

I hope that, apart from trying to improve his chess skills, the reader will also simply enjoy studying the games selected in this book.

Ivan Sokolov,
August 2008

Chapter 2

Isolated Pawns

Introduction

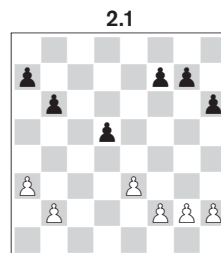
In Chapter 2 I have followed a similar structure as in the chapter on doubled pawns, with the difference that here I have divided the material into two sections. The first section shows several successfully employed strategies to fight against the isolated pawn, while the second section focuses on plans to be implemented by the side that has the isolated pawn.

Isolated pawn structures are arguably the structures that arise from the most different openings (Tarrasch Defence and Semi-Tarrasch, Queen's Gambit Accepted, Queen's Gambit Declined, Nimzo-Indian Defence, Meran Variation, Ragozin Variation, Petroff Defence, etc.) and are therefore very important positions to understand, regardless of the opening preferences a player may have. In the comments to the games, the club player will not only be explained the main strategic ideas, but he will also receive a lot of information about the openings played.

If the reader takes enough time to study this chapter, he should be well-armed to meet a number of variations in practical tournament play.

A) Playing against an isolated pawn

Structure 2.1 (Game 20 – Ivanchuk-Aronian). Here a classical isolated pawn-position is reached, where the side fighting against the isolated pawn has a good blockade while the side with the isolated pawn has seemingly enough counterplay to make a draw. With masterful play, Ivanchuk first quashes Aronian's counterplay and then exploits the weakness of the isolated pawn.

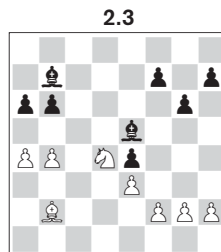


Structure 2.2 (Game 21 – Kramnik-Illescas Cordoba). In one of the main variations of the Tarrasch Defence, fighting against an isolated pawn, Kramnik employs a well-known strategy of creating a second weakness to target. When the knights are exchanged on c6, Black recaptures with his b7 pawn and now, instead of an isolated pawn on d5, the newly-created weakness on c6 is the object of White's attention. In our main game (Kramnik-



Illescas Cordoba) and other games featured in the comments (Kasparov-Illescas Cordoba, Sokolov-Petrosian and Ljubojevic-Gligoric), this classical strategy is explained.

Structure 2.3 (Game 22 – Jaracz-P.H.Nielsen). In this game another strategy is employed. Fighting against an isolated pawn, White at some stage exchanges a black knight on e4 and after Black recaptures with ...d5xe4 a relative pawn symmetry is reached, where White's pieces are better placed for the ensuing actions.

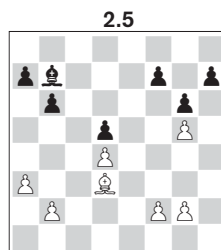


B) Playing with an isolated pawn

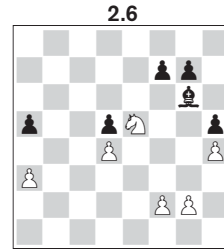
Structure 2.4 (Game 23 – Petrosian-Spassky). In this beautiful classic World Championship encounter, Spassky, playing with an isolated pawn, at some stage exchanges knights on d4, and after Petrosian recaptures e3xd4, a pawn symmetry in the centre (white d4/black d5) is reached, which drastically changes the strategic objectives. In general, given the fact that both sides have a light-squared bishop remaining (the dark-squared ones have been exchanged), such a transaction should in general favour White. However, with the beautiful knight manoeuvre 32...♞h7!, Spassky brilliantly exposes the deficiencies of the white position and wins the game in style.



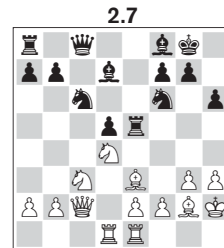
Structure 2.5 (Game 24 – Sokolov-Cebalo). In my own game I employed a similar strategy; at some stage exchanging knights on d5, and after the forced recapture ...e6xd5, a pawn symmetry in the centre (white d4/black d5) is reached, where the superiority of White's light-squared bishop to his black colleague (the dark-squared ones being exchanged), combined with White's control of the e5-square, along with the kingside attack that is developed, plays a crucial role.



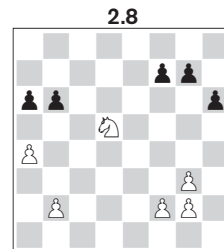
Structure 2.6 (Game 25 – Kasparov-Karpov and Game 26 – Sokolov-Schandorff). Here, the same central exchange transaction occurs as in the two previous games (Petrosian-Spassky and Sokolov-Cebalo), with the difference that now White has a knight as a minor piece and Black a light-squared bishop. In general, the knight is superior here. Most of the time, Black’s light-squared bishop combines badly with its own pawn on d5 – a light square –, and the dark-squared bishops are already exchanged.



Structure 2.7 (Game 27 – Beliavsky-Illescas Cordoba) shows a beautiful, original rook manoeuvre, executed by Illescas Cordoba playing with an isolated pawn.

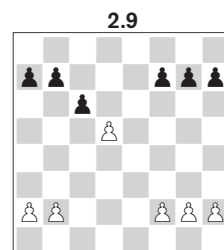


Structure 2.8 (Game 28 – Vyzhmanavin-Beliavsky and Game 29 – Sokolov-Nikolic): White, playing with an isolated pawn, executes a d4-d5 pawn break, after which a few pieces are exchanged. When a pawn symmetry is left on the board (two vs two on the queenside, three vs three on the kingside), White will have a dominantly-placed piece on the d5-square, causing trouble for Black.



