

Opening Repertoire The Semi-Slav

Nicolás Yap



POPULAR CHESS

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Opening Repertoire: The Semi-Slav

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Nicolás Yap started playing in tournaments aged nine, and won the Northern California K-8 Championship in 2003, the Northern California K-12 Championship in 2009 and was a part of the USA delegation at the 2005 World Youth Championship in Belfort, France. Having recently completed his academic studies he is now restarting his chess career, as well as planning to fulfil his two life dreams of becoming a grandmaster and entering medical school to become a doctor. This is his second book.

Also by the Author:

Opening Repertoire: Queen's Gambit Accepted

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Introduction

The Semi-Slav is a weird beast. In few defences can Black play ambitiously for a win in a way that even the strongest engines of our days look upon it with favour. If we list all of the “elite-GM” approved defences where Black can genuinely play for a win right from the start, the list is small: the Grünfeld, the Nimzo-Indian and the Slav. The Semi-Slav belongs to the last on the list, which is made up of the Classical Slav, the Chebanenko Slav, the Triangle Slav, the Schlechter Slav, and the Semi-Slav. Of the listed Slav defences, only the Classical, the Chebanenko, and the Semi-Slav are really considered reliable at the highest level.

I thus give herein a full repertoire for Black after 1 d4 that is based on the Semi-Slav. This includes answers to White’s 1 d4 sidelines, such as the London (which I consider a main line opening nowadays and no sideline), the Jobava London, the Torre, the Colle, etc. Due to the Semi-Slav’s propensity to be several times more theoretical than the Queen’s Gambit Accepted, this book is heavier, both physically and in terms of content, than my first book, which was on the QGA.

One upside is that the Semi-Slav is ambitious, yet rock-solid. The list of the more ‘unsound’ defences to 1 d4 include the King’s Indian, Benko Gambit, Modern Benoni, etc. Swinging the pendulum the other way, a list of ‘sound’ and ‘highly solid’ defences would be the Classical Slav, QGD, QGA, etc. The Semi-Slav is right in the middle. This is what I mean by taking the best characteristics of the ‘unsound’ defences with the best characteristics of the ‘highly solid’ and mixing them into a Macbeth-like stew; you end up with the Semi-Slav. As computers get ever stronger, they give us insight into the real truth of an opening. As of this moment, White has no theoretical edge in the Semi-Slav. You can feel comfort knowing that you are playing an ‘unbreakable’ defence whenever your opponents push 1 d4 on the board.

The downside is that the Semi-Slav is highly theoretical. This is no surprise, given that the Botvinnik Variation, one of the maddest and most theoretical openings in all of chess, is a branch of the Semi-Slav. What will be noted quite early is that there is a lot to learn. There are variations that – although I have tried to simplify many of them and make them more digestible – go past move 25, 30, even 40 which you must memorize if you are playing at the highest level. At 2200-2500 you will have to memorize at least a few, and quite a bit of stuff even below that level. This is something that has no shortcut. I have read and heard many times about how understanding overrides memorization but, in my experience, often this is not true. A doctor must understand but can in no way refuse to memorize human anatomy.

A mathematician must understand but can in no way refuse to memorize trigonometric relationships, nor methods of solving partial differential equations. A language learner must understand but can in no way refuse to memorize grammatical rules. The list goes on. What seems cumbersome is often just one of the things that must be done. To play this repertoire properly, you will need to understand *and* memorize. But, as indicated above, this hard work all pays off when the engine gives out a logical “0.00” at the end.

I do not recommend the Botvinnik Variation in this book (instead, the Moscow/Anti-Moscow), but against the main moves at White’s disposal – 5 $\text{g}5$, 5 e3, and some other variations that have sprung to popularity, such as 5 g3 – there are times when one misstep could end in tragedy. This is the crux of modern opening preparation; as engines become stronger, often Black uses brute force and pure calculation to equalize down to “0.00”. Should you ever feel overwhelmed, always remember that White must memorize a lot of theory as well!

For this book, just like for my QGA book, in order to be as theoretically bulletproof as possible, I consulted as many sources that I could. The outcome is painstaking attention to detail. I even had to truncate a lot of material, as my first draft was over 1000 pages. The book is much smaller after heavy editing, but it is more concise and will serve you well in your Semi-Slav adventure. I wish you all the best as you start your own Semi-Slav journey and make this defence your own.

