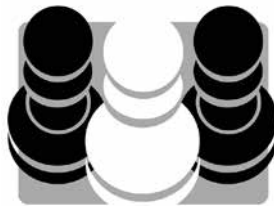


Grandmaster Guide

Playing the Nimzo-Indian

By

Renier Castellanos



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Preface

The Nimzo-Indian has been one of the most popular defences against 1.d4 in the history of chess. Building on the pioneering work of Aron Nimzowitsch, the Nimzo-Indian was regularly employed by Jose Raul Capablanca, and its legacy carried on, allowing it to be a weapon in the arsenal of every World Champion ever since. Of course, you probably already know that. However, I want to share my personal history and experience with this universal opening.

As a young kid I was inclined to play sharp systems, and the Benko Gambit was my weapon of choice against 1.d4, together with all sorts of King's Indian and Benoni-style systems. My results were good against players of my age, but every time I faced an adult I would lose, because such systems were too complex for my chess understanding and gave White too much space and freedom of choice. Tired of getting bad positions out of the opening or having to start the game down a pawn, I went to a more experienced friend of mine asking for advice on how to deal with 1.d4. My friend immediately suggested the Nimzo, with the simple reasoning that after 3...♗b4 Black's game was already easy to play. A bit of an exaggeration, but I liked it! This unbreakable confidence about the Nimzo-Indian Defence motivated me to start learning the variations, and I started playing it shortly afterwards.

Why the Nimzo over other defences?

From my perspective, the Nimzo not only offers a superb weapon against 1.d4, but it is also a fantastic opening to learn if you want to improve your chess understanding in general – mainly due to its versatility. There are many possible pawn structures that can arise in the opening and the middlegame. The IQP (Isolated Queen's Pawn) is a common one, but also the hanging pawns (for both sides), the Carlsbad, the Benoni structure and many more.

Learning how to play these structures will naturally result in an improvement of your chess understanding and quality of play. Another key point for choosing the Nimzo for me was the notion that it takes a lot of bad moves to get a bad position. Unlike with other defences, being out of book should not be a catastrophe – just following the general principles should usually get you to some sort of safety. Obviously, there are exceptions.

However, it must be said that things are rapidly changing. The theory of the Nimzo has evolved greatly. The eruption of engines and the number of games being played around the world have developed the most popular openings to an extent that the amount of theory is increasing at an exponential rate. On the other hand, this doesn't matter too much in practical terms. It is impossible to remember everything – the foundations and understanding are what will remain with us over time.

Let's talk about how this book was created. The project was born inside the Killer Chess Training Academy, which we will henceforth refer to as KCT. If you have not heard of this Chess Academy before, I recommend you do an online search.

As part of our opening courses, I was in charge of teaching the Nimzo to a group of our students. Every week, we'd look at a few lines and discuss them as a group. I presented the material which I had previously researched, and our students not only learned it but also helped greatly in its development with suggestions and improvements.

Is this repertoire a good choice for you?

This book is meant to be useful for players of all levels. Ambitious tournament players can use it as their manual for a complete professional repertoire. Those who want to learn a new opening from scratch and expand their chess understanding can also benefit from going over the lines, as they are always accompanied with plenty of text explaining the reasoning behind the moves, the key ideas and strategic motifs.

In many cases, the inspiration of my choices was Michael Adams, a player whose games in the Nimzo I have studied carefully. His understanding of the Nimzo fits well with my view of treating it as a lifetime opening. An opening that can be played anytime, without always having to check your notes before the game. An opening where we can always choose the principled approach.

However, not everything is quiet, calm and easy. There are some other razor-sharp lines which were new to me, but I decided to investigate them further for the course and then for this book.

That is the case with 4...d5! against the Classical Variation with 4.♖c2. This is probably the most extensive and critical chapter of the whole book. After 4...d5 5.cxd5 (5.a3 is another important line) 5...exd5 6.♗g5 h6 7.♗h4 I suggest going 7...♘c6!? followed by ...g7-g5 – a modern line that leads to incredibly double-edged positions where both sides need to be accurate. I like this choice because it changes the character of the struggle, in a line which is typically chosen by solid players who want a quiet game where they can out-manoeuvre their opponents. Rather than play the slow game, we instigate a totally different scenario.

Another important line is 4.f3, one of White's most aggressive variations where he tries to crush the Nimzo by grabbing space in the centre. I propose meeting 4.f3 with 4...c5, and after the main move 5.d5 we go for 5...d6 6.e4 b5. We enter a Benoni type of pawn structure with plenty of dynamic factors at play. White has a fair number of continuations, with 7.♘e2 being the critical line. At that point, I present two options, with 8...e5 and 8...g5!?. This is a rare exception in the book when I give two possible choices, mainly because they are both interesting and couldn't be more different in nature. You should use which one suits you better according to your style.

The third important chapter is the one tackling the Rubinstein Variation with 4.e3, one of White's most popular choices. Theoretically speaking, this chapter is not especially critical. Black can play in many ways in most lines. However, this is where I believe the core of the Nimzo is and where we can learn most about this opening – the typical positions, how the pieces coordinate, and several different pawn structures that every Nimzo-Indian player must know.

Finally, two other important chapters are dedicated to 4.♘f3, the so-called Kasparov variation. My recommended antidote is 4...c5 5.g3 cxd4, followed by castling kingside with the idea of ...d7-d5 next. This line was highly popular some years ago, but it faded away because of the more modern approach with 5...♘e4. However, I always liked the old line with 5...cxd4, and that's what I re-studied and properly structured for this project.

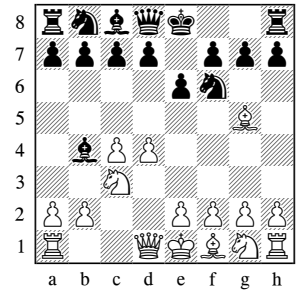
Other chapters are also important, but I consider the four sections mentioned above to hold the essence of what the Nimzo-Indian is all about. Learning the main concepts well should serve as a strong foundation that will allow you to handle any sideline with confidence.

