

The Modernized Berlin Defense

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The Modernized Berlin Defense

**Priyadharshan
Kannappan**

Thinkers Publishing 2019



Key to Symbols

| | | | |
|----|--|----|--------------------------------|
| ! | a good move | ± | White stands slightly better |
| ? | a weak move | ∓ | Black stands slightly better |
| !! | an excellent move | ± | White has a serious advantage |
| ?? | a blunder | ∓ | Black has a serious advantage |
| !? | an interesting move | +− | White has a decisive advantage |
| ?! | a dubious move | −+ | Black has a decisive advantage |
| □ | only move | → | with an attack |
| N | novelty | ↑ | with initiative |
| ⊙ | lead in development | ↔ | with counterplay |
| ⊙ | zugzwang | Δ | with the idea of |
| = | equality | △ | better is |
| ∞ | unclear position | ≤ | worse is |
| ∞ | with compensation for the sacrificed material | + | check |
| | | # | mate |

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Foreword

I came to know about Priyadharshan or, as I call him, PD, for the first time in 2011. Over the years I continued to keep track of his progress. He became a valuable member of the SPICE program between 2016 and 2018.

PD is a very passionate chess lover, and contributed in any way possible to the team, like running the chess club, managing an online league, writing articles for leading chess magazines, commentating on games and so on.

In addition, he often played the role of a second, working on opening ideas for the Webster chess team, and openly shared his knowledge for the greater good of his team mates. I also know that he has personally worked with some 2650-2700+ players, exchanging opening ideas on a regular basis. His knowledge of his favorite openings is top-notch and his curiosity to experiment with openings is truly commendable.

The Berlin Defense is an opening system PD is very familiar with, and I am very confident that his knowledge will be invaluable to anyone who wants to master this incredibly solid opening.

I am very happy that he has put his knowledge of and love for chess into writing a book on the Berlin Defense. I wish Priyadharshan the best of success, and hope that readers will get to learn about an opening that can be played at all levels for life!

Sincerely,
Susan Polgar

Preface

This book's journey began on the first day of January 2018 when one of my New Year resolutions was to write a chess book. The journey has been very long, but certainly fun, and has in many ways made me understand myself better, both as a person and as a chess player!

If it has taken a long time, you also have to know the distance the book has covered! It has travelled 14,130 km, as the first page was written when I was about to complete my Master's degree at Webster University in St Louis in the USA, and now, as I write my preface, I am a full-time chess trainer, currently living in Bengaluru, India.

So how did I fall in love with this beautiful Berlin Defense? In mid-2003, when I was preparing for the World U-10 Championship, I found that my Philidor Defense wasn't good enough to be played in a tournament of such stature, and my coach at the time, IM Raja Ravi Sekhar, suggested the Berlin to me as it was at the peak of its popularity after the 2001 World Championship match between Kasparov and Kramnik.

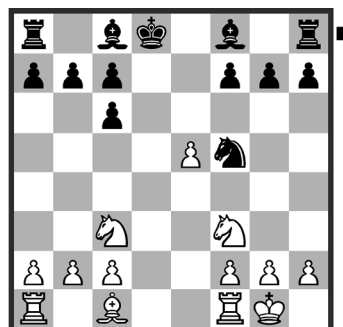
The Berlin was a good fit for me then, as it didn't have extensive theory (unlike now!) and the lines given in ECO were simple and easy to remember, which made me very happy, as I never really enjoyed memorizing moves in the opening.

My first-ever Berlin game was against the now GM Gil Popilski from Israel, and you must certainly see why I got hooked on this line:

♙ Popilski, Gil
♚ Priyadharshan, K. (2063)
♜ Halkidiki 2003

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 ♘f6 4. 0-0 ♗xe4 5. d4 ♗d6 6. ♙xc6 dxc6 7. dxe5 ♘f5 8. ♚xd8+ ♚xd8 9. ♘c3

(see diagram on the right)



Position after: 9. ♘c3

I remember taking some time when I reached this position, and then played a natural-looking but not so precise move.

9... ♖e6!?

