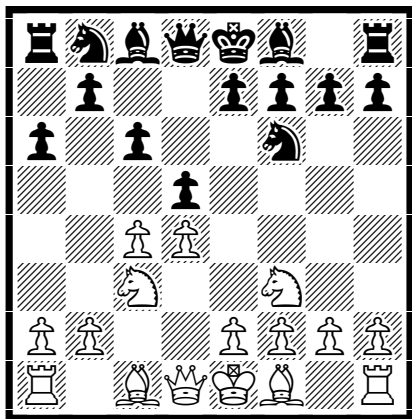


Mini-Lessons from Short Games of the 21st Century

by IM Nikolay Minev

#3: Modern Trends in the Slav Defense

For a long, long time the Slav Defense has been very popular because of its reputation as a sound opening for Black. In the last hundred years, many unsuccessful attempts have been made from the White side to destroy this reputation. And strangely enough, in the end of 20th beginning of 21st Century we saw a trend for more frequent use of a continuation for Black that is not new, but almost totally forgotten! I'm speaking about the deviation from the main line **1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3** followed by **4...a6!?**, instead of the more common 4...dxc4.



This original continuation is used in all the games below. Based on these games, I don't offer a final assessment, but my intention is to present some relatively new examples that show some typical strategic and tactical aspects of this modern variation.

D15 Z. Sturua – Suat Atalik

Bled (ol) 2002

1.Nf3 d5 2.d4 Nf6 3.c4 c6 4.Nc3 a6 5.c5 Nbd7 6.Bf4 Nh5!

An important innovation that makes White's plan with 5.c5 look dubious. Previously known from tournament practice was 6...g6 7.e3 Bg7 8.h3 and White has the better game due to controlling the square e5.

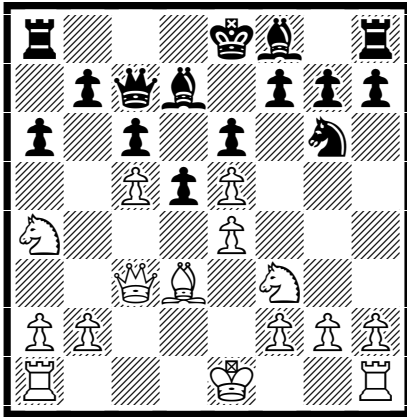
7.Be5

The game J. Obona – D. Schwarz, Slovakia (ch team) 2005 continued 7.e3 g6 8.Be2 Bg7 9.O-O O-O 10.Ng5 e5! 11.dxe5 Nxf4 12.exf4 Nxc5 with better chances for Black.

7...Nxe5 8.dxe5 Nf4! 9.Qd2 Ng6 10.e4 e6 11.Na4 Bd7

11...dxe4!?

12.Bd3 Qc7 13.Qc3



13...Nf4! 14.O-O??

A blunder in an already lost position. If, for example, 14,O-O-O? dxe4, or 14.g3 Nxd3+ 15.Qxd3 Qa5+ 16.Nc3 Bxc5, or 14.Kf1 Nxd3 15.Qxd3 Qa5 16.Nb6 Rd8 and Black wins the c5 pawn.

14...dxe4 0-1

For if 15.Bxe4 Ne2+.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Nf3 a6 5.cxd5

There is logic in this continuation, because in many situations Black's move 4...a6 seems to be waste of time.

5...cxd5 6.Bg5

A continuation with an independent meaning. Instead 6.Bf4 Nc6 7.e3 Bg4 transposes into the Slav-Exchange variation (D13), which, according to ECO, leads to position with equal chances.

6...Nc6 7.e3 e6 8.Bd3 Be7 9.O-O O-O 10.Rc1 Bd7

Maybe Black should try 10...h6 11.Bh4 Ne8, but his position is already worse.

11.Ne5! Rc8 12.f4 h6 13.Bxf6 Bxf6 14.Qh5

Threatening 15.Ng4 and 16.Nxh6+.

14...Nxe5 15.dxe5 Be7 16.Rf3 f5

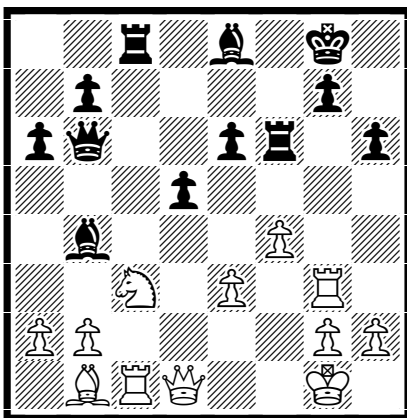
Perhaps 16...Be8 17.Rg3 Kh8 offers more resistance.

17.exf6 Rxf6!

If 17...Bxf6? 18.Rg3 Kh8 19.Qg6 etc.

18.Rg3 Bb4 19.Bb1 Be8 20.Qd1 Qb6??

Here again, as in previous game, Black blundered. However, without any doubt, it is White who has clear advantage because of the threat 21.Qd3.