A last recommendation I want to give the reader is not to be discouraged by the amount of theory presented in some of the lines. You do not have to remember everything. Even in the most complicated lines, grasping the main ideas should be enough to give you a playable position in a practical game. The lengthy lines are instructive and may help you to develop a feel for the positions in general, but they are not always there for you to remember them move by move.

Without further ado, I wish the reader an enjoyable read. I sincerely hope this repertoire brings you great success in your upcoming tournaments.

Renier Castellanos
Bucharest, June 2024

Chapter 2



Leningrad Variation

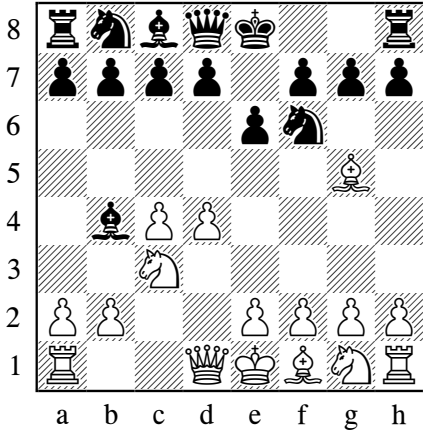
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1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.♙g5 c5

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Introduction

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♘b4 4.♕g5



The Leningrad Variation is an aggressive line that tries to punish Black for committing the bishop to b4. White would like to prove that the pin on the f6-knight will interfere with our development plans, since breaking it with ...h7-h6 and ...g7-g5 would weaken our kingside.

The dream for White would be to continue with e2-e3, ♕d3 and ♖e2. If that configuration were to be achieved, then already having the bishop on g5 would mean having a superior version of the already dangerous setups usually connected with the a2-a3 and e2-e3 lines. You can now imagine why this variation was a favourite of Boris Spassky, who employed it frequently, winning some fantastic games in the process. In that regard, it might be considered a fun line to play, because it could lead to sharp positions and quick wins against unprepared opponents.

However, things are not so rosy for White as the description above might seem to imply. Unlike moves like 4.e3 where White is strengthening the control over the centre, this long bishop move is a bit provocative and

double-edged. The bishop is loose on g5, and Black can already start thinking of ways to harass it. Furthermore, the bishop is already committed to the kingside, meaning that some of the central and queenside dark squares are lacking in protection. That's the two main factors we're going to exploit.

As people started realizing when looking at this line with modern engines, if Black knows what to do, it might even be White that ends up fighting for equality. Sadly for White, the natural development of the bishop turns out to be a tad overambitious. Time to stop yapping – let's get an idea of what our repertoire will look like:

4...c5

A natural break, immediately attacking White's centre and entertaining the idea of ...♗d8-a5 with a somewhat hidden attack on the white bishop.

5.d5

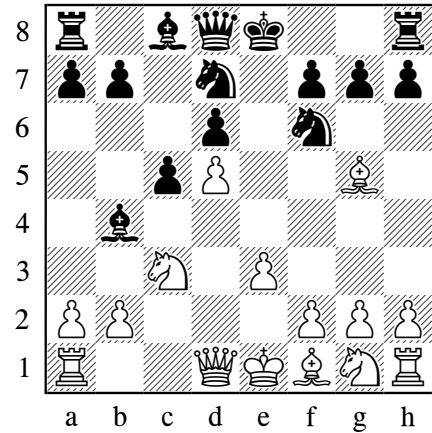
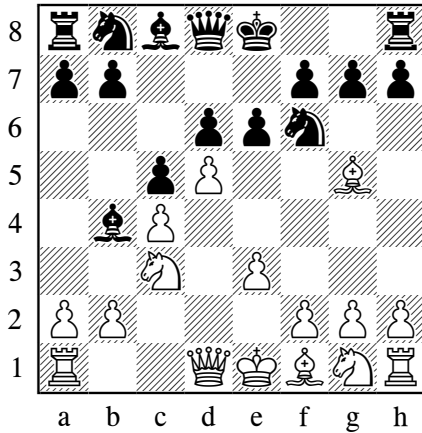
Somewhat sadly for White, this is almost forced, at least in the sense of looking for an advantage. as the alternatives are harmless. White accepts a Benoni-style structure, gaining space but weakening the dark squares even further.

It might be considered telling for this line that the engine slightly prefers 5.♗f3 developing pieces while keeping the tension. However, after 5...h6 White should play 6.♕xf6 which is a good indication that this approach cannot really be challenging.

5...d6

We will need to make this move at some point, so we might as well start with it.

6.e3



Everyone plays this, and not without reason. As we shall see in the theory section, alternatives are clearly inferior.

6...exd5!?

A modern approach, and a move that characterizes our repertoire. By taking on d5 we go for open, dynamic play.

A popular approach for Black has been 6...h6 7.♘h4 ♘xc3† 8.bxc3 e5!?, giving White doubled pawns on the c-file and placing all our pawns on dark squares, playing against the white bishop on h4. As hundreds of games have shown, the resulting positions are rich in strategic nuances, and fine for Black. This is an excellent alternative for anyone that wants something quieter than our proposed approach, but I would advise you to study it carefully. It is not a simple position to handle for either side.

7.cxd5 ♘bd7

This can be considered the starting point of our studies. White now has two main paths.

One option is 8.♙b5. This is the second-best move. Since the black knight was about to become annoyingly active on e5, White opts to pre-emptively chop it while it is still on d7. Even though this has been tried by strong players, I think that if White is willing to give us the bishop pair while helping us trade pieces as early as move 8, it is a sign that something has gone wrong.

The main option is 8.♙d3. This is clearly a more natural move. White hopes to finish development and then mobilize the central pawns. Neither line is especially hard to meet, but there are a few nuances that we will need to remember to navigate this variation confidently.

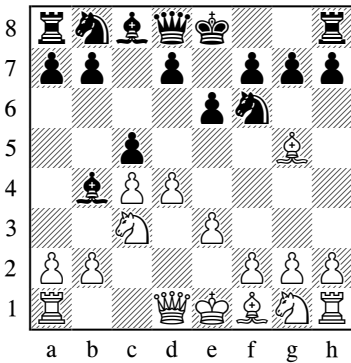
We shall analyse each move separately in the theory section.

