

The Caro-Kann Revisited

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Francesco Rambaldi

Thinkers Publishing 2020



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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**To Gerard Talvard,
connoisseur of chess,
my first chess coach**

Preface

The modern chess player faces a challenging task before every game: the choice of opening. For most players, the ideal opening for Black has the following characteristics:

- a. It requires a limited amount of memorization.
- b. It contains an element of surprise for the opponent.
- c. It leads to an equal position.
- d. It allows for a relatively complex game, with winning chances for Black.

Obviously, the ideal opening does not exist. Before every game, the modern chess player needs to consider numerous variables – the most obvious being his specific opponent and the tournament situation – and then compromise. As the number of games played in each variation increases and opening theory becomes more and more developed, finding a suitable opening becomes harder and harder, and players tend to follow the most popular variations.

Openings rise and fall in popularity over time, as players continue to learn and find new ideas for both sides. The two main replies to 1.e4 have always been 1...e5 and 1...c5, and with good ‘homework’ it is exceedingly likely you will equalize with either. However, in tandem with their popularity, the amount of theory that is needed to play those openings has increased as well.

In this book, I recommend the Caro-Kann Defense as a viable and flexible opening for Black. Let’s examine, point by point, how it compares to both 1...e5 and 1...c5.

- Judging the amount of theory required to play an opening is not an exact science, but it is quite clear that the Caro-Kann will be an easier opening to pick up from scratch than any Sicilian. The amount of theory is probably more comparable to a 1...e5 repertoire, depending on which variations one chooses to play.
- As I mentioned earlier, the Caro-Kann is not played as frequently as 1...e5 and 1...c5. Further, the Caro-Kann comes in various flavors and can be adopted either as a mainstay or surprise weapon, due to these diverse options Black has.

- Chess players always need to make some concessions in the opening, but this point is the hardest to tackle for any chess player (for good reason). I believe that the Caro-Kann is very playable, and that it is White who needs to find fresh ideas to trouble Black. Opening theory will evolve well beyond this book, but the Caro-Kann will remain a viable opening.
- Last but not least, the Caro-Kann is a pretty good choice if you are looking to avoid simple draws or major simplifications since it rarely leads to forcing variations.

The Caro-Kann Defense has always been one of my favorite openings to play and was the very first opening I learned when I started playing chess. Former world champion Anatoly Karpov espoused this opening throughout his career and, with his solid and positional style, inspired me to play the Caro-Kann as well. Many games have been played, and theory has evolved since the days of Karpov's Caro-Kann. As you will see in this book, this opening offers Black many opportunities for dynamic play, despite its solid framework.

My hope is that readers of all levels will find something of value to them in this book. The material contains many new ideas and the analysis often stretch quite far from the opening stages. Nevertheless, I have done my best to help the reader make sense of the complicated variations and of the positional nuances inextricably woven between them. The idea is not only to show you the moves, but also to help you develop both your understanding of the underlying plans and your familiarity with broader strategic concepts, to guide your decision-making even beyond the opening.



Francesco Rambaldi
St. Louis, March 2020



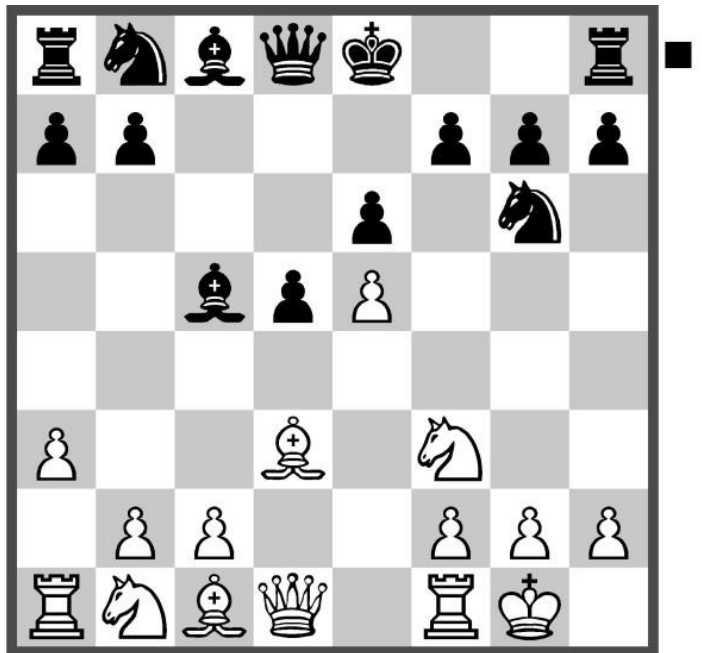
4.dxc5 e6 5.  f3 with 8.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5