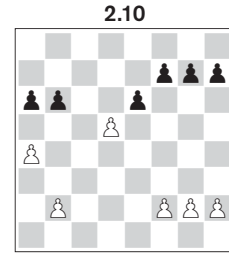
Game 30 (Kramnik-Hübner) shows a slightly unorthodox and uncommon idea: White sacrifices his central (isolated) pawn in order to eliminate Black’s bishop pair and gain a few tempi to develop an initiative.

Structure 2.9 (Game 31 – Kasparov-Timman). Here and in the following games we analyse an important strategic idea for White, where he sacrifices his isolated pawn under different circumstances (mostly by playing d4-d5), either to disorganize Black’s pieces or to take advantage (should Black recapture with a pawn) of a beautiful newly-created outpost for the knight on d4, as well as the open e-file for the white rook on e1, which creates various sacrificial motifs around taking the black bishop on e7 with the rook. In our first game (Kasparov-Timman), the purpose is to take advantage of the disorganization of Black’s pieces caused by the sacrifice.



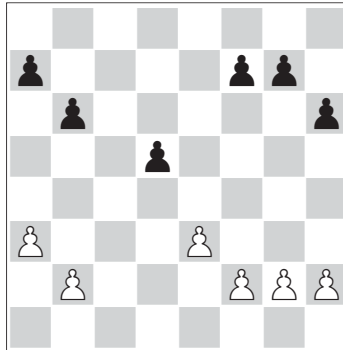
Structure 2.10 (Game 32 – Petrosian-Spassky, Game 33 – Kramnik-Anand 1999 and Game 34 – Kramnik-Anand 2001). These games excellently demonstrate White’s attacking potential should Black capture the pawn sacrificed on d5 with his e6 pawn.

Game 35 (Illescas Cordoba-Short) again shows the power of the pieces after a central break with the isolated pawn, this time by Black with ...d5-d4. An excellent learning example demonstrated by Short. In the comments to this game and the analysis diagram (the game Karpov-Kir.Georgiev in the comments), please observe the powerful strategy of the 12th World Champion, showing that after a potential exchange of pawns on the queenside in a particular variation of the Tartakower Variation of the Orthodox Queen’s Gambit, White’s a4 and d4 pawns, which also seem weak, are not much of a reason to worry, while Black’s pawns on b6 and c6 could worry him for a long time to come.



A) Playing against an isolated pawn

Structure 2.1



Pure blockade

Exploring isolated pawn positions, I would like to start with several instructive examples of play against the isolated pawn.

NI 27.7 (D38)

Vasily Ivanchuk

Levon Aronian

Morelia/Linares 2007 (7)

1. d2-d4 ♗g8-f6
2. c2-c4 e7-e6
3. ♗g1-f3 d7-d5
4. ♗b1-c3 ♕f8-b4
5. ♕c1-g5 ♗b8-d7
6. c4xd5 e6xd5
7. ♖d1-c2

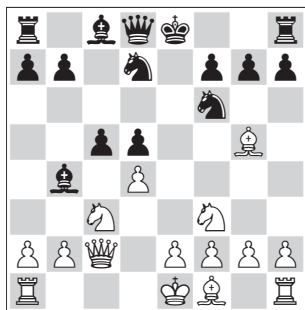
Starting somewhere in the beginning of the nineties, this move became more popular than the old main line 7.e3.

7. ... c7-c5

The other, less played but rather interesting continuation here is 7...h6 and after 8.♕h4 g5! (the correct reaction; in case of 8...c5 White gets a better game after 9.e3 c4 10.♕e2 ♖a5 11.0-0

GAME 20

(11.♗d2 0-0 12.♕f3 should also be better for White) 11...♕xc3 12.bxc3 ♗e4 (here it is obvious that the inclusion of 7...h6 8.♕h4 favours White, as otherwise the bishop on g5 would be attacked now) 13.♖fc1 ♗b6. White now gave an instructive demonstration: 14.a4! ♕f5 15.♖b2 0-0 16.♕d1! ♖fe8 17.♖a2 f6 18.♗d2 ♕d7 19.♗f1! with f3 to follow, with a clear advantage for White in the second match game Kramnik-Lautier, Cannes 1993) 9.♕g3 ♗e4 10.♗d2 (the natural 10.e3 leads to very complicated play after 10...h5! 11.h4 g4 12.♗g5 ♗xg3 13.fxg3 ♖e7 14.0-0-0! ♕xc3 15.bxc3 ♖h6! 16.♕d3 f6 17.♗h7, as seen in Sokolov-Rainfray, France tt 2003) 10...♗xg3 11.hxg3 ♗b6 12.a3 ♕f8! and Black had an equal game in Van Wely-Eliyanov, Foros 2007.



8. a2-a3

It is already clear that a position with an isolated pawn is likely to arise. White could have forced this immediately with 8.dxc5.

A) Now, rather passive and not in the spirit of the position is the recapture 8...dxc5, since after the virtually forced 9.a3 dxc3+ 10.cxc3 ce4 11.fxf6 gxf6 12.gxf6 hxf6 13.e3 d7 14.d4 White has a small but lasting advantage, pressing for a win without any risk;

B) However, Black has good piece play to compensate for the pawn weakness after 8...h6 and now:

B1) Enterprising, but no good is 9.fxf6 gxf6 10.0-0 dxc3 11.gxc3 gxc3+ 12.bxc3 hf6 13.e4?! dxe4 (13...dxe4 would allow White to justify his idea after 14.fxd5 e6 15.fb5+ ce7 16.fxe5! hxf2 (or 16...dxc3 17.fxc4) 17.fhe1 hg4 18.f5e2 fhc8 19.c6! bxc6 20.fa6 fe8 21.d4 and White is better) 14.fb5+ fd7 (14...ce7 15.d4 looks better for White) 15.d4 0-0! 16.fhe1 fhe8 and Black is better;

B2) 9.fxd2 0-0 10.a3 dxc5 11.e3 a6 12.fxe2 fd6 13.0-0 ce5 14.ffd1 fe6 15.fac1 fc8 16.fbb1 hc4 17.d4 fe5 and due to his nicely developed

pieces Black had a slight initiative in Aronian-Lautier, ICC Petrosian Memorial 2004.