Theory Section

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.♙g5 c5

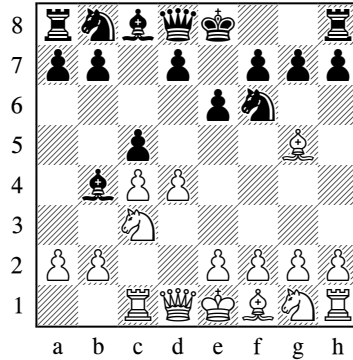
We will study: A) 5.♘f3 and B) 5.d5.

The most optimistic option for White would be 5.e3?, trying to keep the d4-pawn in place. It is important to know that this move has a concrete refutation:



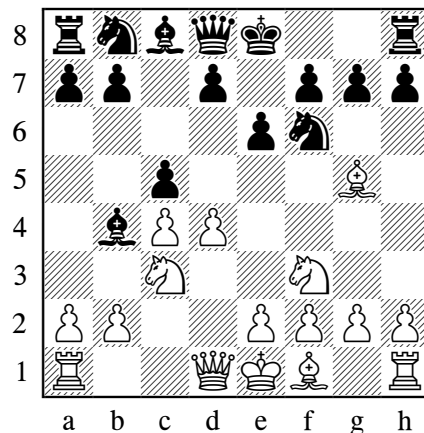
5...♗a5! Threatening ...cxd4, with a horizontal attack on the loose g5-bishop, as well as ...♘e4, with a double attack on the bishop and the knight on c3. That is one of the main tactical reasons why we should start with 4...c5 and not with 4...h6, which, as we shall see numerous times throughout the book, is the usual way of reacting to a bishop appearing on g5. White is pretty much busted already. For example: 6.♙xf6 ♙xc3† 7.bxc3 (7.♙e2 is also as bad as it looks after 7...♙xb2 8.♙xg7 ♖g8 9.♖b1 ♙xd4! and Black has an overwhelming advantage due to the white king on e2.) 7...♗xc3† 8.♙e2 gxf6 In addition to the hilarious placement of the white king, Black is up a pawn.

A few strong players have tried 5.♖c1, preventing Black from doubling the pawns on c3.



However, this move has a couple of drawbacks. First, Black can capture on d4, following that up with ...♘b8-c6, getting pieces out with gain of tempo as shown by Roiz in his book, *The Nimzo-Indian Defence*, published by Quality Chess back in 2017. Secondly, Black can simply play 5...h6!?, when White is forced to take on f6 giving Black an easy game. The capture on f6 is forced because after 6.♙h4?! cxd4 7.♗xd4 ♘c6 White does not have the h4-square available for the queen, and after 8.♙xf6 (8.♗d3 ♘e5!? followed by ...♘g6 is also good for Black) 8...♗xf6 9.♗xf6 gxf6 Black has a small but nagging advantage in the endgame.

A) 5.♘f3



This could be considered White's attempt at playing it safe, and developing pieces while keeping the tension is quite natural.

5...h6!

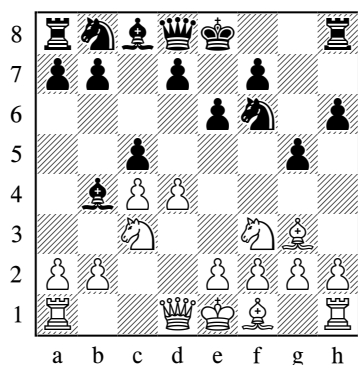
Asking an awkward question.

6.♙xf6

That this is White's best should already give us an idea that things are going well for us.

6.♙h4?

This is the desirable move, keeping the pin. However, it runs into:

6...g5! 7.♙g3**7...g4!**

The only move leading to a large advantage, disrupting the harmony among the white pieces even further.

8.♘e5

Naturally, this was the option chosen by the white players in both games that reached this position.

Against the alternative 8.♘g1 Black has many ways to continue, for example: 8...♘e4 9.♙d3 ♙a5 10.♞c1 ♘xg3 11.hxg3 ♙xa2! Black is up a pawn with excellent winning chances.

8...♘e4!N

The most accurate.

9.♞c1

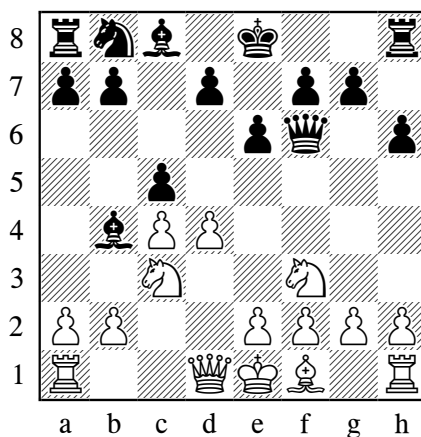
9.♙d3 will lead to even more trouble after 9...♘xg3 10.hxg3 d6! 11.♘xg4 e5! and White loses a piece.

9...d6! 10.♘d3 ♙xc3† 11.bxc3 cxd4!

The tactical point of the whole operation. Black holds a large advantage, as White cannot take back on d4 because of the check on a5.

6...♞xf6

Including 6...♙xc3† is an interesting positional alternative.

**7.♞c1**

The solid approach.

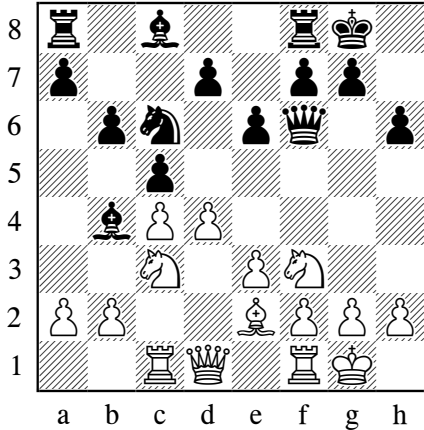
The alternative 7.e3 would allow 7...cxd4 8.exd4 ♙xc3†!?. Black could also delay this move, but it is tempting to ruin White's structure. The game could continue: 9.bxc3 b6 10.♙e2 0–0 This was Ye Rongguang – Nisipeanu, Groningen 1997. For computers this position is close to equality, but for a human this is unpleasant to play with White. There is not much happening in terms of dynamics, while Black has a clear plan of piling up on the weaknesses on the c-file. White is the one that needs to be careful.