4.dxc5 e6 5.  f3  xc5

6.  d3  e7 7.0-0  g6





8.a3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 3 – 4.dxc5 e6 5. f3 with 8.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.  f3  xc5 6.  d3  e7 7.0-0  g6 8.a3

a) 8...  c6	53
b) 8...0-0 9.  g5.....	57
c) 8...0-0 9.  e1	60
d) 8...a6.....	62
e) 8...  e7.....	65

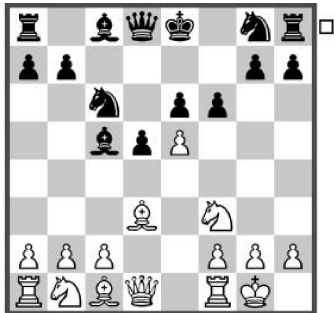
a) 8...♘c6

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 c5 4. dxc5 e6 5. ♘f3 ♙xc5 6. ♙d3

6. a3 is covered via 5.a3 ♙xc5 6. ♘f3.

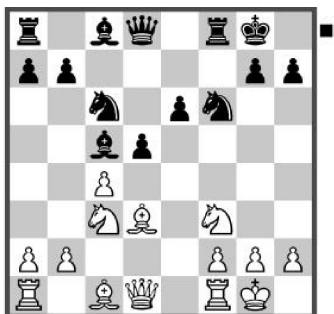
6... ♘e7

It is worth considering the currently popular variation 6... f6 7. 0-0 ♘c6:



Position after: 7... ♘c6

White obtains the upper hand here with precise play. 8. exf6 ♘xf6 9. c4 0-0 10. ♘c3 and Black can choose a few different ideas, but none of them give him enough counterplay. In the long run, Black's central pawns are weak and Black will either lose one or give up important squares by pushing them.



Position after: 10. ♘c3

A) 10... ♔h8 11. ♙g5 ♚d6 12. ♙h4!± gave White an edge in Van Kampen, R (2572) – Kroeze, F (2408) Germany 2012.

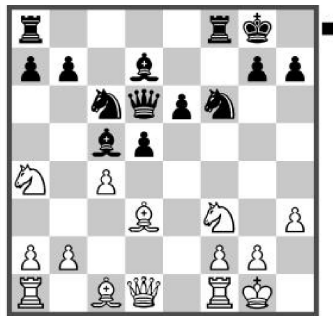
B) 10... h6



Position after: 10... h6

11. ♙f4!N White wants to bring the bishop to g3 so that it will defend the f2-pawn and control the e5-square. 11... d4 [11... ♘h5 12. ♙d2 ♙d7 13. ♖c1± Black's position is too loose.; 11... ♙d7 12. ♙g3 ♙e8 13. ♖e1±] 12. ♘b1!? The idea is to bring the knight to d2 and control the e4-square. White has a slight edge due to Black's inferior pawn structure. 12... ♘h5 13. ♙g3 e5 14. ♘bd2±

C) 10... ♚d6 11. h3! ♙d7 [11... ♘e5 is forcing and worth considering, but after 12. cxd5 ♘fg4 13. ♙xh7+ ♚xh7 14. ♘g5+ ♚g8 15. hxg4 exd5 16. ♚xd5+ ♚xd5 17. ♘xd5 ♙xg4 18. ♙e3± the tactics have worked out in White's favour.] 12. ♘a4!