9... ♔e8 10. ♜d1 ♘e7 11. h3 ½-½ (44)
Csiba, T (2065) – Willow, M (2270) ICCF
email 2013

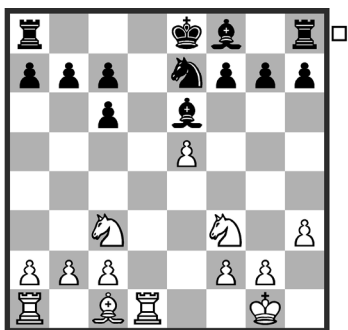
10. ♜d1+

10. ♘g5!? ♔e7 11. f4 h5 12. b3 ♜d8
13. ♘ce4 ♖c8 14. ♖b2 ♔e8 15. ♔f2
♕e7 16. ♜ad1∞

10... ♔e8 11. h3

♞ 11. ♘g5 ♖c8 12. ♘e2 ♕e7 13. ♘e4
b6∞

11... ♘e7?!



Position after: 11... ♘e7?!

New move.

12. ♘e4

♞ 12. ♘d4 ♜d8 13. ♖g5 ♖c8 14. ♘e4
♜d7 15. e6 fxe6 16. ♘c5 ♜d6 17. ♖f4
e5 18. ♖xe5± Black needs to be precise
to hold this position. ½-½ (44) Csiba, T
(2065) – Willow, M (2270) ICCF email
2013

12... ♘g6 13. b3

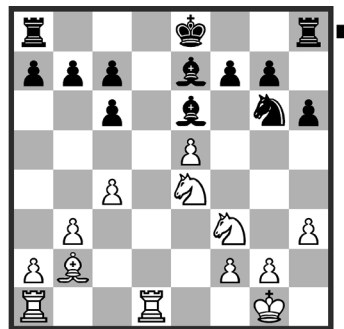
White has an edge.

13... ♖e7 14. c4 h6?

♞ 14... ♜d8

15. ♖b2?!

♞ 15. ♘d4±



Position after: 15. ♖b2?!

15... ♜d8?!

♞ 15... c5

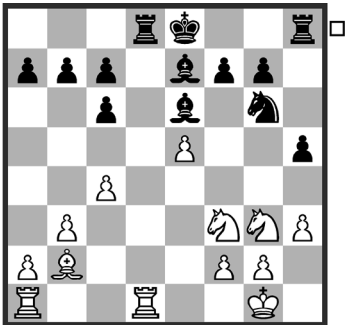
16. ♘g3

White is threatening to occupy the h5-
square from where the white knight

would exert great influence on the king-side.

16. ♘d4±

16... h5!



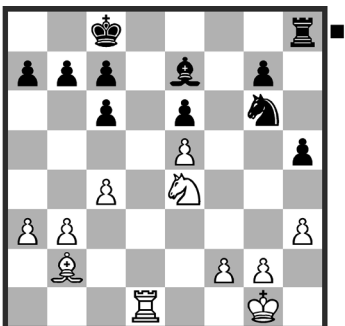
Position after: 16... h5!

Prophylaxis.

17. ♘d4 ♙c5?!

♞ 17... ♘f4 18. ♘gf5 ♙xf5 19. ♘xf5 ♙xd1+ 20. ♙xd1 ♘e6=

18. ♘xe6 fxe6 19. ♘e4 ♙e7 20. ♙xd8+ ♙xd8 21. ♙d1+ ♙c8 22. a3



Position after: 22. a3

22... c5

♞ 22... h4 with the plan to play ... ♙h5 and create dark square weaknesses.

23. ♙h2 ♙f8

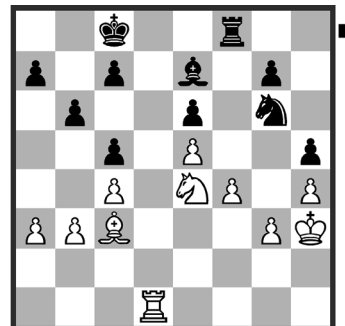
I waste a bunch of tempos without a plan here.

24. g3 ♙f3 25. ♙c3 ♙f5 26. f4 ♙f8?

Black's rook achieved nothing other than helping White improve his pawn structure on the kingside.

♞ 26... h4 27. ♙g1 hxg3+ 28. ♙xg3 ♙xf4 29. ♘d2 ♘h4 30. ♙xg7 ♙d8±

27. h4 b6 28. ♙h3



Position after: 28. ♙h3

This is the point where I came upon a brilliant reconfiguration of Black's minor pieces.