7...0–0 8.e3 ♘c6!?

Anything goes at this point. We have several good ways to develop our pieces, but it makes sense to try and be ambitious. This move keeps the tension and tries to avoid further simplification. The game might continue:

9. ♖e2 b6

Starting with 9...cxd4 is also possible.

10.0-0**10...cxd4!N**

An accurate move.

The immediate 10...♗b7? would be terribly awkward after 11.♘e4, when the bishop on b4 is suddenly out of place.

11.exd4

The endgame after 11.♘xd4 ♘xd4 12.♗xd4 ♗xd4 13.exd4 ♗b7 is close to equality, but Black is the one pressing because of the pair of bishops.

11...♗b7 12.a3

Anything else is even easier for us.

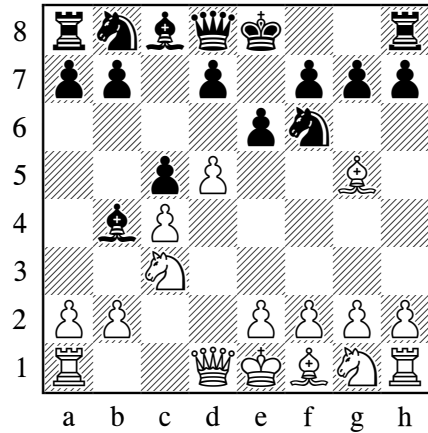
12...♗xc3

We should oblige, and part with our bishop. There is no comfortable square to retreat to.

13.♗xc3 ♗ac8

With an equal position. Black will play ...♗fd8 next and try to play ...d7-d5, always recapturing on d5 with the rook and never with the pawn. Black's position is slightly more flexible, but White is also healthy.

As the above analysis demonstrates, 5.♘f3 is a relatively safe way to play for White, but something we should be happy to see. Let's move on to the more critical lines.

B) 5.d5

This is the actual position most players starting with 4.♗g5 would be aiming for. White goes forward, boldly grabbing the extra space. However, in doing so, the white position comes right to the brink of overextension. After our automatic response it is once again White's turn to make a decision:

5...d6 6.e3

The main continuation by a large margin. Everything else would pretty much lead to worse versions of the same thing.

6.e4?! does not quite work after 6...♗xc3†! 7.bxc3 h6! when White should give up the bishop on f6 and accept a position with doubled pawns and nothing to show for them. As a general rule, Black is always better in the Nimzo-Indian if the damage on c3 is inflicted and White does not have the bishop pair. Trying to fight by keeping the bishop with something like 8.♗d2 can even be met by a bold capture on e4, but I would prefer 8...0-0!, when White has experienced a

positional catastrophe. The desirable $9.\text{♕d3}$ exd5 $10.\text{cxd5}$ loses to $10...\text{♗xe4}$!

$6.\text{f3}?!$ might seem logical, trying to increase control over the $e4$ -square but, as we shall see in the 4.f3 chapter, combining a pawn on $f3$ with the bishop on $g5$ doesn't work well. In this version, most logical would be to start with $6...h6$, asking the bishop an awkward question. (Of course, our usual $6...b5$ is also excellent.)

Trying to keep the structure intact with $6.\text{♖c2}$ does not bear a great difference to the mainline after $6...\text{exd5}$ $7.\text{cxd5}$ ♗bd7 . However, having the queen on $c2$ seems to be less useful than having a pawn on $e3$.

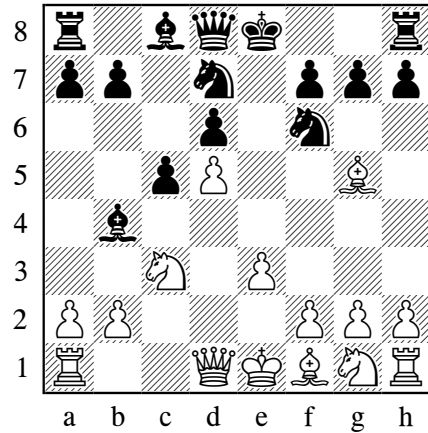
The above reasoning also applies to $6.\text{♞c1}$.

$6.\text{♗f3}?!$ is advocated by Chris Ward in a chapter of *Dangerous Weapons: The Nimzo-Indian*. Although the knight is not without merit on $f3$, the drawback is that it weakens White's control of the $e4$ -square quite significantly. The most straightforward and instructive continuation is $6...h6!$, intending to meet $7.\text{♗h4}$ with $7...g5$ $8.\text{♗g3}$ ♗e4 , when White experiences serious trouble on both $c3$ and $g3$. Ward's idea was to play dynamically with $9.\text{♗d2}$ ($9.\text{♖d3}$ $f5$ also favours Black) $9...\text{♗xc3}$ $10.\text{bxc3}$ ♗xc3 $11.\text{♞c1}$, but Black has more than one way to keep the advantage: $11...\text{♗g7}$ ($11...\text{♗xd2}†$ $12.\text{♖xd2}$ $e5$ $13.h4$ ♞g8 $14.\text{hxcg5}$ hxcg5 also leaves White struggling for compensation.) $12.e3$ (Ward offers $12.\text{dxe6}$ ♗xe6 $13.e3$, but $13...f5$ is great for Black.) $12...0-0$ White stands worse, as $13.h4$ $g4!$ $14.\text{♖xcg4}$ exd5 $15.\text{♖h5}$ ♞e8 sees us returning the extra pawn to seize the initiative.

6...exd5!?

As explained in the introduction, this is the dynamic option.

7.cxd5 ♗bd7



We will split our attention between:
B1) $8.\text{♗b5}$ and **B2) $8.\text{♗d3}$** .