Position after: 12. ♖a4!

White harasses the c5-bishop, which is Black's best piece. 12... ♗b4 [12... b6 13. cxd5 exd5 14. ♖xc5 bxc5 15. ♗e3±] 13. a3 ♗a5 14. ♘c3 Black's dark-squared bishop has been driven away and a3 is a useful move. 14... a6 [14... ♘e5 15. ♗f4 ♘xf3+ 16. ♔xf3 e5 17. ♗g3±] 15. cxd5 exd5 16. ♘e4! ♘xe4 [16... dxe4?? loses to 17. ♗c4+-] 17. ♗xe4 d4 [17... ♘e7 18. ♗g5 ♔h8 19. ♗xe7 ♔xe7 20. ♔xd5± leaves White a pawn up for little compensation.] 18. ♘g5! g6 19. ♗d2 ♖ae8 20. ♗xa5 ♘xa5 21. ♖e1± White's position is more comfortable, as the d4-pawn is very weak.

7. 0-0

7. a3 has no independent value since Black frees the e7-square for the bishop with 7... ♘g6.

7... ♘g6 8. a3

White's intention is quite clear: he wants to play b4 and follow up with ♗b2, ♘bd2, ♖e1 and possibly c4.



Position after: 8. a3

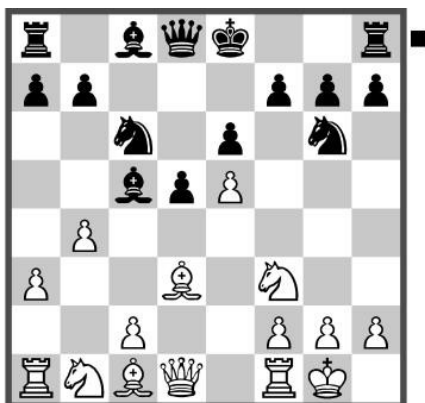
A lot of players have reached this position, and there is considerably more theory than in the lines we discussed in the previous chapter, where a3 was played on an earlier move. Nevertheless, there are many new ideas to be explored. Since we are discussing one of the main lines for White, I will show a few different continuations for Black. 8... ♘c6 is the most popular move and should be followed up with 9. b4 ♗e7. White can likely claim a slight pull in that line, but he needs to be very precise. 8... 0-0 is another popular move, which can lead to very sharp and forcing play after 9. ♘g5 or to a positional struggle after 9. ♖e1. Overall, Black needs to put in a considerable amount of work to equalize in both lines, so I will just showcase the main variations. Although it is only move 8, Black has two interesting novelties in this position. The first one is 8... a6!?N, freeing the a7-square for the bishop. The critical lines arise after 9. ♘bd2, as White mirrors the main line with 8. ♘bd2 with the moves a3 and ...a6 included. My main recommendation is 8...

♙e7!?N, an intriguing move that can be best understood by examining the shortfalls of the other variations. It almost always makes sense to delay ...♘c6, because in case White plays b4 Black wants to reply with ...♙e7 and ...a5 (displacing the b4-pawn) and then develop the queen's knight to c5 instead. We will begin by discussing Black's alternatives to 8... ♙e7, and we will revert to my main recommendation in the last subchapter.

8... ♘c6

The most straightforward approach. Black simply continues development and invites White to show his plan.

9. b4

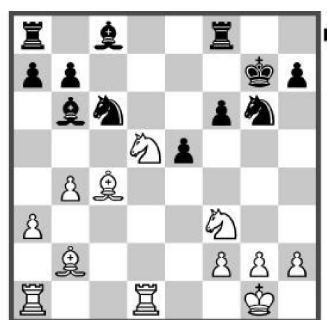


Position after: 9. b4

9... ♙e7

9... ♙b6?! is more popular, but Black fails to equalize as White opens up the center with c4. 10. ♙b2 0-0 [10... ♘f4 can also be played, but White retains the upper hand with 11. c4 0-0 12. c5!