Nicolás Yap,
San Francisco,
December 2024

Game 19

Raffaele Tassone – Kalervo Suihko Correspondence 2019

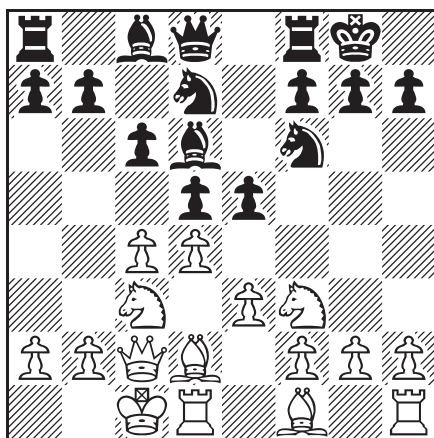
1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♗f3 d5 4 ♘c3 e6 5 e3 ♗bd7 6 ♚c2 ♙d6 7 g4!?

Ever since I was a teenager, I used to see this bombastic pawn push quite often in the open tournaments I played in. GM Alexei Shirov, the man who founded this variation and known for his ice-cold aggression, slaughtered several opponents with this move in the early 90s. The idea is to rush Black with g4-g5, or, if Black accepts the pawn, to put the rook on g1, take on g7 and break into Black's kingside. Although this variation is no longer as topical or popular as it was in the mid-2000s, I have given it two games because the tree of variations in the notes became too unwieldy in a single game.

White has a few other seventh-move options that should be mentioned:

a) 7 a3 0-0 8 b4?! (trying to stretch out on the queenside, but this is premature) 8... a5! (my recommendation, as well as Schandorff's; Dreev only considers 8...e5, 8...♖e8 and 8...♗e7, but this is by far the best, breaking up White's pawns) 9 b5 (or 9 ♖b1 axb4 10 axb4 e5!) 9...c5! and Black is already better, T.H.Dao-So.Polgar, Münster 1993.

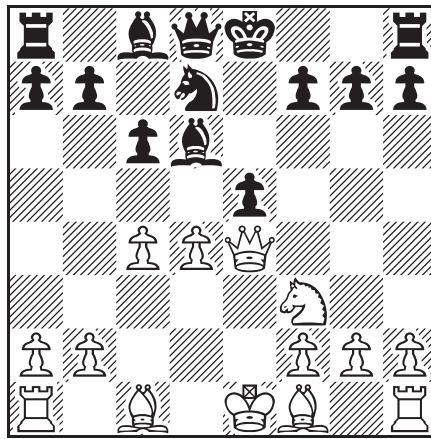
b) 7 ♙d2 is covered by John Donaldson and Jeremy Silman in *Semi-Slav Defense: Non-Meran Variations*. The idea is to castle queenside quickly, but it is Black who ends up with an attack on the king, not White: 7...0-0 8 0-0-0 e5 (best, as White's king sits shakily on c1 with the centre unlocked; Shankland, Knaak and Schandorff all give 8...b5, which is good too, but I prefer to blow up White's centre; Dreev and Vigorito opt for 8...c5, but that leads to a mess)



9 cxd5 (or 9 dx5 ♗xe5 10 ♗xe5 ♙xe5 11 ♚b1 ♖e8 12 h3 ♙d7 with ideas of ...b7-b5, with or without taking on c4 first) 9...cxd5 10 ♗b5 ♙b8 11 dx5 (11 ♙b4 ♖e8 12 ♗d6?! ♙xd6

13 ♖xd6 e4 14 ♗c7 ♕e7 15 ♘e5 ♘xe5 16 dxe5 ♘g4 is good for Black with the e5-pawn dropping, T.V.Petrosian-V.Korchnoi, USSR Championship, Moscow 1955) 11...♘xe5 12 ♗c3 (after 12 ♘xe5 ♗xe5 13 ♗c3 ♕e7 Black has no problems) 12...a6! (better than 12...♕e7, as given Donaldson and Silman, as well as Pedersen, which lets the b5-knight linger) 13 ♘bd4 ♘e4 and Black has an edge due to White's shaky queenside, S.Saric-M.Herman, Milan 2015.

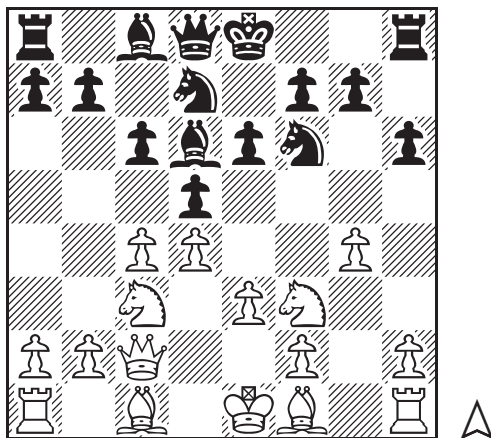
c) 7 e4?! is also analysed by Donaldson and Silman, but this is just a mistake. Moving the e-pawn twice so early costs White too much time: 7...dxe4 8 ♘xe4 (8 ♘g5 e5 9 ♘gxe4 ♘xe4 10 ♘xe4 ♗c7 11 d5 f5 is good for Black) 8...♘xe4 9 ♕xe4 e5 (best, in order to blast open the centre, though Vigorito calls it "risky")



