

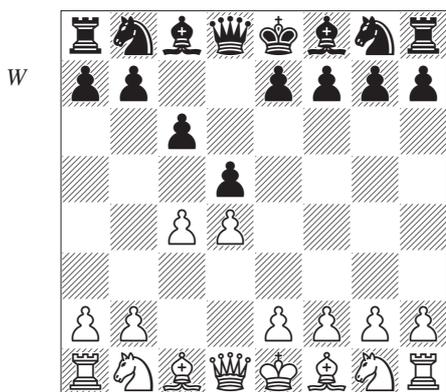
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# Slav and Semi-Slav

1 d4 d5  
2 c4 c6 (D)



Though not as old as the Queen's Gambit Declined, the Slav has an excellent record of service and is considered a classical opening. It first became popular when it was extensively tested in the World Championship matches between Alekhine and Euwe in 1935 and 1937, with both players adopting it in turn. Since then it has always remained one of the most important 1 d4 openings with new variations being developed and refined all the time.

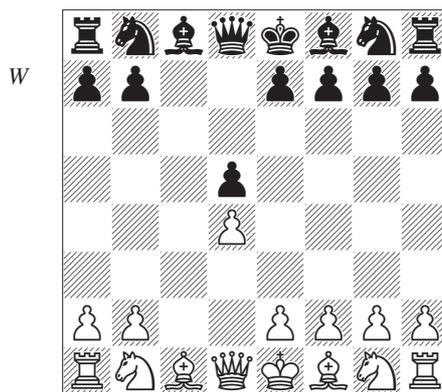
As in the Queen's Gambit Declined Black maintains a firm grip on d5, but the difference is an important one: he keeps the c8-h3 diagonal open for his queen's bishop where it can be aggressively developed to f5 or g4. Another point of 2...c6 is that now the threat of taking on c4 looms much larger over White's position than after 2...e6 since a black pawn on c4 can now be immediately protected by a pawn on b5 (...b5) which will itself be covered in advance by the pawn on c6. In fact 2...c6 forces White to take a fundamental decision: in comparison with 2...e6 he will either have to be more reticent in his natural development (moves like ♖f3, ♖c3 and ♙f4 or ♙g5 are less self-evident than in the

Queen's Gambit Declined) or he must be prepared to risk some fairly sharp variations where he may have to sacrifice a pawn.

The most radical way of eliminating ...dxc4 is 3 cxd5, the **Exchange Variation**, yet the main lines of the Slav are to be reached with either 3 ♖f3 or 3 ♖c3. These two 'natural developing moves' will often transpose, but of course there are a few important differences.

## Exchange Variation

3 cxd5 cxd5 (D)



One of the great tragedies of the Slav Exchange Variation is that its reputation has been soiled in the past by the fact that it has been *the* most popular line for pre-arranged draws in tournament games.

Countless games have been 'played' along the lines of 4 ♖c3 ♖c6 5 ♖f3 ♖f6 6 ♙f4 ♙f5 7 e3 e6 8 ♙d3 ♙xd3 9 ♚xd3 ♙d6 10 ♙xd6 ♚xd6 11 0-0 0-0, followed by a random number of uninteresting moves and a draw before move twenty.

And yet the exchange on d5 is a perfectly legitimate and highly serious way of playing, a strategy that has been successfully employed

by great champions like Botvinnik, Portisch and Kasparov! It is based on the assumption that it is precisely in a symmetrical position that the advantage of having the first move can be the most dangerous.

4 ♖c3 ♗f6

A somewhat puzzling feature of the Exchange Variation is that its theory does not really start before the position shown in the next diagram. In what way this position is best reached, however, is a sadly neglected question.

So much is certain that 4...♗f6 is played far more often than 4...♖c6 (with some aggressive ideas like 5 ♙f4 e5!?), yet the only move that could possibly prove the latter wrong or at least inaccurate is 5 e4 and almost nothing is known about this! Since 5...dxe4 6 d5 looks rather dangerous, 5...♗f6 seems a sensible reply. This produces a position from the Panov Attack of the Caro-Kann (see page 379) if White continues 6 exd5 ♗xd5 7 ♗f3, but 6 e5 ♗e4 7 ♙d3, for instance, leads us into totally unknown territory.

We should also note that 4...e5!? transposes to a line of the Winawer Counter-Gambit (see page 38) and so totally changes the strategic picture. White can of course avoid this possibility by playing 4 ♗f3, or by inserting 3 ♗f3 ♗f6 before exchanging on d5.