28... ♘h8! 29. ♙d2

29. b4 with more complications. 29... cxb4 30. axb4 ♖f7 31. b5 ♖h6 32. ♗e1∞

29... ♖f7 30. ♖g5 ♗xg5 31. hxg5

31. fxg5 ♖d8 32. ♖g2 ♖c6∞

31... g6 32. ♖g2?!

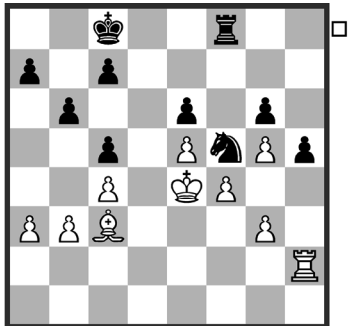
White still hasn't noticed Black's plan.

♞ 32. b4

32... ♖d8 33. ♖f3 ♖c6 34. ♖e4 ♖e7 35. ♖h2?

35. ♖d1= keeps the balance.

35... ♖f5∞



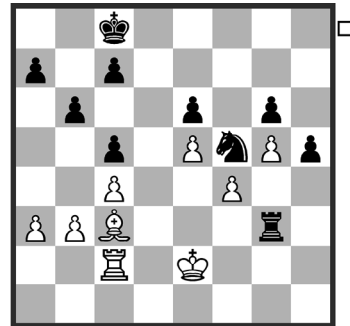
Position after: 35... ♖f5∞

The knight has landed on a dream outpost after a lengthy journey. This is the piece maneuver that made this game so memorable for me and made me fall in love with the Berlin Defense.

36. ♖f3 ♖d8! 37. ♖c2?

37. ♖d2∞

37... ♖d3+→ 38. ♖e2 ♖xg3

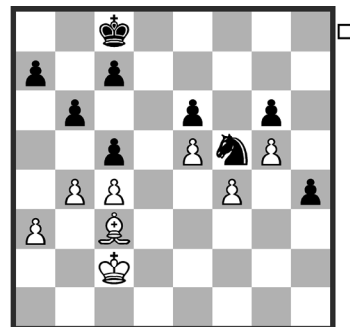


Position after: 38... ♖xg3

39. b4

♞ 39. ♖c1 h4 40. ♗e1 ♖e3+ 41. ♖f2

39... ♖g2+ 40. ♖d3 ♖xc2 41. ♖xc2 h4



Position after: 41... h4

42. bxc5 h3 43. cxb6 axb6

0-1

The knight maneuver starting with 28...♗h8 was something I am very proud of, and that is how I developed a lifelong love for the Berlin Defense. People often say that you choose something or something chooses you; I think the Berlin chose me, not the other way around!

Since then, the Berlin has been my go-to, rain or shine opening against 1.e4, and has given me the chance to play a whole bunch of memorable games against players of all rating levels. An incident that is still fresh in my mind happened in the World U-16 Championship in 2009, when I was paired against an opponent who was 200 points lower rated than me. I was scared to play the Berlin as I thought he might hold me to a draw, but my coach, GM R.B. Ramesh, told me to go and play it confidently, and the result was a 31-move victory!

The Berlin Defense has had a significant impact on my chess career, as it made me a positional player who would happily exchange queens in the firm belief of outplaying his opponents in practical endgames. The Berlin has made me enjoy these endgames and has had a huge impact on my playing style.

When I set out to write this book, I was clear on certain aspects, like keeping the moves simple and giving as much explanation as possible at the critical moments, as I wanted to ensure that someone interested in learning the intricacies of the Berlin doesn't get swamped by long theoretical lines, but acquires a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the positions. If you manage to grasp the dynamics of these lines, then you can play not just the systems recommended in the book, but also other popular Berlin variations that have not been covered in this book for the Black side.

There is a long list of people whom I should thank for their part in my writing journey, above all IM Raja Panjwani for putting me in touch with the Thinkers Publishing team, especially Mr Daniël Vanheirzeele and GM Romain Edouard, who were very supportive of the idea from day one when I made my pitch to them about my plans.

I am grateful to the Thinkers Publishing team for allowing me not only to write the book, but also for their regular advice on how to fine tune it, and in editing the final drafts I certainly couldn't have asked for a better publisher!

