

Alexander Khalifman

Botvinnik's Best Games
The Sixth World Chess Champion

New In Chess 2025

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A pioneer of systematic chess study

Today, a naive and pragmatic approach to chess literature prevails, with books like 'How to Win in the Opening' being especially popular. In fact, your playing strength does not increase when you study opening reference books: to achieve real progress, you need to carefully study the works of the world's best chess players. Everyone studies the games of modern top grandmasters, but the classics have also contributed a lot of valuable things to our game, and there is much to learn from them. One of the recognized authorities is the Patriarch of Soviet chess, the sixth World Champion Mikhail Moiseevich Botvinnik.

Compilers of various symbolic lists of the five or ten 'greatest chess players of all time' often forget Botvinnik. But his contribution to chess is colossal; after a deep analysis of Mikhail Moiseevich's best games, it became clear to me that his role is underestimated. But I don't really like ranking people according to criteria like 'who is the coolest'. So who to include in the notorious 'top ten' and who not, let everyone decide for themselves.

I will note Botvinnik's strongest points: the connection between the opening and the middlegame, complex strategic concepts, and the technique of realizing an advantage. What I used to pay less attention to and what amazed me was his constant will to win! Among modern chess players, Magnus Carlsen has this quality in full measure. And Botvinnik had it very well developed: he tried to find even the smallest resources to fight for victory. It seems that there are often almost no chances, but the fight continues anyway. This makes a huge impression! In the book you will find two protracted endgames in which Botvinnik won with Black against Korchnoi and Spassky; in both, the game continued literally 'to the last pawn'. So if I were to single out one quality against the background of all the others, it is precisely this – the indomitable will to win, which often brought him success.

Botvinnik was the first to understand how important deep and comprehensive preparation for competitions is. First of all, from the point of view of the approach to the opening repertoire as a whole. Without diminishing the merits of previous generations, we must still admit that before Botvinnik, serious homework was not necessary for successful performances. Whereas with Botvinnik, everything was systematic, put 'on the right foot'.

Possessing colossal match experience, he learned to very subtly adapt to specific opponents and choose the type of positions that would be most unpleasant for them. Without any exaggeration, we can say: Botvinnik paved the way for our times.

Now it is difficult to assess the contribution of the sixth World Champion to this or that specific opening variation, since so much water has flowed under the bridge since then. Commenting on the games, I have tried to show that today the theory often looks completely different, but back then he was an innovator. Botvinnik significantly developed and modernized not only the system that now bears his name, but also other closed openings; in particular, various lines of the English Opening from White's point of view. I would like to draw special attention to the Caro-Kann Defence. A man of almost 50 years of age, having already achieved everything possible in chess, suddenly includes a completely new opening in his repertoire – because he decided that he could not stand still, he must continue to improve! This was also a distinctive quality of Botvinnik: not to rest on his laurels, but to constantly continue to work. So he made a very large contribution to his favourite schemes, although now, I repeat, the theory looks different. But we must remember that the systematic analytical approach to the study of the opening began with Botvinnik. Not fragmentary, but precisely systematic, 'across the entire field'. He paved the way, showed the importance of such an approach, and others followed him – Geller, Korchnoi, Polugaevsky...

At the end of his brilliant career, Botvinnik sometimes played the Modern Defence, the King's Indian Defence with Black – but this was, in my opinion, a bit of indulgence. When he stopped participating in the fight for the World Championship (after 1963), his practical strength was colossal, but sometimes he allowed himself to 'relax' a little and play something simply interesting, but not entirely correct. When he fought for the title of World Champion, he chose his openings differently.

Botvinnik wrote about himself that his combinational vision let him down more than once. It cannot be said that this was his weak point, but there were chess players who surpassed him in this component. This was, let's say, not the strongest side of his creativity, and he took this circumstance into account when choosing his openings. For example, he did not really like opposite-side castling and tried to avoid irrational positions in which everything was decided by calculation, calculation and only calculation. A sober assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses is also something that Botvinnik fully brought to chess.

The younger generation often underestimates the classics. Young talents say: 'Why should I study Lasker's games when he played mainly against

weaker players?’ I am sure that Lasker’s games should also be studied – if only because his opponents included Capablanca, Alekhine, Rubinstein, Bogoljubow, Nimzowitsch, Réti... often these games have instructional value, but the level of resistance of opponents, indeed, sometimes leaves much to be desired. But in the post-war period, there were many more strong chess players, and the average level increased significantly. So in Botvinnik’s best games, as a rule, his opponents resisted quite stubbornly. Of course, these people also made mistakes, but these were already serious struggles at a high level. So these duels should not be neglected at all.

Botvinnik played a lot of quality games against strong opponents, but from the start, we decided to select 50 games for this book. I think everything that should be included has been included. All things being equal, I have tried to choose games where I could say something new. After all, many books have already been written about Botvinnik’s work, including separate ones about his World Championship matches. He himself wrote his famous four-volume *Analytical and Critical Works*.

When reading books, much depends on the goal the reader sets for himself. If he simply wants to enjoy the play of the great masters of the past, then he can just skim the text. I have tried to pay attention to all the critical moments, so reading ‘diagonally’ will also be useful. But if a chess player sets himself the goal of improving in chess, then it is much more useful to study these games in sufficient depth. They deserve it, and I have tried to make studying Botvinnik’s best games with my comments even more interesting.

Alexander Khalifman
St Petersburg, February 2025

Botvinnik was yet to play his first game against a reigning world champion, which came against Euwe at Nottingham in 1936 (not counting his simultaneous victory against Capablanca in 1925), but in the next game he faces the reigning Women's World Champion.

Game 4 Queen's Gambit Declined

Mikhail Botvinnik

Vera Menchik

Hastings 1934

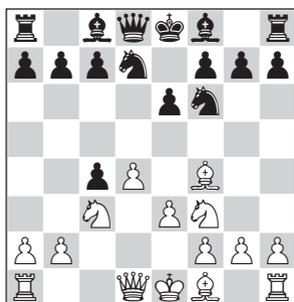
1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 d5 4.♗f3 ♜bd7 5.♙f4

This variation, which appeared a number of times in Botvinnik's practice, remains current even in our day.

5...dxc4

And this is the most principled reply. Of course, White will recover the pawn, but will this suffice for an opening advantage?!

6.e3



If 6.e4 ♙b4, Black is fine.

6...♗d5

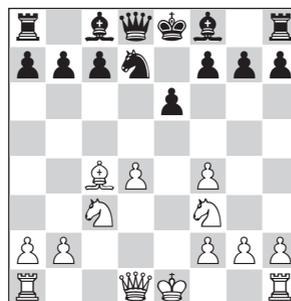
In the 21st century, other continuations are more popular; principally, the sharp 6...b5 7.♗xb5

♙b4+ 8.♗c3 ♗d5. Even so, I will not describe this line as a definite improvement. There are also the moves 6...a6 and 6...♙d6. Interestingly, Black can gain the bishop pair in another way from the game, namely 6...♗b6 7.♙xc4 ♗xc4 8.♙a4+ c6 9.♙xc4. Thus, Black has won the other bishop, but the assessment remains the same – Black has a solid but cramped position and still has to work for full equality.

7.♙xc4

White can also keep the bishop with 7.♙g5?! f6 8.♙h4 ♙b4, but he should not, as he has no obvious compensation for the pawn.

7...♗xf4 8.exf4



It would seem that Black should be at least not worse thanks to the advantage of the two bishops and the better pawn structure, but it is not that simple. White has his own trump cards, particularly the advantages in development and space, and these may prove to be more significant. Objectively, Black should gradually achieve equality, but first of all he needs to solve the problem of his light-squared bishop.

8...♔d6

Later, the bishop was often developed to g7, but this does not look like an improvement over the classical method: 8...♖b6 9.♔d3 (9.♔b3 g6) 9...g6 10.h4, and White has new objects for his attack. The immediate 8...g6?! is bad because of 9.d5!.

9.g3

It would be tempting to avoid this weakening, but on 9.♗e5 Black has the strong reply 9...c5!?, and after 10.dxc5 ♕xe5 11.fxex5 ♘xe5 12.♙xd8+ ♚xd8 13.0-0-0+ ♔d7 the game is equalized.

