

Tony Rotella

foreword by Alexander Shabalov

the killer Sicilian

fighting 1 e4 with the Kalashnikov

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About the Author

Tony Rotella is an experienced correspondence player, teacher, analyst and openings theoretician, from Ohio, USA.

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Foreword

by four-time U.S. Champion Alex Shabalov

What defines the relationship between a chess player and his pet opening? Is it the number of hours that Kramnik has spent on the Berlin, the defence that brought him the world championship title in 2000? Is it the enormous confidence Svidler puts in his Grünfeld Defence, an opening that's allowed him to stay in the world elite for more than two decades? How was it possible that Kasparov and Gelfand defended the Najdorf for so long when the whole world was preparing against them?

I'm sure every story like this is a love story. It usually starts with a spark of some kind, and then you have to live through it when, inevitably, every good thing comes to an end. This is why I love opening books with a personal touch – I never bother to read an opening monograph if the author has not played the line himself.

This book is dedicated to one of the most controversial openings in chess history. Sveshnikov's discovery was a revolution back in the late seventies when he started playing ...e5 in the Sicilian Defence. It took the chess world nearly 20 years to fully embrace his 'weakness for dynamic compensation' concept, and as such both the Sveshnikov and Kalashnikov peaked in popularity from 1995 to 2010. Thousands of chess players jumped on the 'Sveshnikov Express' during these years and I was one of them (by the way, the line was never known as the Kalashnikov back in Russia, it was always known as the Accelerated Sveshnikov). Here is my story.

Back in 1981, the inventor himself, Evgeny Sveshnikov, married a girl from Latvia and started to spend more and more time in Riga. Of course, on more than one occasion, I had to hear motivational talks about the "objectively best" system for Black against 1 e4. Everyone who was ever subjected to these 'lectures' will never forget them: Evgeny Ellinovich was never shy in defence of his brainchild, always ready to share new plans and ideas. But you know how it works inside a teenager's head – the more something is forced upon you, the more rejection it generates. And I was not an exception. The first time I played the Accelerated Sveshnikov system was fifteen years later. Needless to say, I regret that to this day.

Most Kalashnikov players graduate to 4...e5 after years of playing the Sveshnikov (which seems to be a necessary prerequisite), though it was the other way around in my career. I started to look for ways to organize my cocktail of the French/Alekhine/Pirc and ten differ-

ent Sicilians into something more predictable in the mid-nineties. My only condition was the possibility of an early ...f5. That's how I came across the game Lutz-Kramnik from the Bundesliga in 1996 (see Chapter 4, Line B2 to check out the game). This game was a quick draw, but the concept was absolutely delightful and I was instantly hooked.

I worked out a few of the critical lines, which marked the beginning of my ongoing love/hate relationship with the opening. It took me about 5-6 years to become fully comfortable playing with the 'eternally' weak d5-square, at which point I switched to the full-fledged Sveshnikov in the mid 2000's as my main opening. The Classical Sveshnikov and Accelerated Sveshnikov are psychologically different lines, and so when the Classical Sveshnikov abruptly fell out of fashion around 2011 (11 c4 being the main reason), the Kalashnikov did not suffer collateral damage. Everyone who played it before kept on playing it.

I did not know what to expect when Tony asked me to look at his new book. The subject was still too touchy for me, a super-nostalgic reminder of the glory days. All my doubts disappeared when I first opened the book. First of all, this is an old world, classical chess opening book – the kind no one does any more. And by that I mean there are indeed words, and a lot of words, not just cold, obscure lines and computer assessments.

It's a delightful read, the kind of book you should study in the comfort of your home with some warm tea and other extras. There's no rating range for those who want to study this book, from a grandmaster down to a beginner who is finally ready to answer 1 e4 with something other than 1...e5. A nice invention is the key takeaways at the end of each chapter, a real treat for people with chess Alzheimer's like me. If you've decided to switch to the Kalashnikov from a non-Sicilian opening, here again Tony takes care of you, as all possible lines after 1 e4 c5 are covered. This is a gigantic work packed into a very attractive form, encyclopedic in nature and practical in use.

This book is not a quick fix manual, but if you are ready to invest some time into the legendary Kalashnikov, it will help you gain a friend for life.

Alex Shabalov

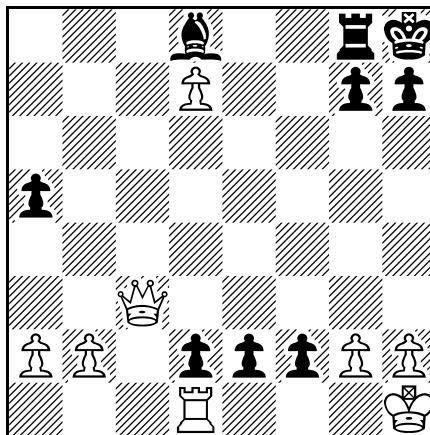
Introduction

History

The history of the Kalashnikov variation started off with a bang. In the 64th game played between Frenchman Louis Charles Mahé de La Bourdonnais and Irishman Alexander McDonnell during their famous 1834 match, the following piece of art was created:

A. McDonnell-L.de La Bourdonnais
London 1834

1 e4 c5 2 $\mathbb{Q}f3$ $\mathbb{Q}c6$ 3 d4 cxd4 4 $\mathbb{Q}xd4$ e5 5 $\mathbb{Q}xc6$ bxc6 6 $\mathbb{Q}c4$ $\mathbb{Q}f6$ 7 $\mathbb{Q}g5$ $\mathbb{Q}e7$ 8 $\mathbb{Q}e2$ d5 9 $\mathbb{Q}xf6$ $\mathbb{Q}xf6$ 10 $\mathbb{Q}b3$ 0-0 11 0-0 a5 12 exd5 cxd5 13 $\mathbb{Q}d1$ d4 14 c4 $\mathbb{Q}b6$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}c2$ $\mathbb{Q}b7$ 16 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}ae8$ 17 $\mathbb{Q}e4$ $\mathbb{Q}d8$ 18 c5 $\mathbb{Q}c6$ 19 f3 $\mathbb{Q}e7$ 20 $\mathbb{Q}ac1$ f5 21 $\mathbb{Q}c4+$ $\mathbb{Q}h8$ 22 $\mathbb{Q}a4$ $\mathbb{Q}h6$ 23 $\mathbb{Q}xe8$ fxe4 24 c6 exf3 25 $\mathbb{Q}c2$ $\mathbb{Q}e3+$ 26 $\mathbb{Q}h1$ $\mathbb{Q}c8$ 27 $\mathbb{Q}d7$ f2 28 $\mathbb{Q}f1$ d3 29 $\mathbb{Q}c3$ $\mathbb{Q}xd7$ 30 cxd7 e4 31 $\mathbb{Q}c8$ $\mathbb{Q}d8$ 32 $\mathbb{Q}c4$ $\mathbb{Q}e1$ 33 $\mathbb{Q}c1$ d2 34 $\mathbb{Q}c5$ $\mathbb{Q}g8$ 35 $\mathbb{Q}d1$ e3 36 $\mathbb{Q}c3$ $\mathbb{Q}xd1$ 37 $\mathbb{Q}xd1$ e2 0-1



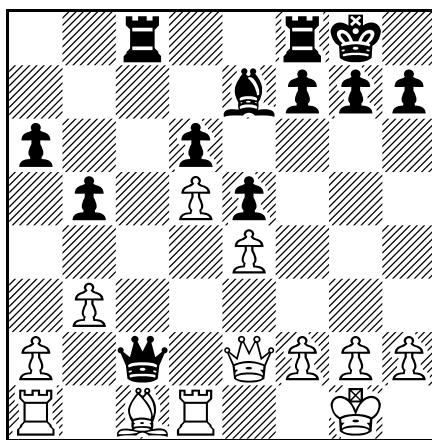
One of the most fantastic positions in all of chess history, produced (roughly, as White's 5th isn't exactly the main focus of the work you just purchased) by the very subject of this book by two of the best players in the world over a century and a half ago.

Sadly, Black's opening choice barely sparked a flame, only being essayed by Staunton in three games during the period 1840-1851, and only then sporadically all the way up until

the 1980's, when the Kalashnikov's popularity boomed under the wings of Russian legend and independent-minded openings theoretician Evgeny Sveshnikov. Shunning the massive amount of theory building up behind his namesake defence, Sveshnikov moved on to familiar but fertile grounds, pushing forth the theory of the Kalashnikov with crisply played and active games like the one below, typical of his style.

M.Ulibin-E.Sveshnikov
Soviet Team Championship 1988

**1 e4 c5 2 ♜f3 ♜c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♜xd4 e5 5 ♜b5 d6 6 c4 ♜e7 7 ♜c3 a6 8 ♜a3 ♜e6 9 ♜e2
♜d4 10 ♜c2 ♜xe2 11 ♜xe2 ♜f6 12 0-0 ♜c8 13 ♜e3 0-0 14 ♜d1 ♜c7 15 b3 b5! 16 ♜ed5
♜xd5 17 ♜xd5 ♜xd5 18 cxd5 ♜c2**



19 ♜g4?? f5! 20 exf5 h5! 21 ♜f3 e4! 22 ♜xh5 ♜xf5! 0-1

A well-played game by both sides up until White's tragic 19th move. Others quickly followed the trails blazed by Sveshnikov, most notably players like Nigel Short, Sergey Tiviakov, Dusko Pavasovic, even Vladimir Kramnik and our last world champion Viswanathan Anand, perhaps inspired by Tiviakov holding him to a draw three years earlier with the Kalashnikov.

Today, the line-up of Kalashnikov champions is no less impressive – perennial Top-10 GM Teimour Radjabov, Radjabov's trainer and attacking wizard Igor Nataf, the unpredictably brilliant Vassily Ivanchuk, 4-time U.S. Champion Alexander Shabalov, Alexei 'Fire on Board' Shirov, and die-hards like Alexander Moiseenko and Vyacheslav Ikonnikov, whose games are peppered throughout the entire book. Kalashnikov games of today are complicated and hard-fought.

many lines. We'll examine this line in detail in Chapter 4.

b) 7 b3 is no longer particularly popular, but historically has seen plenty of play. See Chapter 5 for all of the details.

c) Finally, 7 ♜d3 and all of White's other tries on the 7th move round out the Kalashnikov coverage in Chapter 6.

