

Attacking the Strongpoint

The Philosophy of Chess

Igor Zaitsev

**Foreword by
Garry Kasparov**



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The Philosophy of Chess
by Igor Zaitsev

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Foreword

Garry Kasparov

13th World Champion

Igor Zaitsev, a grandmaster from Moscow, is definitely one of the most paradoxical chess thinkers of our time, which is evident even from the title of this book.

An outstanding tactician and analyst, he has worked with Tigran Petrosian and Lev Polugaevsky, and later became the leading trainer of Anatoly Karpov's team, accompanying him through seven world championship matches!

He has left his brilliant stamp on many openings, from the Ruy Lopez (the Zaitsev System, 11. ♖g5!? in the Open Variation, etc.) to the Caro-Kann Defense (the variation with 4... ♗d7 5. ♖g5!?) and the English Opening (11... dxc4! Timman-Karpov, Montreal 1979; 9... e3!? Kasparov-Karpov, Sevilla (m/2) 1987)... too many to name.

Zaitsev was always famous for his unorthodox chess vision. He was able to see what no one else noticed. Unfortunately, chess moves cannot be patented, for Igor Alexandrovich definitely deserves a reward – other than the gratitude of chessplayers all over the world who have benefited from his ideas.

We met each other in spring of 1980 at an international tournament in Baku. I was seventeen years old then, preparing for my school graduation exams, but could not miss my chance to earn the grandmaster title. According to my trainer Alexander Nikitin, “Those days Garry was under close surveillance in the shadow of a worried world champion: Karpov's trainer, grandmaster Igor Zaitsev, was among the participants in the tournament.”

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I played easily, in a relaxed manner – it must be true that the walls at home are your friends. However, before round seven, when I was to play Zaitsev, the sporting intrigue was still very high.

Garry Kasparov – Igor Zaitsev

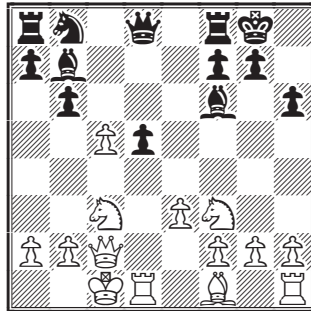
Baku 1980

Queen's Gambit Declined

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 ♙e7 5.e3 0-0 6.♘f3 h6 7.♙h4 b6 8.♚c2

In those days, the most popular move in the struggle against the Tartakower-Makogonov-Bondarevsky Variation was 8.♚b3, but I liked the double-edged plan with castling on opposite sides much more.

8...♙b7 9.♙xh6 ♙xh6 10.cxd5 exd5 11.0-0-0 c5 12.dxc5

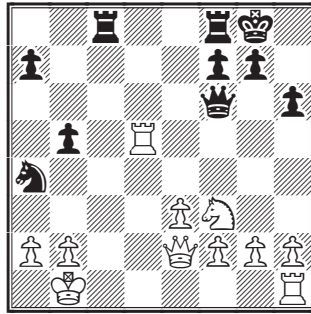


12...♘d7!

A beautiful pawn sacrifice.

13.♘xd5 ♘xc5 14.♙c4 b5 15.♘xf6+ ♚xf6 16.♙d5 ♞ac8 17.♚b1 ♘a4 18.♚e2 ♙xd5 19.♞xd5

The formidable a4-knight, in combination with the shaky position of the white king, promises Black counterplay. However, he has to hurry with it, otherwise White will manage to consolidate his position in a couple of moves.



19...♖c4!

A brilliant move that changes the battle picture immediately. Black not only strengthens the threat of ♕g6+, but also creates two other ones – ♖fc8, and particularly ♖b4. I saw this and became sad...

20.♗d4 (a forced reply) **20...♖fc8**

Instead of 20...♕g6+!? and ♕xg2, Zaitsev was content with good compensation for his sacrificed pawn. However, there were only twenty minutes left on his clock. Apparently, the previous part of the game demanded too much energy from my opponent, and soon he made a fateful error.

This game was an important lesson for me. It demonstrated that my “youthful” opening preparation was not quite on a par with the level of “adult” tournaments.

All his life Zaitsev was enthusiastic about searching for novel ways of handling openings. Just like many other genuine chess innovators, he used to “lend” his experience and creative genius to stronger players, providing an original impetus for them, just like bobsled brakemen who impart a necessary acceleration to their sleds.

To crown it all, he has long been a witty poet and a distinctive writer. This is what they say about his publications: “As a rule, they combine unique generalizations, which rise to the level of chess philosophy, with insights into the subtleties of positions which have slipped everyone’s attention.”

To my mind, such is his book *Attacking the Strongpoint*.