With 9.♙d2, the queen is not ideally placed: 9...0-0 10.0-0 (10.0-0-0 is aggressive but risky; it is completely unclear whose attack will develop more quickly after 10...a6 11.♔d3 ♗f6) 10...a6 11.a4 b6 with equal play.

9...0-0 10.0-0

10.♗e5 c5 gives even chances.

**10...♗f6**

But here the classical models need strengthening, as was done in the 21st century. The problem of the light-squared bishop needs solving at once: 10...b6!? 11.♙e1 (11.d5 e5!) 11...♗f6 (11...♔b7 12.d5 exd5 13.♔xd5

♔xd5 14.♙xd5, Akobian-Seirawan, Saint Louis 2012) 12.♗e5 ♔b7 with chances for both sides.

11.♙e2

It is hard to criticize the young Botvinnik for following the path suggested by Capablanca, but this move loses the opening advantage. Instead, after 11.♗e5! it is difficult for Black to activate his light-squared bishop: 11...a6 (11...b6 12.♙f3 ♖b8 does not lose material but allows a positional press with 13.♔b5! ♔b7 14.♔c6) 12.♔d3 b6 13.♗e4 with an edge.

11...b6 12.♙fd1 ♔b7

Black has developed satisfactorily and should gradually achieve full equality.

13.♙ac1**13...♙e7**

In the source game Capablanca-Becker, Carlsbad 1929, Black first prevented the exchange of light-squared bishops, which is also perfectly possible: 13...a6!? 14.♔d3 and now Black should have played 14...♙e7 15.♗e4 g6 or 14...h6 with counterplay.

If 13...a5, 14.♗e5 gives White an edge.

14.a3

Now the exchange of bishops was possible, but not particularly dangerous: 14. ♖a6!? c6 15. ♖xb7 ♜xb7 16. ♗e4 ♗xe4 17. ♞xe4 ♜ac8. Black has only one weakness, which he can defend without great problems: 18. ♗e5 ♖xe5 19.dxe5 ♜a6! and the position is balanced.

14... ♜fd8

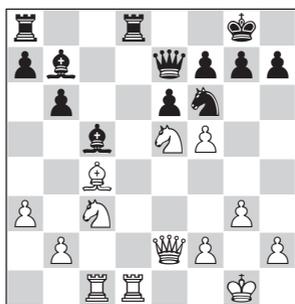
An inaccuracy. The rook was needed to defend f7. The most direct path to equality was 14... ♜ad8!? 15. ♗b5 c5! 16.dxc5 ♖xc5 17.b4 ♜xd1+ 18. ♞xd1 (18. ♜xd1 a6!; this equalizing resource had to be foreseen) 18... ♜d8 19. ♞e2 and again 19...a6 with counterchances.

15. ♗e5 c5

15...g6 16. ♖a6.

16. ♗b5

White tries to activate the second knight, but this leads only to exchanges. More dangerous was 16.dxc5!? ♖xc5 17.f5 (the square f7! First 17.b4 ♖d6 allows Black to trade on e5 and ease his task)



analysis diagram

and now Black needs miracles of ingenuity: 17... ♜xd1+ (17...b5 18. ♖a2!) 18. ♜xd1 exf5 and now:

A) 19.b4 ♖xf2+! 20. ♗f1 (20. ♗xf2 loses to 20... ♞xe5) 20... ♗f8 21. ♖xf7 ♜c8 22. ♖g6 ♜xc3 23. ♖xh7! ♞c7 24. ♗g6+ ♗f7 25. ♗h8+ ♗f8 with a likely draw;

B) 19. ♗xf7 ♗f8! (if 19... ♞xe2 20. ♗xe2 ♗f8, 21. ♗d8! ♖e4 22. ♗e6+ wins a pawn) 20.b4 ♞xe2 21. ♗xe2 ♖f3 and Black defends, but even here, despite the opposite-coloured bishops, Black needs to show definite accuracy.

16...cxd4 17. ♗xd4

17. ♜xd4 ♖xe5 18.fxe5 ♗e8 is equal.



17... ♖xe5

This exchange was criticized by Botvinnik – probably not wholly deservedly, although one has to agree that there was another, slightly simpler path to equality: 17... ♖c5!? 18. ♗ec6 ♖xc6 19. ♗xc6 ♜xd1+ 20. ♜xd1 ♞c7 21. ♗e5 (Botvinnik) 21...g6! 22.b4 ♖f8 23. ♞f3 ♜b8 24. ♗c6 ♜c8 25.b5 ♗d7.

18. ♞xe5

After 18.fxe5! the passive knight retreat is strongest, since with queens on the knight can return at the appropriate moment via c7: 18... ♗e8! 19. ♖a6 ♜ac8 with equality.

18... ♞d6

The threats f4-f5 and ♖f5 seem unpleasant, but they could be ignored: 18...♖ac8!? 19.♗f5 (19.f5?! ♖c5) 19...♖xd1+ 20.♖xd1 ♕e8! 21.♗d6 ♖c6 22.♗xb7 ♖xc4 23.♗d6 ♖c2. 18...♗f8!? looks equal as well.

19. ♖b3

The possible endgame after 19. ♖e2!? (controlling g4) is more unpleasant for Black, but here Black is not at all forced to exchange queens: 19...♖d5 (19...♖f8!?) 20.f3 h6!? 21.♗f2 ♖ac8 22.♖xc8 ♖xc8 23.♗b5 ♖b3! with counterplay.

19... ♖xe5 20.fxe5



20... ♗e8?

The most critical moment of the game. From e8, the knight controls the important squares c7 and d6, which is a plus. But it cannot return to play and this minus proves significantly more important.

A) Equality could have been maintained very easily with the active 20...♗g4!, and indeed, after this it is White who must in some variations display accuracy:

A1) 21.f4 ♗e3 22.♖d3 ♗f5 (easier than 22...♖e4 23.♖d2 ♖b7!?) 24.♖c7) 23.♖cd1 ♗xd4 24.♖xd4 ♖xd4 25.♖xd4 ♖c6;

A2) 21.♖c7 ♖d5;

A3) 21.♗xe6 ♖xd1+ 22.♖xd1 ♗xe5 (easier than 22...♖f3!? 23.♖d3 ♗xe5) 23.♗g5 ♗f3+ 24.♗xf3 ♖xf3 25.♖d7 ♖c8! 26.♖c4 ♖g4 27.♖e7 g5.

B) Surprisingly, the natural centralizing move 20...♗d5? turns out to be even worse than the text. The problem is that the black knight looks very pretty on d5 but is useless there (in addition to which it can be exchanged off if necessary), whilst the white knight comes to d6 and begins to dominate: 21.♗b5! h6 22.♗d6 ♖ab8 23.f4!. There is no hurry: 23.♖xd5 ♖xd5 24.♖c7 f6 25.f4 a5 26.♖dc1 b5 27.♖e7 fxe5 28.fxe5 ♗h7! loses the advantage;

C) 20...♗d7? loses to 21.♗xe6!;

D) But 20...♗e4 21.f4 g5 (21...h5) 22.f5 ♖d5 23.♖c2 ♗c5 24.♗b5 may be playable as well.

21.f4 a6?!

Taking b5 from the white knight. But in reality, this move weakens the queenside and loses time; it seems that this is in fact the decisive mistake.

A) Passive defence does not work: 21...g6 22.♗f2 h5 23.♖a4! with the idea of exchanging bishop for knight and entering on c7. In general, this endgame is exceptionally interesting to analyse from the viewpoint of the details which affect which exchanges favour which side;

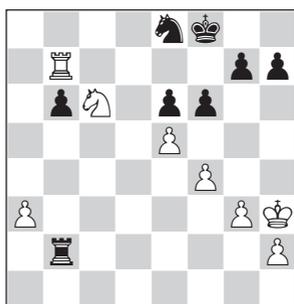
B) 21...♖ac8? loses to 22.♗xe6! fxe6 23.♖xe6+ ♗f8 24.♖xc8 ♖xd1+ 25.♖xd1 ♖xc8 26.♖d8;

C) However, even after the strongest move 21...♔d5!, the main line requires study-like subtlety from Black in order to save the game:

C1) 22.♖c6 ♕xc6 23.♞xc6 ♞xd1+ 24.♕xd1 ♜f8 is equal;

C2) 22.♕a4 ♜f8 23.♜f2 (23.♕xe8 ♞xe8 24.♗b5 ♞e7 25.♜f2 f6) 23...a6 24.♜e3 is difficult for Black;

C3) 22.♕xd5 ♞xd5 23.♗c6! ♞xd1+ 24.♞xd1 ♜f8 25.♞d7 ♞c8 26.♗xa7 ♞c1+ 27.♜g2 ♞c2+ 28.♜h3 ♞xb2 29.♞b7 f6 30.♗c6.