$8.\text{♗f3}?!$ can once again be met in various ways, the most accurate being $8...h6!$ $9.\text{♗h4}?! \text{ ♖a5}!$ and White is on the verge of collapse. The point of including $...h7-h6$ is revealed after $10.\text{♗d2}$ ♗xc3 $11.\text{bxc3}$ ♖xc3 $12.\text{♞c1}$ $\text{♖b4}!$, when the bishop hanging on $h4$ wins Black a crucial tempo or drives the white rook to a ridiculous square on $c4$.

$8.\text{♗h4}$ is a mysterious move which I don't quite understand. However, both games in my database feature strong grandmasters on the white side (Bareev and Milov), and this usually means that a move should be taken seriously. Anyway, after $8...0-0!$ White has nothing better than developing the bishop to $d3$, which would allow us to hit the bishop with $...♗e5$ and obtain a slightly better version of our mainline. (Even more accurate is $8...\text{♗xc3}†!$ as in Milov – Pelletier, Bern 2014, but I see no reason in trying to remember something so niche. However, one should opt to avoid the premature $8...\text{♗e5}?!$ when after $9.\text{♗b5}†$ White's plan of delaying the development of the $f1$ -bishop seems to have a point.)

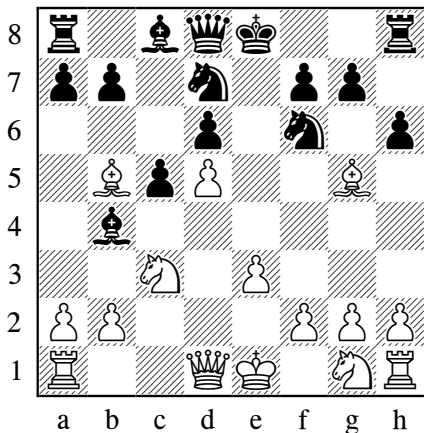
B1) 8.♖b5

This is significantly less aggressive in comparison to the mainline. White is ready to get rid of the bishop for the knight on d7. It may strike us as slightly weird, but the light-squared bishop has little function in this position. Even in the mainline with 8.♗d3 White allows us to capture on d3 if we want, so it makes some sense just to get rid of the bishop and eliminate a piece that can later become active by jumping to e5.

8...h6

Asking the dark-squared bishop the question first.

Starting with 8...a6!? should transpose to the mainline after 9.♗xd7† ♗xd7 10.♖e2 h6 11.♗h4 ♜e7.

**9.♗h4**

The natural response.

9.♗xf6?! is always a welcome sight. After 9...♜xf6 10.♖e2 a6 11.♗d3 ♖e5 Black has a clear edge.

9.♗f4?! would lead to a better version of the mainline for Black after: 9...a6 10.♗xd7† ♗xd7 11.♖e2 ♜e7!? 12.a3 ♗a5 13.0-0 0-0!

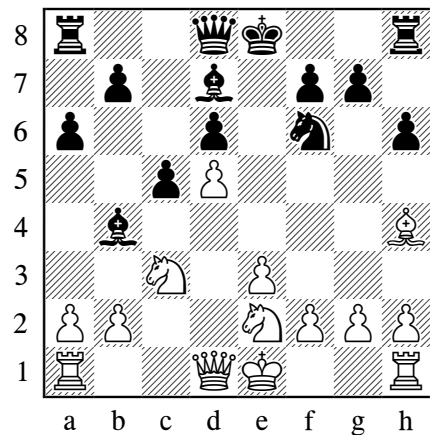
Since there was no pin on the f6-knight, there was no need for ...g7-g5.

9...a6!?

The more fighting approach.

Black has a good alternative in 9...♗xc3† as played by Kramnik against Korobov in Tromsø 2013, but I would prefer playing a livelier game.

With the text move, we allow the game to keep a more complicated character and aim to fight in the style of a turbo-charged Snake Benoni.

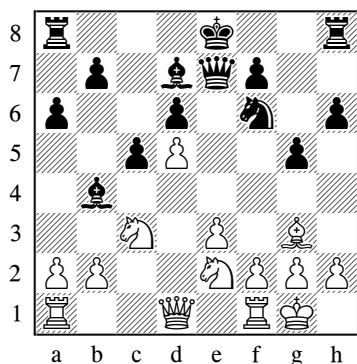
10.♗xd7† ♗xd7 11.♖e2**11...♜e7!**

Keeping our options open regarding our king. This has been played only twice according to my database and in both games White answered with a natural inaccuracy.

12.a3!N

The only way not to drift into serious trouble. After including a2-a3 and ...♗b4-a5, if Black ever castles queenside then White will have b2-b4.

Both games went 12.0-0!?, which gives Black the chance to go for: 12...g5! 13.♗g3



In Pomes Marcet – Cruz Estrada, Llinars del Valles 2023, Black could have gone 13...0-0!N. Up next is ...h6-h5, with a huge initiative. Trying to include 14.a3 at this moment fails to 14...♗xc3 15.♘xc3 h5! when White sadly needs to focus on defence.

12...♗a5!?

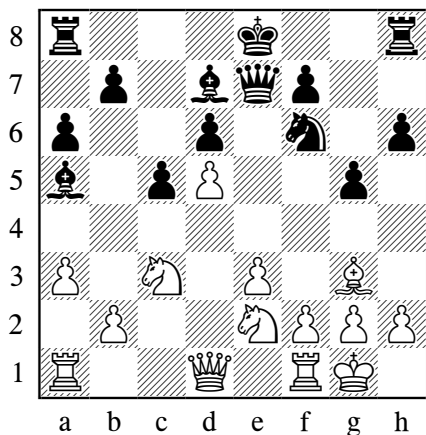
I prefer to keep the bishop because it keeps more chances of a sharp game with mutual chances.

However, the more solid 12...♗xc3† 13.♘xc3 b5 also leads to a balanced position. Black has very little to worry about and can think of continuing with ...a6-a5 and ...b5-b4.

13.0-0 g5!?