8. ... **b4xc3+**

9. c2xc3

White has to take with the queen, since the pawn capture 9.bxc3?! is met by 9...ca5 followed by ...de4, with pressure.

9. ... **h7-h6**

10. fg5xf6

Trying to keep the bishop with 10.fh4? is simply bad after 10...g5 11.fg3 de4.

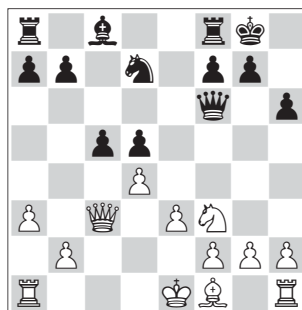
10. ... **d8xf6**

11. e2-e3

The other option is to play against an isolated pawn in the ending after 11.fxe3+ fe7 12.fxe7+ ce7 13.dxc5 hxc5 14.fc1.

In the stem game Van Wely-Piket, Eindhoven ch-NED 1993, White could hope for an edge after 14...de4 15.e3 fd7 16.fxd3. The black knight, however, is better placed on e6 and with 14...de6 instead of 14...de4, controlling the d4-square, Black gains easy equality.

11. ... **0-0**



12. f1-e2

White plans to finish his development and then, at a favourable moment, to

capture on c5, creating an isolated pawn.

Forcing Black to make a decision in the centre with 12.♙b5?! may look positionally sound, but Black gets excellent play on the queenside after 12...c4! 13.♙xd7 (if 13.0-0?, then 13...♗b6 with ...a7-a6 to follow, and the white bishop gets stuck) 13...♙xd7 14.♗e5 ♕f5 15.b3 b5 16.0-0 ♖e6 and after 17...f6 the pride of White's position, the e5 knight, is kicked back, while Black has all the trumps.

12. ... ♗b6-b7

Closing the centre with 12...c4 is now different, since White does not have to allow Black to advance his queenside pawns. White's chances are to be preferred after 13.0-0 b6 (or 13...♖e8 14.a4 b6 15.b3) 14.b3.

13. 0-0 ♙c8-b7

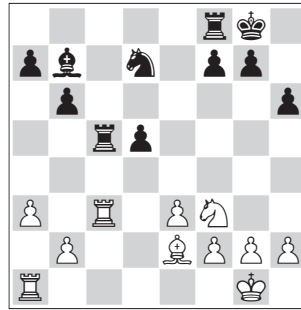
In Yakovich-Sargissian, Moscow Aeroflot 2007, Black prepared to advance his queenside pawns with 13...a6 in order, after 14.♖a1, to push 14...c4. A principled battle ensued, both sides having their trumps: 15.♗e5 b5 16.f4 ♖d6 17.♙f3 ♙b7. White has to be quick with his kingside action, before Black starts rolling his pawns on the queenside. In such positions, which can arise from different openings, the choice is often a matter of taste. I have played plenty of similar positions and mostly preferred White. 18.g4 ♖fe8 19.♖ce1 ♗f8 20.g5! hxg5 21.fxg5 and White seized the initiative.

14. ♖f1-c1 ♖a8-c8

Sensing that White plans to capture on c5, creating an isolated pawn, Black prepares counterplay along the c-file.

15. d4xc5 ♖f6xc3

16. ♖c1xc3 ♖c8xc5



It seems that all four rooks are soon going to be exchanged along the c-file, resulting in an easy draw for Black. But as we will soon see, the c-file is not that important here.

Opting for the structure with two hanging pawns in the centre with 16...bxc5? would not be wise here, since White can undermine these pawns with the standard 17.b4! c4 18.♗d4 and with a dominant knight and better pawn structure, White has a massive, probably winning advantage.

17. ♖c3-c1!!

A beautiful move. White keeps the rooks on in order to target the weak isolated pawn on d5. For his part, Black cannot create any counterplay related to his control of the c-file.

17. ... ♖f8-c8

18. ♖c1-d1 ♖c5-c2

19. ♙e2-b5!

An important tempo.

19. ... ♗d7-f8

20. ♖a1-b1

On the next move, the black rook will be kicked out.

20. ... ♖c2-c7

21. ♙b5-a4 ♗f8-e6

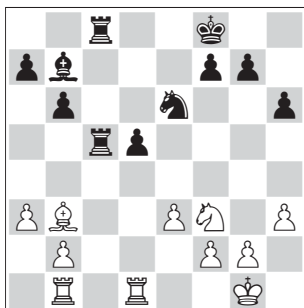
22. ♙a4-b3 ♖g8-f8

23. h2-h3!

White wants to take the d5 pawn on his own terms. Taking this pawn immedi-

ately would result in a drawish endgame: 23. ♖xd5?! ♗xd5 24. ♖xd5 ♖c1+ 25. ♖d1 ♖xb1 26. ♖xb1 ♖c2 and due to his active rook, Black should hold.

23. ... ♖c7-c5



It seems that White won't be able to improve his position, and Black will achieve a draw after all. However, the technique that Ivanchuk now displays to convert his small advantage into a full point is an excellent learning example for amateurs and grandmasters alike!

24. ♖g1-h2!!

Stepping away from a check on c1, in order to double the rooks along the d-file. It is very important for White to keep all four rooks on the board.