5 ♗f3

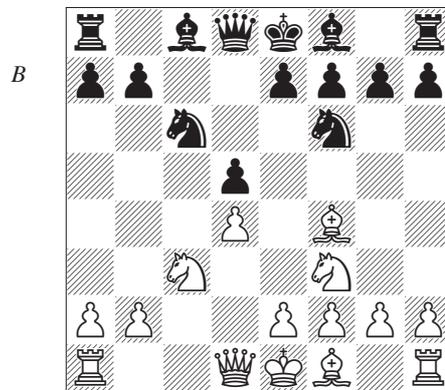
At this point theory begins to be interested, if only vaguely. 5 ♗f3 and 5 ♙f4 are about equally popular with the latter move being considered slightly more flexible. Still, after 5 ♙f4 ♗c6 6 e3 the general picture is almost the same as after 5 ♗f3 ♗c6 6 ♙f4: 6...♙f5 and 6...e6 are the traditional moves and 6...a6 the cheeky newcomer.

5 ... ♗c6

6 ♙f4 (D)

This is the most important point of departure for the Slav Exchange Variation. Black now has four moves, all giving the game a decided flavour of its own.

6...♙f5 is the most traditional option, preserving the symmetry and challenging White to show what his 'advantage' is worth. For this purpose 7 e3 e6 8 ♙b5 is the preferred choice.

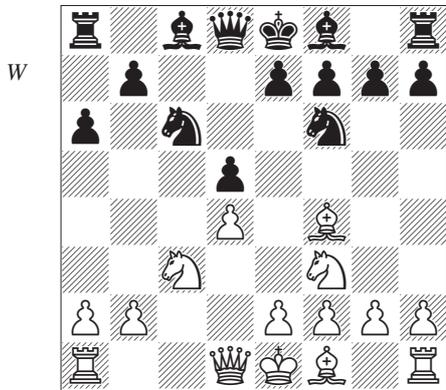


White is threatening 9 ♗e5 and is hoping at least to saddle his opponent with a backward c-pawn after a future ♙xc6 bxc6. Black has to concede *some* ground here and 8...♗d7 is generally looked upon as the best defence. The main line then runs 9 ♖a4 ♗c8 10 0-0 a6 11 ♙xc6 ♗xc6 12 ♗fc1, when White has a tiny lead in development. However, it is very difficult to turn this into a more tangible advantage.

Another long-standing main line is 6...e6, which is usually looked upon as perhaps a little bit on the passive side but very reliable. After 7 e3 ♙d6 (7...♙e7 is also a good move) White can simply take on d6 or he can keep a little more tension in the position by playing 8 ♙g3. This is aimed at making castling kingside less attractive for Black; e.g., 8...0-0 9 ♙d3 followed by 10 ♗e5 could become troublesome. A solid alternative is 8...♙xg3 9 hxg3 ♖d6, delaying castling and stopping White from playing ♗e5. Indeed Black could now take the initiative in the centre himself by playing ...e5 at some point.

Of far more recent origin is the attempt to pre-empt any possible aggression by White on the queenside by playing 6...a6 (D).

This has an added advantage in that it retains the possibility of ...♙g4, which would now be an excellent reply if White were to continue 7 e3. The immediate 6...♙g4 has a bad reputation because of 7 ♗e5, but if White does not have this reply (as after 6...a6 7 e3 ♙g4), this active development of the queen's bishop is perfectly playable. In fact this is why many players meet 6...a6 with 7 ♗c1 instead of 7 e3. Only if Black

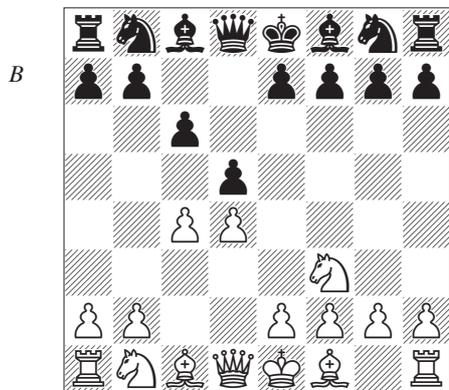


then ‘commits’ himself with 7...♙f5, is 8 e3 ventured. In practice, however, Black has experienced few difficulties in this line. Having a pawn on a6 has turned out to be simply quite useful. This ...a6 variation is especially important since those who play ...a6 in the standard Slav lines are committed to this line if White exchanges on d5 in a line like 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 a6 5 cxd5 cxd5.

Equally youthful and perhaps even more amazing is the bold sally 6...♘e4. Black breaks the symmetry and intends to continue 7 e3 ♘xc3 8 bxc3 g6. This variation contains an element of risk but at least White must now really fight for the initiative and it therefore seems a very suitable choice against an opponent who had been looking forward to an easy draw.