Also possible is 13...0-0 with a tense game ahead. Black can either go for ...g7-g5 later or unpin with ...♗a5-d8.

14.♗g3



14...0-0

With the pawn on a3, castling kingside is the wiser option. The position is double-edged, but Black has easy play on the kingside with ...♘h5 followed by ...f7-f5. For example, the game could continue:

15.h3 ♘h5

15...♗f5!?! also comes to mind, aiming to put the bishop on g6 and then expand on the queenside.

16.e4

16.♗h2 is met with 16...f5! with a complicated game in which Black has the better chances.

16...f5!?

The consistent approach. Many other moves could be considered, but we shouldn't get carried away overanalysing this.

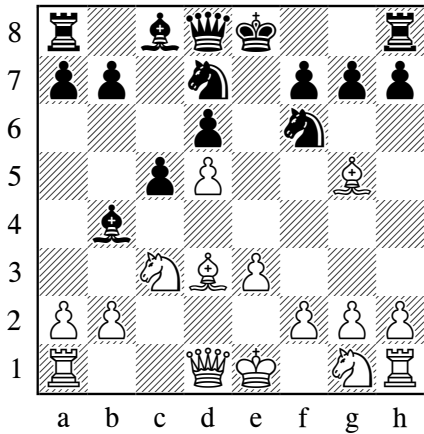
17.exf5 ♗xf5 18.♗h2 ♗g6

Getting out of the way of the f8-rook and protecting the knight. Up next is ...♞ae8. We have an easy game, with White being the one that needs to prove equality.

In conclusion, 8.♗b5 does not really put Black under a serious test. White is hoping for a quiet game in which the dark-squared bishop could put some pressure on the d6-pawn but, as it turns out, this is far from easy to accomplish. Our recommendation aims for Snake Benoni-style counterplay in muddy, double-edged waters. With the sneaky 11...♞e7!?! we're setting a cunning trap which White is likely to fall into. Even if your opponent manages to dodge the bullet and finds 12.a3!, the resulting positions seem easier for Black to play.

All in all, despite 8.♗b5 being tried in several high-level games, it turns out to be nothing special.

B2) 8.♘d3



This is both the most popular and the most natural option for White. The bishop does not have any better squares, and White needs to somehow develop the kingside.

8...♗e5!?

Surprisingly, this natural move is quite rare. We just continue improving our pieces, trusting our Snake Benoni-style counterplay to give us a good game.

The more concrete 8...♞a5 is played almost exclusively and is also the move chosen by Michael Roiz and analysed deeply in his book. However, the pawn-grabbing operation initiated by this move is not necessary, and it seems to me like it's not very practical.

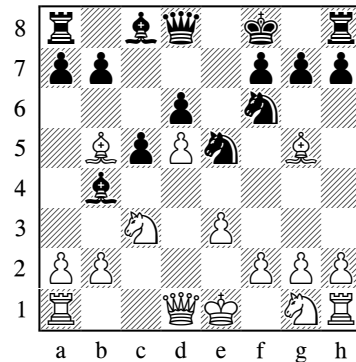
Starting with 8...0-0 could also be considered, but then White gains the extra option of going 9.♗f3!?, which annoyingly prevents our knight from jumping to e5.

9.♗e2

This is simultaneously the natural square to develop the knight and the only move ever played.

9.♗f3N is nicely met with: 9...h6! 10.♘h4 ♗xf3† 11.gxf3 (11.♞xf3?? loses to 11...g5 12.♘g3 ♘g4.) 11...g5 12.♘g3 ♘h3 when Black has the easier game.

9.♘b5†!N is a nice idea, as if we block with the bishop White might claim that it's a better version of the 8.♘b5 lines. However, we can meet White's surprise with a surprise of our own and go: 9...♗f8!?



With ideas of exploiting the weird placement of the white bishops by expanding on either side. A natural continuation could be: 10.♗e2 h6 11.♘h4 a6 12.♘d3 g5 13.♘g3 ♞e7 14.0-0 ♘d7 with ...♞ae8 and ...♗f8-g7 to follow, and a vastly complicated but balanced struggle ahead.

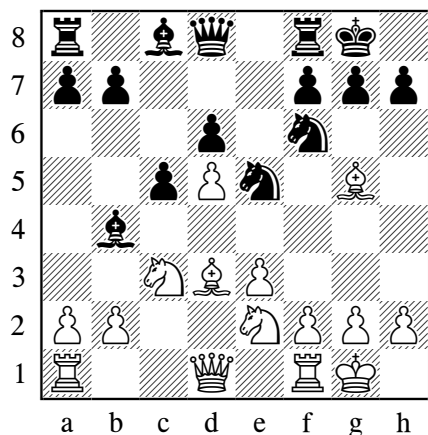
9...0-0

Castling immediately removes the option of a check on b5.

10.0-0

There is nothing else for White really.

White has also tried 10.♘c2, but 10...h6 11.♘h4 ♗g6 is a better version of the mainline. We weren't going to capture the bishop on d3 anyway so, albeit natural, it is not logical to retreat it.

**10...h6!**

The pin on the f6-knight must at some point be broken.

11.♙h4

Breaking the pin with 11.♙f4?! doesn't make much sense. Other moves also work, but I would prefer the simple 11...♘xd3 12.♚xd3 ♘h5, grabbing both of White's bishops. The engine claims the position remains equal, but I think every human would rather be Black.

11...♘g6!

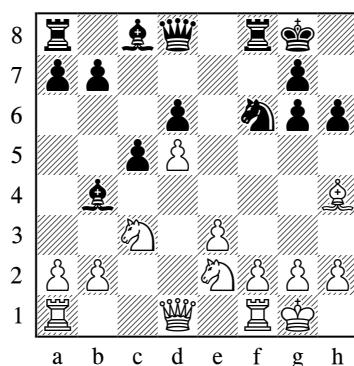
This is the main point of our operation. Black brings the knight over to the kingside to eliminate White's dark-squared bishop.

Just like in the previous segment on 8.♙b5, the character of the game is somewhat sharp; both sides have their trumps. White has a bit of extra space, but we have strong active counterplay in the centre and on the kingside.

