



BOOK REVIEWS



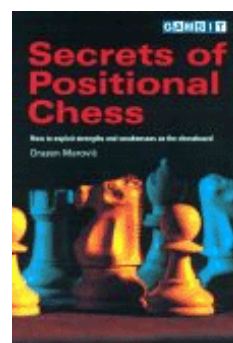
Secrets? Positional Chess?!

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Secrets of Positional Chess by Drazen Marovic, 2003
Gambit Publications, Figurine Algebraic Notation,
Paperback, 224 pp., \$23.95

Despite having written several interesting books, I'm still not sure the average chess player knows who Croatian Grandmaster Drazen Marovic is. Aside from some earlier works on openings, Marovic has more recently penned two other books for Gambit, both looking at pawn play:

Understanding Pawn Play in Chess and *Dynamic Pawn Play in Chess*. Both are reasonable efforts with plenty of useful examples for the dedicated student. In these books I found that he used a fair amount of examples that had been used by others, while also using some original material. Recycling material from other sources isn't a crime *per se*, as long as the author finds a new angle or setting for the material to make it useful. This Marovic managed, but there are enough more recent examples to avoid this recycling. On the other hand, it is obvious that it facilitates the author's task of locating new and useful material, a task which can be a time-consuming exercise. This pattern has been perpetuated in *Secrets of Positional Chess*, his most recent book.



Keeping in mind the book's subtitle, "How to exploits strengths and weaknesses on the chessboard", let's have a look at the contents:

- Symbols (1 page)
- Introduction (1 page)
- **Part 1: Strength and Weakness in Space**
- 1 Weak and Strong Squares (21 pages)
- 2 Strength and Weaknesses Files and Diagonals (21

- pages)
- 3 Weakness of the First and Second Ranks (12 pages)
- 4 Outposts (8 pages)
- 5 Static Weakness and Attack (4 pages)
- **Part 2: Chess Pieces: Their Strengths and Weaknesses**
- 6 The King (28 pages)
- 7 The Queen (27 pages)
- 8 The Rook (35 pages)
- 9 Minor Pieces (50 pages)
- Index of Players (2 pages)
- Index of Composers (half-page)
- Index of Openings (half-page)

While the contents have traces of elements that are essential in positional chess, the actual text deals with that as well as a myriad of other things. Let's see what Marovic himself writes in the introduction: "This book is about chess space and chess pieces, and their strength and weakness: an unpretentious book on a simple subject - so simple that it is widely considered one of those themes which are absorbed just by time and playing experience." Further on he continues "Sometimes a weakness is accepted light-heartedly in the hope that it can be compensated for, or the opponent outwitted, but once committed, weaknesses stay in the position and eventually may cost us dearly. More often, however, it is not apparent what is weak and what is strong and even a highly trained chess mind does not discern it; after all, the fundamental difficulty of the game of chess lies in that. The purpose of this book is to turn the reader's awareness to the topic and its significance, and so help him make clearer distinctions in the constant changing of values that constitutes a game of chess."

This sounds alright, but does this pertain particularly to positional chess or to chess in general? It can be both, but the title of the book indicates it should be the former, so until we look closer at the examples in the book the jury will remain out.

The first chapter deals with a subject that by nature is considered part of positional chess, and is so important that you can find relevant examples in almost any recent master game that has gone past the opening stage. Yet my worst fears regarding Marovic's selection of examples were

confirmed right from the start. While the examples are perfectly satisfactory and they illustrate his point, I'm not sure how many times it is necessary to show us the games Smyslov-Rudakovsky, USSR Ch 1945 and Smyslov-Denker, USSR-USA 1946. The first example in particular has been used so many times that I personally regard it as an affront when I see an author use it in a book. Well, realizing that I may not be the average chess student, I noted that, with one or two exceptions, I had seen all of the examples used in the first chapter previously. A look at the chronological distribution of the twenty-four examples in the first chapter gives some insight why:

- 1920-29: 2
- 1930-39: 2
- 1940-49: 5
- 1950-59: 3
- 1960-69: 5
- 1970-79: 3
- 1980-89: 0
- 1990-99: 2
- 2000-03: 2

Only 4 examples from the last 23 years, or 7 from the last 33 years. I rest my case. While chapter 1 perhaps is a bit more skewed than the other chapters in this regard, a similar pattern is seen throughout the book. While the examples may be fresh to new students of chess, it makes the game look somewhat one-dimensional to some of us veterans.