About This Book

I've tried to give the ambitious black player looking for a strong repertoire in the Sicilian Defence everything he could want. I aimed to walk the tightrope between giving strong players enough analysis to chew on and players new to the Sicilian enough verbal explanations and strategic guidance to succeed – I hope that every reader finds enough in this book to make them happy.

A suggestion – players new to the Sicilian Defence should read the commentary and stick to the bold lines at first to become familiar with the ideas and most popular variations. Players at club level should pay very special attention to Chapter 2 – my experience wielding the 6 ♜c3 a6 7 ♜a3 ♜e7 variation is that very few play the critical 8 ♜c4, and that playing à la the Sveshnikov with 8 ♜d5 is overwhelmingly popular, even among the FM and IM players that I've battled on many occasions over the internet. Special care should also be given to handling the Rossolimo. I see this in around half of my games that start with 1 e4 c5 2 ♜f3 ♜c6. Perhaps this is because a lot of players are happy to play 3 ♜b5 against 2... ♜c6, but less happy to play 2...d6 3 ♜b5+, as 3...♜d7 tends to be a bit dry.

Readers will invariably notice that I'm 110% biased towards the black side of the Kalashnikov. While I'm rooting for the player wielding the black pieces every time, I've tried to be as objective as possible in the final evaluations of positions. If it's equal, I've tried to say so, while emphasizing Black's favourable imbalances such that he can play with purpose later, even if best play fizzles out to a split point.

Due to the complex nature of the Sicilian Defence, I've chosen a tree structure instead of the more reader-friendly and entertaining 'complete games' structure. I've always found it easier to assimilate all of the relevant information and 'download' it into my biological hard-drive when the material is well organized and systematic. I've typically found it difficult to see the big picture of opening systems when I have to piece together 15 complete games I'd just studied into a mental tree, instead of seeing the material presented that way in the first place. And with all of that said, I've tried to include game fragments and famous games in their entirety anyway if I found them to be useful or interesting.

I hope that the reader finds my weapons against the Anti-Sicilians to be adequate and exciting. It's a difficult challenge to deal with these lines for many reasons. Firstly, internal consistency of the repertoire can be constricting – the Kalashnikov is especially tricky in this regard, as White has a few annoying opportunities to try and move order us right out of our boots. Secondly, I feel a certain amount of responsibility towards breaking new ground in opening coverage. There are a lot of books on the Sicilian Defence, and therefore a lot of recommendations in this book have been covered elsewhere. I'd like to think that

where this is true, there's still a great deal of new material and a fresh perspective. Lastly, there's a fine balance between extracting every last drop of value present in Black's position against White's less dangerous tries and constructing a repertoire that's easy to assimilate and learn. I have used these systems extensively and feel that there's a lot of play without being oppressive to learn and maintain – hopefully most readers feel the same.

Every variation in this book has been checked with one or more modern chess engines (*Houdini*, *Stockfish*, *Critter*, and *Komodo* is my normal suite), and sometimes by more than one human as well. I can't guarantee that assessments won't be overturned and new moves won't be found (history has shown that even in the best books by the best authors/players, they're going to get embarrassed a few times), but I can guarantee that I put forth a lot of time making sure that someone's going to have work hard to one-up the book you're holding in your hands, especially if they're not privy to all of the information inside.

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this book in their own special way. Thanks to my dad Mike, an incredible father who continually shows me what someone can achieve through smarts and hard work. Conversely, I can always count on my selfless mother Pam to prop me up during my ever-increasing bouts of vacuity and lethargy. Thanks to my big sister Heidi, who's been my best friend and a magnificent second mother to me for as long as I can remember. To my wonderful girlfriend Vickie, beautiful inside and out, and exceedingly supportive during the copious, unreasonably late writing sessions and missed deadlines. Lastly, the Stantons... where would the Rotella family be without you guys? I can't think of people I'd rather surround myself with – love all of you guys.

Chess has given me the opportunity to cultivate a great group of friends. Firstly, immeasurable gratitude goes out to Mike Joelson, who taught me to love the game. Many thanks to friends Ananth Pappu, Paul Swaney, Phil Seitzer, Peter June, Joe Fogarty, John Gray, and Greg Juneja – top notch guys and formidable sparring partners. Cheers to virtual friends and fellow 'ChessPubbers' Nikos Ntirlis, Mark Morss, Simon Bibby, and Michael Ayton. Your support and comments on my material were invaluable, and drinks are on me if you ever have the misfortune of running into me face to face. A special 'thanks' goes out to my peers at work – without your relentless ridicule, I would have no doubt forgotten that I'd traversed *well* past my deadline!

Thanks to all of the wonderfully thoughtful and talented chess authors and journalists who've inspired me to do this. And finally, my sincerest gratitude goes out to John Emms and Byron Jacobs for giving me the chance to chase a dream. It took me a hell of a long time to catch it – patience of Job would be an insult at this point.