♘xd3 13. ♙xd3 ♙c7 14. b5 ♘e7 15. ♘bd2± as was played in Kadric, D (2554) – Pogorelov, R (2354) Sitges 2018.] 11. ♚e1 f6! This is Black's only try, as Black's position will be very hard to play if he does not look for counterplay. 12. exf6 gxf6 13. c4 dxc4 [13... ♘f4 14. cxd5 ♙xd5 15. ♙e4 ♙xd1 16. ♚xd1 e5 17. ♘c3± gave White a more comfortable endgame in Wolfrum, R (2212) – Gierth, K (2187) GER email 2011.] 14. ♙xc4 ♙xd1 15. ♚xd1 ♙g7 16. ♘c3 e5 17. ♘d5±



Position after: 17. ♘d5±

White also had a more comfortable endgame in Karjakin, S (2753) – Adhiban, B (2683) Astana 2019.

10. ♙b2

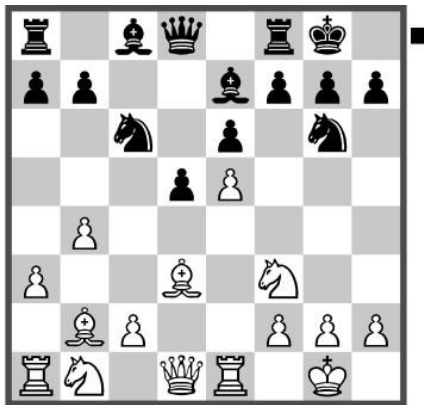
10. ♚e1 transposes to 8... ♙e7 9. ♚e1 ♘c6 10.b4.

10... 0-0

A) 10... ♘f4 eliminates the light-squared bishop, but Black's kingside is left exposed and White can start an attack with 11. ♚e1!N ♘xd3 12. ♙xd3 0-0 13. ♘bd2 b6 14. ♚e3!±.

B) 10... f6 is a worse version of the lines with 8... ♖e7 9. ♜e1 ♞c6 10.b4 f6, as White can take on g6 without spending time on ♜e1. 11. ♙xg6+ hxg6 12. ♚d3 f5N 13. ♞bd2 g5 14. h3± White is about to play c4 and Black is under pressure.

11. ♜e1



Position after: 11. ♜e1

White needs to free the f1-square for his light-squared bishop.

11. ♞bd2 ♞f4= was equal in Bernadskiy, V (2570) – Tabatabaei, M (2566) Teheran 2017

11... ♙d7

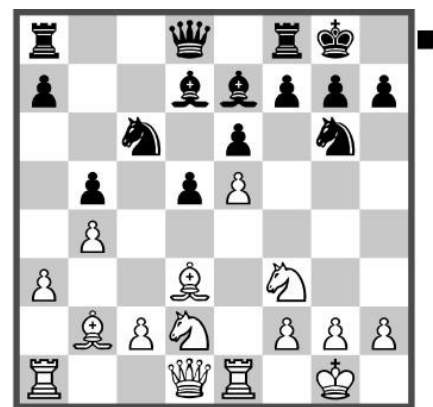
A) 11...f6 is not as strong now since Black has already castled and cannot generate a kingside initiative. 12. ♙xg6 hxg6 13. ♞bd2±

B) 11... ♞f4 is pointless, as White can retreat the bishop to f1. 12. ♙f1 f6 13. ♞bd2±

12. ♞bd2

12. c4 dxc4 13. ♙xc4 was seen in Zilberstein, D – Bartholomew, J ICC 2007, and now Black can equalize completely with: 13...b5!N 14. ♙xb5 a5=.

12... b5!



Position after: 12... b5!

Without this move, Black's position is cramped and passive.

