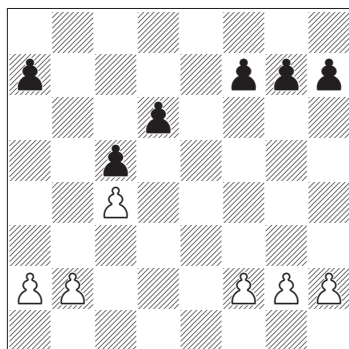


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5 Backward Pawns

Backward pawns are either isolated pawns or the last pawns in a chain of pawns. We generally find them on their second rank or just a square forward on their third rank. It is their position on the board which tells against them and their very name implies a positional weakness.



Our diagram represents a typical case of a backward pawn. Placed at d6, it is under pressure. It cannot advance and it cannot be sacrificed for some counterplay. Therefore it must be defended. The defence ties Black's forces in the passive effort to keep the material balance. An additional shortcoming is the weak d5-square, White's strong square, a regular occurrence with backward pawns. So all the black forces are tied in defence on a narrow

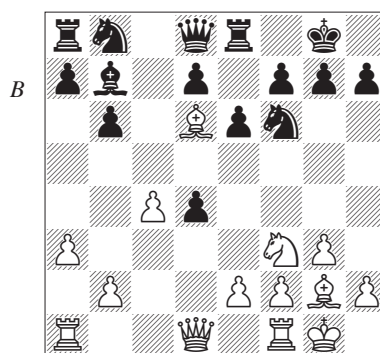
part of the board, causing passivity and lack of counterplay. In general, that is the negative image of backward pawns we come across so often, but we shall learn that backward pawns in harmony with minor pieces can play a useful, positive role. It is our aim to see its face and the reverse. In order to understand and distinguish between their drawbacks and their qualities we shall consider examples from the rich master experience.

Karpov – Andersson

Madrid 1973

Bogo-Indian Defence

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 b6 4 g3 ♙b4+
5 ♘bd2 ♙b7 6 ♙g2 0-0 7 0-0 c5?! 8
a3 ♙xd2 9 ♙xd2 cxd4 10 ♙b4 ♖e8
11 ♙d6 (D)



Black's opening is not an example of good play. By ceding the bishop-pair and capturing on d4 he made possible the manoeuvre ♖b4-d6. The dark-squared bishop blocks the d7-pawn in its initial position, preventing Black from freeing his game. The d7-pawn will remain backward as long as the blockade on d6 exists.

11...♗e4?! 12 ♖xd4 ♘a6 13 b4 ♙c8 14 ♙ac1 ♗xd6 15 ♖xd6

In entering this continuation, Black probably relied on the possibility of removing the bishop from d6, but a new blockader has taken the bishop's place at d6. It is true that the queen in most cases is too valuable to be used as a blockader, but combined with the subsequent ♗fd1 its role on the d-file is natural.

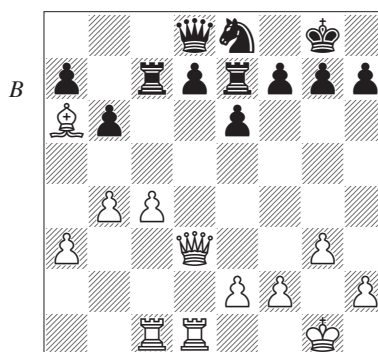
15...♗c7

Black could continue 15...♖c7, but then his knight would remain out of play. The d7-pawn is threatened and Andersson, an excellent master of defence, conjures up a hidden defence: the knight moves to e8 in order to chase the queen and get some breathing space. The trouble with backward pawns is often not just their own weakness, but the lack of room to manoeuvre that is a consequence of their position on the board.

16 ♗fd1 ♗e7 17 ♖d3 ♗xf3

17...d5 does not work because of 18 e4, while 18 ♗g5 hangs in the air. Black is forced to enter an endgame in which White's bishop will be superior to Black's passive knight.