I am highly indebted to Webster University, the SPICE chess program, Mr Paul Truong and GM Susan Polgar, as I did the majority of my initial analysis with the powerful computers available in the SPICE chess center, an opportunity only possible because I was a student at Webster and member of the SPICE program. A special thanks also to Susan for graciously writing the foreword for the book.

Finally, I wouldn't be here if not for the support of my family, so a big thanks to my parents, my brother and his wife for being there for me, irrespective of the situation. They also ensured that I didn't slack at any point during the long writing process.

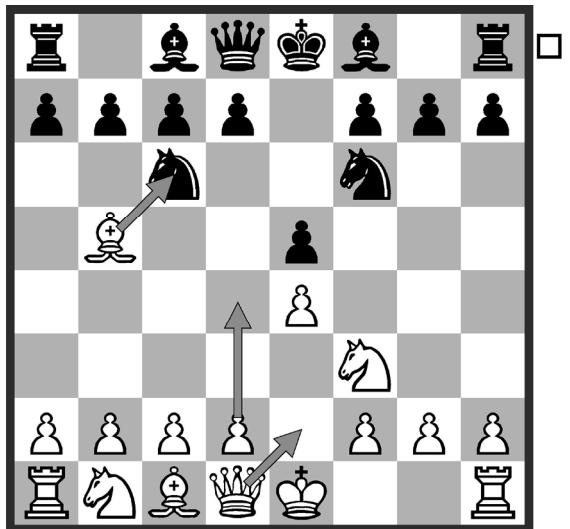
Now that I have thanked a lot of people, let's wait no longer and dive into the world of the Berlin and immerse ourselves in this evergreen opening system!

GM Priyadharshan Kannappan
21 September 2019



Alternatives on Move 4



1. e4 e5 2. ♞f3 ♞c6
3. ♚b5 ♞f6 4.--



Chapter Guide

Chapter 1 – Alternatives on Move 4

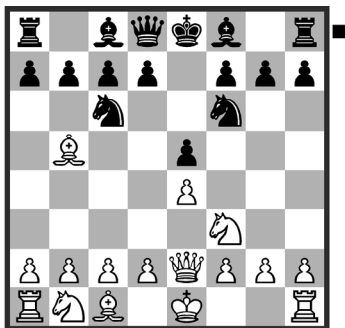
1. e4 e5 2.  f3  c6 3.  b5  f6

| | |
|---|----|
| a) 4.  e2 | 17 |
| b) 4. d4 | 21 |
| c) 4.  xc6 | 31 |

a) 4. ♔e2

Let's start with different moves by White on move four, viz. ♔e2, d4 and ♘xc6, which each have fewer than 1500 games. We will look at ♔e2 here and the other two variations in the following sub-chapters.

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♘b5 ♘f6 4. ♔e2



Position after: 4. ♔e2

Occasionally used by 2600+ GMs as a surprise weapon in their arsenal against the Berlin. The most faithful adherent of this line was the late GM Vugar Gashimov. In recent times the Ukrainian blitz specialist GM Oleksandr Bortnyk has employed it in a good number of his games.

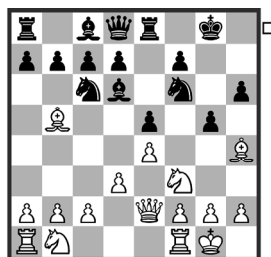
4... ♘d6

The pet line of GM Vladimir Malakhov. To get a deep understanding of this system I would strongly suggest looking at all his games from this position.

5. c3

A) 5. 0-0 0-0 6. c3 transposes to 5.c3.

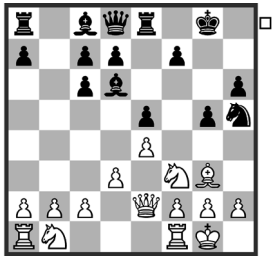
B) 5. d3 0-0 6. ♘g5 [6. c3 transposes to 5.c3.] 6... ♖e8 7. 0-0 h6 8. ♘h4 ½-½ (19) Adams, M (2723) – Malakhov, V (2712), Konya 2012. 8... g5!N