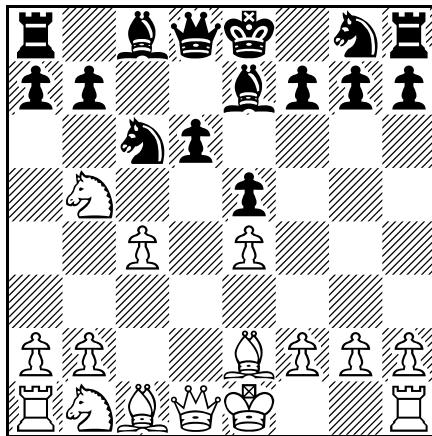
Lastly, I hope you like it and enjoy your games with 1...c5! Happy hunting to all you 'Killers' out there!

Tony Rotella, Cleveland, Ohio
October 2014

Chapter Four

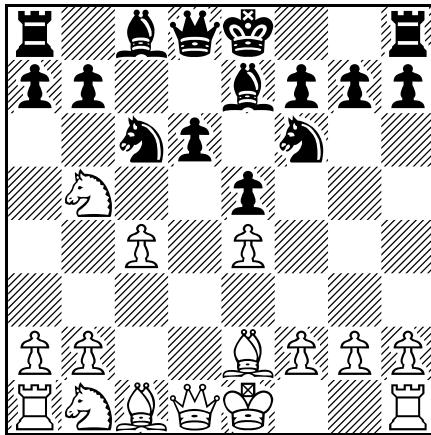
6 c4 – The Natural 7 ♕e2

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 e5 5 ♘b5 d6 6 c4 ♖e7 7 ♕e2



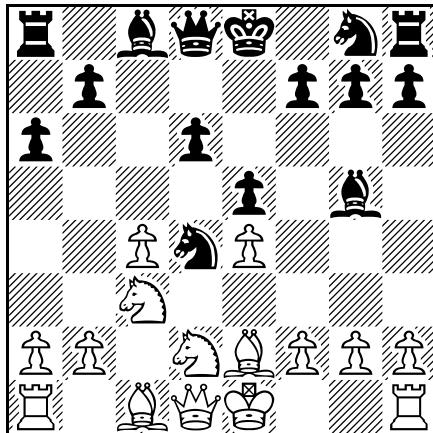
In comparison to 7 ♘1c3, this move contains a few interesting subtleties worth noting. White preserves the option to arrange his knights on c3 and d2 (though throughout the book, you'll notice that this is never particularly dangerous), and can try and exchange off his poor light-squared bishop with ♖g4 or ♘f3-d5 if Black ever tries ...f5. Lastly, as noted before, Black has the double-edged opportunity to play ...♘d4xe2. In doing so, Black trades off White's bad bishop, but weakens the c4-pawn and relaxes the noose around the b5-square. Furthermore, Black should find it easier to manoeuvre with a set of minor pieces missing.

As usual, we've got the choice of opening up the centre right away with ...f5 and accepting the long-term weaknesses that follow, or fighting in the trenches a little while longer with 7...♘f6.

A: 7...♝f6**B: 7...f5!?****A) 7...♝f6**

This is our ‘classic’ Kalashnikov path, with Black opting to play a bit slower than in the 7...f5 lines. Coverage will be short as very few lines have independent significance – most transpose to material I’ve chosen to put in Chapter 3 instead.

7...a6 right away is unexplored, but may be good enough for rough equality. The resulting positions aren’t exactly exciting, but perhaps this line is a worthy surprise weapon if you’re not looking to press for a win or run into a familiar opponent’s preparation. Refusing to trade dark-squared bishops looks best here, so play might continue 8 ♜c3 ♜g5 9 ♜d2! (9 ♜xg5 looks like it should be good, but White lacks a good way to deal with a black knight on d4 in the resulting positions: for instance, 9...♝xg5 10 ♜d5 ♛d8 11 ♜bc3 ♜ge7 12 0-0 when perhaps the most straightforward way to depress a white player is 12...♜xd5 13 ♜xd5 0-0 14 ♜e3 ♜e6 followed soon by ...♞d4), and now 9...♞d4!? might seem a bit premature, but this sortie makes some sense.



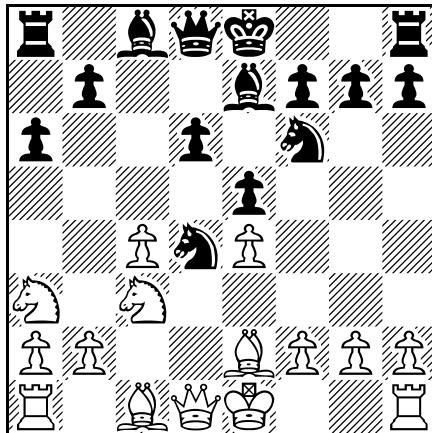
White will soon play $\mathbb{Q}f3$ or $\mathbb{Q}b3$, when the d4-square is well guarded and longer available to Black's knight. With his 9th, the second player ensures that the c6-knight is exchanged off instead of sitting idly on c6. This is also in line with the general rule that the player with less space should exchange pieces to ease the friction between his cramped pieces.

