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## 2 Transition from Opening to Middlegame

*Tactics is knowing what to do when there is something to do; strategy is knowing what to do when there is nothing to do.*

SAVIELLY TARTAKOWER

As stated in the Introduction, I believe the importance of the transition from opening to middlegame is vastly underestimated. In my opinion, this is one of the most crucial points in a chess game – perhaps *the* most important one for the course of the game. This point in time has psychological implications. The players are ‘out of the book’ and must ask themselves a whole range of questions in that respect – should I play actively or safely; how should I react to the fact that my opponent has blitzed out his opening moves; and how are my previous experiences with this kind of position?

But most of all, the transition from opening to middlegame signals the beginning of the *strategic* phase of the game; the phase where the strategies are drawn up, the plan for the middlegame decided upon, and the structures of the battle disclosed. What do I mean by *strategic*? In this context I mean the long-term features of the game; the pawn-structures or the overall decision whether to launch an attack in the centre or on either wing – in other words a number of *positional* issues. Often more than one plan is at the player’s disposal, and he must make a choice. This choice will typically determine the course of the game over the next 10-20 moves. Let us examine a typical example of this process.

**L.B. Hansen – Bang**  
*Copenhagen 1988*

Black is my good friend FM Andreas Bang. Andreas and I both belong to the group of

friends casually referred to as ‘The Baby Sharks’. I suppose that necessitates an explanation. In the mid-1980s we had a number of rapid team tournaments in Denmark, usually four players plus one reserve. The dominant team in those events was a team consisting of seasoned players, some from the Danish national team, that called themselves ‘The Sharks’. Then we came along – the three others in our team were Mads Smith Hansen, Mikael Bjertrup and Christian Overgaard – and challenged The Sharks’ supremacy. We jokingly entered under the team name ‘The Baby Sharks’, and this name has stuck ever since when we refer to this group of friends.

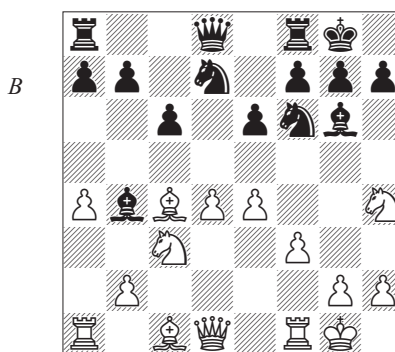
**1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 dxc4**

Andreas is a great expert on the Slav.

**5 a4 ♙f5 6 e3**

Nowadays 6 ♘e5 is more fashionable.

**6...e6 7 ♙xc4 ♙b4 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♘h4 ♙g6 10 f3 ♘bd7 11 e4 (D)**



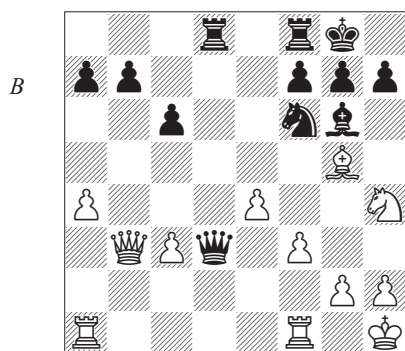
A standard position in the Slav. We are gradually leaving the opening and entering the early middlegame. White usually takes on g6 at some point and hopes to exploit his pair of bishops and strong pawn-centre. But Black is

not without chances; for example, he can play for a dark-squared bind.

**11...e5 12 dxe5**

A typical continuation is 12 ♖xg6 hxg6 13 ♙e3 ♗e7 14 ♗e2 exd4 15 ♙xd4 ♙c5 16 ♙xc5 ♗xc5+ 17 ♖h1 g5 18 g3 with a small edge for White in Botvinnik-Smyslov, World Ch match (game 12), Moscow 1954. But when studying these historic games, a comment by Botvinnik caught my attention. The Patriarch suggested a completely different plan for White: rather than exchanging the bishop on g6, White could try to play around or against this bishop, which at the moment is ineffectively targeting White's granite f3-e4 pawn-chain. Why exchange it? This is a completely different approach to the position. It may not be objectively better than exchanging on g6, but I liked the basic strategic idea and put it to good use in a number of games in the late 1980s. Such a decision is what I refer to as 'the transition from opening to middle-game'. It shapes the future course of the game.

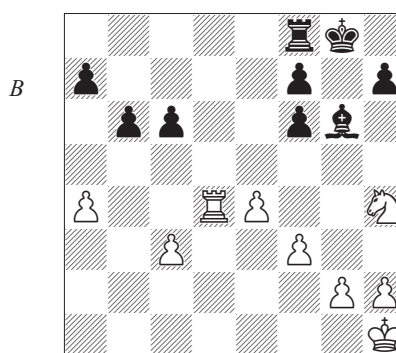
**12...♗b6+ 13 ♖h1 ♗xe5 14 ♙e2 ♗ad8 15 ♗c2 ♗d4 16 ♙g5 ♗d3 17 ♙xd3 ♗xd3 18 ♗b3 ♙xc3 19 bxc3 (D)**



**19...♗d7??**

A blunder that loses immediately. White is somewhat better after the correct 19...b6, but it is still a game. A sample line – certainly not exhaustive – worked out with Shredder's assistance, is 20 ♗fd1 ♗a6 21 ♗d4!? (after 21 ♗xd8 ♗xd8 22 e5 Black has 22...♗d5!) 21...♗e2 22 ♙xf6 gxf6 23 ♗d1!? ♗xd1+ 24 ♗axd1 ♗xd4 25 ♗xd4 (D).

