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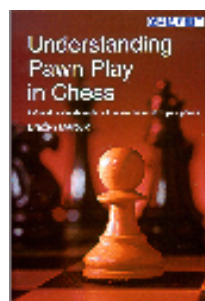


A Pawn Plus

Stephen Ham

Understanding Pawn Play in Chess, by GM Drazen Marovic, 2000 Gambit Publications, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 208pp., \$21.95

Early chess games usually emphasized the role of the pieces; greater piece activity meant attacks and traps and combinations. Pawns had little to no value and were frequently an impediment to one's own attack, so they were frequently sacrificed or gambitted away. Yes, Philidor wrote about the influence of pawns, but his theories were swept away by the brilliant piece play of his successors, such as Morphy and Anderssen. Thus the world waited for Steinitz to teach us that certain laws of chess existed. His understanding of these laws involved concepts regarding the center and how to control it. According to Steinitz's concepts, White occupied the center with his pawns. Conversely, Black often employed a somewhat symmetrical pawn center. Thus 1 e4, was met by 1...e5 and 1 d4 was met by 1...d5. Central strong-points were maintained, while one often developed pieces behind one's pawn structure. From these notions, positional advantages were accumulated, taking into consideration concepts of weak squares, isolated, doubled or hanging pawns, open files, etc. Later theoreticians and "law-givers" such as Tarrasch and Nimzovich built upon this body of work, changing and reworking various parts of it.



Modern chess theory has assimilated the amassed knowledge of previous times. The author of this recently released Gambit publication "explores the nature of pawns and the basic forms in which they appear" from the perspective of a modern notion of pawn structures. Drazen Marovic is a Croatian grandmaster. I first noticed his games when I was learning chess in the 1970s and his creative but unorthodox style left an impression. I always assumed that chess players with unorthodox styles had an unorthodox understanding of chess...not an inferior one, just a non-mainstream one. Therefore, it seems somewhat strange to me that chess players with non-mainstream styles would be considered reliable choices to coach or teach others. Perhaps my sub-conscious reasoning was that the mainstream existed for a reason...it



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was tested and proven time after time by the strongest players of the day.

However, Grandmaster Marovic successfully coached Bojan Kurijska (World Under-20 Champion in 1965 and now a grandmaster) and Al Modiahki of Qatar (the first Arabian grandmaster). He is currently the trainer of the Croatian national chess team. He has experience as a writer as well. My 1975 edition of *King Pawn Openings*, which he co-wrote, with Susic, identified him as the editor of the (then) primary Yugoslav chess periodical, *Sahovski Glasnik*. Clearly grandmaster Marovic understands chess very well and has a long history of successfully imparting his knowledge to others.

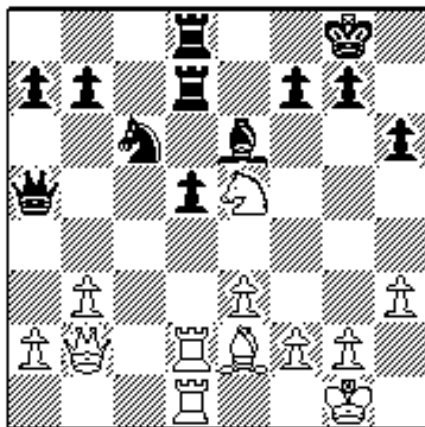
The book contains 206 double-column pages of text (followed by 2 pages of indexes) divided into seven chapters: (1) Isolated Pawns; (2) Isolated Pawn Couples and Hanging Pawns; (3) Passed Pawns; (4) Doubled Pawns; (5) Backward Pawns; (6) Pawn Chains; and 7) Pawn Islands. This is followed by an Index of Players and an Index of Openings.

Marovic believes in the importance of analyzing pawn structures within the context of entire games, because only then can we see how these structures were created and evolved, and we can see the underlying causes behind these processes. Also, using actual games emphasizes the practical benefits of knowing the supporting theory. The result is that the reader can more easily grasp general concepts for each subject studied. These illustrative games seem pleasingly diverse, spanning from the late 1800's to three games from 1999, and nearly all games are played by grandmasters. Surprisingly only one of the author's games was offered. One might have expected the grandmaster to use his own games because of the fact that he'd be intimately aware of their fine points and thus be in a position to communicate his thoughts in detail.