After 10 $\mathbb{Q}f3$ (10 $\mathbb{Q}d3$ is too skittish and slow to be effective; Black was equal after 10... $\mathbb{Q}e7$ 11 0-0 0-0 12 $\mathbb{Q}b3$ $\mathbb{Q}xc1$ 13 $\mathbb{Q}xc1$ $\mathbb{Q}e6$ in M.Sorokin-A.Minasian, Moscow 1992) 10... $\mathbb{Q}xc1$ 11 $\mathbb{Q}xc1$ $\mathbb{Q}xf3+$ 12 $\mathbb{Q}xf3$ $\mathbb{Q}e7$ 13 0-0 (White can also try and speed up the attack on the d-pawn by a move with something like 13 $\mathbb{Q}d3$, but after 13... $\mathbb{Q}e6$ 14 $\mathbb{Q}d1$ $\mathbb{Q}c8$ 15 $b3$ $\mathbb{Q}a5!$ 16 0-0 $b5!$ Black has strong counterplay) 13...0-0 14 $\mathbb{Q}d3$ it appears as though something has gone wrong for Black, as he's fallen behind in development, and his d-pawn looks doomed. However, Black's pieces spring out nicely, using the weakness of the c4-pawn to catch up after 14... $\mathbb{Q}e6$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}fd1$ $\mathbb{Q}c6$ 16 $\mathbb{Q}xd6$ (16 $b3$ $\mathbb{Q}a5$ is the point, when White can't play 17 $\mathbb{Q}xd6?$ on account of 17... $\mathbb{Q}ad8$; White's last chance is 18 $b4$ $\mathbb{Q}a3$ 19 $\mathbb{Q}b1$, but this runs into 19... $\mathbb{Q}xc1!$ 20 $\mathbb{Q}xd8$ $\mathbb{Q}xc4)$ 16... $\mathbb{Q}xd6$ 17 $\mathbb{Q}xd6$ $\mathbb{Q}xc4$ 18 $\mathbb{Q}d7$ $b5$ with rough equality. Black, if allowed, should kick out the rook with ... $\mathbb{Q}e6$, followed up with moves like ... $\mathbb{Q}fd8$, ... $\mathbb{Q}ac8$, and ... $g6$. This is a line well worth more practical tests and analysis.

8 $\mathbb{Q}1c3$

Overwhelmingly preferred over other moves. The only other independent possibility is 8 $\mathbb{Q}5c3$, however, Black has equal chances after 8... $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 9 0-0 0-0 10 $\mathbb{Q}e3$ $\mathbb{Q}xe2+$ 11 $\mathbb{Q}xe2$ $\mathbb{Q}e6$ 12 $f3$ (12 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}g4$ 13 $\mathbb{Q}fd1$ $a6$ 14 $\mathbb{Q}f1$ $\mathbb{Q}c8$ 15 $b3$ $b5!$ ensures Black sufficient counterplay too) 12... $\mathbb{Q}c8$ 13 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}h5$ followed by ... $a6$ and ... $g5$. The problem with White's 8th is that a knight has to work to prove itself useful on d2 – White's development is simply a little less harmonious.

8... $a6$ 9 $\mathbb{Q}a3$ $\mathbb{Q}d4!?$



Black opts to pre-empt ♜e3 and hop into d4 immediately, looking to snap off the bishop on e2 and start quick counterplay against the weak c4-pawn. This transposes to the 7 ♜c3 line and was covered in detail in Chapter 3. We'll continue on for a few moves just to reinforce the material, but Black's alternative in 9...♜e6 should also be mentioned here for completeness. We already discussed why I don't like the positions occurring after 10 ♜e3! (this is more precise than 10 0-0, as it stops ...♝d4) 10...0-0 11 0-0 ♜c8 12 ♜c1! in Chapter 3.

10 0-0

10 ♜e3 and 10 ♜c2 were both be discussed in Line A1 of the previous chapter.

10...♞xe2+!

This move order seeks to avoid 10...0-0?! 11 ♜c2 ♜xe2+ (11...♝xc2 12 ♜xc2 ♜e6 13 a4! is similar) 12 ♜xe2 ♜e6, when 13 a4! clamps down on the ...b5 break and stops the manoeuvre ...♝d7 and ...♝d8-b6 on account of a5. White looks better here, as now Black lacks a clear plan, and simply has less space to work with. It will be hard for White to make progress here because Black's position is so solid, but this is not the type of position I'd want to play.

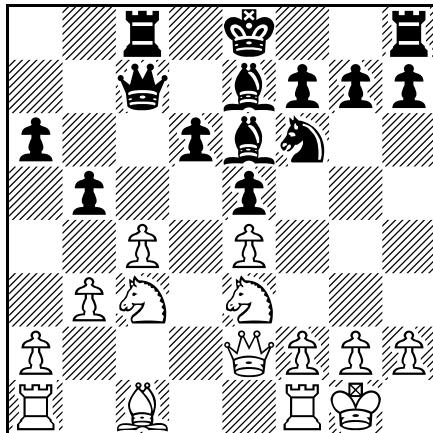
11 ♜xe2 ♜e6 12 ♜c2

12 ♜e3 0-0 would again take play into Line A1 in Chapter 3.