This position shows White's basic strategic idea – playing against the g6-bishop. On the



next move White plays g4 and then activates the knight via g2, after which Black is struggling to draw. Notice that the effects of the strategic choice on move 11 are still visible 15 moves later.

**20 ♙xf6 gxf6 21 ♗fd1 1-0**

Oops, Andreas had forgotten that I could choose this rook. He had only counted on 21 ♗ad1? ♗a6, when f1 hangs.

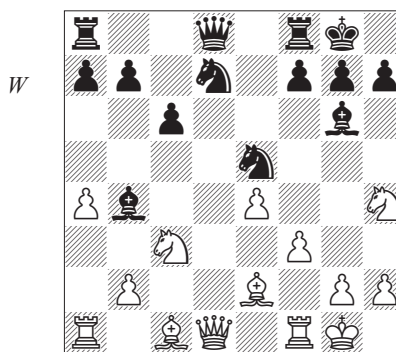
This strategic feature of playing against the bishop on g6 is also visible in the next game.

**L.B. Hansen – Kirov**

*Groningen 1989*

First 11 moves as in the game above.

**12 dxe5 ♗xe5 13 ♙e2 ♗fd7 (D)**



**14 g3!?**

White sticks to the plan of not exchanging on g6.

**14...♗b6+**

Kirov deviates from an earlier game that I played against his son, Ninov, a few months

earlier (Starozagorsky Bani 1989), which ended in a draw after 14...♙h5!? 15 f4 ♙xe2 16 ♖xe2 ♗g6 17 ♗f3 ♞e8 18 ♞d1 ♞e7 19 e5 ♗gf8 20 ♙e3 ♙xc3 21 bxc3 f6! 22 ♞ab1 fxe5 23 ♞xb7. Kirov apparently did not want to see what I had prepared to improve on that game.

**15 ♖h1 ♞ad8 16 ♞c2 ♞fe8!**

A good move in the spirit of Nimzowitsch. Black aims to restrain White's advance of his kingside pawn-majority.

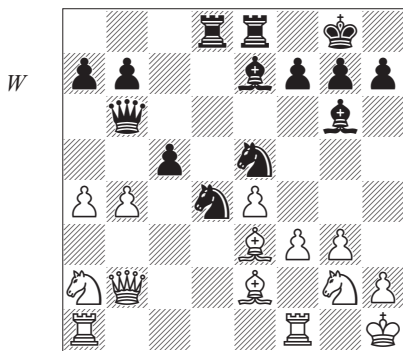
**17 ♗a2**

After 17 f4 Black has 17...♙xc3 18 bxc3 ♗f6! 19 ♗xg6 ♗xg6 20 e5 ♗d5 with counterplay.

**17...♙e7 18 ♗g2!?**

Remaining faithful to the strategic plan. 18 ♗xg6 is safer but less ambitious.

**18...♗c5 19 b4 ♗e6 20 ♙e3 ♗d4 21 ♞b2 c5 (D)**



**22 f4!**

The climax of White's strategy – the bishop on g6 is trapped! But the position remains complicated.

**22...♗ec6 23 f5 ♙xf5 24 exf5 ♙f6 25 ♞ae1! cxb4**

After 25...♗xf5 26 ♙xc5! ♙xb2 27 ♙xb6 axb6 28 ♞xf5 it becomes apparent why the rook had to go to e1 on the previous move: the e2-bishop is defended.

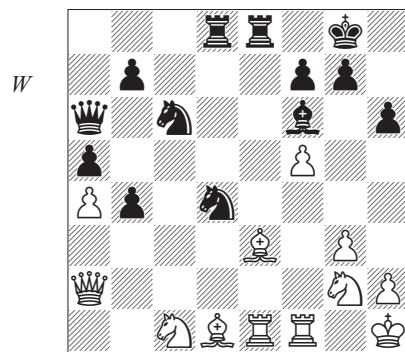
**26 ♙d1 a5**

Perhaps 26...b3!? was better.

**27 ♗c1 ♞a6 28 ♞a2 h6 (D)**

**29 ♙e2?**

A conceptual mistake. The light-squared bishop is crucial in blockading Black's passed pawns. 29 ♗e2! is correct, after which White

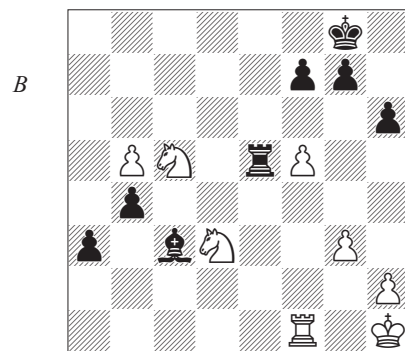


should be able to consolidate his material advantage. Now the game is up in the air, and to boot both players were approaching time-pressure.