10 dxe5 (inserting 10 c5 ♗c7 11 dxe5 allows 11...♘xc5, while 10 ♗d3? runs into 10...f5! 11 ♕xf5 ♘f6 12 ♕g5 e4) 10...0-0! 11 exd6?! (but 11 ♗e2 ♖e8 or 11 ♗d3 f5! 12 ♕e2 ♘xe5 13 ♘xe5 ♗xe5 14 0-0 ♖e8 gives Black the initiative) 11...♖e8 12 ♕xe8+ ♕xe8+ 13 ♗e3 (Dreev says that White has compensation, while Schandorff says that he would rather be White; I cannot but disagree) 13...♘e5! (the best move, as the machine finds; although White has a 60% score here, objectively Black stands slightly better) 14 0-0-0 (14 ♗e2 ♗g4 15 0-0-0 transposes) 14...♗g4! (Donaldson and Silman, as well as Vigorito, give 14...♘xf3 15 gxf3 ♗d7, citing the game A.Mikhailchishin-G.Flear, Mexico City 1980, but then the bishop is less active) 15 ♗e2 (in the only game to reach this position Black put the rook on d8 here, but it is better to make threats with the queen) 15...♕e6 16 ♖he1 ♘xf3 17 gxf3 ♗f5 18 ♗f1 ♕f6 with a slight edge. Black should make luft with ...h7-h6, then play ...b7-b6 to break up White's pawns.

7...h6!

The best response, both objectively and practically, is not to take the g-pawn but rather deter it from going forwards again.



Question: Why is the best answer to be frightened and meekly halt the g4-g5 push?

Answer: In chess, just like in life, trying to put on a front of looking “aggressive” often backfires. Black can definitely take on g4 – and that is a heavy theoretical line in its own right – but White gets too much fun for my liking. I prefer to halt the g-pawn and let it sit there on g4, and both *Stockfish* and *Leela* agree with me. Thus, there is good news and bad news.

Let us start with the bad news. There is one thing that I must warn you about: the extreme amount of theory that this line has developed over a decade of being played at elite super-GM right down to club level. You will have to learn quite a lot of theory because, although today’s computers have shown that White has nothing, refuting or equalizing against White’s many tries is not intuitive. In particular, it is important that you know how to smash White should they venture some overaggressive try.

However, the good news is that Black is at least equal in all variations that begin from this position. Both Sam Shankland and Lars Schandorff recommend this line in their own works.

8 ♖g1?!

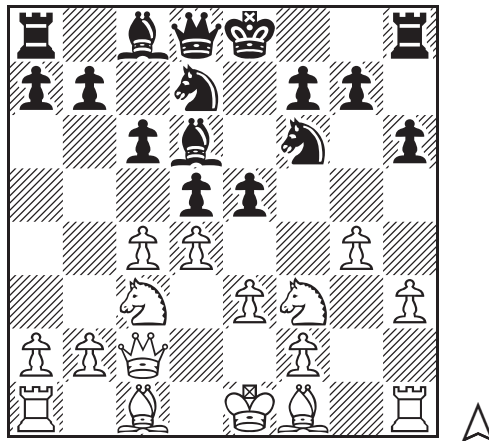
The most-frequent choice, with over 800 games played, but it is not the best move at all. This is probably due to the fact that this was mostly played over a decade ago, when strong computers like *Stockfish 16* never existed. Instead:

- a) 8 ♗d2 is examined in the next game.
- b) 8 g5 (not subtle at all, are we...) 8...hxg5 9 ♘xg5 e5

Question: Which classical chess principle, as seen here, should be remembered in this 7 g4 variation?

Answer: Breaking in the centre as a form of countering a flank attack. White has neither time nor resources to cause Black any trouble. After 10 ♙d2 exd4 11 exd4 ♚e7+ 12 ♙e2 dxc4 13 0-0-0 ♜b6 14 ♝de1 ♙e6 , Black is at least equal, N.Abasov-L.Mendonca, FIDE Grand Swiss, Douglas 2023.

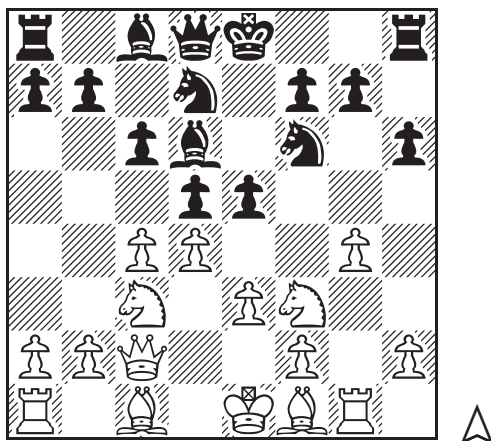
c) Steffen Pedersen considers 8 h3 “interesting”, but modern engines show that it is White who must take care: 8...e5 (Black breaks open the centre to punish White’s passive play; 8...dxc4!? is also good, intending 9 e4 e5 10 ♙xc4 b5 11 ♙e2 ♚c7 with dark-square counterplay after swapping central pawns, or 9 ♙xc4 b5 10 ♙e2 ♙b7 11 e4 b4 12 ♜a4 $\text{♚a5!$? 13 e5 b3+ 14 ♙d2 ♚xa4 with equality)