The first chapter is entitled simply, "Isolated Pawns". As such, the chapter is actually incorrectly named because only the Isolated Queen Pawn (IQP) is studied here. Nevertheless, the primary topic for any study of isolated pawn structures is that of the IQP, so it is a fitting first chapter. My belief is that the first concept a chess student must learn about IQPs is to determine whether the IQP on his chessboard is an asset or a liability. Next, given the dynamism often inherent in IQP positions, one should be aware of how this asset/liability can switch from one to the other after only subtle positional changes. These are difficult concepts to teach. For comparison of teaching techniques, I consulted grandmaster Alex Baburin's excellent book, *Winning Pawn Structures*. This book is devoted entirely to a study of the IQP, so it is perhaps not fair to compare too closely. It does however provide a

handy general reference.

Both books use the illustrative game, *Botvinnik-Zagoriansky, Sverdlovsk 1943*. Marovic's book characteristically provides the full game score, giving light notes until the IQP position is reached. Baburin's book only starts with White's 19th move. The key position was reached (omitting the initial commentary) via **1 c4 c5 2 Nf3 Nf6 3 Nc3 e6 4 e3 Be7 5 b3 0-0 6 Bb2 d5 7 cxd5 Nxd5 8 Nxd5 exd5 9 d4 cxd4 10 Qxd4 Bf6 11 Qd2 Nc6 12 Be2 Be6 13 0-0 Bxb2 14 Qxb2 Qa5 15 Rfd1 Rfd8 16 Rd2 Rd7 17 Rad1 Rad8 18 h3 h6 19 Ne5** (*See Diagram*)

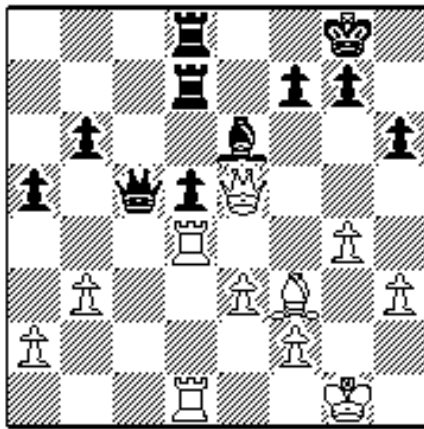


Marovic: "Again crystal clear: the fewer pieces there are on the board, the more exposed the d5-pawn will be".

Baburin: "When the Knights come off, White will be able to utilize the d4-square with his major piece. The text also vacates the f3-post for the Bishop". I find this comparison intriguing.

The authors, both totally correct, are emphasizing related but different points. I think Marovic's commentary is easier to grasp, while Baburin's message is not as clear. What major piece did Baburin think should be posted on d4?

19...Nxe5 20 Qxe5 Qc5 21 Bf3 b6 22 Qb2 Rc8 23 Qe5 Rcd8 24 Rd4. *Marovic*: "Following the old recommendation that a pawn weakness should be immobilized. Besides, the Rook on the fourth rank can be put to good use on the wings". **24...a5** *Baburin*: "This is the same material balance as in the game Petrosian-Yudovich. Compared to that game, here there is an extra pair of Rooks on the board. From one point of view, this fact makes Black's task of defending the isolani easier, as the threat of e3-e4 is not that dangerous here, but on the other hand the same feature reduces Black's chances of play on the open c-file, as White's Rooks can control the entry points on it. Now White has to find a way to increase his advantage. As the attack against the isolani and its defense are in balance, White needs to find or create a second weakness in order to benefit from his more active pieces..." **25 g4!** (*See Diagram*)



Marovic: "A move to remember, played at an important moment. The position is highly instructive for the method applied against the blockaded isolated pawn. At the moment when all Black's forces are tied to the defense of the lame d5-pawn, White opens another front on the kingside. Attacks of this

kind are in principle very dangerous because they are undertaken when the passive position of the defender's pieces diminishes his prospects of putting up resistance".