– Garry Kasparov

Painstaking development of individual elements of strategy serves the process of improvement in certain kinds of positions. These are attempts to outline an algorithm of action, suitable for a whole string of similar positions.

But before this, perhaps we should agree on what our idea of similar positions is. It seems correct to me to place at the head of this characteristic what seems to be at first sight an external sign – their structural similarity. And from here we will consider positions to be similar when they have similar pawn configurations. Such an approach should in no way be considered either superficial or formal, because the body of pawns in each position defines its content, as well as its evolutionary and combinational future.

Indefinite and Definite Positions

In order to explain certain questions of strategy, it will be useful to introduce a new concept for categorizing positions: There will be indefinite positions and definite positions – in the latter, the level of concreteness is markedly higher. Having conveniently sorted in this way their entire great numbers into two giant categories, we can better understand the particulars of the strategic play in each of these groups by a simple bit of comparison.

It is curious that positions without any pawns on the board are the most specific, carried (if one may say so) to absolute definiteness. (In the field of compositions, such positions are called “aristocrats.”) Such situations, deprived of the prospect of strategic battle, in practice nearly always have a final, accurate evaluation.

On the other hand, a position with many pawns on the board is one of the clearest examples of indefiniteness. The opening phase is most often an illustration. This is the reason why orienting oneself in them wholly by oneself, without relying on any preliminary home preparation, can be done only by players extremely skilled in strategy. And that ability is largely thanks to their interior compass, achieved by a well-developed native intuition, formed on the basis of an objective chess philosophy. The latter can cope successfully with the chaos in the opening, turning it slowly, through networking the cooperation among pieces into the an well-arranged middlegame cosmos.

Attacking the Strongpoint

This structural similarity also means a strategic similarity – that is, a similar reserve of actions. This is because the pawns, as the most inert and structure-building mass upon the chessboard, serve as practically the only foundation for carrying on strategic play. And so, pawn structure lies at the base of any strategic line.

Strategy versus Positional Play; Combinative versus Tactical

We have already noted that in its essence, strategic play is nothing other than striving to bring about, with the aid of a chain of successive and logical operations, an alteration in the pawn structure in the direction you desire. All of this is important to explain, so as to avoid subsequent confusion of strategy with positional play, and combinative play with tactics.

Choosing freely from examples from your author's praxis, we will try to show the favorable conclusions the practical player might reach by following similar structures.

We select an old French Defense variation, which is usually associated with the names of Steinitz and Nimzovich. In the 1960s, I started working out this old line of the French Defense:

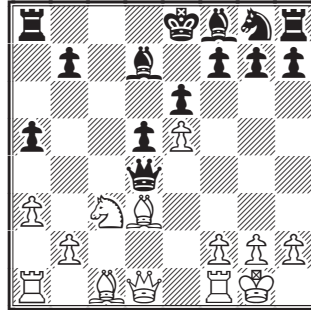
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♖b6 5.♗f3

I was trying to resuscitate it with the idea of a strategic breakthrough. But of course, this did not come to pass in just an hour.

When playing White, I would start the game nine out of ten times by playing 1.e2-e4. Therefore, more often than not, in a game or in analysis, I had to consider e4-e5 – the fortified pawn push – in accordance with the program that by then already bore the name of strategic breakthrough. Sooner or later, this pawn would have to be regarded by my opponent as the ancient Romans did Carthage: “It must be destroyed!”

The first thing that caught my eye was the following gambit line:

5...♗c6 6.a3 a5 7.♗d3 ♗d7 8.0-0 c×d4 9.c×d4 ♗×d4 10.♗×d4 ♖×d4 11.♗c3



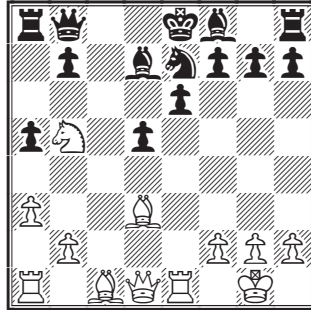
In those days, the opening manuals dealt with this second pawn sacrifice rather cursorily: 11...♙×e5 12.♞e1 ♖d6 13.♟b5 ♘×b5 14.♙×b5+ ♜d8, considering that Black was over the worst of it. However, 15.♙h5!, as I found at the time, would give White a strong initiative – for example, 15...♙c7 16.♙×d5+! (16.♞×e6! is also very strong). Or 15...g6 16.♙f3 f6 (16...♟h6? 17.♙g5+) 17.♙f4 ♙b6 18.♙×d5+. That leaves just 15...♞e7. However, there are not a lot of people who would like to see their king setting off on a lengthy journey through the middle of the board: 16.♙e3 g6 17.♙h4+ f6 18.♞ac1.