21.Nxd5 1-0

D15 Florian Handke – Wolfgang Pajeken
Germany (ch) Altenkirchen 2005

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 a6 5.h3

A new and quite original idea, which gives Black the opportunity to have his own choice of the best answer. Believe me, this is not an easy task!

5...dxc4

Probably not a bad reply, but I prefer 5...e6, and if 6.Bf4 c5, or 6.Bg5 Nbd7 7,e4 Qa5, or 6.e3 c5.

6.a4!

For the gambit variation 6.e4 the opening idea 5.h3 is not useful move.

6...e6 7.e3 c5 8.Bxc4 Nc6

Now the game has transposed into a position from the Queens Gambit Accepted.

9.O-O cxd4?!

In my opinion the early exchange in this special position is strategically inaccurate because it gives White too much freedom to seize the initiative. Correct is 9...Be7 first, and if 10.Qe2 cxd4 11.Rd1 O-O 12.exd4 Nb4.

10.exd4 Be7 11.Bg5 O-O 12.Qd2 Na5

12...Nb4!?

13.Ba2 b5 14.d5!?

The fight for the initiative! If 14.axb5 axb5 15.Nxb5? Ba6!

14...exd5

Instead 14...b4 15.Bxf6! Bxf6 17.Ne4 exd5 18.Qxd5! Qxd5 (18...Bb7 19.Nxf6+ Qxf6 20.Qxa5) 19.Nxf6+ gxf6 20.Bxd5 leads to a position with only a slightly better endgame for White.

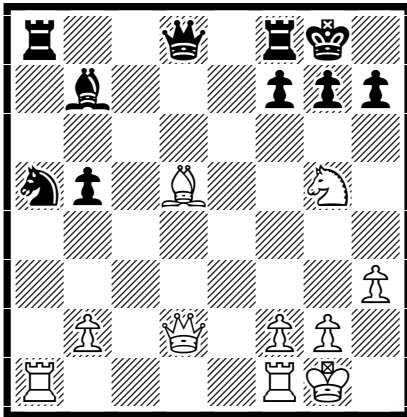
15.axb5 axb5?

15...Bb7!?

16.Nxd5 Nxd5??

16...Bb7!?

17.Bxd5 Bxg5 18.Nxg5 Bb7



19.Bxf7+! Rxf7? 20.Qxd8+ 1-0

Black's play in this game is far from perfect and only further testing in practice can give us a clearer picture about the whole variation with 5.h3.

D15 Suat Atalik – Tibor Reiss

Augsburg 2005

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 a6 5.e3

The continuation that is preferred in tournament practice.

5...b5

Instead 5...e6 transposes into well known variation of Queen's Gambit (D45).

6.e5

For the alternative 5.b3 – see next game.

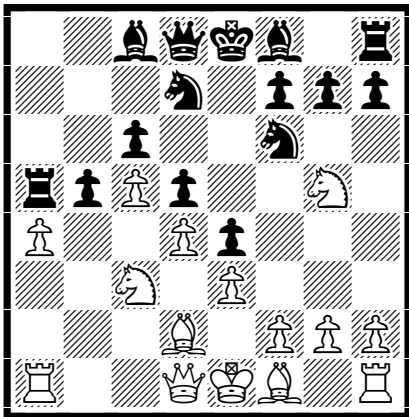
6...Nbd7

Black uses an idea known from the variation D45 mentioned above, but here this plan seems to be unsuitable. According to GM Gavrikov, Black should play 6...Bg4, followed by 7...Nbd7 and e7-e5.

7.b4 a5 8.bxa5 e5

Maybe 8...Qxa5 and if 9.Bd2 b4 10.Ne2 (Nb1) Ne4, deserves some attention.

9.Bd2! e4 10.Ng5 Rxa5 11.a4!



The right strategy! After opening of the a- and b-files White has space and more pieces on the Q-side, hence, a decisive advantage.

11...bxa4 12.Rxa4 Rx a4 13.Qxa4 Nb8

Or 13...Qc7 14.Na2!

14.Qa7 Bd7 15.Na4 h6 16.Ba5 1-0

1.c4 c6 2.Nf3 d5 3.e3 Nf6 4.Nc3 a6 5.d4 b5 6.b3 Bg4 7.Be2 Nbd7 8.O-O e6 9.Bb2 Qb8?

A novelty but not a good one. The theory suggests 9...Bxf3 10.Bf3 Be7 with a slight edge to White. In my opinion 9...Bd6!?! deserves to be tested.

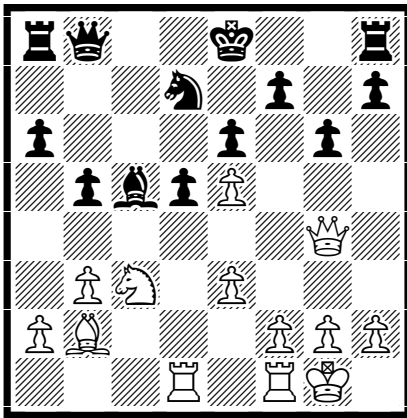
10.Ne5! Bxe2 11.Qxe2 Nxe5 12.dxe5 Nd7

If 12...Qxe5? 13.Nxd5!