Baburin: "This is truly excellent. White plans to open the g-file by playing g4-g5, after which Black's monarch itself will be White's target. Black's pieces, tied down to the weak d5-pawn, are less mobile compared to their white counterparts and therefore may not be able to save their King. The position of the black pawn on h6 helps White to create an attack. The fact that the text weakens White's King as well, does not matter here as Black's pieces are passive and cannot use this factor. Computers probably will not be able to come up with such a move for years to come, at least I hope not!"

This exercise captures the general differences between the two books. Baburin's book, devoted entirely to studying IQP situations, provides greater detail. However Marovic's commentary is clear and concise in his chapter on this topic. The chapter ends with a section called "Some General Observations", as do all the first six chapters. I wonder why this helpful practice wasn't continued through to the last chapter? These finishing summaries are really helpful to aid the student in reinforcing what he's already gleaned from the chapter. Nearly 2 pages (over three columns of text) comprise the "Some General Observations" section for this IQP chapter. Surprisingly, the longer summary provided by Marovic is not as useful as Baburin's shorter one given at the end of his Chapter 9 (the chapter containing the above Botvinnik game). Baburin effectively lists the goals for the possessor of the IQP and for those of the opponent. On the other hand, Marovic presents vague expressions about how one needs to be careful since one error can radically transform the game. He then lectures on the importance of knowing what one is doing. Marovic eventually cites some general rules for both sides to follow. But he omits an important rule listed by Baburin which was a point of the Botvinnik game above, namely, the creation of a second

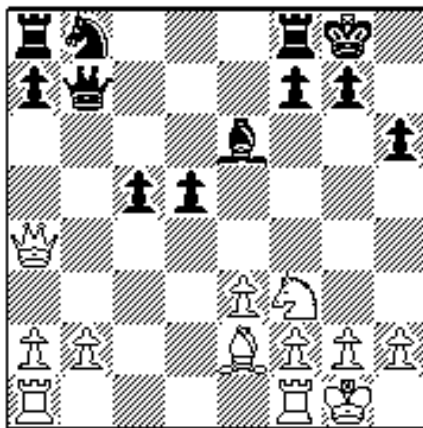
target for the pieces to attack when the defender is totally committed to a defense of the IQP.

Marovic's pedagogical style is characterized by brevity in his illustrative games. The reader is supplied with sufficient information for the learning process without being buried under excessive data. Therefore, most games are annotated almost entirely with commentary. For the reader who wants more detailed information, other games have extensive analysis at key positions. In short, there's plenty here for most serious chess students. A truncated example of Marovic's commentary is seen in the chapter entitled "Isolated Pawn Couples and Hanging Pawns". From this chapter...

Bertok-Fischer, Stockholm Interzonal 1962

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Be7 4 Nf3 Nf6 5 Bg5 O-O 6 e3 h6 7 Bh4 b6 8 cxd5 Nxd5 9 Bxe7 Qxe7 10 Nxd5 exd5 11 Be2 Be6 12 O-O c5 13 dxc5? My club-mate Mario Bertok was clearly playing for a draw against a superior opponent.

However, as often happens in such circumstances, he does it the wrong way. He could apply the routine maneuver against Black's hanging pawns, based on the pin after Qa4-a3 or he could choose 12 Ne5 or 13 Ne5 as well. The text-move is a definite error. The exchange on c5 is premature. It leaves a larger choice to his opponent and Fischer does not miss his chance to avoid the standard positions and switch to a more promising continuation. **13...bxc5 14 Qa4 Qb7!** (*See Diagram*)