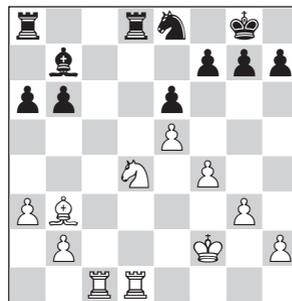
analysis diagram

C31) Usually, the defending side seeks to exchange pawns, but this is a quite different case: 30...fxe5 31.fxe5 ♜g8 (31...♞a2 32.♗d4 ♞xa3 33.♗xe6+ ♜g8 34.♜g4!) 32.♗d8 ♞a2 (32...♞e2 33.♞b8) 33.♞e7! ♜f8 34.♞d7 leaves Black in trouble;

C32) 30...♞a2! is the study-like subtlety: 31.♗d4 ♞xa3 32.♗xe6+ ♜g8 33.♜g4 g6 with chances to hold.

22. ♜f2

White quietly prepares the decisive action. There is no need to hurry: 22.f5 exf5 23.♗xf5 ♜f8 and now 24.♗d6 ♗xd6 doesn't promise White any advantage.



22... ♜f8?

Desperation. However, even more tenacious continuations cannot save the black position.

A) Botvinnik recommended 22...♕d5 for Black, but here after the precise 23.♗c6! (less convincing is 23.♕xd5 ♞xd5 24.♗c6 ♞xd1 25.♞xd1 ♜f8 26.b4 'with a significant advantage to White' according to Botvinnik, but after 26...♗c7! the black knight finally comes to life) 23...♕xc6 24.♞xc6 the weakening of the black queenside with a7-a6 tells. White will increase the pressure with b2-b4 and ♕e2;

B) 22...h5 23.f5 exf5 24.♗xf5 ♜f8 (24...a5 loses after 25.♗d6 ♗xd6 26.exd6) 25.♗d6 ♗xd6 26.♞xd6! ♞xd6 27.exd6 ♞c8 28.d7 ♞d8 29.♞c7 ♕e4 30.♞c8 ♜e7 31.♞xd8 ♜xd8 32.♕xf7 wins for White;

C) 22...g6 was probably the best chance. Here White would still need to show exceptional technique to realize the advantage: 23.g4 ♗g7 24.♞d2! (24.♞c7 ♕d5; the text move prepares either a favourable rook swap with ♗f3 or a doubling of the rooks) 24...♞d7 25.♞cd1 (here, this is stronger than 25.♗f3 ♞xd2+

26. ♖xd2 h5) 25... ♖e7 26. ♗f3. Black's main problem is that with accurate play, White can prevent him from bringing the knight back into play.

23.f5!

Now Black does not even have the possibility of prolonging his resistance for very long. 23. ♖xe6 ♗xd4 24. ♖xd4 fxe6 25. ♗d7 ♖d5 was less convincing.

23... ♖d5?!

This is already capitulation, but after 23...exf5 24.e6! White's initiative is also overwhelming.

24.fxe6 ♖xb3

24...fxe6 25. ♖xd5.



25.e7+! 1-0

It is significant that this game, where the young Botvinnik played the opening in 'Capablanca style', finished with a small combination in the spirit of the great Cuban. Vera Menchik was the first female chess player to reach the level of a good master. Her contribution to the development of women's chess cannot be overestimated, and yet in games with the strongest chess players of her time she often failed to fully match the level of her opponents in all three stages of the

game, and more often than not the endgame was the problem.

Game 5 Caro-Kann Defence

Mikhail Botvinnik

Rudolf Spielmann

Moscow 1935

1.c4 c6 2.e4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.d4

The Panov Attack was Botvinnik's permanent weapon against the Caro-Kann, one he regularly obtained via the English Opening move-order. In our day, it is not considered completely harmless but White has more promising systems.

4... ♗f6 5. ♗c3 ♗c6

Other main lines are 5...e6 and 5...g6.

6. ♖g5

Botvinnik only played this way. Towards the end of the 20th century, White more often used to fight for an advantage with the move 6. ♗f3, but step by step it was established that after 6... ♖g4 (the less forcing and more prophylactic 6...a6 is also not bad) 7.cxd5 ♗xd5 8. ♖b3 ♖xf3 9.gxf3 e6 a drawn ending arises by force in another ten moves or so.



6... ♖b6

Game 25 Nimzo-Indian Defence

Mikhail Botvinnik

Paul Keres

World Championship, The Hague/Moscow 1948

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♙b4 4.e3

The Rubinstein System served Botvinnik well for most of his career, including later World Championship matches. But if we talk specifically about the 1948 match-tournament, then given that Botvinnik played 5.a3 after any fourth move by Black (against Reshevsky in the 4th round after 4...d5 and in the 14th round against 4...c5), it would probably be correct to call the variation the Sämisch System via the move-order 4.e3. We can only guess what Botvinnik didn't like about the move-order 4.a3 ♙xc3+ 5.bxc3, which also has its obvious advantages (after f2-f3, White can put a pawn on e4 in one go in many variations). In the 21st century, many (but by no means all) strong chess players are concerned about Black's possible plan to immediately put pressure on the c4-pawn without castling (...b7-b6, ...♙a6, ...♘b8-c6-a5) in one order or another.

4...0-0 5.a3

Both before and after the present game, Botvinnik more often played 5.♙d3, which is still the main continuation in our day.

5...♙xc3+ 6.bxc3

After a surge in popularity during the Botvinnik era and a long lull at the end of the 20th century,

this variation has begun to appear again in grandmaster practice in the new millennium. For example, Caruana and Grischuk regularly play this way now. True, this is mostly with a fast time control, but nevertheless, if players of this level have a game count in the tens in some opening system, even in blitz, this is definitely the result of serious analytical work. For Keres, Botvinnik's opening choice should not have been unexpected; in their game in the AVRO tournament in 1938, Botvinnik had already played the Sämisch System, albeit via the move-order with 4.a3.

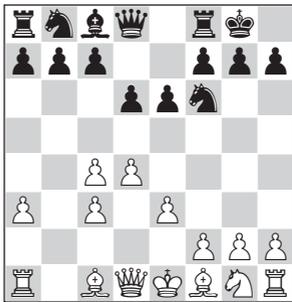


6...♖e8

A rare but not bad move. Black plans to carry out ...e6-e5 as quickly as possible, and the d-pawn can, if necessary, go to d5. Of course, it is unlikely to be advantageous for Black to undouble the white c-pawns and open up the position for his bishop pair, but the root cause of the defeat is not this move.

A) These days, the most reliable and flexible continuation still seems to be 6...d6!?, and then Black can decide whether to play ...c7-c5,

...e6-e5, or refrain from both for the time being, based on the opponent's actions:



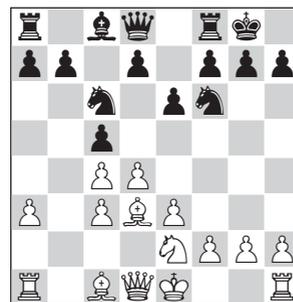
A1) 7.♔d3 e5 8.e4 (apparently the strongest, but it is still a pawn sacrifice. After 8.♞e2 e4 9.♙b1 ♙e6 10.♞g3 ♙xc4 11.♞xe4 White maintains material equality, but the powerful bishop on c4 guarantees Black a comfortable game, Gupta-Gukesh, Delhi 2022) 8...exd4 9.cxd4 ♞xe4! 10.♞e2 d5. White has some compensation, but it is unlikely that he is fighting for an advantage;

A2) 7.f3 c5 (7...e5 8.e4) 8.♙d3 ♞c6 9.♞e2 ♞a5 10.e4 ♞d7, and Black is ready to go for the c4-pawn with two knights – not quite the usual way. Of course, White will have compensation, but is it sufficient?;