12.♙g3!

This is the way to play for White.

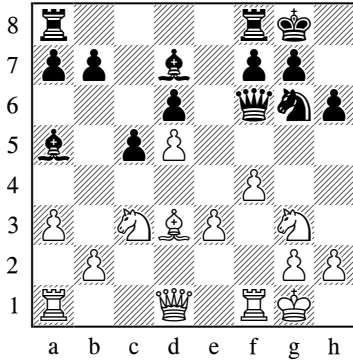
Some players might be tempted to capture on g6, but that is great news for us: 12.♙xg6?! fxc6



The doubled pawns are not weak, as we can form a healthy pawn chain by going ...g6-g5. That way, we also comfortably break the pin on the f6-knight. Furthermore, our rook on f8 is activated, and against either f2-f3 or h2-h3 we have gained the possibility of ...g6-g5-g4, opening more lines on the kingside without weakening our king.

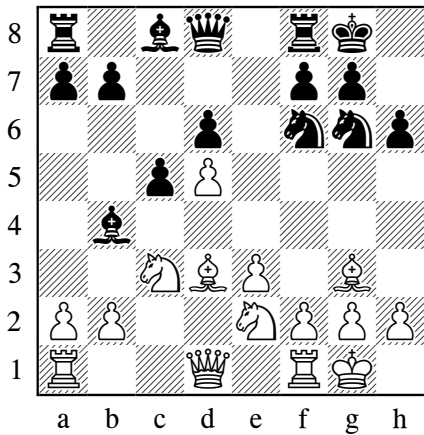
A possible continuation would be: 13.♚d3 (After 13.f3? g5 14.♙f2 g4! Black had a great advantage and went on to win in Dambacher – Wojtaszek, Rhodes 2013.) 13...g5 14.♙g3 ♚e7!? Black is intending to continue with ...♙d7 next and possibly double rooks on the f-file with ...♖f7 and ...♗af8. Once this is achieved, then we can think of expanding on the queenside. Our position is flexible, and we can easily create active play on both wings.

12.♙xf6 is possible but that is generally a decision that Black is happy to see. After 12...♚xf6 13.a3 ♙a5 14.♘g3 in Thorsteins – Orłowski, Lyon 1990, Black should have kept developing pieces with 14...♙d7N and met 15.f4 with:



15...♖e7 16.♗d2 f5! Putting a stop to White's potential kingside play. White might continue to try, but there is no way to advance without e3-e4, and that would open the game even more for our bishop pair.

Our next move is probably ...♞ae8, followed by expanding on the queenside. This is a typical situation for this line, where the engine evaluates the position as equal, but I would personally rather be playing Black.



12...♘h5

The most direct. Black wants to take the bishop on g3, and at the same time prepares ...f7-f5, fighting for the centre and preventing White's central advance. Even though this is my main suggestion, I find it a bit weird that it was Black's unanimous decision in all 33 games in my database.

The character of the game is not too concrete, and there are many possible alternatives that could possibly transpose to similar, or even the same positions to the mainline. For instance, I can't see what would be wrong with the natural 12...♞e8!?N, putting pressure on e3 and making White's plan of going f2-f4 harder to achieve.

13.f4!

The critical move. White tries to attack on the kingside with careless abandon.

White has an interesting and natural alternative in:

13.♗c2

Continuing to develop while staying solid.

13...♘g3 14.♘g3 ♘e5

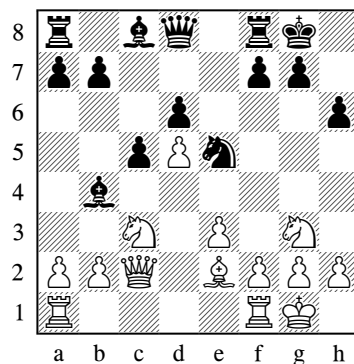
The natural reaction.

14...♘h4!? is also interesting, as the knight on h4 is quite active.

15.♙e2

This is the challenging approach.

15.♙h7† ♘h8 16.♙f5 can be met with 16...♙xf5! 17.♘f5 g6! with a nice position for Black.



This was Gonzalez Velez – Ionescu, Manresa 1993. The knight on e5 looks nice, but it is also a potential problem as it will get kicked out and there is nowhere to go except back to d7. White has a space advantage, but we

have the two bishops and good chances to create dynamic counterplay. It makes sense to start regrouping without waiting for White to chase us:

15...♠d7!N

The knight will later go to f6, which is a much more stable place. An instructive continuation would be:

16.e4 a6

Controlling the b5-square and introducing the option of a later ...b7-b5.

17.f4 ♖e8 18.♔h1 ♘f6 19.♞ae1 b5 20.♙f3 ♞a7!

Black will follow up with ...♞ae7. This is typical Benoni-style play, but in much better conditions for Black than it usually is.

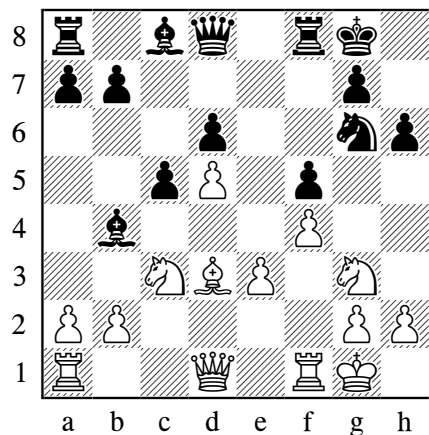
13...♘g3!?

Taking the bishop is natural and part of the plan, removing a potentially strong piece from the enemy camp.

However, with the pawn committed to f4 it would also make sense to play 13...f5 14.♙f2 ♘f6 followed by ...♙d7, with fine position, as played in Moiseenko – Bacrot, San Sebastian 2012.

14.♘g3 f5!

Stopping the white pawn avalanche is the correct idea with or without the capture on g3.