Before the Knight takes its place on d7, Fischer was allowed to move his Queen to a more active place. Missing the correct move-order, Bertok, instead of forcing the black Queen to stay passively on e7, allowed a move which is part of Black's strategic plan. The backward b2-pawn and the semi-open b-file

dictate future events. **15 Qa3 Nd7 16 Ne1** White is already in difficulties. **16 Rac1, Rfb8 17 Rc2, Bf5 18 Rd2, Nf6** favors Black, but the text-move is ineffective as well. **16..., a5 17 Nd3 c4** Like Capablanca, Fischer had that rare ability to find simple, straightforward moves, which, as a rule, are part of equally simple and straightforward plans. Since he was able to move the Queen to b7, the subsequent course of action has all been self-explanatory. **18 Nf4 Rfb8.**

I think the point is made that a complex topic can be presented so that most readers can easily digest it without having to play through reams of side analysis

Now I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that studying any book devoted solely to pawn structures must be even more dull and boring than studying endgames. Not so! Since all examples are based upon real games, one sees plenty of interesting games. Also, a nice thing about Marovic having been an active grandmaster is his notes often include interesting and humorous anecdotes. The book is therefore not only instructional, but also entertaining. For example, the chapter entitled "Isolated Pawn Couples and Hanging Pawns" includes the following anecdote. "I shall always remember a scene in the press-room in the Banja Luka tournament of 1979. Two players were stubbornly defending a dubious position against two potent white pawns on the fourth rank but whatever they tried, it failed. Tigran Petrosian was quietly watching the proceedings and one of the analysts finally turned to him for help: 'What would you do in this position?' Petrosian replied, 'I would never accept such a position!' "

Marovic, with few exceptions, communicates his teachings clearly. This is all the more interesting since no translator was mentioned. Graham Burgess was listed as the editor, so I presume he's the one whose job it was to fix the strange English that occasionally pops up. For example, we read on the bottom of page 189, "In order to succeed against a wedge supported by a healthy base, undermining it by pawns is not enough. They need strong support from pieces, exerting simultaneous pressure on the wedge. One should take care that the pieces generating pressure cannot be excluded by pins, and often violent measures, including material sacrifices, are indispensable." Was that clear to you?

Fortunately such expressions are uncommon, but interestingly seem to occur near the end of the book. Did Burgess and Gambit Publications proofread the book up a point and then not examine the rest of the book? Does this account for the omission of a "Some General Observations" section for the last chapter? Personally, I think the final chapter, entitled "Pawn-Islands," really needed that section because the chapter ends with a game and the following: "...[N]o rules are sacred and no maxims without exceptions. We have been trying to learn lessons and draw logical conclusions not in order to respect them to the letter, but in order to understand them so well that we can see beyond the rules and disregard general advice. Only he who commands the laws of the chess-board to perfection can do that." What kind of a statement is that for a teacher to write for students who are trying to understand concepts from this chapter? Couldn't the author/publisher team have given us a meaningful summation from this

chapter? This proclamation by Marovic stands in contrast to his earlier thoughtful and helpful teachings.

Those looking for a comprehensive textbook style coverage of pawn structures should consider purchasing the book. Priced at \$21.95, it provides good value. Coverage within the 7 chapters is comprehensive on practical topics of interest to all aspiring chess players. Marovic's book compares favorably with its predecessors. For example, Hans Kmoch's *Pawn Power in Chess* is considered a classic by many. Nonetheless, most people found it daunting and confusing, given its weird terminology. Also the scope the book was more theoretical than practical; not an easy book to read and study with.

Grandmaster Andrew Soltis wrote *Pawn Structure Chess*, but its general focus was upon specific pawn formations evolving from various openings. The result is that one generally learns more about opening theory than about pawn structures. Both books must be frustrating to read and study from for those rated below 1700.

While the concepts explained within Marovic's book might be too difficult for those rated below 1500 to comprehend immediately, I still recommend buying this book. A serious student will re-read each chapter until matters become clearer. Given Marovic's concise yet generally clear instructions, matters are sure to clarify. Finally, *Understanding Pawn Play in Chess* is an enjoyable book to read, so the intimidation factor of this textbook is minimal, unlike other books on this topic. This book will surely raise the level of ones ability because the pawn structure knowledge that Marovic offers is indispensable.

Order *Understanding Pawn Play in Chess*, by GM Drazen Marovic



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