A3) 7.♞e2 c5 and in order to complete his development, White has to put the knight on g3 earlier than he would like: 8.♞g3 ♞c6 (9.♙d3 b6 – see variations after 6...c5, the game Botvinnik-Keres, AVRO 1938; 9.e4 d5! 10.e5 ♞e4) 9.♙a2! is an interesting idea by grandmaster Akopian, which has already been tested in a World Championship match: 9...b6

10.e4 ♙a6 11.♙g5 h6 12.h4 hxg5 13.hxg5 g6 14.gxf6 ♙xf6 with a very complex game, Ding Liren-Nepomniachtchi, Astana 2023, 8th game;

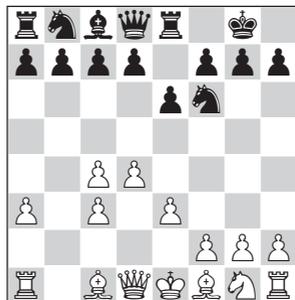
B) The most popular move in this position, 6...c5, is also quite possible, after which, with a transposition of moves, the position from the abovementioned game Botvinnik-Keres (1938) would arise. There followed 7.♙d3 (an interesting idea is 7.♞e2 ♞c6 8.♞g3, not rushing to develop the light-squared bishop and trying to reduce the game to the variations considered above with the move-order 6...d6 7.♞e2) 7...♞c6 (Keres also played 7...d5, which after 8.cxd5 exd5 9.♞e2 transposes to a variation from the great game Botvinnik-Capablanca in the same AVRO tournament) 8.♞e2 (it is also worth considering 8.♞f3 d6 9.e4 e5 10.h3)



B1) 8...d6 and now 9.♞g3 is somewhat passive as e3-e4 will have to be prepared further: 9...b6 10.♙b2 ♙a6, and the opening was not optimal for White, Botvinnik-Keres, AVRO 1938. Botvinnik demonstrated an improvement

in his own game two years later, but there is a nuance... 9.e4!? e5 (9...b6 10.0-0 ♖a6 11.♗g5) 10.d5 ♘e7 (10...♗a5 as in Bondarevsky-Botvinnik, Moscow 1940, is too reckless because of 11.♘g3, when the c4-pawn cannot be threatened and there are not enough defenders on the kingside) 11.f3 and Black has a solid position, but very little chance of active counterplay, Stahlberg-Bolbochan, Mar del Plata 1946;

B2) Towards the end of the millennium, it became clear that 8...b6 is more accurate, which, by the way, Botvinnik also played already in the match-tournament of 1948: 9.e4 ♘e8! 10.♙e3 d6 (here it is better to play 10...♙a6!?, which was first seen in a game Keres-Bronstein, Gagra 1952. It is important to leave the d6-square free for the e8-knight. This is how opening theory moved forward) 11.0-0 ♗a5 12.♘g3 ♙a6 13.♚e2 (White has managed to reliably protect the c4-pawn) 13...♚d7 (Botvinnik-Reshevsky, Moscow 1948, 14th round), and now 14.d5!? looks quite promising.



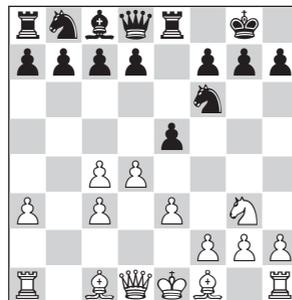
7.♘e2

In this version, there are no downsides to the early knight move to g3.

A) Botvinnik correctly assessed that after 7.♙d3 e5, the positional threat ...e5-e4 is quite unpleasant. 10 years later, Spassky-Uusi, Rostov-on-Don 1958, saw 8.♘e2 (relatively better may be 8.f3 e4 9.fxe4 ♘xe4 10.♘f3 d6 11.0-0, but here too White cannot claim an advantage) 8...e4 9.♙b1 b6 10.♘g3 ♙a6 11.f3 ♙xc4 12.fxe4 d6 and White won the game, but not because of the opening;

B) However, the attempt to build a powerful pawn centre immediately with 7.f3!? deserves attention. This move seems to require greater precision from Black: 7...e5 (after 7...c5 8.e4, the role of the rook move is unclear; 7...d5 8.cxd5 exd5 9.♙d3 b6 10.♘e2, again with a possible transition to Botvinnik-Capablanca) 8.e4 ♘c6! (an important subtlety! Black slows down the white bishop's exit to d3. If we play abstractly with 8...d6 9.♙d3 c5, White gets a very promising position after 10.d5) 9.♘e2 b6 10.♘g3 ♙a6 and Black has sufficient counterplay.

7...e5 8.♘g3



8...d6

This natural move is quite acceptable, but it is interesting that three strong grandmasters proposed three different improvements here. It is interesting to trace how these recommendations, all quite high-quality, reflect differences in style:

A) Keres recommended 8...d5, immediately opening the centre and fighting for the initiative, wishing to use his certain advantage in development: 9.♙e2 (after 9.cxd5 exd4 10.cxd4 ♖xd5 White can prepare for the bishop to go to e2 by 11.h3, but Black immediately attacks the centre: 11...c5 12.dxc5 ♖xd1+ 13.♗xd1 ♘fd7 with full counterplay) 9...dxc4 10.♙xc4 c5 11.♙b2 ♘c6 12.d5 ♗a5 13.♙a2 c4 14.e4 ♘d7! – the black knights are quite a worthy counter to the white bishops.

B) Taimanov's proposal was 8...b6!?, finishing development and focussing on weaknesses, without defining the structure in the centre yet: 9.f3 (9.♙e2 meets with the same reply) 9...♘c6 10.e4 ♙a6 with sufficient counterplay – we have already seen this position in the variation with 7.f3;

C) Finally, Botvinnik himself proposed 8...e4, locking the centre and restricting the enemy bishops. However, here White has a strong plan: 9.f3! d6 10.♞a2! b6 11.♞f2, preparing to double the rooks along the f-file in an unconventional way. There is no big advantage for White, but there is no equality either;

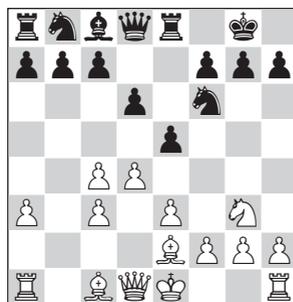
D) The combination of Keres' and Taimanov's methods also looks quite interesting: 8...♘c6!? 9.f3 d5!? (perhaps this is more promising than 8...b6, which transposes to 8...b6) 10.♗f2 (otherwise Black seizes the initiative) 10...dxc4 11.♙xc4 ♗a5 12.♙e2 exd4! 13.cxd4 c5 with very confusing play.

9. ♙e2

This position is also encountered via the move-order 6...d6 7.♘e2 e5, so there are plenty of examples from grandmaster practice here.

A) 9.f3 has been played more often, but after 9...c5 (9...e4 10.♞a2! – this picture is already familiar to us – see 8...e4) 10.e4 cxd4 11.cxd4 exd4 12.♖xd4 (12.♙e2 ♘c6 13.0-0 ♘d7 favoured Black in Kotov-Najdorf, Budapest 1950) 12...♘c6 13.♗f2 ♙e6 Black has quite sufficient counterplay;

B) To provoke ...e5-e4 at the cost of a tempo is quite original, but hardly promising: 9.♙d3 e4 10.♙e2 ♘bd7 11.0-0 h5!? (11...b6 is also quite acceptable, but how can we not mention this unconventional idea?) 12.♘xh5 ♘xh5 13.♙xh5 ♞e6 with interesting play for the pawn.



9...♟bd7

Apparently, the first step in the wrong direction. Most likely, Keres didn't like the prospect of a slightly worse closed position without active counterplay.

A) The correct path was shown by Botvinnik: 9...c5 10.0-0 ♟c6, increasing the pressure on the white centre. Now White can't play e3-e4 without first d4-d5: 11.d5 ♟e7 12.♚c2 ♟g6, and Black's position is very solid;

B) Keres recommended the more adventurous 9...♟c6 10.0-0 ♟a5, which once again shows that he didn't like a calm development of events. However, in this case after 11.e4! b6 (or 11...exd4 12.cxd4 ♟xe4 13.♟xe4 ♚xe4 14.♙d3 ♚h4 15.♚e1 with excellent compensation for the pawn) 12.♚c2 ♙a6 13.f4 Black runs a serious risk of quickly coming under a strong attack.