Quite often, Black will choose the immediate retreat, 11...♙b6. The double-edged game that comes up after 12.♙e2!, or 12.♙g4!?! g6 (12...♟e7 is more often seen) 13.♙e3 ♘c5 is also not unfavorable to White, since now, according to GM Ftacnik, by 14.♙f4! (the idea is to refute 14...d4 with the counterstroke 15.b4!), White keeps a powerful attacking position (Shirov-Anand, Teheran 2000). So these days, the main line is **11...♟e7**.

In a game I. Zaitsev-E. Geller (Moscow 1982), Black sent his knight down a different path with 11...♟h6. The continuation was: 12.♟b5 ♙×e5 13.♞e1 ♙b8 14.♙f3 ♘d6 15.♟×d6+ ♙×d6 16.♙f4 ♙e7 17.♙g3!, and Black had a hard time keeping White's rook from invading via c7: 17...f6 18.♘d6! ♙f7 19.♞ac1 ♘c6 20.b4 a×b4 21.a×b4.

12.♟b5 ♙×e5 13.♞e1 ♙b8

Attacking the Strongpoint

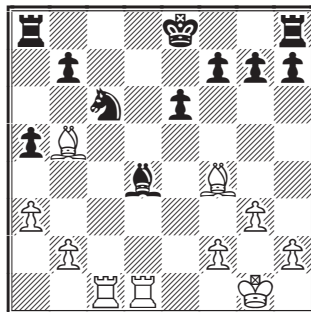


White had usually continued 14. ♖f3, but now I wanted to play something different:

14.g3!?

Here is a condensed analysis of this continuation: To all appearances, Black is forced to take the knight on b5. If 14...e5, then 15. ♖xe5! ♜xe5 16. ♗f4, and on 14...♞c6, the variation 15. ♗f4 e5 16. ♜h5! is unpleasant. That leaves just 14...♟g6. But then, after 15. ♗xg6 ♗xg6 16. ♜xd5 ♟xg6 17. ♜xb5+ ♞e7 18. ♗g5+ ♟f6 19. ♖xe6+! ♜xe6 20. ♖e1+ ♜e5, White would win easily.

14... ♗xg6 15. ♗xg6 ♟xg6 16. ♜xd5 ♟xg6 17. ♜xb5+ ♞e7 18. ♗g5+ ♟f6 19. ♖xe6+! ♜xe6 20. ♖e1+ ♜e5 21. ♖ed1



In all the endgame variations that could arise here, the move g2-g3 comes in very handy for White, as you can easily see. Additionally, along the way, he can set a well-disguised trap for his opponent.

Chapter Four: Attacking the Strongpoint

21...♗b2? 22.♖xc6! bxc6 23.♗xc6+ ♕e7 24.♗g5+, and suddenly we see that Black sustains severe material losses: 24...f6 (if 24...♗f6, then 25.♞d7+ ♖f8 26.♗xf6 ♞c8 27.♗e5!, and Black is in a bad way) 25.♞d7+ ♖f8 26.♗xa8, and White should win easily.

True – after the more solid reply **21...e5** (or 21...♞d8 22.♗c7 ♞c8 23.♗xc6+ bxc6 24.♞xd4 ♞xc7 25.♞c5, and White stands a little better) **22.♗xc6+ bxc6 23.♗xe5 ♗xe5 24.♞e1**, the struggle enters a roughly equal rook endgame.

I suggest that you compare the new idea, in the position from the next-to-last diagram, with this volatile one:

14.b2-b4!?

By way of illustration, let me present the following general line:

14...axb4 15.♗b2

You should also keep in mind the continuations 15.g3 and 15.♖f3.

15...♗c6 16.axb4 ♞xa1 17.♖xa1 f6 18.♗xf6 gxf6 19.♖xf6 ♞g8 20.♞xe6+ ♗e7 21.♞xe7+ ♗xe7 22.♗d6+ ♖d8 23.♗f7+ – and it seems as though it will eventually end in perpetual check.



While playing out a lot of French Defense setups, I kept my eye all the time on the status of that central pawn “fist” so that I might seize my first opportunity to try to break down Black’s strategic structure.

And here, some 55 years later, is how a game against my old chess friend went:

Zaitsev – Lepeshkin

Moscow 1964

French Defense

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♗c6 5.♗f3 ♖b6 6.a3 ♗d7 7.b4 cxd4 8.cxd4 ♞c8 9.♗e3 ♗ge7 10.♗d3 ♗f5 11.0-0 ♗ce7 12.♖e2 f6 13.♗bd2 ♗xe3 14.fxe4 f5 15.♗b3 ♗g6 16.♗c5 ♗xc5 17.bxc5 ♖d8