12...♜c8!

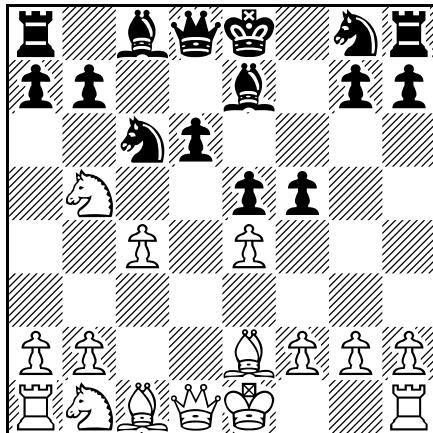
Again, Black delays castling in favour of immediate threats on c4. White can't be given the opportunity to play 13 or 14 a4.

13 ♜e3 ♜c7! 14 b3 b5!

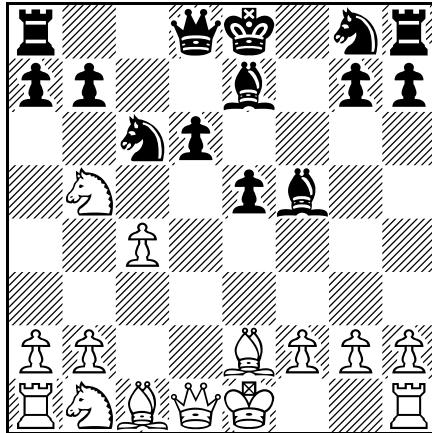


This was E.Reina Guerra-J.Rogos, correspondence 2010. Black cements his queenside counterplay with this move, and should have equal chances. Once again, see Chapter 3 for the nitty-gritty on this line.

B) 7...f5!?



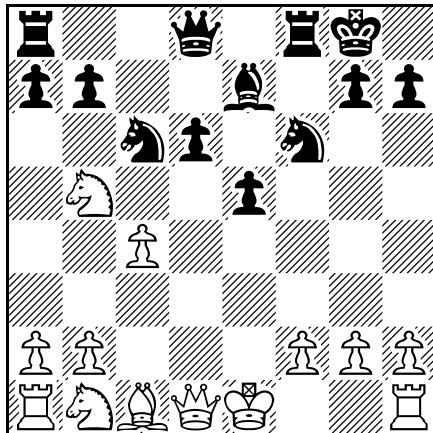
I am really fond of meeting 7 $\mathbb{Q}e2$ with this thrust. As we've seen after 7 $\mathbb{Q}c3$ a6 8 $\mathbb{Q}a3$ f5 9 exf5 $\mathbb{Q}xf5$, the best way for White to treat positions like these is to immediately challenge the bishop and threaten a strategically dangerous trade (for us) with 10 $\mathbb{Q}d3$. However, since White's already committed his bishop and would have to forfeit a tempo to play $\mathbb{Q}d3$, the ...f5 break becomes especially appealing.

B1: 8 exf5**B2: 8 ♜1c3****B1) 8 exf5 ♜xf5****9 ♜g5!?**

Relying on the cheapo with 9...♜xg5 10 ♜xd6+ and 11 ♜xf5. White has tried other, more honourable paths:

- a) 9 0-0 ♜f6 10 ♜e3 (10 ♜1c3 a6 11 ♜a3 0-0 transposes back to 8 ♜1c3) 10...0-0 11 f4 (this is the only independent try, as 11 ♜1c3 a6 12 ♜a3 ♜e8! transposes to material covered under 8 ♜1c3) 11...♜e6!? 12 ♜1c3 a6 13 ♜a3 exf4 14 ♜xf4 (14 ♜xf4 ♜b6+ is problematic for White) 14...d5 was perfectly adequate for Black in R.Van Dijk-D.Rutten, Leiden 2003.
- b) 9 ♜e3 will likely transpose to 8 ♜1c3 positions akin to Lutz-Kramnik in Line B2 after either 9...♜f6 10 0-0 0-0 11 ♜1c3 a6 or 10 ♜1c3 a6 11 ♜a3 0-0 12 0-0.

c) 9 ♜g4?! has the right spirit, but just simply falls short. If it was this easy to trade the light-squared bishops favourably, then everyone would be doing it. Black should push the pace with 9...♜xg4 10 ♜xg4 ♜f6! 11 ♜d1 (11 ♜xg7? ♜g8 12 ♜h6 ♜xg2 is probably better for Black, who is looking forward to ...a6 and ...♝d4) 11...0-0 when White has two options:

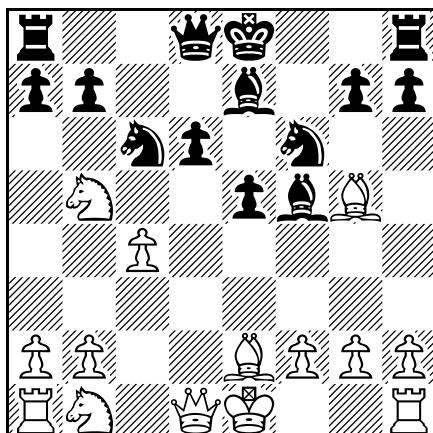


c1) 12 0-0 d5! 13 cxd5 $\mathbb{Q}xd5$ was T.Kabisch-V.Ikonnikov, Ditzingen 2006. The position is equal, but Black succeeded in beating his lower-rated opponent in 42 moves. Sveshnikov and Sherbakov have also reached this position as Black, and have scored 1½/2, collectively.

c2) 12 $\mathbb{Q}5c3$ is also sensible. E.Anka-I.Nataf, French League 1995, saw the Kalashnikov expert and attacking wizard whip up a nasty assault in short order after 12... $\mathbb{R}c8$ 13 0-0 $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 14 $\mathbb{Q}e3$ $\mathbb{Q}xc4$ 15 b3 $\mathbb{Q}c6$ 16 $\mathbb{Q}xd4$ exd4 17 $\mathbb{Q}xd4?$ (17 $\mathbb{Q}b5$ is a better try) 17...d5 18 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}c5$ 19 $\mathbb{Q}d3$ $\mathbb{Q}g4!$ 20 $\mathbb{Q}f3$ $\mathbb{Q}b8!$? (it might have been better to cash in right away with 20... $\mathbb{Q}xf2?$ 21 $\mathbb{Q}xf2$ $\mathbb{Q}f6!$ 22 $\mathbb{Q}c1$ $\mathbb{Q}fc8!$ 23 $\mathbb{Q}xd5+$ $\mathbb{Q}h8$ 24 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}xf2+$ 25 $\mathbb{Q}xf2$ $\mathbb{Q}xc3$, though it's likely that Nataf missed Black's 22nd) 21 g3 $\mathbb{Q}xf2+$ 22 $\mathbb{Q}xf2$ $\mathbb{Q}xf2$ 23 $\mathbb{Q}xf2$ $\mathbb{Q}cf6$ 24 $\mathbb{Q}xd5+$ $\mathbb{Q}h8$ 25 $\mathbb{Q}e1$ $\mathbb{Q}xf3+$ 26 $\mathbb{Q}xf3$ h6. Despite being much better, Nataf found it difficult to convert, since White has no real weaknesses.

9...a6

The level-headed 9... $\mathbb{Q}f6!$? is a great alternative.



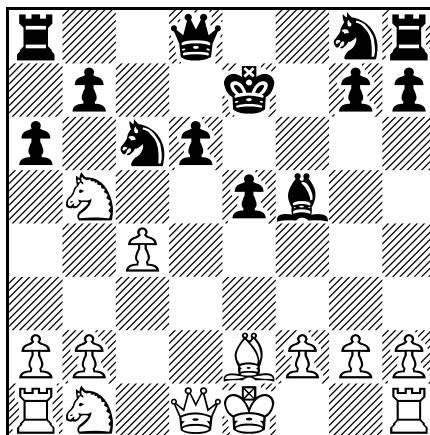
A short survey of modern practice:

a) 10 ♘h5+ has been essayed twice in my database. Black responded 10...♗g6 in one and 10...♕f8 in the other, both of which look awfully compliant, or just awful to me. Better seems to be 10...♘xh5! 11 ♘xe7 ♘xe7 12 ♖xh5+ ♗g6 13 ♖d1 and now Black is mostly forced to gambit the d-pawn with 13...0-0, when his lead in development is reaching alarming levels. Now 14 ♖xd6 (14 ♘xd6? ♖b6 threatens f2 and ...♖d8 at the same time, practically forcing 15 c5 ♖xc5 16 0-0 ♖ad8 17 ♖b3+ ♖d5 18 ♖xd5+ ♘xd5 19 ♘xb7 ♖b8 20 ♘c5 ♖xb2 when Black is much better, threatening ...♖c8-c2) 14...♘c6! 15 0-0 (15 ♖xd8 ♖axd8 16 0-0 a6 17 ♘c3 ♘d4 is similar to the main line, with ...b5 and ...♗d3 coming) 15...a6 16 ♖xd8 ♖axd8 17 ♘c3 ♘d4! 18 ♘a3 b5! 19 cxb5 axb5 20 ♖axb5 ♖xb5 21 ♖xb5 ♘d3 is obviously better for Black.

b) 10 ♘d2 0-0 11 0-0 ♖d7 12 ♘c3 ♘h8 (12...♘d4 right away feels more accurate to me) 13 ♘xf6 gxf6 (my computer suggests that 13...gxsf6 14 ♘de4 ♘h6 is better, with ...♘d4 and ...♘f8 to follow, but the text seems fine as well) 14 ♘de4 ♘d4 15 ♘h5 ♘e6 16 ♘d3 ♖ac8 17 b3 was F.Hippe-A.Skripchenko, German League 2003. Here Black has the snazzy 17...b5! based on 18 ♖xb5 d5! or 18 cxb5 ♘f5, with a multitude of dangerous threats. Black is already much better in either case.