13. ♙xb5

White can also choose to leave the pawn on b5 with 13. g3N a5 14. c3 ♜b8 15. ♜b1 [Putting the rook on c1 does not change much, as the rook will be headed to d1 once Black closes the queenside. Thus 15. ♜c1 a4 16. ♙e2 ♙b6 17. ♜cd1 would transpose.] 15... a4 16. ♙e2 ♙b6 17. ♜bd1 ♙b7 18. h4!? [18. ♞f1 f6 19. exf6 ♙xf6 20. ♙xg6 hxg6=] 18... f6 19. exf6 ♙xf6 20. ♙b1∞ The position is complex, but slightly easier to play for White as his pieces are more centralized.

13... ♘ce5 14. ♙xd7

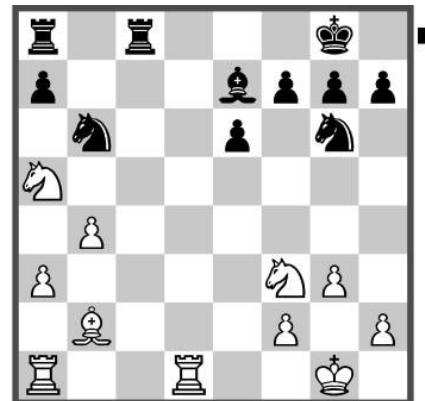
14. ♙f1 is too slow: 14... ♘xf3+ 15. ♘xf3 ♙a4!=.

14... ♘xd7 15. c4 dxc4 16. ♘xc4 ♘b6 17. ♘a5!?

A) 17. ♖c1 ♙xd1 18. ♖exd1 ♘f4 19. ♙f1 ♖fc8=

B) 17. ♙e2 ♙d5 18. ♘xb6 axb6 19. g3 ♖fd8=

17... ♙xd1 18. ♖exd1 ♖fc8 19. g3∞



Position after: 19. g3∞

Although this endgame is not far from equality, Black is the one who will have to work for a draw.

b) 8...0-0 9.♘g5

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 c5 4. dxc5 e6 5. ♘f3 ♙xc5 6. ♙d3 ♘e7 7. 0-0 ♘g6 8. a3 0-0!?

A very logical move, but it restricts Black's options, as f6 will not be as good without the rook on h8. White now has two main options: the calmer 9. ♖e1!? and the more aggressive 9. ♘g5!?.

9. ♘g5!?

Taking the bait. Now, Black needs to defend against White's threat of an imminent attack on the kingside.



Position after: 9. ♘g5!?

A) 9. b4?! is not a good idea now since 9... ♙e7= (followed by ...a5) gives Black a good position.

B) 9. ♘bd2 seems logical, with the

idea of waiting for ...♘c6 to play b4, but the f4-square is now free for Black to use. 9... ♘c6 10. b4 ♙b6 11. ♙b2 [Black was fine after 11. ♙xg6 fxc6= in Anand, V (2773) – Mamedyarov, S (2817) Wijk aan Zee 2019.] 11... ♘f4= Once the light-squared bishop comes off the board, Black will not be in any danger. Black was fine in Vitiugov, N (2735) – Anand, V (2776) Karlsruhe/Baden-Baden 2018.

C) 9. ♖e1!? - see the next subchapter.

9... ♙c7

9... ♙e7?! was played in Xiong, J (2656) – Karavade, E (2374) Douglas 2018, and Black soon succumbed to the attack: 10. ♙h5 ♙xg5 11. ♙xg5→ ♙c7 12. ♘c3 ♘c6 13. f4 ♘d4 14. ♖ae1 h6 15. ♙f6! gxf6 16. exf6 ♘f5 17. ♙xf5 exf5 18. ♘xd5 ♙c5+ 19. ♖e3 ♖d8 20. ♙xh6 ♙f8 21. ♘e7+ and resigns.