10.0-0 c5

In a situation where the pressure on the d4 point cannot be increased (the knight is already on d7), the usefulness of this move is rather questionable. It was worth choosing between 10...e4 11.♙d2 b6 12.a4 a5 13.f4, when White has a clear plan to increase the pressure on the kingside with ♙e1, ♟h1, ♙h4, however Black's defensive resources are far from exhausted; and 10...♟f8 11.♚c2 (in the case of the natural 11.f3, Black has the interesting resource 11...h5!? 12.e4 h4 13.♟h1 ♟h5) 11...♚e7 12.a4 a5 13.f3 h5 14.♙d3 h4 15.♟f5 ♙xf5 16.♙xf5

White's positional advantage is undeniable, but it will not be easy to break through Black's defence.

11.f3**11...cxd4?!**

Frankly, if this move had been made by a player of a lesser calibre, I would have undoubtedly put a question mark on it. Both by classical and modern standards, exchanging pawns is a serious positional mistake here. Black rids White of a weakness and facilitates the opening of diagonals for the powerful white bishops – primarily the dark-squared one. What Black expected to get in return remains a mystery. However, the picture is not so rare, even at a high level: a couple of minor tactical miscalculations are often followed by a gross blunder, and a couple of seemingly non-critical positional inaccuracies by something like this. Moreover, Keres's inaccuracies did not arise out of the blue, but because the position as a whole was not very comfortable for him, which in turn was one of the consequences of his opponent's clever choice of opening system.

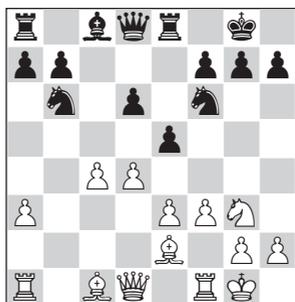
Black's position was already quite unpleasant, and yet there was no reason to panic:

A) After 11...♞f8 12.e4, waiting for White to transfer the knight to d5 is rather futile, so Black must try to determine the situation in the centre: 12...♞e6 (now, 12...cxd4 13.cxd4 ♞e6 is also acceptable, with the same goal) 13.dxe5 dxe5 14.♞xd8 ♜xd8 15.♞f5. Black faces a very unpleasant defence, and yet I would not risk saying that his chances of a draw are less than White's chances of winning;

B) With 11...♞b6 12.e4 ♞e6 13.d5 ♞c8, Black disposes of any chance of the white knight landing on d5, but has spent too many tempi on it. And White has other plans: 14.f4!

12.cxd4 ♞b6?!

Further down the slippery slope... the counterplay against the c4-pawn is too late and Black only loses precious time. Now, it was necessary to play 12...♞f8 13.♞b2 (probably more promising than 13.e4 now) 13...♞e7 14.a4. There are many positional factors in White's favour, but nevertheless, it is still a long way to a win.



13. ♞b2

Perhaps Botvinnik's only inaccuracy in this game. With this quite natural move, White loses part of his advantage. It was possible to wait before determining the best position for the bishop, and there were more useful moves. After 13.a4! (the straightforward 13.e4 is also strong) Black's position is suddenly close to critical. White is ready to attack the d6-pawn with all his might, but counterplay against the c4-pawn does not lead to the desired result:

A) 13...♞e6 14.d5 ♞c8 15.♞a3! ♞c7 – dreams of easing White's pressure by placing the knight on c5 remain just that, dreams, in view of 16.f4! with a very strong attack;

B) 13...a5 14.e4;

C) 13...♞c7 14.e4! exd4 (14...♞xc4? 15.♞c2) 15.♞xd4 ♞e6 16.♞a3! ♜ed8 17.f4, and it is increasingly difficult for Black to defend against the threats.

13...exd4

The best chance. Botvinnik recommended 13...♞e6, but after 14.d5! (stronger than Botvinnik's suggestion 14.♞c1 ♜c8) 14...♞c8 (14...♞d7 15.a4) 15.f4! ♞bd7 16.♞c2 ♞c5 17.♞f2 White's pressure grows.

14.e4

Nice, but allowing a strong simplifying operation. However, it is not clear that other continuations were any stronger. White is better in all lines, but far from decisively:

A) 14.♞xd4 ♞e6 15.♞b3 ♜c8 16.♞fc1 ♞bd7!, and if 17.♞xb7

♟c5 18. ♙xc5 dxc5, Black has compensation for the pawn;

B) 14. ♖xd4 ♜a4 15. ♙c1 ♚e7 is only slightly better for White.

14... ♙e6 15. ♜c1



15... ♜e7

Very sluggish. Botvinnik correctly showed that 15... ♜c8!? was stronger, but after 16. ♖xd4 ♜a4 17. ♙a1 it is essential to find 17... ♖b6!

(Botvinnik gave 17... ♟c5, when White retains the advantage with 18. ♜b1), and the endgame promises Black good chances of salvation: 18. ♖xb6 ♜xb6 19. ♙xf6 gxf6 20. ♟h5 ♜e7! (not the most obvious, but the strongest; if 20... ♟d7 21. ♜fd1 ♜c6 22. ♜b1 ♜b8 23. ♜d4) 21. ♜fd1 (21. ♟xf6+ ♟g7 22. ♟d5 ♙xd5 23. cxd5 ♜xc1 24. ♜xc1 ♟xd5 and Black can defend) 21...f5 22.c5 ♜ec7! (22...dxc5 23. ♜xc5!) 23. ♜xd6 fxe4 24. ♜cd1 ♟d7 25. ♙b5 ♟f8 26. ♟f6+ ♟h8 27. ♟xe4 ♙f5 and the tactical equilibrium allows White to keep the extra pawn for now, but the draw is getting closer and closer.

16. ♖xd4 ♚c7?!

Another mistake. It is at this point that Black finally passes the point of no return. Apparently, Keres

thought that exchanging the c4- and d6-pawns would make his defence easier, but with queens on the board, this is not the case at all.

A) The best chance of salvation was to sacrifice a pawn: 16... ♜c7 17. ♜fd1 ♖f8 and if 18. ♖xd6 ♖xd6 19. ♜xd6 ♟e8 20. ♜d4 ♜ac8 21. ♟f5 ♟a4 22. ♙a1 b5 White clearly has the better endgame, but it still needs to be won;

B) 16... ♜c8 is less precise, since after 17. ♜fd1 ♖c7, instead of 18. ♖xd6 White also has the very promising option 18.f4! ♟e8 19. ♖f2 (threatening f4-f5-f6) 19...f6 20.h3, and White's attack becomes more and more dangerous.



17.c5!?

The computer insists that the threat is stronger than its execution and gives the more convincing 17.f4! ♖c5 18. ♖xc5 dxc5 19.f5 ♙d7 20.e5 ♟e8 21. ♜f2, when even after the exchange of queens, the mating attack remains relevant. However, Botvinnik's choice is also perfectly sufficient.

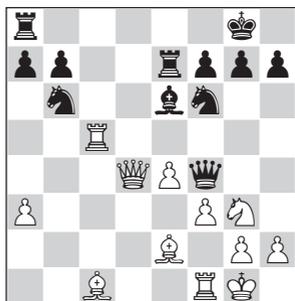
17...dxc5 18. ♜xc5 ♖f4?

The only defence was 18... ♖d8!, when White needs to be very

accurate: 19.♖b4! (playing over the entire board! This is stronger than the variations 19.♖xd8+ ♜xd8 20.♙xf6 gxf6 21.♘h5 f5! and 19.♖e3 ♘e8! given by Botvinnik) 19...♘e8 20.♘h5 f6 21.a4!. In a practical game, it is impossible to hold such a position.

19. ♙c1

The computer insists that 19.♙b5!? wins more convincingly. The idea is the same: again, the threat is stronger than the execution, so White takes control of the d7-square and threatens to remove the queen from the kingside not only by ♙c1, as in the game, but also by ♘e2. Here is an illustrative variation, containing computer special effects: 19...♘bd7 20.♘e2 ♖h4 21.g3 ♖h3 22.♘f4 ♖h6 23.♙c1 ♘xc5 24.♖xc5.



19... ♖b8?!

Capitulation. Instead, after 19...♞d7 the win is still not completely trivial: 20.♖f2! (after Botvinnik's recommendation 20.♖b4 there is the strong 20...♖d6!, and the win still has to be proved: after 21.e5 (stronger is 21.♙e3) 21...a5! 22.♞xa5 ♖xb4 23.axb4 ♘fd5 White still

faces a good deal of technical work) 20...♖b8 21.♙b5! ♞e7 22.♙g5 with a decisive attack.