15.♞e2!N

At my course for KCT I claimed that this move was critical and ensuring an advantage for White, who wants to advance with e3-e4 next and exploit Black's weaknesses on the light squares. However, my opinion has evolved, and I consider the position to be far more complex than I did before, with Black having a fair share of chances. The right setup involves bringing the queen to f6 and the rook from a8 to e8. Then, the concentration of pieces on the kingside ensures counterplay in case White opens the position with e3-e4.

After 15.♞c2 ♘h4 16.e4 fxe4 17.♙xe4 ♙d7 18.♔h1 ♞f6 Black was slightly better in Lodici – Werle, Trieste 2015, and he went on to win. Black's position is both easier to play and has more potential to evolve. The a8-rook coming the e-file and the queenside expansion are the obvious plans for the near future.

Another example went: 15.a3 ♙a5 16.h3 ♙d7 17.♔h2 This was Babula – Stoczek, Pardubice 2020. Black should have continued developing pieces to their natural squares with 17...♞f6!N, keeping the h4-square for the knight. Our next move is ...♞ae8, and 18.e4 can be answered with 18...♘h4!.

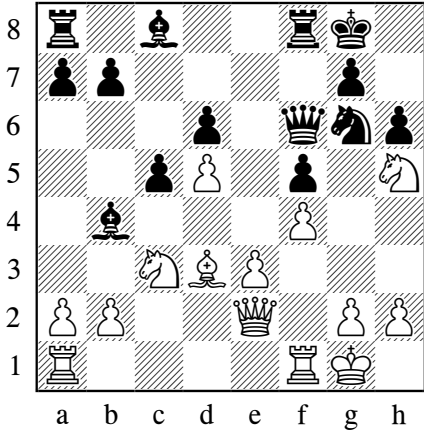
15...♞f6!

This is both part of building our ideal setup (queen on f6, bishop on d7, a8-rook to e8, knight to h4), and fights against e3-e4 by using tactical means.

16.♘h5

Gaining a tempo and pushing the queen away from the central dark squares, but the knight on h5 does not help the cause of e3-e4.

16.e4 runs into: 16...♞d4† 17.♔h1 fxe4 18.♞xe4 ♞xe4 19.♘cxe4 ♘xf4 Every step of this line was forced, and it is White that needs to prove equality in the final position.



16...♖e7

Putting pressure on the e3-pawn.

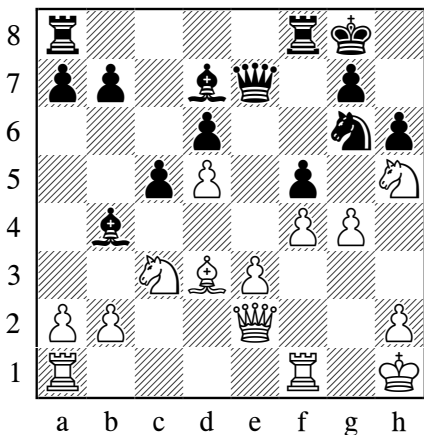
17.♔h1

17.e4 has no real threat so it can be met in many ways, the most straightforward being 17...♙xc3! 18.bxc3 fxe4 followed by ...♙f5, with a good position.

17...♙d7

We're close to activating our whole army by bringing the a8-rook into play, with an easy game. If White wants anything, quick action is required:

18.g4!?



18...♗ae8!

As usual, development is the answer to all of our problems. With all our pieces participating, it is unrealistic for White to hope for anything. I would already rather be Black, and this seems like a good moment for us to stop.

In conclusion, our line against 8...♙d3, which is characterized by 8...♙e5!?, leads a different kind of structure than we usually get, offering us more aggressive and dynamic possibilities. In principle, we do not play for equality in this variation. On the contrary, we accept a higher risk, looking for a higher reward. There are a few concepts to keep in mind:

- 1) The idea of placing the knight on e5 is to play ...♙e5-g6 and ...♙f6-h5, gaining the bishop pair. Under no circumstance, should we allow White to push the central pawns while keeping us under a pin.
- 2) We should be ready to meet White's f2-f4 with ...f7-f5, stopping the f4-pawn in its tracks.
- 3) In the main line, after 14...f5!, our ideal setup is achieved by ...♗d8-f6, ...♙c8-d7, ...♗a8-e8, and finally ...♙g6-h4.

I think these three pointers will help you better organize your knowledge of the Snake Benoni... oh wait!

Conclusion

Despite its tricky appearance, the Leningrad Variation turns out to be quite harmless. I could not resist suggesting a Benoni-type structure, because when White chooses these second-tier systems, it gives us an opportunity to fight for the full point right from the get-go. We rarely get these chances in the mainlines, so I think we should be willing to take some risks when the opportunity presents itself. In this case, quite frankly, the risk isn't even that great.

After 4...c5 the only line that matters is 5.d5. Everything else is either totally harmless or downright bad. After 5.d5 d6 6.e3 exd5 7.cxd5 ♖bd7, the critical line is 8.♙d3, as 8.♙b5 allows us to start playing for an advantage with our tricky little move 11...♗e7!, keeping our options open regarding our king.

Against 8.♙d3 we go 8...♗e5!? aiming for Snake Benoni-style counterplay and accepting a complicated position where Black has excellent chances to emerge victorious. Our main source of counterplay is the vulnerability of both white bishops, and we should take care to at least eliminate the annoying of the two, the one pinning our knight on the h4-d8 diagonal. It would be catastrophic if the white pawns started rolling and we're still under that pin.

I have also included a few different options here and there, and you are obviously free to choose one to deviate from my main suggestion and opt for one of them, depending on your playing style. The hard part about facing offbeat lines like 4.♙g5 is to choose one approach, as we are spoiled for choice. As is often the case, I find it more useful to try to understand the position than to strictly memorize the moves. Without a good understanding to back us up, we could confuse a move order and completely mangle the moves in a practical setting. That is why I wrote all these wordy explanations throughout the chapter. My hope is that next time you face 4.♙g5, you feel comfortable to crack a big smile and immediately start playing for an advantage!

Abridged Variation Index

The Variation Index in the book is six pages long. Below is an abridged version giving just the main variations, not the sub-variations.

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