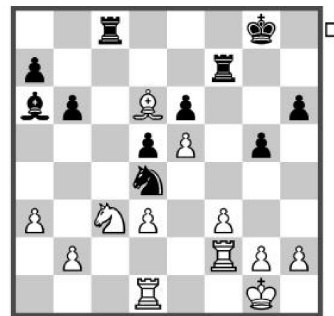
10. ♙h5 h6 11. ♘f3

11. ♘xf7 wins a pawn but gives up the initiative, and Black finds ample compensation. 11... ♙xf7

A) 12. ♙xg6? seems crushing, but it is White fighting for a draw after 12... ♙xf2+!! 13. ♖xf2 ♖xf2 14. ♘d2 [14. b4 ♙b6 15. c4 was played in Gaponenko, I (2396) – Socko, M (2407) Moscow 2019, and Black could have played 15... ♙d4!N with a winning position] 14... ♖f5+ 15. ♙h1 ♖xh5

16. ♙xh5 ♘c6= Polgar, T (2241) – Chylewski, P (2376) Pardubice 2019.

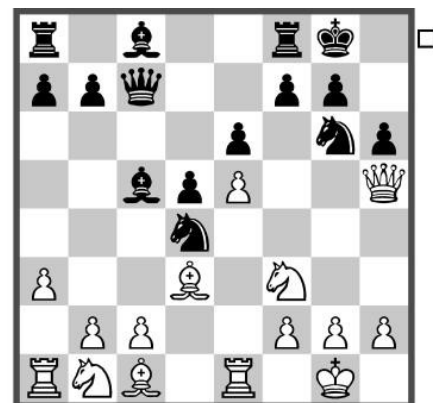
B) 12. ♙e3 ♘f4! 13. ♙xf7+ ♖xf7 14. ♙xc5 ♘xd3 15. cxd3 ♘c6 16. ♙d6 ♘d4 17. ♘c3 b6 18. f3 ♙a6 19. ♖ad1 ♖c8 20. ♖f2 g5=



Position after: 20... g5=

White has an extra pawn, but Black should be quite comfortable holding this endgame.

11... ♘c6 12. ♖e1 ♘d4!



Position after: 12... ♘d4!

The only way for Black to create counterplay.

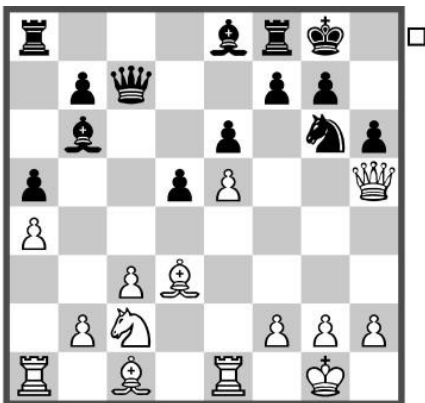
13. ♘xd4 ♙xd4 14. c3 ♙b6!?

Retreating to c5 is imprecise: 14... ♖c5
 15. a4 a5 [15...a6 is too passive, and
 Black will struggle after 16. ♘a3 ♖d7
 17. ♘c2±.] 16. ♘a3 ♖d7 17. ♘b5
 ♖xb5 [17... ♙b6 18. ♙e2±] 18. axb5
 a4 19. ♖d2 a3 20. b4! ♖b6 21. ♗a2!±
 The pawn is blockaded, and Black is left
 without any play.

15. a4 a5 16. ♘a3 ♖d7 17. ♘c2

17. ♘b5 While this move was strong
 after 14... ♖c5, Black is fine here since
 after 17... ♖xb5 18. axb5 a4 19. ♖d2
 a3 b4 does not come with tempo. 20.
 bxa3 [20. b4 a2!± is now simply better
 for Black.] 20... ♙c5! 21. ♗f1 ♗xa3
 22. ♗xa3 ♙xa3=

17... ♖e8!



Position after: 17... ♖e8!

Defending the knight on g6 and prepar-
 ing to push the f-pawn for counterplay.

18. ♘d4

We have been following Arjun, K

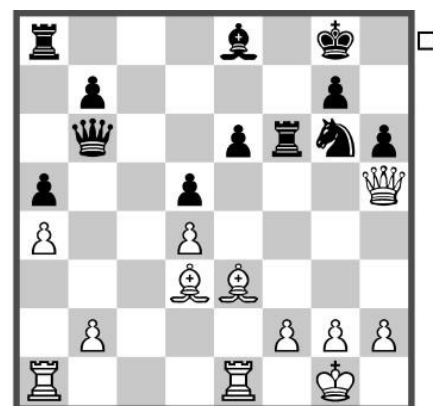
(2483) – Sankalp, G (2369) New Delhi
 2019.