c1) 9 ♙d2 0-0 (the king is safe enough here, given that White slowed down their own pawn storm) 10 0-0-0 (if White goes for the bishop pair with 10 cxd5 cxd5 11 ♜b5 ♙b8 12 ♙b4 ♝e8 13 ♜d6 ♙xd6 14 ♙xd6 , the time taken allows Black to develop a strong initiative, as after 14... exd4 15 ♜xd4 ♚b6 16 ♜b5 ♜e4 17 ♙c7 ♚f6 , A.Anarkulov-N.Khoroshev, Tashkent 2010) 10...e4 11 ♜h4 ♝e8 12 ♝g1 (or 12 ♜f5 ♙f8 , followed by ... ♜b6) 12... ♜f8 and Black halts White’s kingside play and can break open the queenside next. Note that pushing the f-pawn lets Black swap and plop a knight on e4.

c2) 9 cxd5 (White has a 60% score here over the board, but Black did not always play in the most accurate way) 9... cxd5 10 dxe5 (both 10 ♙d2 0-0 and 10 ♜b5 ♙b8 11 ♙d2 0-0 were covered in line ‘c1’) 10... ♜xe5 11 ♜xe5 ♙xe5 12 ♙d2 ♙d7 (I think this is better than just castling, as it enables ... ♝c8 and ... ♙c6 to be played quickly if required) 13 0-0-0 (after 13 ♙g2?! ♝c8 14 0-0 0-0 15 ♚d3 ♙c6 , the d5-pawn is securely defended and Black can continue with ... ♚d7 and ... ♜fd8 or ... ♜fe8 ; White stands slightly worse due to their Swiss cheese kingside) 13...0-0 14 f4 ♙xc3 15 ♙xc3 ♜e4 16 ♜xd5 ♜xc3 17 bxc3 ♚e7 and Black has more than enough compensation in view of White’s overstretched pawns and terrible king safety, B.Fister-L.Cadillón Costa, correspondence 2015.

8...e5



Following the classical principle given above.

Question: White has a rook on g1 and floats ideas of swapping on d5 and leaping with ♖b5. How scary is White's attack?

Answer: Not really very scary. White may think they're on for a crush but, honestly, if anyone is attacking it is Black. Although there will be times when it seems like White has a lot of threats, modern computers have refuted these ideas. The downside, as said above, is that there is a lot of theory. The upside is that Black has all the fun now.

9 cxd5

White's main answer by some way; White wants to get into Black's camp with ♖b5.

a) 9 g5?! is even worse than on the previous move. After 9...hxg5 10 ♖xg5 (if 10 ♖xg5?? e4 11 ♖d2 ♔f8!, White is dead lost, as the h2-pawn is doomed) 10...♚e7 White has no attack, but Black does!

b) 9 ♔d2 prompts 9...e4 10 ♖h4 and now 10...♙xh2 (in *Attacking with g2-g4*, Dmitry Kryakvin only gives 10...g6, as in H.Nakamura-M.Muzychuk, Gibraltar 2016) 11 ♖g2 ♙b8 12 0-0-0 ♖b6, when White has problems with both their c- and g-pawns.

c) 9 h4 (White's second most-played option, but this pawn storm goes nowhere) 9...e4 (gaining ground in the centre again is better than either 9...exd4 or 9...dxc4, as given by Dreev and Vigorito) 10 ♖d2 (not 10 g5? exf3 11 gxf6 ♖xf6 12 ♖xg7?, since the pretty and deadly 12...♙h2! traps the rook with ...♔f8 to follow) 10...g5 fixes the g4-pawn, which will be a target when the c8-bishop is uncovered. Note that 11 hxg5 (11 cxd5 cxd5 transposes to 10 h4?! below) 11...hxg5 12 f3 can be answered by 12...♚c7!, intending 13 fxe4 ♙g3+ 14 ♔d1 ♖xg4 with a big advantage.

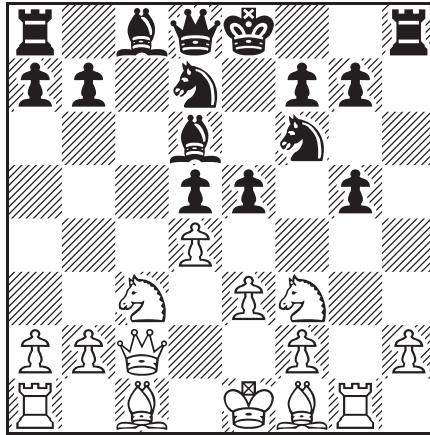
9...cxd5 10 ♖b5

When you see this on the board, you might be a bit anxious. Take a deep breath and remember that in all of these lines Black is simply better. This was scary 15 years ago – not now.