24. ... ♖f8-e7

Aronian does not find the best defence. 24... ♖b5! remains active and equalizes.

25. ♖d1-d2 ♖c5-b5

26. ♗b3-a2 ♖b5-c5

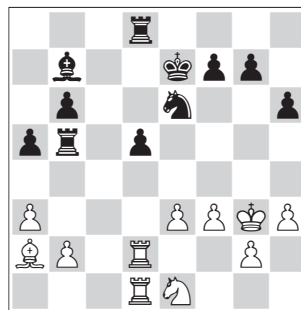
27. ♘f3-e1! a7-a5

The attempt to become active with 27... ♖c1 would not help Black after 28. ♖xc1 ♖xc1 29. ♘d3 ♖a1 30. ♘b4 d4 (the d5 pawn will be lost anyhow) 31. exd4 ♘f4 32. d5 ♗d6 33. ♗b3 ♖e1 34. ♘c6!.

28. ♖b1-d1 ♖c8-d8

29. ♗h2-g3 ♖c5-b5

30. f2-f3



30. ... ♖d8-c8?

30... ♘c5 may still hold: 31. e4 ♘a4! (31... ♘b3 32. ♗xb3 ♖xb3 33. exd5 ♖d6 (33... ♗d6 34. ♘d3 ♖b5 or 34... ♖e8 35. ♘c1! ♖b5 36. ♘a2) 35. ♘f4 and Black has a hard time ahead) 34. ♘c2 ♖xb2 35. ♘e3 ♖xd2 36. ♖xd2 g6 37. ♗f4 with a small edge.

31. ♘e1-d3!

Threatening to trap the b5 rook with 32. a4, so Black has to give a pawn.

31. ... d5-d4

32. ♗a2xe6 ♗e7xe6

33. ♘d3-f4+ ♗e6-e7

34. ♖d2xd4

White is a sound pawn up, with a better position besides. The rest is agony.

34. ... ♖c8-c7

35. ♖d1-d2 ♖b5-c5

36. e3-e4 ♖c5-c4

37. ♖d4-d6 ♖c4-c6

38. e4-e5 ♖c6-c2

39. ♖d2xc2 ♖c7xc2

40. ♖d6xb6 ♗b7-c6

41. b2-b4 g7-g5

42. ♘f4-h5 a5xb4

43. a3xb4 ♗c6-d5

44. ♘h5-g7 ♖c2-e2

45. ♘g7-f5+ ♗e7-e8

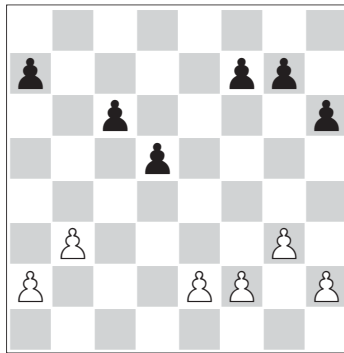
46. ♘f5xh6 ♗d5-e6

47. ♖b6-b5 ♖e2-b2

48. ♖b5-b8+ ♗e8-d7

49. ♖b8-g8 1-0

Structure 2.2



Creation of a new weakness

The Tarrasch Defence is a perfect variation to study this type of position. As we will see from many examples in this book, former World Champion Vladimir Kramnik has played many excellent games both with and against the isolated pawn. Given the fact that such positions occur frequently, it is worth spending a considerable amount of time on them to learn the ins and outs.

TD 4.16 (D34)

Vladimir Kramnik

Miguel Illescas Cordoba

Linares 1994 (6)

- | | |
|-----------|--------|
| 1. d2-d4 | e7-e6 |
| 2. c2-c4 | d7-d5 |
| 3. ♘g1-f3 | c7-c5 |
| 4. c4xd5 | e6xd5 |
| 5. ♘b1-c3 | ♘b8-c6 |
| 6. g2-g3 | ♘g8-f6 |
| 7. ♕f1-g2 | ♕f8-e7 |
| 8. 0-0 | 0-0 |
| 9. ♖c1-g5 | |

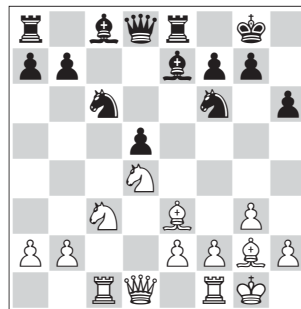
One of two main moves here, 9.dxc5 ♕xc5 10.♕g5 being the other option.

- | | |
|------------|--------|
| 9. ... | c5xd4 |
| 10. ♘f3xd4 | h7-h6 |
| 11. ♕g5-e3 | ♖f8-e8 |
| 12. ♖a1-c1 | |

This is one of many moves here, played very frequently in the beginning of the 1980s and enjoying new popularity

GAME 21

lately. It should be noted that the pawn structure can easily transform.



White may take on c6 and play against the two connected pawns, targeting the newly-created weakness on c6 or, should Black put his bishop on e6, White would take with the knight and then try to make use of his bishop pair.

- | | |
|---------|--------|
| 12. ... | ♕e7-f8 |
|---------|--------|

The other principled way to play this position is 12...♕g4 and after 13.h3 ♕e6, White normally does not capture the

bishop immediately (which would improve Black's pawn structure), but play some useful moves like 14.♘h2 ♖d7 15.♗b3 (trying to play against the weak c-pawn with 15.♘xc6 bxc6 16.♘a4 does not bring anything: 16...♙f5 17.♙c5 ♙d8! 18.♙d4 ♘e4, Züger-Kasparov, Zurich 1987) 15...♞ac8 16.♞fd1, with an advantage for White.