3 ♘f3

3 ♘f3 (D)



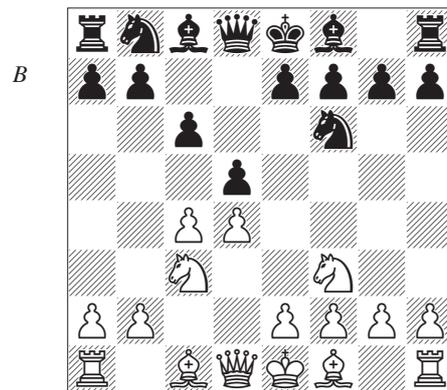
With this move we are entering main-line territory. White does not resolve the central tension and boldly develops a knight without being worried about a possible ...dxc4. It is interesting that this attitude was practically taken for granted for a very long period of time and was only brought up for discussion in the 1990s, when all of a sudden 3...dxc4 came to be taken very seriously indeed. Just like the Noteboom Variation (3...e6 4 ♘c3 dxc4; see page 13) Black aims for a sharp battle based on a very asymmetrical pawn-formation. Similar to the Noteboom, the main line runs 4 e3 b5 5 a4 e6 6 axb5 cxb5 7 b3 ♙b4+ 8 ♙d2 ♙xd2+ 9 ♘bxd2 a5 10 bxc4 b4. Black has ‘saddled’ his opponent with a strong pawn-centre while creating two dangerous-looking passed pawns for himself on the queenside. This has become accepted theory in recent years, although a name has not yet been given to this new branch of the Slav.

Nevertheless the traditional move firmly remains in place:

3 ... ♘f6

White now has a choice of 4 cxd5, going for the Exchange Variation after all, 4 e3, which is cautious and not bad but considered relatively easy for Black after 4...♙f5 (while 4...a6 is also popular), or he may choose to ignore the threat of taking on c4 again by playing the most natural developing move:

4 ♘c3 (D)

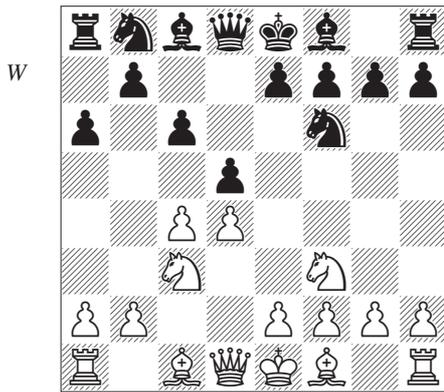


Traditionally, theory of the Slav splits up at this point into two main lines.

To begin with, **4...dxc4**, commonly called the **Slav Accepted**, is viewed by many as the only true way of playing this opening. It was this line which first drew serious attention to the Slav when it was played in the 1935 and 1937 World Championship matches between Alekhine and Euwe. Many famous grandmasters have used it since then, most notably perhaps World Champion Vasily Smyslov in the 1950s.

**4...e6** is the other ‘traditional’ move. This position is often reached via other move-orders; e.g., 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 d5 4 ♘c3 c6. It is called the **Semi-Slav** and it is the starting point for some of the most complicated variations the Queen’s Gambit complex has to offer.

A list of ‘other moves’ has to start with **4...a6** (*D*).



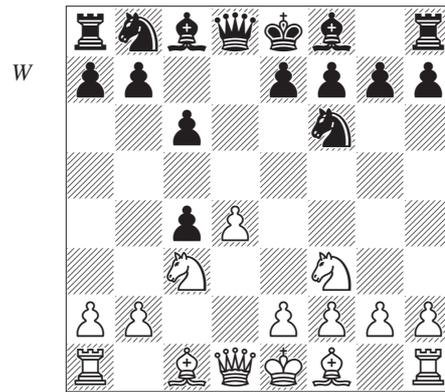
This move may look rather silly at first, yet it has been played by some of the world’s best players since it started to become popular in the late 1980s and it is closing in on the two traditional main lines fast. It combines many of the characteristic traits of modern chess: it is provocative, flexible and it is based – although it may not look it at first sight – on sound positional principles. Black intends to meet the plausible **5 e3** with 5...b5 6 b3 and now 6...♗g4, an attractive developing move, which when played one move earlier would have been met by ♖b3, but is now perfectly satisfactory. Theory of this very young variation is growing fast, in recent years concentrating mainly (but by no means exclusively) on the logical rejoinder **5 c5**.

Immediate active development of the queen’s bishop by means of **4...♗f5?!** is not good and is played very little because White then has 5 cxd5 cxd5 6 ♖b3, when the desirable answer 6...♗b6 can be met by 7 ♘xd5.

Finally, there is **4...g6** to be taken into account, but this variation is far less popular than its cousin 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 e3 g6, the Schlechter Variation (see page 39). Because White has not yet played e3, he has some aggressive options that are unavailable to him in the Schlechter proper. 5 cxd5 cxd5 6 ♗f4 in particular is considered quite good for White.