White has also tried:

a) 10 ♙d2 ?! e4 11 ♜b5 (or 11 ♜h4 ♜b6 as in the 11 ♙d2 line below) 11... ♜b8 12 g5 exf3 13 gxf6 ♜xf6 14 ♙b4 (if 14 ♝xg7 then 14...a6 15 ♜c3 ♙xh2 and ... ♚f8 again) 14...a6 15 ♜c3 g5 and Black has a huge edge, being a pawn up and White with zero attack.

b) 10 g5?! hxg5 still doesn't work for White:



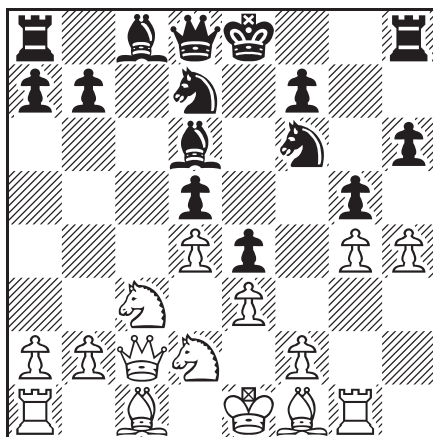
b1) 11 ♝xg5 ?? e4 ends any thought of an attack; it is little wonder that White has 0/6 here.

b2) 11 dxe5? ♜xe5 12 ♜xe5 ♙xe5 13 ♝xg5 is not much better: 13... ♚e7 14 ♝xg7 ♚f8 15 ♝g1 , E.Trumic-M.Miljkovic, Bosnian League 2008, and now 15...d4 16 ♜e2 ♜g4 puts White in serious difficulties.

b3) 11 ♜xg5 e4 (Dreev calls this unclear and gives 11... ♚e7 , but I do not know why, since Black is already better) 12 ♜b5 (or 12 ♙d2 ♜b6 with ... ♙d7 and ... ♝c8 coming next; even after 12 h3 g6 13 ♜xd6+ ♚xd6 Black has all the chances, K.Mielke-I.Panitevsky, correspondence 2018) 12... ♜b6 ! (12... ♜b8 would transpose to the main game, but there's no need for that) 13 ♜xd6+ ♚xd6 14 ♚c5 ♚xc5 15 dxc5 ♜bd7 16 b4 a5 and the bishop pair cannot hold White's broken queenside.

b4) 11 ♜b5 is well met by 11... ♜e4 ! (not minding the swap on d6 and threatening ... ♙b4+) 12 ♜xd6+ ♜xd6 13 dxe5 ♜e4 14 ♙d2 0-0, when the bishop pair cannot offset White's horrendous pawn structure and weak king.

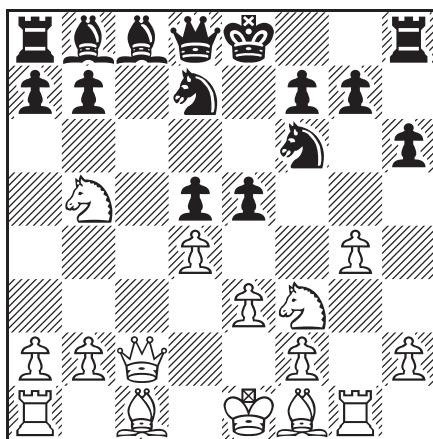
c) 10 h4?! e4 11 ♜d2 (after 11 g5 exf3! 12 gxf6 ♜xf6 White is near lost, since 13 ♝xg7 ?? ♙h2 ! and ... ♚f8 dooms the g7-rook again) 11...g5 and then:



c1) 12 hxg5 hxg5 13 f3 (anything like 13 ♖b5 ♙b8 14 ♙e2 a6 15 ♗c3 ♖b6 16 a4 ♙e6, O.Bucsa-K.Feco, correspondence 2011, or 13 a4 ♖b8! 14 ♖b5 ♗c6 15 ♗xd6+ ♜xd6, A.Suleymanli-A.Erigaisi, World Blitz Championship, Almaty 2022, is just good for Black) 13...♜c7! 14 ♙d1 (or 14 fxe4 ♙g3+ 15 ♙d1 ♗xg4 again) 14...♖b6 (much better than 14...♗f8?!, as in I.Akash Pc-M.Tabatabaei, Abu Dhabi 2019) 15 ♖b5 ♜e7 16 ♗xd6+ (not 16 fxe4? ♙xg4+ 17 ♙e1 ♜c8) 16...♜xd6 17 ♜c5 ♜e6 and Black has a big advantage.