Position after: 8... g5!N

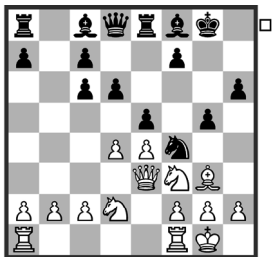
Malakhov missed this strong move which makes the game very dynamic, with complications favoring Black in my opinion. I made some natural moves for both sides from here to see where the line might lead. 9. ♘xc6 bxc6 I spent a lot of time over which recapture to recommend here, as they look equally good, but in the end I decided to call upon the spirit of Nimzowitsch to help me and went with the odd-looking ...bxc6, capturing towards the center. The idea behind this move is to take control of the semi-open b-file and also play ...♘c5 or ...♘f8 and take control of the center with a pawn push to d6 or d5. [9... dxc6!? I didn't like this, as the e5-pawn seems weak and Black's kingside

seems unstable.] 10. ♖g3 [10. ♘xg5?? This tempting sacrifice doesn't work. 10... hxg5 11. ♖xg5 ♜e6! Now the queen can go via f8 to g7 and shield the king from attacks.] 10... ♘h5



Position after: 10... ♘h5

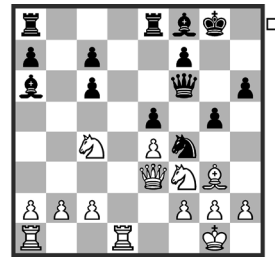
11. ♘bd2 [If White tries to strike in the center with 11. d4?! then 11... ♘f4 12. ♖xf4 exf4.] 11... ♖f8 12. d4 [12. ♘c4? d5 13. ♘cxe5 g4.] 12... ♘f4 13. ♜e3 d6



Position after: 13... d6

The possibility of playing this move was the reason why I chose 9... bxc6. I believe that keeping the center stable benefits Black, as he has placed his long-term bets on his two bishops. White's trumps are Black's spoiled pawn structure and the weak f5-square, which can be exploited if Black plays carelessly.

14. dxe5 dxe5 15. ♘c4 ♖a6 16. ♜fd1 ♜f6∞



Position after: 16... ♜f6∞

A complicated position where White has to be pretty precise to hold the balance. Black's key plan is to play ...h5-h4 and create threats on the king-side.

5... 0-0



Position after: 5... 0-0

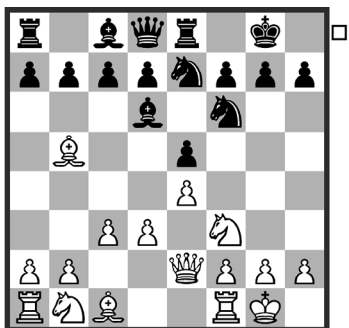
6. 0-0

6. d3 ♘e7 7. d4 ♘g6 8. 0-0 c6 9. ♖d3 ♜e8 transposes to the main line.

6... ♜e8 7. d3

Black has a bunch of good options in this position, and I decided on

7... ♖e7

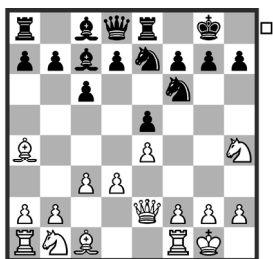


Position after: 7... ♖e7

This quick transfer of the knight to g6, followed by expansion in the center, is a standard plan for Black in Giuoco Piano structures. The critical decision that Black needs to make in these positions is where to place the d6-bishop, whether it will go to c7 or f8.

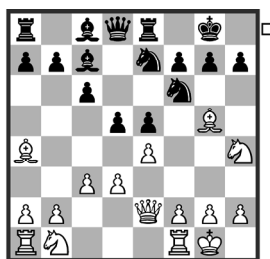
8. d4

8. ♘h4? White isn't interested in letting Black plonk his knight on f4. 8... c6 9. ♙a4 ♙c7!N



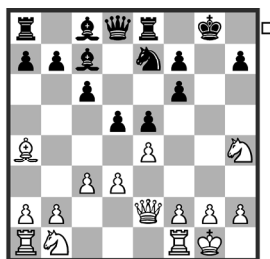
Position after: 9... ♙c7!N

Previous games in this position had continued with 9... ♘g6, as Black was afraid of ♙c1-g5xf6, shattering his kingside pawn structure. I would like to extend my analysis to give an idea of how the game could develop. [9... ♘g6 10. ♘xg6 hxg6 11. ♘d2=] 10. ♙g5 [10. c4 h6 11. ♘c3 d6 12. h3 g5 13. ♘f3 ♘g6] 10... d5!