In Van Wely-Magomedov, Yerevan Olympiad 1996, Black now blundered with 16...♘e5??, which White failed to punish with 17.♘xe6 (he played 17.♗b5? and was slightly better, but only drew in the end) 17...fxe6 18.♘xd5!! exd5 19.♞xd5 ♘xd5 20.♙xd5+ ♖h8 21.♙e6, winning.



13. ♘c3-a4

White decides to remain focused on the d5 weakness. The other way was to take on c6 in order to create and focus on a new weakness for Black. This used to be the main plan here – and it looks rather logical to me as well. Some examples:

13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.♘a4 and now:

A) The attempt to create counterplay with 14...♗a5? does not work since the tactics favour White after 15.♞xc6! ♙d7 16.♙d2! (16.♞xf6 ♙xa4 17.b3 gxf6 18.bxa4 can also be considered) 16...♗b5 (16...♙b4 leads to a very difficult endgame for Black after 17.♞c5 ♗xa4 18.♗xa4 ♙xa4 19.♙xb4 ♞xe2

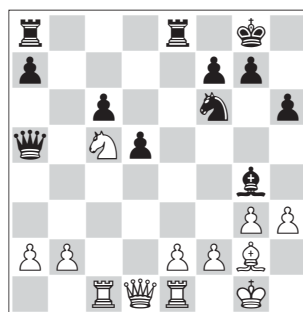
20.♞a5! ♙d7 21.♙c3) 17.♞xf6 ♗xa4 (in case of 17...gxf6 18.♘c3 ♗xb2 19.♘xd5 White soon gets his minimal material investment back, obtaining a winning advantage) 18.♗xa4 ♙xa4 19.♞f5 and White is a sound pawn up;

B) 14...♙d7 15.♙c5 ♙xc5 16.♘xc5. White's strategy is rather clear. The dark-squared bishops have been exchanged, the knight on c5 is a strong, dominant piece and the black pawn on c6 is a newly-created weakness. Black has to create counterplay in order to achieve a dynamic balance. However, without the dark-squared bishops and with the white knight so well placed on c5, counterplay is not easy to find.

Almost all further piece exchanges favour White: 16...♙g4 17.♞e1 and now:

B1) The stem game in this line, Ljubojevic-Gligoric, Bugojno 1978, continued 17...♗b6 18.♗c2 ♞ad8 19.h3 ♙c8 20.b3 ♗b8 21.e3 ♞e7 22.♞ed1 (with his firm control over the dark squares, White easily improves his position, while for Black counterplay is nowhere to be found) 22...♞de8 23.♞d4 ♘h7 24.♗d2 ♘g5 25.h4 ♘e6 26.♘xe6 ♞xe6 27.♗b4 ♗b6 28.♗c5 and White continued to build on his dark-square domination and won easily;

B2) 17...♗a5 18.h3 and now:



analysis diagram

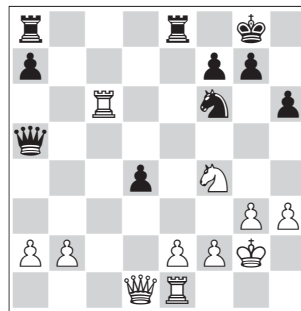
B21) 18...♔f5 was played in Kasparov-Illescas Cordoba, Linares 1994. The play by the former World Champion was very instructive. The game continued 19.♖d4 ♜ab8 20.a3 ♖b5 21.b3! (cautious and strong. The immediate 21.b4 would allow 21...a5!, when White would have to be clever enough to force a drawish endgame with 22.♗f4! ♔g6 23.♘b3! axb4 24.♘d4 ♖b7 25.axb4 (not 25.♘xc6? b3!) 25...♗xb4 26.♘xc6 ♗xf4 27.gxf4 ♜b2) 21...♘e4 (21...♜xe2?? would be a terrible blunder, losing a piece after 22.♜xe2 ♗xe2 23.♗f4) 22.b4! (great play. The situation has changed and White need not fear the ...a7-a5 break any more) 22...a5 23.♘xe4 ♔xe4 24.♜c5 ♖b6 25.bxa5 and White was a sound pawn up, soon converting it into a full point;

B22) 18...♔h5 is the latest attempt to improve on the previous examples and create the much-desired dynamic balance: 19.♘d3 (with the black bishop on h5, the e2 pawn is attacked and Kasparov's play could not be copied. However, the drawback of Black's strategy is that with the bishop on h5, White has a possibility to transfer his knight to f4 with tempo) 19...♔g6 (the other, probably better option was 19...♗xa2! 20.♜xc6 ♔g6! 21.♘b4 (21.♘f4 ♔e4!) 21...♗xb2 22.♘d5 ♘d5 23.♔xd5 ♖h7 24.e4 ♜ac8 and a draw should be the most likely outcome) 20.♘f4 and now:

B221) 20...♗xa2 21.♘xg6 fxg6 22.♜xc6 ♖xb2 is better than it looks, since after 23.♔xd5+ ♘d5 24.♗xd5+ ♖h8! (24...♖h7 25.♗d3) 25.♜xg6 a5! the a-pawn is very strong and Black should be able to draw;

B222) On the other hand, in case of a passive defence with 20...♗b6 21.♘xg6 fxg6 22.b3 ♜e6, White improves his position with 23.e3 ♜f8 24.♜e2 with ♜ec2 to follow, and the black pawn weakness on c6 will start to become visible;