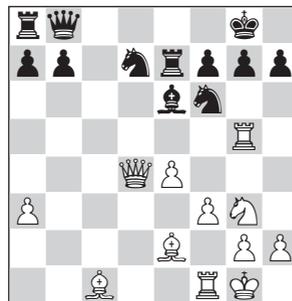
20. ♞g5!

Now it is all over.

20... ♘bd7

Resistance is not prolonged by 20...♘e8 21.♘h5 f5 22.exf5 ♙xf5 23.♞e1.

Botvinnik finishes off beautifully:



21. ♞xg7+! ♞xg7 22. ♘h5+ ♞g6

Or 22...♞h8 23.♘xf6 ♖e5 24.♙b2.

23. ♖e3

In view of the inevitable checkmate, Black resigned.

In addition to the great tournament significance and beautiful finish, it is worth highlighting Botvinnik's exceptionally subtle psychological approach to setting up the opening. After the second round, the gap over his pursuers grew to 1½ points and never fell below that again.

Game 26 Slav Defence

Mikhail Botvinnik

Max Euwe

World Championship, The Hague/Moscow 1948

This was Botvinnik's first game of the Moscow half of the match-

tournament. For Euwe, things had been catastrophic – at this point, he had scored only 1½ out of 9.

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.c4 e6 4.♗c3 c6 5.e3 ♗bd7 6.♙d3 dxc4

After two defeats with 5...♙b4 against Botvinnik and Reshevsky, Euwe returns to the main line of the Meran Variation, which he had used in his games since 1924. This variation began to be used as Black by Botvinnik as well, but much later. In general, chess players who are not quite in shape often choose sharp forcing variations. This approach can be described as ‘if I can’t play, let my knowledge play for me’. I will not undertake to evaluate this, I will simply state that it happens quite often.

7.♙xc4 b5 8.♙d3



8...a6

The sharpest and at that time practically the only answer. 8...♙b7 became the most popular move closer to the end of the 20th century and remains so to this day. To use it, you also need a serious amount of knowledge, but still, the game here rarely takes on such an irrational character as after 8...a6.

The move 8...b4 is quite solid and reliable, but here Black has fewer chances to seize the initiative.

And finally, it is worth noting the fairly new continuation 8...♙d6, introduced into practice by Zvjagintsev in 1990, which later became quite popular at all levels.

9.e4

The only way to fight for an advantage. After 9.0-0 c5 Black has a very comfortable variation of the Queen’s Gambit Accepted.

9...c5

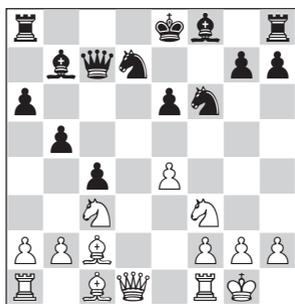
Against Euwe, 9...b4 was played a couple of times, which is not entirely consistent with Black’s previous move and is worth mentioning only in connection with the following exotic variation: 10.e5 (retreating the knight to a4 or e2 also preserves the opening advantage) 10...bxc3 11.exf6 cxb2 12.fxg7 bxa1♙ 13.gxh8♙ with White having the better chances.



10.e5

Towards the end of the 20th century, 10.d5 became more popular (and remains so to this day). However, even here Black has quite sufficient resources: 10...♙b7

(this order of moves is preferred by grandmasters in the 21st century; Botvinnik himself played 10...c4, and after 11.dxe6 fxe6 12.♙c2 ♙b7 13.0-0 ♖c7 the game still came down to the main critical position) 11.0-0 (this position also arises with the move-order 8...♙b7 9.0-0 a6 10.e4 d5 11.d5) 11...c4 12.♙c2 ♖c7 13.dxe6 fxe6. This is the main tabiya of the 10.d5 variation today.



A) In case of 14.♖e2 ♙d6 15.♙g5 0-0 16.♞ad1 (Kan-Botvinnik, Moscow 1954) 16...♞ad8, Black can count on seizing the initiative. Stronger is 15.♗d4, but Black has nothing to fear after 15...♗c5 16.f4 e5 17.♗f5 0-0. The knight sacrifice 17.♗dxb5 brings White good practical results, but with precise play by Black it does not promise an advantage: 17...axb5 18.♗xb5 ♖b6 19.♗xd6+ ♖xd6 20.fxe5 ♖xe5 21.♞f5 ♖e7 22.♖xc4 ♜c8 23.♖b5+ ♗cd7 is dynamically equal;

B) 14.♗d4 ♗c5. Here, 15.♙e3 is more often played than 15.♖e2 (after which 15...♙d6 – see line A – is more solid than 15...e5, as practice has proven, among others in the game Averbakh-Botvinnik, Moscow

1955), but here too in the line 15...e5 16.♗f5 (after 16.♗f3 ♙e7 17.♗g5 0-0 18.♙xc5 ♙xc5 19.♗e6 ♖e7 20.♗xf8 ♞xf8 Black has excellent compensation for the exchange) 16...g6 17.♙g5 ♗fxe4 Black has nothing to fear;

C) 14.♗e2 is the trend of the 21st century. After 14...0-0-0 15.♗ed4 ♗e5 16.♖e2 ♗xf3+ 17.♗xf3 ♙c5 Black has fully sufficient compensation.

10...cxd4

In Botvinnik's very first game in the Meran Variation, there followed 10...♗g4?! 11.♙g5 ♖b6 12.♙e4 ♙b7 13.♙xb7 ♖xb7 14.0-0 h5 15.d5 ♗dxe5 (Botvinnik-Rabinovich, Leningrad 1926), and here the simplest path to a large advantage is 16.♞e1! f6 17.h3.



11.♗dxb5 axb5

This leads to more complicated play than the move used by Botvinnik (and earlier also Euwe), 11...♗xe5, which is probably more reliable, although these things are relative and anyway, Black does not play the Meran for the sake of reliability. After 12.♗xe5 axb5 we have a crossroads:



A) In those days, 13.0-0 was considered the most dangerous for Black. Then after 13...♙d5 14.♚e2

A1) 14...♙a6 is still considered the clearest, although there are other possibilities: 15.a4 (15.♙g5 h6 16.♙h4 ♙d6 with good play for Black) 15...♙d6 16.axb5 ♙b7 17.♞xa8+ ♙xa8 and now:

A11) 18.♘c6 ♙xc6 19.bxc6 0-0 (Botvinnik played 19...♙e7 against Lilienthal, which is acceptable, but hardly stronger) 20.♞f3 ♞c8 with an edge for Black in Spielmann-Bogoljubow, Semmering 1932;

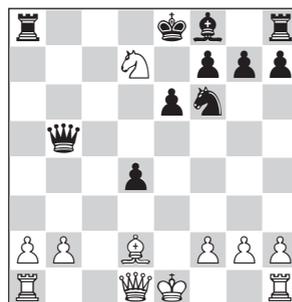
A12) 18.f4 0-0 19.♙d2 ♘e4 is no worse for Black.

A2) 14...♞b8, as Euwe played, 15.♙g5 ♞b6! (an important subtlety. Black is preparing to move the bishop to b7; weaker is 15...♘d7?! 16.♙f4 ♘xe5 (Johner-Euwe, Bern 1932) in view of 17.♞xe5!, leading to a clearly better endgame) 16.f4 ♙b7 17.♞ac1 ♙d6 and White has compensation for the pawn, but Black's position is quite strong;

A3) Less successful is 14...♞a5 (Botvinnik-Belavenets, Moscow 1934) in view of 15.♙d2 b4 16.♞ac1 ♙b7 17.f4.