c2) 12 ♜h1 ♜g8 13 hxg5 hxg5 14 ♙e2 (if 14 ♖b5 ♗f8 15 ♜a4 then 15...♙e7! 16 ♗xd6 ♜xd6 17 b3 ♙d7 18 ♜a5 ♜b6 19 ♙a3+ ♙d8 20 ♜c5 ♗g6 and White has huge problems, K.Connelly-A.Moreto, correspondence 2016) 14...♙f8 (not 14...♖b8?, as in D.Gordievsky-I. Bukavshin, St. Petersburg 2013, because of 15 ♜b3 ♙e7 16 ♜h6, followed by ♜xf6!) 15 ♖b5 ♙e7 16 ♜c7 ♜xc7 17 ♗xc7 ♜b8 18 ♖b5 ♖b6 19 ♗xa7 ♙xg4, when Black has more space and better-placed pieces and thus an edge.

10...♙b8



The most logical reply – Black keeps the bishop and the crucial c7- and d6-squares covered. White can throw the kitchen and bathroom washbasins into the attack, but Black's camp is simply too solid and withstands all threats.

11 g5

The critical continuation. Instead:

a) 11 dxe5?! ♖xe5 12 ♗xe5 ♙xe5 13 f4 ♙b8 14 h3 (or 14 ♙d2 0-0) 14...♗e4, with ...♖h4+ to follow, leaves White clearly worse with zero attack, K.Tarun-B.Subrota, Online Olympiad (rapid) 2021.

b) 11 ♙d2? e4 12 ♗h4 (or 12 ♖c1 0-0) 12...♗b6 and Black stands much better, with ...a7-a6 and ...♖c8 coming shortly, while 13 ♗f5 ♙xf5 14 gxf5 0-0 15 ♙b4 ♖e8 gave White nothing in Z.Kozul-Z.Ribli, Slovenian Team Championship 2010.

11...hxg5 12 ♗xg5 e4

Very important, closing the b1-h7 diagonal and cutting White's forces in two. Now the h2-pawn is doomed. Not 12...a6?? 13 ♗e6! fxe6 14 ♖g6+ and Black is lost, R.Quintiliano Pinto-D.Stamenkovic, Florianopolis 2015.

13 ♙d2

The only way to justify White's play is to mobilize and create threats as quickly as possible. After 13 f4? a6 14 ♗c3 ♗b6 15 a4 ♙f5 16 a5 ♗c8 White should be dead, as both a5 and h2 are likely to fall soon, C.Ríos-E.Pelaez Murias, Villa de Gijón 2016.

13...♗b6

Note that 13...a6 would now be met by 14 ♖c1!

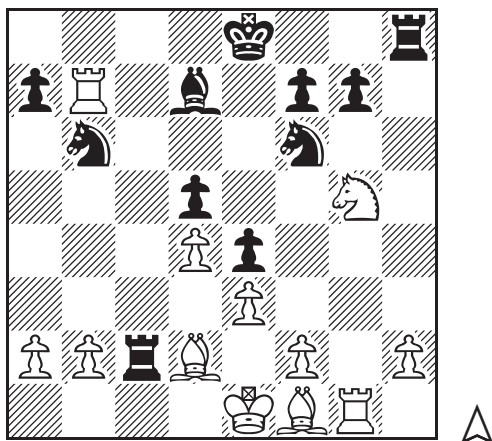
14 ♖c5

White wants to build a battery with ♙b4 and/or ♖c1 to hit Black with either ♗c7+ or ♗d6+, but Black is not fazed. Instead:

a) 14 ♙b4? a6 is the height of dumbness.

b) 14 h3 a6 15 ♙a5 (this only keeps the b5-knight in place for one more move) 15...♙f5 (not 15...axb5?? 16 ♙xb6 and wins) 16 ♗c3 ♙h2 (pushing the white rook to an inferior square) 17 ♖g2 ♙c7 18 ♖b3 ♖c8 and White has run out of threats, while Black can look to consolidate via 19 ♙b4 ♙d6 or 19 ♖c1 g6 and ...♙f8.

c) 14 ♖c1 ♙d7 15 ♗c7+ (15 ♖c5 transposes to 15 ♖c1 in the game) 15...♖xc7 16 ♖xc7 ♙xc7 17 ♖xc7 ♖c8 18 ♖xb7 ♖c2 is quite theoretical.