White could also have tried 18. ♖d2N:
 by delaying ♘d4, he maintains his op-
 tions of pushing the b-pawn. 18... ♖c5!

A) Black's point is to answer 19. ♘d4
 with 19... ♙b6! 19. b3 ♗c8 [19...
 ♙b6?! 20. ♙e2!±] 20. ♘d4 ♖xd4
 21. cxd4 ♙b6 22. ♙g4 f5 23. exf6
 ♗xf6 24. h3 ♘e7∞ with an unclear
 position.

B) 19. b4 axb4 20. cxb4 ♖a7 21. b5
 [21. a5 ♖b5! 22. ♖xb5 ♙xc2=] 21...
 f6! A cool resource! 22. ♖xg6 ♙xc2!
 23. ♖xc2 ♖xh5=

**18... ♖xd4N 19. cxd4 ♙b6 20. ♖e3 f5
 21. exf6 ♗xf6∞**

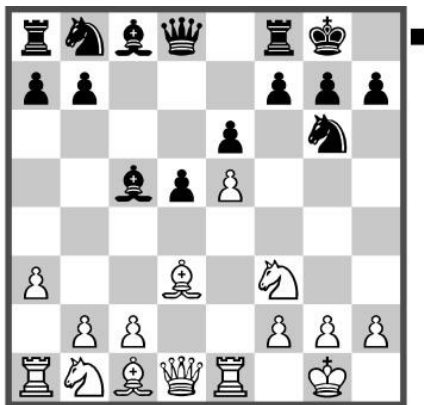


Position after: 21... ♗xf6∞

The position is quite complicated, and
 we could analyze it further, but the
 general assessment is that Black will
 need to be quite precise to avoid trou-
 ble.

c) 8...0-0 9. ♖e1

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 c5 4. dxc5 e6 5. ♘f3 ♙xc5 6. ♙d3 ♘e7 7. 0-0 ♘g6 8. a3 0-0!? 9. ♖e1!?



Position after: 9. ♖e1!?

This move is surprisingly difficult to deal with since Black normally prefers delaying ...0-0. The inclusion of the last two moves favors White as ...f6 breaks are harder to accomplish now. The text move is perhaps stronger than 9. ♘g5 since Black is now left to find a plan. By contrast, in the 9. ♘g5 variations, Black's moves are forced and somewhat easier to find.

9... a5!?

An interesting move: Black restricts White's play on the queenside and gains space. Still, Black does not have a clear plan to find counterplay, so White's position is a bit more comfortable.

A) 9... ♙b6 creates some discomfort

for White, but he can quickly re-adjust his position:

A1) 10. ♙d2!? White will develop his dark-squared bishop on b2, and now Black's own queen is misplaced on b6.



Position after: 10. ♙d2!?

10... ♘c6 [10... ♙d7 allows 11. h4! ♙d8 12. b4 ♙b6 13. h5 ♘h4 14. ♘g5 h6 15. ♘h7 ♖e8 16. a4!→ with a crushing attack.] 11. b4 ♙e7 12. ♙b2 a6 13. ♙c1!± Black now has no easy way to deal with c4.

A2) 10. ♙e3 is also possible as Black cannot take on b2: 10... ♙xe3 11. ♖xe3 ♘f4 [11... ♙xb2? 12. ♘c3!+→] 12. ♘bd2∞.

B) 9... ♙c7 is rather odd, but has an idea: Black is waiting for White to play b4 to develop his b8-knight so that he can then play ...a5 followed by b5 ...♘d7. However, White can seize the initiative with 10. b4 ♙e7 [The bishop is misplaced on b6, as Black can no longer pressure the b4-pawn: 10...