18 ♗xf3 ♗e8 19 ♗b7 ♙c7 20 ♗a6!
(D)



Not many players would find this deep manoeuvre. If Black had been counting on playing ...d6, then he now had to think again, as ♗b5 would win the backward pawn. He will be forced to live in a very restricted space.

20...♗c6 21 ♖b3 ♖b8 22 ♖a4 ♙c7

The threat was 23 ♗xd7.

23 ♖b5 ♗f6 24 f3 d5

Black finally manages to advance his backward pawn, but only to face other serious problems. The manoeuvre ♗b7-a6, coupled with a deep strategic decision to transfer the queen to b5, will produce a pawn-majority on the queenside...

25 c5 h5 26 a4 ♗e8 27 cxb6 axb6 28 a5

The queenside pawn-majority is now transformed into a passed pawn, which proves to be White's decisive weapon.

28...♗xc1 29 ♗xc1 ♖e5

Since 29...bxa5 30 ♖xb8 ♗xb8 31 bxa5 ♗a8 32 ♙c8+ and other types of endgame are lost as well, Black tries to improvise counterplay on the kingside, which is futile and soon fails...

30 ♖xb6 d4 31 ♔h1 ♕e3 32 ♜f1
e5 33 ♘d3 h4 34 gxh4 ♜f4 35 ♜g1
♜xh4 36 a6 g6 37 a7 ♔g7 38 ♘xg6
1-0

38...fxg6 39 a8♖ leaves no hope.

The entire course of the game was influenced by the backward pawn at d7, and its blockade. The consequences for Black were a lack of manoeuvring space and general passivity.

Karpov – Svidler

Dos Hermanas 1999

Grünfeld Defence

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 ♘f3
♙g7 5 ♖b3 dxc4 6 ♜xc4 0-0 7 e4 a6
8 e5 b5 9 ♖b3 ♘fd7 10 e6 fxe6 11
♙e3!

White has damaged his opponent's pawn-structure, but with no intention of trying to make use of it at once by 11 ♖xe6+ or 11 ♘g5, continuations which had failed in earlier games to produce positive results in the face of Black's strong counterplay.

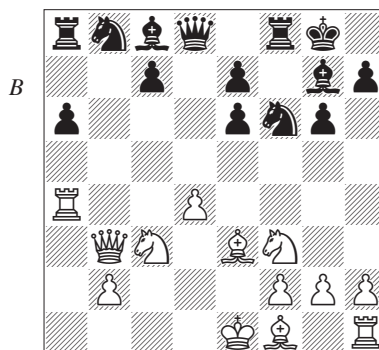
11...♘f6

Earlier, in Wijk aan Zee 1999, Svidler defended this same position against Kasparov and continued 11...♘b6, when 12 h4 ♘c6 13 h5 led to an attack for White.

12 a4 bxa4 13 ♜xa4 (D)

13...♘c6

Svidler has accepted the pawn sacrifice, but at the cost of a lastingly damaged pawn-formation: broken pawn-islands containing several backward pawns. In order to compensate for the weaknesses, he hopes to use the b-file and to generate counter-pressure on it.



The alternative was 13...♘d5, intending to meet 14 ♙c4 by 14...c6, pinning his hopes to his firm albeit passive position. However, that move does little to develop the queenside and also exposes Black's kingside to attack by h4-h5.

14 ♙c4 ♜b8 15 ♙xe6+ ♔h8 16 ♜c4 ♙xe6 17 ♜xe6 ♜d6

This is how Black hoped to settle the issue: after 18 ♜xd6 the weak a6-pawn would be balanced by the weak b2-pawn.

18 ♘g5 ♜xb2 19 0-0

Black was not afraid of 19 ♘f7+, when he had a strong reply in 19...♜xf7 20 ♜xf7 e5. With the text-move, White finishes his development and renews the threat ♜xa6, which forces further events.

19...♘d8 20 ♜h3 ♜d7

Threatened by 21 ♘ce4, Black enters an endgame in which material balance is maintained, but Black remains burdened by two backward pawns on c7 and e7.

21 ♜xd7 ♘xd7 22 ♜xa6 ♘b6 23 h4 ♜c2