**29...♗xe2 30 ♞xe2 ♞xe2 31 ♞xe2 ♞d5 32 ♞d2 ♞xd2 33 ♙xd2 ♗d4! 34 ♙e3 b5! 35 ♙xd4 ♙xd4 36 ♗b3 ♙c3 37 axb5 a4 38 ♗c5 a3 39 ♗f4 ♞e5?**

With his flag about to fall, Kirov starts to go astray. After the simple 39...♞b8 a draw is the most likely result; a sample line is 40 ♗b3 ♞xb5 41 ♗d3 a2 42 ♞f4 a1 ♞+ 43 ♗xa1 ♙xa1 44 ♗xb4 with a draw.

**40 ♗fd3 (D)**



**40...♞d5?**

The second and decisive mistake. Backtracking with 40...♞e8 is correct; e.g., 41 b6 a2 42 b7 ♞b8! 43 ♞c1!, when Black cannot play 43...a1 ♞ because of 44 ♞xa1 ♙xa1 45 ♗xb4 followed by 46 ♗c6, but White also has difficulty improving his position.

**41 b6 ♞d6 42 b7 ♞b6 43 ♗c1 ♞b5 44 ♞d1 ♙e5 45 ♞d8+ ♖h7 46 ♗d7! h5 47 ♗xe5 ♞xb7 48 ♗f3!**

Threatening 49 ♗g5+ ♖h6 50 h4! g6 51 f6!.

48...f6 49 ♖d4 ♗a7 50 ♜cb3 a2 51 ♜a1  
 ♗e7 52 ♜db3 ♗e5 53 ♗d2 ♗xf5 54 ♗xa2 h4 55  
 ♔g2 hxg3 56 hxg3 ♗d5 57 ♗d2 ♗e5 58 ♜c2  
 g5 59 ♜xb4 ♗b5 60 ♗d4 f5 61 ♜d2 1-0

As mentioned above, the idea for this strategic approach to the Slav came from an old comment by Botvinnik. This is one of my key suggestions for ambitious students of chess: the importance of learning from chess history. In relation to all phases of chess, there is much to gain from a thorough study of chess history.

## The Pawn-Structure in the Centre

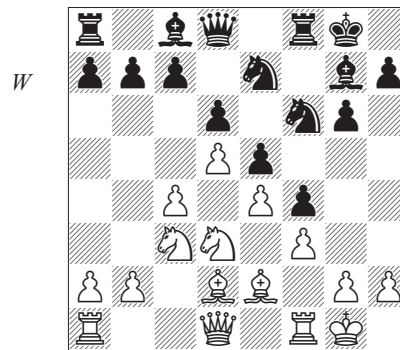
One of the most defining issues of the transition from opening to middlegame is the *pawn-structure in the centre*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the pawn-structure in the centre should be a key criterion for building an opening repertoire, and the reason is that if you feel comfortable with the given pawn-structure, you are likely to play much better and more confidently in the crucial early middlegame phase.

Alexander Kotov, in several of his books, discusses the importance of the pawn-centre and distinguishes between five different types of pawn-centres:

- the closed centre
- the open centre
- the mobile centre
- the rigid centre
- the dynamic centre

The central structure determines the direction of play in the early middlegame, and the structure usually evolves during the transition from opening to middlegame. Studying the possible pawn-structures that derive from various openings is an integral part of selecting and building a coherent opening repertoire. Let us briefly review Kotov's five pawn-centres and discuss how they impact the transition from opening to middlegame.

The **closed centre** is characterized by mutual pawn-chains in the centre. An example is this well-known position from the King's Indian:



L.B. Hansen – D. Southam  
 Luxembourg 1990

The centre is closed and each player has a clear plan: White intends to conquer the queenside through the break c5 while Black plans to attack on the kingside with ...g5-g4. The early middlegame will accordingly be about who best manages the task of organizing these breaks. This includes manoeuvring with the pieces behind one's own lines, looking for the best opportunity to initiate the attack. A key strategic decision to be made is also whether one should abandon the weak wing and concentrate only on his own strong wing, or whether a few defensive moves that may slow down the opponent is a better approach. In practice a combination of these two strategies is often seen – Black for example often regroups with ...♗f7, ...♘f8 and ...♗g7, thereby preparing ...g5-g4 while keeping an eye on d6 (which after White's c5 and cxd6 may be a target) and c7 (on which square White intends to penetrate with either a rook or a knight). In the opening's infancy, White usually went all-out on the queenside, hoping to break through before getting mated on the kingside, but in the past 15-20 years a more defensive approach based on an appropriate g4, slowing Black down, has become popular. In fact, this was the plan that I chose in this game:

13 g4!? g5 14 a4 h5 15 h3 ♜g6 16 ♙e1 ♔f7  
 17 ♜g2 ♗h8 18 ♗h1 ♗h6 19 ♙f2 ♙d7 20 c5  
 ♗h8 21 cxd6 cxd6 22 ♜b5! (D)

And I managed to win this complicated position by penetrating with a rook on c7 before Black's attack down the h-file became too dangerous.