B223) 20...♔e4 21.♜xc6 ♔xg2 22.♘xg2 d4 (an attempt at dynamic play. Regaining the pawn with 22...♗xa2 would lead to a better game for White after 23.♗a1 ♖b3 24.♗a3)



analysis diagram

23.♗c1! (an important move) 23...♘d5 (Black continues his attempts to solve his problems tactically. In the event of 23...♗xa2 the idea behind White's previous move would become clear: 24.♗c4! ♗xc4 (24...♗xb2?? loses to 25.♜c7 ♜f8 26.♘g6) 25.♜xc4 and Black remains stuck with his pawn weaknesses) 24.♘d3! ♘b4 (to 24...♗xa2 White again responds with 25.♗c4) 25.♘xb4 ♖xb4 (White is a pawn up, but Black has some temporary activity) 26.♜c4 ♖b7+ 27.♖g1 ♗d7 28.♗f4 ♜ad8 29.♜d1! (making use of a tactical motif) 29...♗xh3 30.♜cd4 ♜xd4 31.♗xd4 a6 (31...♜xe2?? blunders a rook after 32.♗d8+ ♖h7 33.♗d3+) 32.e3 and White was a sound pawn up. Later he exchanged the

queens and won the rook endgame easily, Sokolov-T.L. Petrosian, European Club Cup, Kemer 2007.

I have to admit that in my preparation for this game, for my decision which variation to choose Kasparov's game played a crucial role. This decision-making process is in no way connected to the pawn structure theme, but may be useful for readers to know.

In the past ten years or so, my main weapon against the Tarrasch had been the main line (like in the game): 9. ♖g5 cxd4 10. ♘xd4 h6 11. ♗f4 (instead of 11. ♗e3), leading to a slightly better endgame for White. A few months before my game against Petrosian, I had a game against Akobian. In the slightly better endgame that resulted after 11. ♗f4, I never had any real winning chances and the game ended in a dull draw. Now, facing Petrosian, I knew the Tarrasch would appear on the board. I had only about two hours to prepare and wanted to play something new.

Under those circumstances it is useful to check the games of the world's very best. Should the line chosen by them suit you and not seem too complicated to prepare in a few hours, PLAY IT. In my professional career this strategy has served me very well.

13. ... ♗c8-d7

The active 13... ♗a5? is bad due to 14. ♘xc6 bxc6 15. ♖xc6! ♗d7 16. ♗d2!, transposing to one of the previous comments – see 13. ♘c6 bc6 14. ♘a4 ♗a5?, while in the event of 13... ♘g4 White is better after 14. ♘c6 bxc6 15. ♗d4.

14. ♘a4-c5 ♘c6-a5

Not an easy choice. This knight looks clumsy at the edge of the board, but

other moves also do not create the kind of play Black is hoping for.

In general, Kramnik's plan is perhaps a sophisticated version of the already discussed 13. ♘xc6 bxc6 14. ♘a4, since in the current position the b7 pawn hangs, creating an extra problem for Black, while White keeps most of his positional trumps. In case you're wondering why I didn't play it myself (against Petrosian) – well, having limited time to prepare, I checked only Kasparov's White games against the Tarrasch!

15. b2-b3

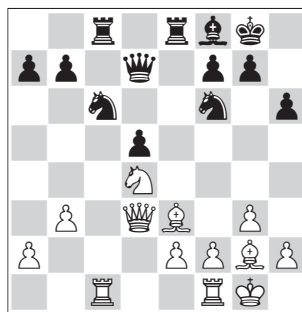
Limiting the scope of the a5 knight.

15. ... ♖a8-c8

16. ♘c5xd7 ♗d8xd7

17. ♗d1-d3 ♘a5-c6

Trying to play 'actively' with 17... ♘e4? would be bad after the simple 18. ♖xc8 ♗xc8 (18... ♖xc8 loses a pawn without any compensation after 19. ♗xe4 dxe4 20. ♗xe4) 19. ♖c1 ♗d7 20. ♗b5, with a winning advantage for White.



18. ♘d4xc6!

Quite rightly, Kramnik now decides to change the pawn structure and focus on the newly-created weakness. The logical 18. ♖fd1 would reveal the drawback of 15.b3 after 18... ♗a3! 19. ♖b1 ♗c5 with good play for Black, since after 20. ♘xc6?! he has the thematic exchange sacrifice 20... ♖xe3! (not 20... ♗xe3

21. ♖b4!) 21. fxe3 bxc6, with at the very least good compensation.

18. ... **b7xc6**
 19. ♖f1-d1 ♗d7-b7
 20. ♕e3-c5

White now uses similar positional plans to those we have already seen under 13. ♖xc6 bxc6 14. ♖a4.

20. ... ♕f8xc5
 21. ♖c1xc5 ♗b7-e7
 22. ♖c5-c2 ♗e7-a3
 23. e2-e3

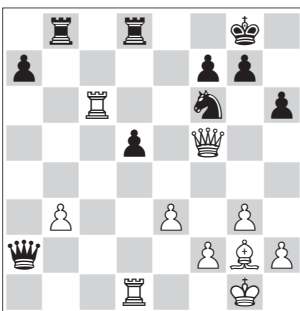
Black is facing a very difficult defence. Due to his better pawn structure, White has a lasting advantage, while Black does not have any dynamic activity to nearly compensate for the positional problems related to his weak pawns.

It is important to note that transitions from an isolated pawn to two weak hanging pawns are a very common way to combat the isolated pawn. Contrary to parallel hanging pawns in the centre, such weak connected pawns are by definition not mobile, so there are no tactics that can be based on their mobility.

23. ... ♖e8-d8
 24. ♗d3-f5 ♖c8-b8?!

Black prefers not to stay passive. A good idea in general; however, it does not work here. It was better to opt for 24... ♗a6 or 24... ♗d6.

25. ♖c2xc6 ♗a3xa2



26. ♖c6xf6!

A rather thematic exchange sacrifice.

26. ... g7xf6

Going for tricks with 26... ♗xb3? would not help after 27. ♗g4 h5 28. ♗xh5 gxf6 29. ♕xd5, winning.