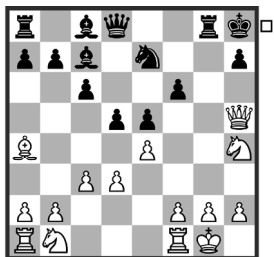
Position after: 10... d5!

Black doesn't worry about weakening his kingside, as he can gain control of the critical f4-square for his knight, play ...♙h8 and ...♗g8 and pressurize the center with the ...f5 pawn break. 11. ♙xf6 gxf6



Position after: 11... gxf6

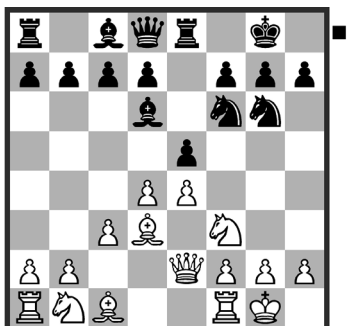
12. ♙h5 [12. ♙f3?! f5 13. exf5 ♙d6 14. g3 ♙f6] 12... ♙h8 [12... ♘g6!?] 13. ♙xf7 ♗f8 14. ♙h5 ♗g8→



Position after: 14... ♖g8→

The two bishops, open g-file and upcoming ...f5 pawn break give Black huge counterplay.

8... ♗g6 9. ♖d3



Position after: 9. ♖d3

9... c6N



Conclusion

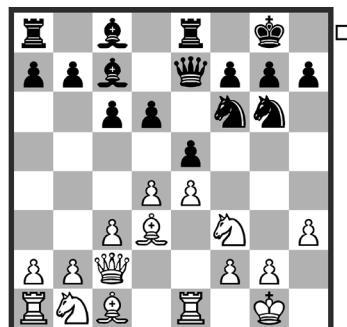
The 4. ♖e2 variation poses no serious threats to Black, and the line I have recommended helps you fight for the initiative with the black pieces. The key maneuver is ...0-0 and then the knight transfer ...♞c6–e7–g6. The positions that we reach from 4. ♖e2 share some similarities with Giuoco Piano variations, except that White still needs to develop all his queenside pieces, which is excellent for Black. As mentioned, study the games of GMs Gashimov, Bortnyk and Malakhov to get a better idea of the plans for both sides in this variation.

A natural-looking improvement over the previously played 9... b6!?. I find this way of developing the pieces weird in this pawn structure. 10. ♖c2 ♖b7∞ 1-0 (74) Bogut, Z (2403) – Yemelin, V (2541), Neum 2002.

10. h3 ♖e7 11. ♖e1

11. dxe5 ♖xe5 12. ♖e1 ♞h5 13. ♞xe5 ♖xe5=

11... ♖c7 12. ♖c2 d6∞



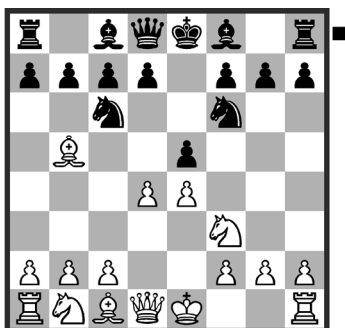
Position after: 12... d6∞

Black's ideas include ...♞h5, ...♞hf4 and ...♖f6 to create threats on the kingside.

b) 4.d4

In this sub-chapter, we will look at what happens if White plays 4.d4, another early deviation against the Berlin Defense.

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 ♘f6 4. d4

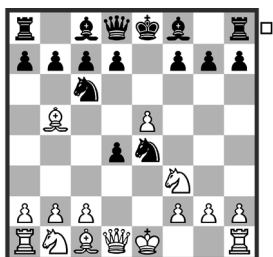


Position after: 4. d4

A variation that is popular at fast time controls and is often employed by Azerbaijani players such as Gashimov, Mamedov and Guseinov.

4... exd4 5. 0-0

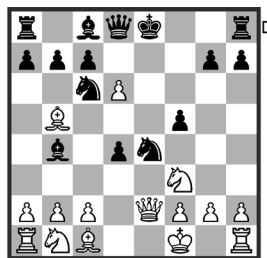
5. e5 ♘e4



Position after: 5... ♘e4

A) 6. ♙e2 ♙b4+N Why not develop a piece with check!