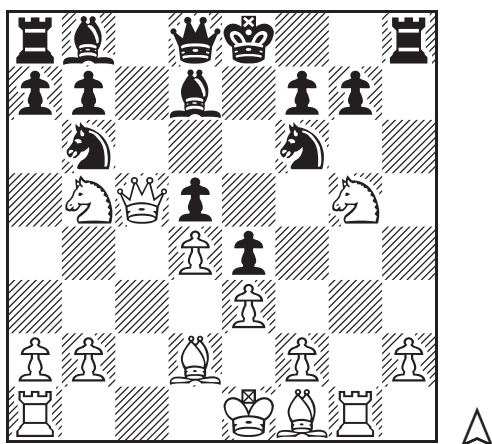


My analysis matches up with Sam Shankland's in his *Lifetime Repertoires: Shankland's Semi-Slav*. The bishop pair and active rook barely make up for White's huge weaknesses.

c1) 19 ♖b8+ ♙c8 20 ♙b5+ ♘fd7 21 ♙d1 ♜xb2 22 ♘xf7! (the only way for White not to slip into a losing position; if 22 ♙xd7+?? ♙xd7 23 ♘xf7 ♜h7 24 ♘e5+ ♙c7, the b8-rook is doomed, A.Aleksandrov-Y.Yakovich, Serpukhov 2008) 22...♙xf7 23 ♙xd7 ♜xa2 24 ♙xc8 ♜a1+ 25 ♙c1 ♜xc8 26 ♜xc8 ♘xc8, when the a-pawn and poor white bishop give Black a slight edge.

c2) 19 ♙b4 ♘c8! (holding a7 and hindering tricks on d6 or e7) 20 ♙d2 (if 20 ♜g2 ♜c1+ 21 ♙e2 ♜b1, White cannot hide from ...a7-a6/...♙b5+ and ...♘g4 as well) 20...♜xh2 and after all of this, White has still not untied themselves, and Black keeps a small edge.

14...♙d7!



Cool, calm and collected. White's threats do nothing, but again there is a huge amount of theory, especially from correspondence games.

Question: But why does Black put the bishop here, instead of on f5, when White cannot leap with ♖d6+ - ?

Answer: Black's idea is highly simple: to plug the c-file with ...♙c6. Putting the bishop on f5 is also fine, but then ♖c1 allows White to infiltrate at c7 instead. The main thing is that ♖d6+ – as well as ♖c7+ – is not dangerous for Black. White has no follow-up, and there is definitely no mate.

15 ♖d6+

Since ♖c7+ is impossible, second-best is to get the bishop pair.

Instead, 15 ♖c1 is duly answered by 15...♙c6, keeping White out of c7.

a) 16 ♙b4 ♖c8 17 ♙h3 ♖e7 18 ♖d6+ ♗xd6 19 ♗xd6 ♙xd6 20 ♙xd6 ♖fg8! and there is no need to go further. White has the bishop pair, but their pieces are precariously placed and they have a horrid pawn structure. There is also the immediate threat of ...f7-f6 to worry about.

b) 16 ♙a5 ♖fd7 17 ♖d6+ ♙xd6 18 ♗xd6 is well met by 18...♖c4! 19 ♙xd8 ♖xd6 20 ♙c7 ♖f5, when swapping queens has killed any White initiative. We can stop here and see that Black threatens to leap to h4 and then to f3, while the g5-knight is running short of squares and must watch out for ...f7-f6 again.

15...♙xd6 16 ♗xd6 ♗e7

Hard to believe (or maybe not!), but this is still a highly theoretical position. The good news is that Black is better no matter what White does. The bad news is only for White.

Kryakvin only gives 16...♗b8, but then 17 ♗e5+ forces Black to swap queens on White's terms.

17 ♗xe7+

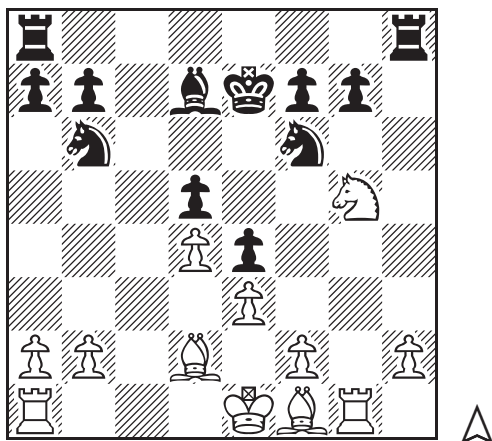
White has to swap queens on Black's terms since other moves are worse:

a) 17 ♗c7? ♖g4 18 h3 ♖c8 19 ♗xb7 ♖h2 20 ♙e2 f6 21 ♗xa7 ♗d6 and White is close to lost, E.Heide-Fr.Meyer, correspondence 2017.

b) 17 ♗e5? ♖g4! (there is no need to swap on e5 here) 18 ♗xe7+ (or 18 ♗xg7 0-0-0) 18...♙xe7 19 ♙b4+ ♙e8 20 ♙e2 ♖xh2 21 ♙d6 ♖g4! 22 ♙d2 f6 is horrible for White, A.Eger-G.Stone, correspondence 2014.

c) 17 ♙b4 ♗xd6 18 ♙xd6 ♖g8! and the threat is ...f7-f6, when White has quite some problems with the g5-knight. Remember this counter-intuitive backleap.