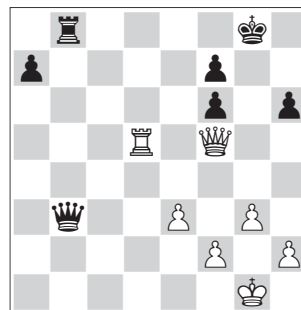
27. ♕g2xd5 ♖d8xd5

Black is obliged to return the exchange, either immediately or after 27... ♖g7 28. ♗g4+ ♖f8 29. ♗h5.

28. ♖d1xd5 ♗a2xb3

Black has ended up with a damaged pawn structure on the kingside, but there are not that many pieces left on the board and there is material equality, so at first sight it seems that Black should have reasonable drawing chances. If he managed to exchange either queens or rooks, even losing his a-pawn in the process, he would reach the safety of a draw.

It is rather possible that Illescas Cordoba aimed for this position when playing 24... ♖b8, believing – with good reason – that he would have reasonable drawing chances. Kramnik, however, does not allow exchanges and keeps the pressure on. Having to defend a difficult position, Illescas Cordoba loses his way in the end.



29. ♗f5-g4+ ♖g8-h7
 30. ♖d5-d6 ♗b3-b1+

31. ♔g1-g2 ♚b1-g6
 32. ♛g4-f3 ♔h7-g7
 33. ♖d6-a6 ♜b8-b5?!

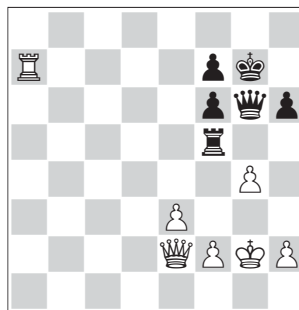
Black loses his a-pawn, but the problems related to his exposed king remain. A better defence was 33...♜e8! 34.♜a4 ♜e5 35.h4 h5, using the fact that either the queen or the rook ending with four versus three pawns on the same side is a draw.

34. ♜a6xa7 ♜b5-f5
 35. ♛f3-e2 ♛g6-h5?

A tactical miscalculation, obviously conceived of when he played 33...♜b5.

36. g3-g4 ♚h5-g6?

An outright blunder. 36...♜g5 was the only move.

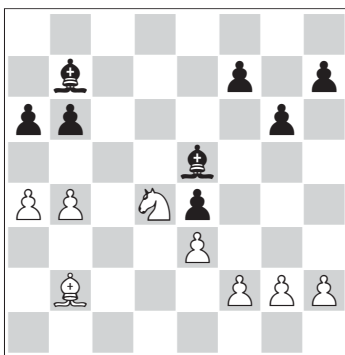


37. ♜a7xf7+! ♔g7xf7
 38. ♛e2-c4+

Black resigned.

He will end up two pawns down: 38...♔f8 39.♛c8+-; 38...♔e7 39.♛e4+-; or 38...♔g7 39.♛c7+ ♔g8 40.♛c8+-.

Structure 2.3



Transferring into a favourable pawn symmetry

In isolated pawn-positions, one of the sides often chooses the right moment to exchange a pair of minor pieces in the centre (mostly knights) in order to reach a favourable symmetry. Such structural transformations are very common and with the next few games I will try to give a few good examples.

SL 8.5 (D45)

GAME 22

Pawel Jaracz

Peter Heine Nielsen

Dresden Ech 2007 (4)

- | | |
|----------|-------|
| 1. d2-d4 | g8-f6 |
| 2. c2-c4 | e7-e6 |
| 3. g1-f3 | d7-d5 |
| 4. b1-c3 | c7-c6 |
| 5. e2-e3 | b8-d7 |
| 6. d1-c2 | f8-d6 |
| 7. b2-b3 | 0-0 |
| 8. f1-e2 | b7-b6 |



This is one of the most common positions in the 6.♖c2 Meran and has been one of the main lines over the years. All of the logical moves, 8...♗e8, 8...e5, 8...dxc4, 8...♖e7 and 8...a6, have been tried in hundreds of games. The game continuation also belongs to the main moves here.

9. 0-0 ♘c8-b7

10. ♘c1-b2 c6-c5

Taking action in the centre. Black can also delay this decision and first play some useful moves, like 10...♖e7, 10...♗e8, or 10...♗c8.

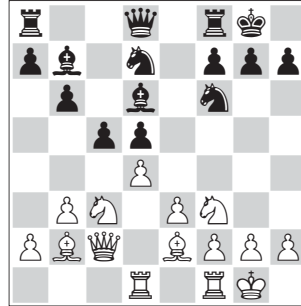
11. c4xd5

The strategic features of the position are becoming visible. It is rather clear that the current situation in the centre will transform to a position where Black will either have two parallel hanging

pawns in the centre, or an isolated pawn.

11. ... e6xd5

12. ♖a1-d1



12. ... ♖d8-e7

In case of 12...♗c8 13.dxc5 bxc5, a complex position with two hanging central pawns is reached. In 1994 I had an interesting game of my own, which continued 14.♖f5! (mounting the pressure on Black's central pawns) 14...♖e7 and now:

A) Now 15.♘b5 plays into Black's hands after 15...♗e5;

B) Kramnik-Kasparov, 8th blitz match game, Moscow 1998, produced interesting and dynamic play after 15.♗fe1 ♖e6 16.♖b1 h6 17.♘d3 ♗e5! 18.♘f5 ♗xf3+ 19.gxf3 ♖e5 20.f4 ♖e8 21.♘h3 ♗d8 22.♘g2 ♖e6 with a complicated game;