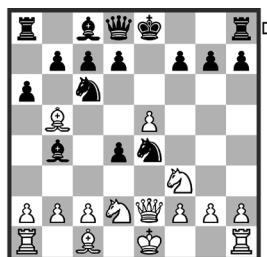
A1) 7. ♙f1?! White misses a nice trick by Black: 7... d5 8. exd6 f5



Position after: 8... f5

This is the key move that saves the knight for Black. 9. dxc7 ♙xc7 This is an open position where White's king is weak on f1, so he must be very careful how he develops his pieces. 10. ♘g5 ♙e7 11. ♘xe4 fxe4 12. ♙xe4 ♙d7 White's undeveloped pieces and precarious king give Black the edge.

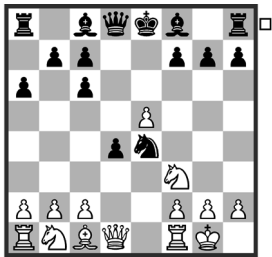
A2) 7. ♘bd2 a6



Position after: 7... a6

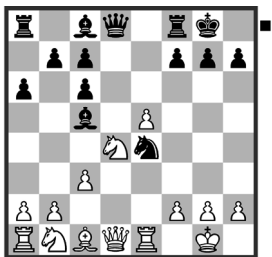
8. ♖xc6 ♜xd2 9. ♖xd2 ♖xd2+ 10. ♜xd2 dxc6= Black will have great control of the light squares.

B) 6. 0-0 a6 7. ♖xc6 [7. ♖a4 The following position can also be reached by various move orders. 7... ♖e7 transposes to the note on 6. 0-0 ♖e7 7.e5 ♜e4.] 7... dxc6



Position after: 7... dxc6

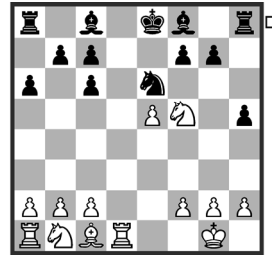
B1) 8. ♜xd4 ♖c5 [The other possibility is 8... ♜c5, but why do that when we have the more active text move?] 9. c3 0-0 10. ♖e1



Position after: 10. ♖e1

10... f5! 11. f3 ♜g5 12. ♖e3 f4 ½-½ (32) Guseinov, G (2659) – Shirov, A (2745), Baku 2009. Black should kick the knight on d4 with ...♖e7–c5 with a great position.

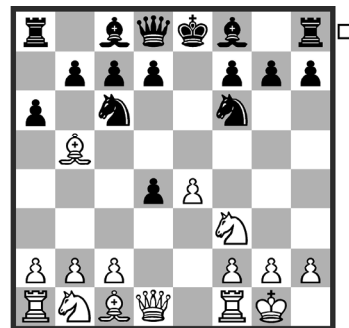
B2) 8. ♖e1 ♜c5 9. ♜xd4 White has a baffling 71.4% score from this position, which surprises me greatly. 9... ♜e6 10. ♜f5 ♜xd1 11. ♖xd1 h5!



Position after: 11... h5!

I like the idea of immediately activating the rook on h8 with ...h4 and ...♖h5. 12. ♜d2 h4 13. ♜f3 h3 14. g3 b6 The light squares are incredibly weak, and Black's two bishops will shortly show their might.

5... a6



Position after: 5... a6

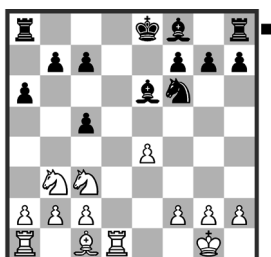
6. ♖a4

6. ♖xc6 dxc6 7. ♜xd4



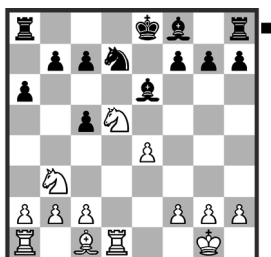
Position after: 7. ♖xd4

World Champion Magnus Carlsen has advocated this move for the white side twice. 7... c5 [7... ♖c5!? was played by Karjakin against Carlsen, but I prefer the text move.] 8. ♗b3 ♕xd1 9. ♖xd1 ♖e6 10. ♗c3