B) Another try for White is 13.♞f3, as was repeatedly played against Botvinnik: 13...♞a5+ 14.♙e2 ♙e7 (this is stronger than 14...♙d6 15.♙d2 ♞a6 16.a4 0-0 (Kamyshov-Khasin, Moscow 1949) 17.axb5! ♞xa1 18.♞xa1 ♞xa1 19.♞f4!, and the white queen is by no means weaker than the black rooks) 15.♙d2 b4 16.♘c6 ♞b6 17.♘xe7 ♙b7 18.♞g3 ♙xe7 with a complex game in which Black's chances are no worse;

C) 13.♙xb5+ is how White plays for an advantage in our day: 13...♙d7 14.♘xd7 (in the early days of the variation, White played 14.♙xd7+ ♘xd7 15.♘xd7 ♞xd7 16.0-0, after which only he can face difficulties, as his pawns are no better than Black's) 14...♞a5+ 15.♙d2 ♞xb5



16.♘xf8! (introduced into practice by Smyslov in 1984) 16...♞xb2 (the accurate move-order; if 16...♙xf8, White can try 17.b3!?) 17.0-0 ♙xf8 18.a4 (18.♙f4 h5 19.♙e5 ♘d5 20.♙xd4 ♞a3 21.♞e2 ♞h6 is equal) 18...♘e4!. This precise move, first seen in Pinter-Tukmakov, Reggio Emilia 1987, solves all Black's problems:

- C1) 19.♙e1 ♖g8! 20.♖b1 ♔a2
 21.♖b4 ♘c3 22.♙xc3 dxc3 23.♗f3
 ♗d5 24.♗xc3 h6;
 C2) 19.♙f4 ♘c3 20.♗f3 ♙e7;
 C3) 19.♗f3 f5 20.♙f4 ♖c3 21.♗h5
 ♘f6!.

Black holds his own in each of these lines.

12.exf6



12... ♗b6

This move is not bad in itself, but requires very precise execution in the future.

A) Time has shown that 12...gxf6 is more promising for Black:

A1) In case of 13.♘xd4 ♗b6
 14.♙e3 ♙b4+ 15.♙f1 ♙c5 Black seizes the initiative, Alterman-Chernin, Groningen 1993;

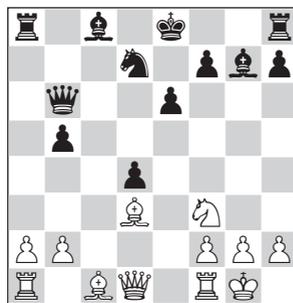
A2) 13.0-0 ♗b6 14.♗e2 ♙b7 (this move brought Black two bright victories in the World Championship Match Kramnik-Anand in 2008; the 'greedy' 14...b4 15.♖d1 ♙c5 16.♙f4 h5 is perfectly playable) 15.♙xb5 ♖g8 (at first, Anand played 15...♙d6, which seems less accurate in view of 16.♖d1 ♖g8 17.g3 ♖g4 18.b4!) 16.a4!? (after 16.♙f4 ♙d6 17.♙g3 f5 the problem of the white king's safety cannot be radically

solved, Kramnik-Anand, 5th Match game, Bonn 2008) 16...♙d6 17.g3 ♙e7 18.♖d1 ♙xf3 19.♗xf3 ♘e5 20.♗e4 h5 with good counterplay.

B) In a fairly recent game by 21st-century stars, an attempt was made to complete the development without weakening the kingside: 12...♙b4+ 13.♙d2 ♙xd2+ 14.♗xd2 ♗xf6, but after 15.♙xb5 e5 16.0-0 17.♖fe1 ♖d8 18.♗e2 Black still has to prove equality, Maghsoodloo-Gukesh, Hangzhou 2023;

C) 12...♙b7 13.0-0 gxf6 14.♙xb5 ♖g8, first encountered in the game Botvinnik-Simagin, Moscow 1951, is less successful due to 15.g3 ♖a5 16.a4 ♖xb5 17.axb5 ♘e5 18.♘e5 fxe5 19.♖a7 ♗d5 20.♖xb7 ♗xb7 21.♗d3 and with Black's king stuck in the centre, White is clearly better.

13.fxg7 ♙xg7 14.0-0



Black has a powerful pawn centre, but he must solve the problem of his unsafe king.

14... ♘c5?!

A) The idea of exchanging the dangerous light-squared bishop is basically correct, but the execution is poor. The knight must control

the vital square e5. Therefore, it was necessary to play 14...0-0 15.♖e1 and now:



analysis diagram

A1) It is not possible to set the pawn centre in motion right away: 15...e5 16.♗d2! (this is more convincing than 16.♗f5 (Larsen-Mestel, Hastings 1973) 16...♗c5! 17.♗xc8 ♖axc8 18.♗xe5 d3 with sufficient compensation for the pawn) and now:

A11) 16...♗c5 17.♗xe5! ♗xe5 18.♗xh7+ ♗xh7 19.♖xe5 and wins;

A12) 16...f5 17.♖b3+ ♗h8 18.♗b4 e4 19.♗xf8 ♗xf8 20.♗g5 ♗f6 21.♖f7 ♗b7 22.♗e6! ♖xe6 23.♖xb7 ♖d8 24.♖xb5 and Black's big centre is insufficient compensation;

A13) 16...h6 is relatively best: 17.♖c1 ♖xa2 18.♗f5 ♖a7 19.♗h4 with a powerful initiative for the pawn.

A2) The other move-order to prepare for the exchange of bishops is less successful: 15...♗a6 16.♗g5! ♗f6 (16...h6 17.♖h5 ♗f6 18.♖h4 b4 19.♗e4) 17.♗f4 b4 18.♗e5 ♗xd3 19.♖xd3 h6 20.♗f3 with an edge for White;

A3) Botvinnik considers only 15...♗b7 16.♗f4 ♗d5, which is quite

acceptable, although after 17.h4!?

White retains some initiative;

A4) 15...b4! has the idea ...♗a6, but also involving the a8-rook in the defence with ...♖a5!:

A41) Now, a direct attack does not promise White an advantage, although it requires Black to make precise moves: 16.♗g5 h6 17.♗h7+ (17.♖h5 ♖a5! 18.♗h7+ ♗h8 19.♗b1 ♗g8) 17...♗h8 18.♗b1 ♖a5! 19.♖c2 d3! 20.♖xd3 f5 21.♗f3 ♖g8 with sufficient counterplay;

A42) 16.♗f4 ♗a6 17.♗e5 (17.♗g5 h6) 17...♗xe5 18.♗xe5 ♗xe5 19.♖xe5 ♗xd3 20.♖xd3 ♗h8! and only heavy pieces are not enough to create real danger for the black king.

B) In the very first game on this theme, 14...♗a6 was played, in response to which the aggressive 15.♗g5! looks good (the less accurate 15.b4 creates fewer problems: 15...0-0 16.♖e1 ♗b7 17.♗f4 (Botvinnik-Ragozin, Moscow 1939) 17...♗d5!, and we have a position from the variation 14...0-0 15.♖e1 ♗b7 with the extra move b2-b4, which does not create any particular inconveniences for Black) 15...h6 16.♖f3 0-0 17.♗h7+ ♗h8 18.♗e4 f6 19.♗h3! (winning the exchange does not lead to clear consequences) 19...♖a7 20.♗f4 ♗e5 21.♗g6+ ♗xg6 22.♗xg6, and White's attack does not cease.

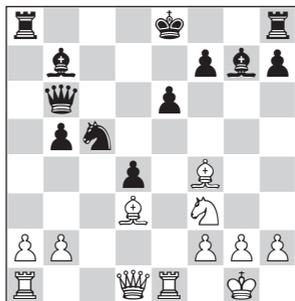
15. ♗f4 ♗b7

A) After the knight has moved away from the kingside, castling loses at once: 15...0-0? 16.♗xh7+ ♗xh7 17.♗g5+ ♗g6 18.♖g4;

B) Nor does the preliminary exchange on d3 help much:
 15...♖xd3 16.♗xd3 0-0 17.♘g5! f5
 18.♗g3 with a strong attack.

16. ♖e1

The immediate penetration with the bishop to e5 does not promise White anything, but he has a way to improve the position of his pieces in 16.♘e5 ♘xd3 17.♗xd3 f6 18.♗g3.



16... ♖d8?

A serious mistake. Euwe apparently underestimated how quickly White could create decisive threats.