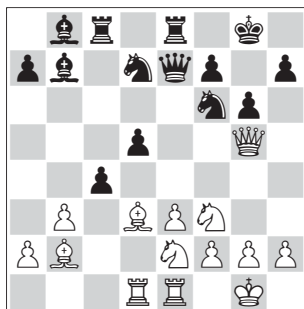
C) 15.♘d3 and now:

C1) 15...♗e5? simply blunders a pawn after 16.♗xd5!;

C2) On the other hand, 15...♖e6 should definitely be considered;

C3) 15...♗fe8 16.♗fe1 (with a black rook on e8, 16.♘b5!?, pinning the knight, was another option) 16...♘b8 17.♗e2 (with both white bishops working and the knights getting transferred to the kingside, threats will soon

be created) 17...g6 18.♖g5 c4 (Black tries to create threats of his own, but misses some tactical shots. Another option was to steer the game into an end-game with 18...♘e5 19.♘xe5 ♙xe5 20.♙xe5 ♖xe5 21.♗xe5 ♜xe5, though then White can target the black pawns and keep the advantage with 22.♞c1 a5 23.♞c2, since 23...♗e7 fails to 24.♞ec1 ♞ec7 25.♘d4!)



analysis diagram

19.♙f5! (the pins are becoming quite unpleasant for Black) 19...♘e4 (19...h6 does not help, since after 20.♗xh6 gxf5 21.♗g5+ ♔h8 22.♘ed4 White gets a winning attack) 20.♗h6! c3 21.♙a3! (a crucial move) 21...♗xa3 22.♙xd7 ♗xa2? (a blunder. Better was 22...c2, though after 23.♞c1 ♞ed8 24.♙xc8 ♞xc8 25.♘fd4! ♗xa2 26.f3 Black's compensation is not sufficient) 23.♙xe8 ♞xe8 24.♞c1 (24.♘xc3! was a direct win: 24...♗xf2+ (24...♘xc3 25.♘g5 is a forced mate) 25.♔h1 ♘xc3 26.♞d2 and the black queen is trapped) 24...♞c8 25.♘fd4 ♗a5 26.f3 and White was clearly better in Sokolov-Lautier, Donner Memorial, Amsterdam 1994.

13. ♘f3-h4

Provoking ...g7-g6 in order to create threats along the a1-h8 diagonal.

- 13. ... g7-g6
- 14. ♘h4-f3 ♞a8-c8
- 15. ♗c2-b1 a7-a6
- 16. a2-a4 ♞f8-e8
- 17. ♗b1-a1



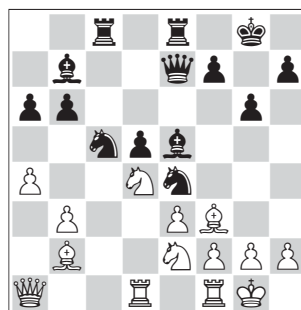
17. ... c5xd4!

Black correctly decides that the time has come to change the pawn structure in the centre. He opts for the isolated pawn position, correctly judging that with his well-placed pieces he has nothing to fear.

- 18. ♘f3xd4 ♘d7-c5
- 19. ♙e2-f3 ♙d6-e5

The bishop is well placed on e5, so the potential weakness created by White's 13th move is rather irrelevant at the moment.

20. ♘c3-e2 ♘f6-e4?



This standard move, though logical in itself, allows a beautiful tactical possi-

bility. It was necessary to first secure the c5 knight with 20...a5! and only then proceed with ...♘fe4, with better chances for Black.

Now White spots a new tactical motif that comes as a consequence of the possibility to change the pawn structure in the centre. Please note that generally, tactics created by a change in pawn structure are very easy to miss.

21. **b3-b4!** ♘c5-d7
 22. **♙f3xe4!** d5xe4

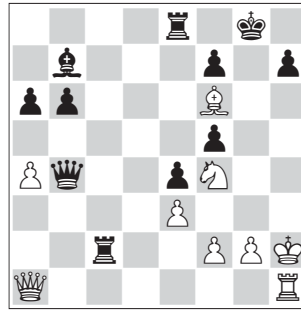


Now the pawn structure is symmetrical, but all of White's pieces are working harmoniously, while Black's b7 bishop is hitting its own pawn. White now executes a very nice positional exchange sacrifice that is worth remembering.

23. **♘d4-f5!** g6xf5
 24. **♖d1xd7** ♙e5xh2+
 25. **♙g1xh2** ♙e7xd7
 26. **♘e2-f4**

For only an exchange White has full control, the black king is weak and his kingside pawn structure is destroyed, and the b7 bishop is reduced to a mere pawn.

26. ... ♙d7-e7
 27. **♖f1-h1!** ♖c8-c2
 28. **♙b2-f6** ♙e7xb4



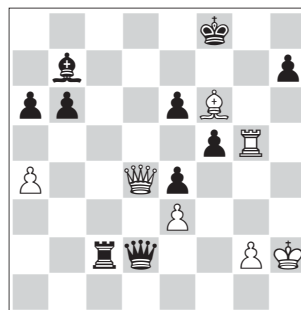
29. **♙h2-g3!**

Involving his last piece – the rook – in the attack, which now becomes devastating. The game is decided.

29. ... ♙b4-d2
 30. **♖h1-h5** ♙d2xf2+
 31. **♙g3-h2**

The black monarch has been left on his own without a single piece defending him, while all of the white pieces are participating in the attack.

31. ... ♖e8-e6
 32. **♙a1-d4!** ♙f2-d2
 33. **♖h5-g5+** ♙g8-f8
 34. **♘f4xe6+** f7xe6



35. **♙f6-e7+!**

The final stroke.

35. ... ♙f8xe7
 36. **♖g5-g7+** ♙e7-e8
 37. **♖g7-g8+** ♙e8-e7
 38. **♙d4-g7+** ♙e7-d6
 39. **♖g8-d8+** 1-0