13.cxd5 cxd5 14.Rad1 Bc5

After this Black is lost. In the case of 14...Nxe5 15.f4 Nc6 16.f5 with a strong attack, but probably this was also Black's last practical chance.

15.Qg4 g6



16.Nxd5! exd5 17.Rxd5 Qb7 18.Rfd1 O-O-O

Or 18...Rd8 19.e6 and wins.

19.Rxc5+ 1-0

Before making some conclusions, let's see two older examples (used back in 90's) of important continuations, 5.Ne5 and 5.Bg5.

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.c4 c6 4.Nc3 a6 5.Ne5!? Bf5

Natural, but a seemingly dubious reply. The alternatives 5...dxc4 and 5...g6 deserve serious attention.

6.Qb3! b5 7.cxd5 cxd5 8.a4! bxa4 9.Qxa4+ Bd7

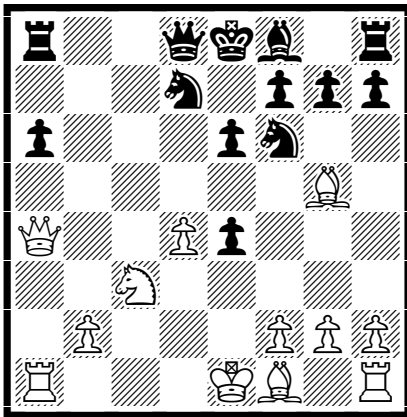
In case of 9...Nbd7 is possible 10.Qc6 and White wins a pawn.

10.Nxd7 Nbx7 11.Bg5

Looks even stronger than 11.Qc6.

11...e6 12.e4! dxe4?

Better is 12...Be7 13.Bxf6 Bxf6 14.exd5 exd5 15.Nxd5 O-O with some counter-play for the pawn.



13.Bb5! Be7 14.Bxf6 Bxf6 15.Nxe4 Bxd4?

The last mistake. Better defense offers 15...Be7.

16.Bc6 Bxb2 17.Rd1 Ra7 18.Bxd7+! 1-0

Because of 18...Rxd7 19.Nc5

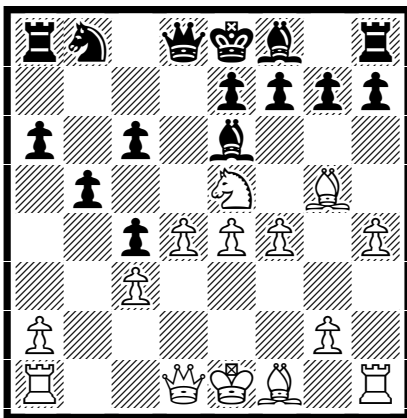
D15 Akesson - Cruz LopezAmsterdam 1996

1.Nf3 d5 2.d4 Nf6 3.c4 c6 4.Nc3 a6 5.Bg5!? Ne4 6.h4!?

6.Bf4!?

6...Nxc3 7.bxc3 dxc4 8.e4 b5 9.Ne5!?

An adventure or a strong continuation? The consequences of 9...f6 10.Qh5+ g6 11.Nxg6 hxg6 12.Qxh8 fxg5 13.hxg5 are not so clear.

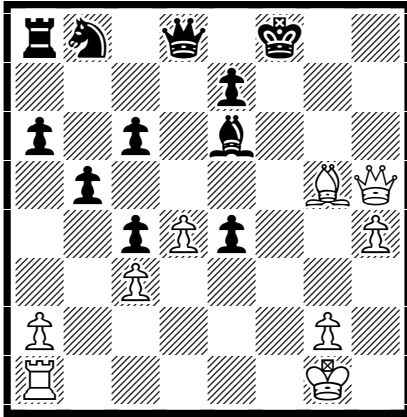
9...Be6 10.f4!**10...f5**

If 10...f6? 11.f5! In the game I. Rogers - T. Engqvist, Gausdal 1995, was 10...g6 11.h5 Rg8 12.hxg6 hxg6 13.Rh7 f6? 14.f5! Bc8 15.Nxg6 1-0

11.Be2! fxe4 12.f5!

White conducts the attack marvelously! Now he is winning by force.

12...Bxf5 13.O-O Be6 14.Bh5+ g6 15.Bxg6+ hxg6 16.Nxg6 Rg8 17.Nxf8 Rxf8 18.Rxf8+ Kxf8 19.Qh5



19...Nd7 20.Bh6+ 1-0

Conclusion: The modern variation 1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 a6 is still not refuted definitely, but it looks very dubious to me. At least, there are many variations that need solid repair, mostly from Black's side. Thinking as coach, I don't recommend it.