c) 10 ♘xf6 is critical. K.Knezevic-O.Jovanic, Pula 2001, saw Black outplay his lower-rated opponent in superb fashion following 10...gxsf6 11 ♘g4 ♘g6! (we know by now that exchanging light-squared bishops in these types of positions is madness) 12 h4?! (this is pretty ambitious, but 12 0-0 f5 13 ♘e2 a6 14 ♘c3 ♖d7! 15 ♘d5 ♘d8! 16 ♘bc3 ♘d4 is pleasantly messy and okay for Black too) 12...a6 13 ♘c3 ♘d4 14 h5 ♘c2! (14...♘c+?? 15 ♘f1 actually wins for White) 15 ♖c1 f5 16 ♘d1 ♘g5! 17 ♘d2 and here the obvious 17...♘d3 framed things nicely. White's plans have gone awry, leaving him wholly hog-tied.

10 ♘xe7 ♘xe7



This king walk is sadly forced due to the weakness on d6.

11 ♘c3 ♘f6 12 0-0

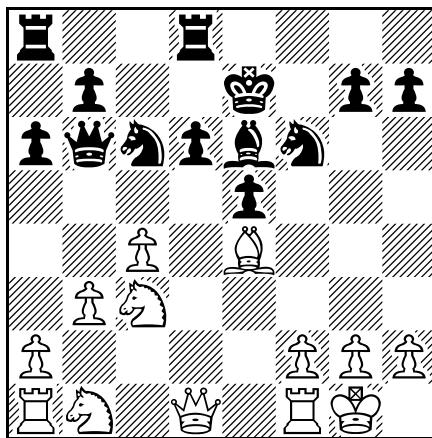
12 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ has also been tried. Black should be okay after 12... $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 13 0-0 $\mathbb{Q}c2$ 14 $\mathbb{Q}e1$, as in A.Ounmaa-J.DeMeye, correspondence 2006, and now 14... $\mathbb{Q}g6$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}c1$ $\mathbb{Q}e8!$ (Black X-rays the queen and castles by hand) 16 $\mathbb{Q}f3$ $\mathbb{Q}f8$ 17 $\mathbb{Q}d1$ $\mathbb{Q}xe2+$ 18 $\mathbb{Q}xe2$ $\mathbb{Q}g8$ seems equal.

12... $\mathbb{Q}b6$ 13 $b3$

a) 13 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 14 $b3$ $\mathbb{Q}f7$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}d3$ $g6$ is unclear according to C&L.

b) C&L also examine the lunge 13 $g4!?$, continuing 13... $\mathbb{Q}e6$ (13... $\mathbb{Q}xb2$ is asking too much after 14 $gxf5$ $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}d2!$ $\mathbb{Q}xa1$ 16 $\mathbb{Q}g2$ $\mathbb{Q}hc8$ 17 $f4!$, with a dangerous initiative) 14 $g5$ $\mathbb{Q}d7$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 16 $\mathbb{Q}de4$ $\mathbb{Q}xd1$ 17 $\mathbb{Q}axd1$ $\mathbb{Q}d4$. It appears that White has to hang the c-pawn, since 18 $b3$ $b5!$ 19 $cxb5$ $d5$ is awful for him. Still, the position after 17... $\mathbb{Q}d4$ is double-edged, as Black's king is pretty exposed on e7.

13... $\mathbb{Q}hd8$ 14 $\mathbb{Q}d3$ $\mathbb{Q}e6!$ 15 $\mathbb{Q}e4$



15... $\mathbb{Q}d4!?$

Black indicates he's willing to take the plunge – for those that aren't, 15... $\mathbb{Q}xe4$ 16 $\mathbb{Q}xe4$ $d5!$ is another reasonable approach.

16 $\mathbb{Q}e2$ $\mathbb{Q}xe4$

Black has another possibility in 16... $\mathbb{Q}g4$ 17 $\mathbb{Q}f3$ $\mathbb{Q}xf3$ 18 $\mathbb{Q}xf3$ $\mathbb{Q}f4$ 19 $\mathbb{Q}xf4$ $exf4$ 20 $\mathbb{Q}d1!$ (20 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $d5$ 21 $\mathbb{Q}fe1+$ $\mathbb{Q}f7$ makes life too easy for Black) 20... $\mathbb{Q}ac8$ 21 $\mathbb{Q}a3$, and now either 21... $\mathbb{Q}e5$ or 21... $\mathbb{Q}b4$ also looks reasonable for Black, but maybe not as good as Kramnik's move.

17 $\mathbb{Q}xe4$ $\mathbb{Q}xa1$ 18 $\mathbb{Q}bc3$ $\mathbb{Q}d4$ 19 $\mathbb{Q}d2$ $\mathbb{Q}xf1+$ 20 $\mathbb{Q}xf1$ $h6!$ 21 $\mathbb{Q}e2$ $\mathbb{Q}xe2$ 22 $\mathbb{Q}xe2$

The players decided that it wasn't worth playing on in P.Leko-V.Kramnik, Dortmund 1995. Black is very solid, and can play 22... $b5!$ to allow his rooks some much needed room to roam.