That being said, I found the examples selected by the author in the first part of the book to be nevertheless relevant, instructive, well-annotated and presented without too much confusing analysis, an important point.

Moving to chapter 3, "Weakness of the First and Second Ranks", I suddenly became a little perplexed, having possible weaknesses of the back rank explained to me. While admittedly entertaining and instructive, this chapter does not seem to come within the scope of the book's intended subject matter, although it arguably could fit into the context of the subtitle, *How to exploit strengths and weaknesses on the chessboard*. Take a look at the following position from this chapter:



***Singh-Harikrishna, Calcutta
2001***

"Black is in some trouble, but manages to trick his opponent..."

36...Nf4! 37 Rxf4??

"37 Nf2? is no good due to 37...Qxb2, but 37 Qe4! keeps an advantage."

37...Bd4+! 0-1

While tactics is a necessary, but often neglected, part of positional chess instruction, it seems to be more the rule than the exception in this chapter.

The second part of the book follows the same pattern: many positions with tactical solutions and some with pure positional play. However, there is also a significant amount of endgames included in this part. Again the question should be raised, what does that have to do with positional chess? I have found that positions with limited material are excellent for instructional purposes when illustrating the strength of individual pieces, but in this section, Marovic occasionally takes it too far. For example in the rook chapter, of the first 25 examples, only two do not start from endgame positions. I would think there are other ways of illustrating the weaknesses, strengths and the usage of rooks rather than lining up one endgame after the other. Of course the study of rook endings has great value, but the overall subject of this book purports to be positional chess. Even some of the other examples can be called into question, e.g.,



***Volokitin-Kozul, Portoroz
Vidmar mem 2001***

Marovic writes: "The first question every strong player would ask upon seeing this position is: does 15 Nxf7 work? Volokitin was sure it worked and was able to back up this conviction:

15 Nxf7! Kxf7 16 Qe6+ Kf8 17 g4

Played for obvious reasons, but not necessary. The immediate 17 Re3! wins cleanly; e.g., 17...Qc8 18 Bh6! paralyzes Black before the final stroke, 19 Rg3; 17...Ne5 18 Bxe5 Qc8 19 Bxf6, etc.; or 17...Nb6 18 Bh6 Qd7 19 Rg3!.

17...a6 18 g5 b5 19 Re3!

A nice point! The rook is lifted to the third rank to strike the fatal blow.

19...Ne5

19...bxc4 is refuted by 20 gxf6 Nxf6 21 Bh6 gxh6 (21...Qc8 22 Rxf6+) 22 Rg3 with mate next move.

20 Bxe5 dxe5 21 g6! 1-0

21...hxg6 22 Rh3 leads to mate."

This is positional chess? I'm once more trying to connect the dots, but I'm not sure how...

In my opinion, the best chapter is the last one, "Minor Pieces". There are so many useful ideas, manoeuvres and suggestions that you are bound to improve your understanding of not only positional chess, but of chess in general. In particular, I found the section "Improving the Position of Minor Pieces" of great instructional value, illustrating both good and bad play in positions with minor pieces.

One thing that I found missing in this book are exercises to be solved by the student. It brings an extra worthwhile element to the instructional aspect of the book and helps the student to see whether he or she has grasped the concepts illustrated.

To sum up:

- (1) The book is somewhat mislabelled as it contains a great deal more than just positional chess; the examples actually presented are hardly the secrets of positional chess, but rather

the fundamentals of chess in general: strengths and weaknesses and how to exploit them.

(2) There are too many 'recycled' examples that have been used by others and not enough new material. The author does, however, re-examine the examples and overturns some analysis presented by others and presents us with some of his own ideas.

(3) There are far too many endgame examples, and by that I mean pure endgames such as rook and pawns vs. rook and pawns. A few endgames for illustrative purposes may be acceptable, but as pointed out above, in some sections the endgames represent about 90% of the total number of examples.

(4) There is no schematic to teach the student how to evaluate the positions and figure out what is important; he or she has to work that out on their own.

(5) The book does contain excellent instructional, well-chosen and well-annotated material. A devoted student will significantly improve his or her game with careful study of the games and examples.

So, do I recommend this book? Yes, certainly, but it isn't the best book on positional chess ever written. It contains a lot of valuable material on how to work with pieces and as the subtitle of the book says, how to exploit strengths and weaknesses on the chessboard. But there is so much more to cover when it comes to positional chess. In any event, you will improve your game by studying this book carefully.

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