A) It was necessary to immediately reduce the opponent's attacking potential by exchanging two pairs of minor pieces: 16...♘xd3 17.♗xd3 ♘xf3 18.♗xf3 0-0 (it is worth noting that the correct method of defence had already been shown before 1948). Now we have a parting of the ways:

A1) Botvinnik recommended 19.♗g4, but after 19...♝h8! 20.♗e5 ♘xe5 21.♗xe5 (Alterman-Morris, Manila 1992) 21...b4 Black should hold the position quite easily;

A2) 19.♗g3 also doesn't promise anything after 19...♝h8 20.♖ac1 ♖g8! (20...♖xa2, Sämisch-Wade,

Oldenburg 1949, fails to 21.♗c7! ♗b7 22.♗e5) 21.a3 ♖ac8. The original game shows how quickly White can end up in a worse position if he plays carelessly: 20.♗e5?! f6 21.♗d6 ♖fe8 and Black was already taking over in Bogoljubow-Schmidt, Salzburg 1943;

A3) More dangerous than the queen's moves is the rook's move to the open file, but here Black manages to involve his queen in the defence of the kingside: 19.♖ac1 ♗d8! 20.♗g3 ♗f6;

A4) 19.♖ad1!? appears to be the most insidious move: 19...f6! (Black tries to set the centre in motion; if 19...♝h8, 20.♗h5 or 19...♖xa2, 20.♗e5) 20.♗b3 ♖fe8 21.♖c1 (21.♖e4 ♖ad8 22.♖de1 ♗c6! 23.♖xe6 ♖xe6 24.♖xe6 ♗c4) and Black faces a difficult but not at all hopeless defence after 21...♝h8! 22.♖c7 ♗a5! 23.♖a1 b4 24.♗d6 ♗f8.

B) Back at move 16, 16...0-0? is just as hopeless as the move before because of the Greek Gift on h7;

C) And in the case of 16...♗d5, as in the game, the strongest preparation for decisive action is by 17.♖c1! ♘xd3 18.♗xd3 ♘c4 19.♗d2 ♖xa2 20.♗e5.

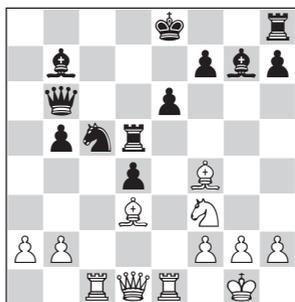
17. ♖c1!

It is still not the time to hurry. White includes all of his pieces in the attack. Now, 18.♘g5 h6 19.♘f7 is a real threat.

For example, 17.♗e5 ♘xd3 18.♗xd3 ♘xe5 19.♖xe5 ♗c6! 20.♗xb5 ♖g8 is not so clear.

17... ♖d5

This strange manoeuvre is a sad necessity. Other moves were no better; for example, 17...0-0 18.♙xh7+ or 17...h6 18.♗e5.



18.♗e5

In my view, this is Botvinnik's only inaccuracy in this game, and one to which none of the commentators have drawn attention. However, Black's strongest defence now is far from obvious.

A close to decisive advantage was offered by 18.♗e5!, immediately opening the white queen's path to the kingside. 18...h5 is probably the best defence. Other moves do not impress. Now White has a wide choice of attractive possibilities.

After 19.b4 or 19.h3 and the exchange on d3, White retains strong pressure with 21.♖g3. The quieter 19.♙f1 ♙f6 20.♖d2 ♖g8 21.g3 also looks healthy. 19.h4! seems the most precise. The reason why we need the pawn on h4 will soon become clear:

A) 19...♙f6 20.b4 ♗xd3 (if 20...♗a4, 21.♗xf7! ♗xf7 22.♖c7+ ♗e8 23.♖f3! wins) 21.♖xd3 0-0 22.♗g6! ♖e8 23.♙c7 ♖a6 24.♙e5 and White gets through to the black king;

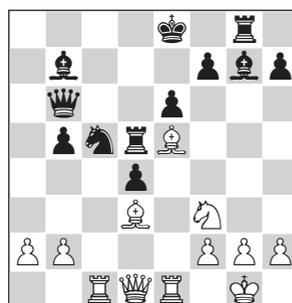
B) 19...♗xd3 20.♖xd3 0-0 21.♖g3 ♗h7 22.♗f3 d3 23.♖c7 e5 24.♖xe5 ♖xe5 (24...♙xe5 25.♗g5+ ♗g6 26.♗xf7+) 25.♙xe5 ♙xe5 26.♗g5+ ♗g8 27.♖xd3. Here we see how important it is that the knight is defended and 27...♖h6 does not help Black: 27...♙h2+ 28.♗h1 and White wins.

18...♙xe5

Falling in with his opponent's wishes.

A) No real improvement is 18...0-0 19.♙xg7 ♗xg7 20.♗e5, with the strong threats ♖xc5, ♖g4+ and ♖h5;

B) However, the surprising 18...♖g8! leads to a completely unclear position:



analysis diagram

B1) After 19.♙xh7 ♙xe5! 20.♙xg8 ♙f4 Black has superb compensation for the exchange. It is quite unclear who is fighting for the advantage; for example, 21.b4 ♙xc1 22.bxc5 ♖xc5 23.♗e5 ♖xe5! 24.♖xe5 ♖c6 with even chances;

B2) 19.♙g3 ♙f6 (19...h5!? 20.b4 ♗xd3 21.♖xd3 ♙f6) 20.♙xh7 ♖g7 21.♙d3 b4 – Black's pieces have achieved coordination and his king no longer faces immediate danger.

19. ♖xe5

The consequences of 19. ♖xe5 ♖g8
20. ♕f1 d3 are much less clear.

19... ♖xe5?!

The final step to oblivion. Black also fails to create counterplay after 19... ♖g8 20. ♖xd5 ♕xd5 21. ♕xh7 ♖g4 22. h3. However, the strongest line 19... ♖xd3 20. ♖xd3 ♖d6! 21. ♖xd5 ♖xd5 22. ♖xd4 0-0! leads to a position where White needs considerable effort to realize his advantage.

20. ♖xe5

Creating many threats, the main one of which is 21. ♖h5.

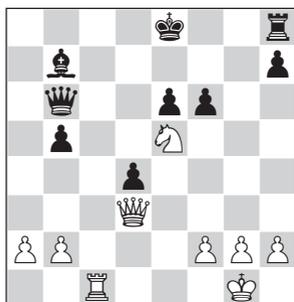
20... ♖xd3

White also has means of activating his queen after 20... h5 21. ♖d2 ♖xd3 22. ♖xd3 ♖g8 23. ♖f4! ♖xg2+ 24. ♖f1 or 20... ♖g8 21. ♕f1 d3 22. ♖h5.

21. ♖xd3 f6

21... ♖g8 still threatens only one check. White's threats are more dangerous after 22. ♖xh7! ♖xg2+ 23. ♖f1.

Also after 21... b4 White has many ways to win. The computer prefers 22. a4!?, convincingly underlining Black's utter helplessness.



22. ♖g3!

White also has a decisive advantage after 22. ♖g4 ♖e7 23. ♖g3, but the move in the game is even more convincing.

22... ♖xe5

There is no defence to the entry of the white heavy pieces onto the seventh rank: 22... ♖f8 23. ♖g7.

23. ♖g7 ♖f8 24. ♖c7 ♖xc7

He can maintain material equality for only a short time after 24... ♖d6 25. ♖xb7 d3 26. ♖a7 ♖d8 27. ♖xh7.

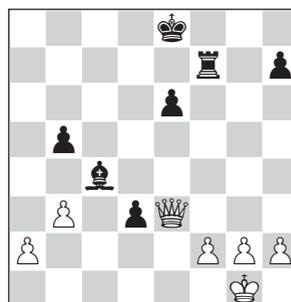
25. ♖xc7 ♕d5

Strictly speaking, the rest could have been dispensed with.

26. ♖xe5 d3

The passed pawn is Black's last hope.

27. ♖e3 ♕c4 28. b3 ♖f7



29. f3!

Taking the bishop also wins fairly easily, but why calculate unnecessary variations?

29... ♖d7 30. ♖d2 e5 31. bxc4 bxc4 32. ♖f2 ♖f7

The pawn ending after 32... c3 33. ♖xc3 d2 34. ♖c8+ ♖e7 35. ♖xd7+ ♖xd7 36. ♖e2 is hopeless. Black continues resisting out of inertia.

33. ♖e3 ♖e6 34. ♖b4 ♖c7 35. ♖d2 ♖c6 36. a4

And Black finally resigned.



The five participants in the World Championship match-tournament, The Hague/Moscow 1948 in the front row: left to right Max Euwe, Vasily Smyslov, Paul Keres, Mikhail Botvinnik and Samuel Reshevsky.



Botvinnik's first World Championship match against David Bronstein, Moscow 1951.