17...♙xe7



18 a4!?

A clever idea; White offers the a-pawn to deflect the b6-knight.

a) 18 h3?! was the earlier game R.Tassone-K.Goldbecker, correspondence 2018, where 18...g8! would again have put the g5-knight in trouble.

b) 18 b4+ e8 doesn't improve anything for White. If 19 a4 a5 20 d6 c8, with ...c2 coming, a4 hanging, h2 almost hanging, and the g5-knight still in danger, Black holds a huge edge.

c) 18 f3 xh2 19 b4+ e8 20 fxe4 dxe4 21 d6 h6 is no good either, but shows what White is playing for with the game move.

18...xa4 19 f3

The difference from note 'c' above is that after 19...xh2 20 b4+ e8 21 fxe4 dxe4 22 d6 h6 White has 23 c4!, attacking f7 with the advantage, because the black knight is missing from b6.

19...exf3 20 b4+ e8 21 xf3

White has eliminated the strong e4-pawn, brought their knight back to the centre, and is now attacking the g7-pawn, but is still a pawn down so not yet out of the woods.

21...a5!

Black gains a couple of tempi on the bishop.

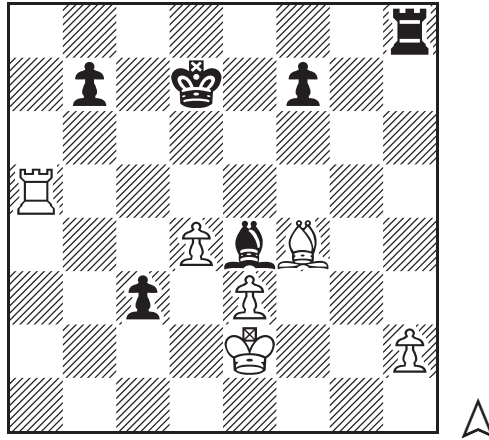
22 d6 e4 23 f4 xb2

If 23...f8 then 24 g5 f6 (24...xg5 25 xg5 targets d5) 25 g2 covers both b2 and h2, when White's two bishops offer good drawing chances.

24 xg7 c4 25 xc4 dxc4 26 g5 c6 27 e2 d5 28 xe4 xe4 29 g5

Threatening the a5-pawn as well as e5+.

29...d7 30 gxa5 xa5 31 xa5 c3



32 d5?

Stockfish indicates this is losing. White had to play 32 ♖e5 c2 (or 32...f5 33 ♜c5 c2 34 ♙d2) 33 ♙d2 ♜c8 34 ♙c1 f5 35 ♜c5 ♜g8 36 ♙b2 ♜g1 37 ♜xc2 ♙xc2 38 ♙xc2, which the engine assesses as drawn. The bishop holds the pawns together, and if Black tries to push the b-pawn using the king and rook, White pushes the d-pawn to d6 to force one black piece back again.

32...c2 33 ♙d2 ♜g8!

A crucial intermezzo; the threatened rook infiltration drags the white bishop from defending the e3-pawn. If 33...♜c8 34 ♙c1 ♜c3 35 ♜b5 ♙c8 at once, then 36 ♜b4! f5 (or 36...♙xd5 37 e4) 37 h4 ♙xd5 38 h5 defends. Black can even lose after 38...♙e4?? 39 h6 ♜a3 40 ♜c4+ ♙d7 41 ♙e5 ♜xe3 42 h7.

34 ♙g3 ♜c8 35 ♙c1 ♜c3 36 ♜b5

Going back with 36 ♙f4 loses immediately to 36...♜b3.

36...♙c8 37 d6

Instead:

a) 37 ♜b4 is now too slow: 37...f5 38 ♙f4 ♙xd5 39 h4 ♙e4 40 h5 ♜a3 41 ♜c4+ ♙d7 42 h6 (or 42 ♙e5 ♜xe3) 42...♜a1+ 43 ♙b2 ♜b1+ 44 ♙a3 c1♚+ wins.

b) 37 ♙f4 ♜a3 38 ♜c5+ ♙d8 39 ♙b2 ♜a6 forces 40 ♜xc2 ♙xc2 41 ♙xc2 ♜a3 and White cannot hold.

37...♙d8 38 ♜b4 f5 39 ♙f4 ♜a3 40 ♜xe4 fxe4 41 ♙xc2 ♜d3

This endgame is equally hopeless for White.

42 h4 ♜d5 43 ♙b3 b5 44 ♙b4 ♙d7 45 ♙c3 ♙c6 46 ♙b4 ♜f5 47 ♙c3 ♙c5 0-1