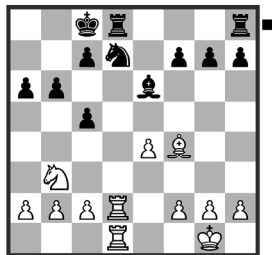
Position after: 10. ♗c3

The position is very similar to an Exchange Ruy Lopez, with the key difference that Black has a knight on f6 instead of a pawn. 10... ♗d7 11. ♗d5



Position after: 11. ♗d5

11... ♖d6 [11... 0-0-0!?N would be a try to unbalance the game, e.g. 12. ♖f4 c6 13. ♗e3 ♖e7 14. ♖d6 ♖f6 15. c3 b6 16. f4 g6 17. ♗d2 ♖he8∞] 12. ♗f4 ♖xf4 13. ♖xf4 0-0-0 14. ♖d2 b6 15. ♖ad1

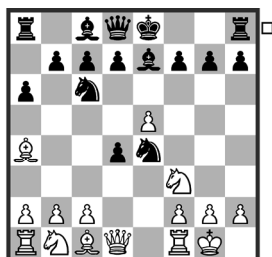


Position after: 15. ♖ad1

15... ♗b8 The idea of this move is to reposition the knight on c6, a very natural plan in Berlin Defense endgames. The black knight would feel happiest on b4, c4, d4 or e5, and ...♗b8–c6 helps us target three of those squares. 16. ♖xd8+ Black drew comfortably in lordachescu, V (2610) – Bacrot, E (2704), Baden-Baden 2013.

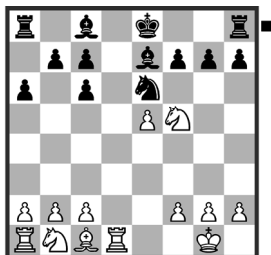
6... ♖e7 7. ♖e1

7. e5 ♗e4



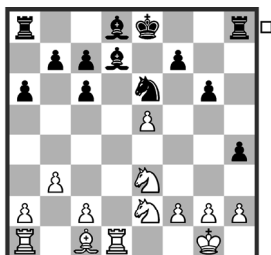
Position after: 7... ♗e4

A) 8. ♖e1 ♘c5 9. ♙xc6 dxc6 10. ♘xd4 ♘e6 11. ♘f5 ♙xd1 12. ♖xd1



Position after: 12. ♖xd1

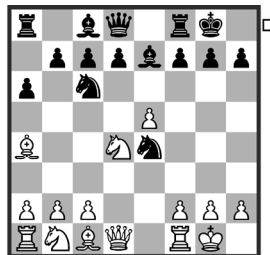
We have the same position as in the 5.e5 ♘e4 6. 0-0 a6 7. ♙c6 dxc6 8. ♖e1 variation, the only difference being the bishop on e7 compared to f8 in that line, so I think it's important to use that to our advantage by placing the bishop on d8. 12... ♙d8! 13. ♘c3 h5! We have already seen this maneuver in similar positions in this chapter. A sample continuation would be 14. b3 h4 15. ♘e2 g6 16. ♘e3 ♙d7.



Position after: 16... ♙d7

Preparing for long castling. Black's strong outpost for the knight on e6 combined with his space advantage give him the edge.

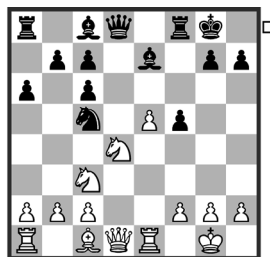
B) 8. ♘xd4 0-0



Position after: 8... 0-0

White has tried various moves here, but none of them is an attempt to play for an advantage.

B1) 9. ♖e1 ♘c5 10. ♙xc6 dxc6 11. ♘c3 f5!?



Position after: 11... f5!?

Black has scored a terrific 71% with this move which kills White's only active idea of f4–f5 and creates a kingside attack. 12. exf6 [12. ♘ce2 ♘e6 13. ♙d3 ♙c5 14. ♖d1 ♙xd4 15. ♘xd4 ♙xd4 16. ♙xd4 ♘xd4 17. ♖xd4 ♙e6= ½-½ (28) Savchenko, B (2608) – Demchenko, A (2588), Nizhny Tagil 2014] 12... ♙xf6 13. ♙e3 ♘e6 14. ♘ce2 1-0 (33) Bitoon, R (2480) – Datu, A