## Slav Accepted

4 ... dxc4 (*D*)



This variation has been very popular at all levels ever since its introduction in the 1930s.

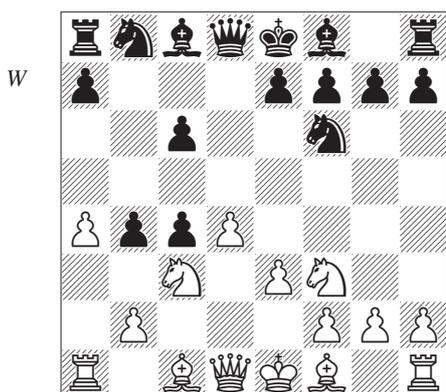
5 a4

Not a useful developing move at all, yet this is by far the most common reply to the Slav Accepted. White prevents 5...b5, which is the reason why the alternatives **5 e4** and **5 e3** are not often played. Despite the loss of time involved and the obvious weakening of the queenside pawn-structure (Black’s pieces will make good use of the b4-square in the future) 5 a4 has always been regarded as White’s best chance for an opening advantage. Not that the other two moves have not had their loyal followers:

**5 e4?!** is a true gambit because Black remains a pawn up after 5...b5. This line has always attracted the bold and the impatient, but

nobody has ever been successful enough to lure the more cautious away from 5 a4. The crucial position is reached after 5...b5 6 e5 ♖d5 7 a4 e6. White has more space on the kingside and may try to utilize this by playing 8 axb5 ♖xc3 9 bxc3 cxb5 10 ♖g5 ♙b7 11 ♗h5 g6 12 ♗g4 or an immediate 8 ♖g5. The problem with this type of approach is that although it *does* offer prospects of a quick and brilliant win, it also opens the door to a most drastic defeat.

The alternative 5 e3 is a very different cup of tea. In fact this is even more cautious than 5 a4 since White not only avoids having to play a gambit but he also avoids having to weaken his queenside. Here too 5...b5 is the critical reply but now White can play 6 a4 forcing 6...b4 (D) and thus robbing the pawn on c4 of its cover (6...a6 does not work on account of 7 axb5 cxb5 8 ♖xb5).



However, White will have to withdraw his knight from c3 and redevelop this piece, which means that he can put very little immediate pressure on his opponent's position. 7 ♖a2 e6 leaves the knight awkwardly stranded on a2 while after 7 ♖b1 ♙a6 White will have to invest additional time and effort in getting his pawn back. Black will be able to develop his pieces quite comfortably in both these lines. Nevertheless this line may be perfectly suitable for those wishing to reduce the element of risk to a minimum.

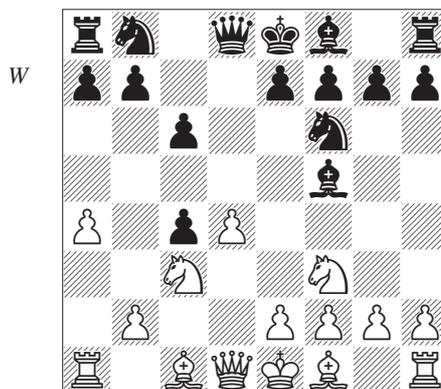
5 ... ♙f5

This simple developing move has always been by far the most popular choice.

Black has a much more provocative alternative in 5...♙g4, inviting 6 ♖e5, which is a main line after 5...♙f5 as well, so this looks totally stupid because now the knight on e5 attacks the black bishop and White gains a tempo. However, there is actually a very clever point to this: after 6...♙h5 7 f3 Black plays 7...♖fd7 8 ♖xc4 e5!, inviting White to lose a piece by playing 9 dxe5? ♗h4+ and – more importantly – creating a very complicated position after 9 ♖xe5 ♖xe5 10 dxe5 ♖d7. At the cost of a pawn, Black has managed to develop his pieces very nicely. Still, the reputation of 5...♙g4 is dubious at best. White has been fairly successful first with 9 ♖e4 and – more recently – with 9 e4 and 9 g3.

Black may also consider the non-committal 5...♖a6, waiting for White to declare his intentions in the centre and intending to develop his queen's bishop accordingly; e.g., 6 e4 ♙g4. This move also has the advantage of allowing Black to answer 6 ♖e5 with 6...♖g4 7 ♖xc4 e5!, which is an improved version of the 5...♙g4 line. This variation has never been really popular, but it is not bad and by playing it Black avoids an enormous amount of theory.

We now return to 5...♙f5 (D):



Starting from this position many thousands of games have been played, leaving behind layer after layer of theory. This never-ending process of improving, going deeper, refining and sometimes changing track abruptly, is likely to continue as long as chess will be played.