

Steve Giddins

Nimzowitsch

move by move

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About the Author

Steve Giddins is a FIDE Master and a former editor of *British Chess Magazine*. He spent a number of years of his professional life based in Moscow, where he learnt Russian and acquired an extensive familiarity with Russian chess literature and the training methods of the Russian/Soviet chess school. He's the author of several outstanding books and is well known for his clarity and no-nonsense advice. He has also translated over 20 books, for various publishers, and has contributed regularly to chess magazines and websites.

Other Everyman Chess books by the author:

The Greatest Ever Chess Endgames

The English: Move by Move

The French Winawer: Move by Move

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Series Foreword

The *Move by Move* format is designed to be interactive, and is based on questions asked by both teachers and students. It aims – as much as possible – to replicate chess lessons. All the way through, readers will be challenged to answer searching questions and to complete exercises, to test their skills in key aspects of the game. It's our firm belief that practising your skills like this is an excellent way to study chess.

Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms,
Everyman Chess

Introduction

Although he was neither world champion, nor even a direct world championship challenger, Aron Nimzowitsch was one of the most important and influential players in chess history. He belongs to that select band of players (the other main one, ironically enough, being his arch-enemy Tarrasch) who have influenced the development of chess style as much (or more) by their writings than by their play. His books *The Blockade*, *My System* and *Chess Praxis* have had an enormous influence on the game, and until the computer became the main source of chess experience for the present generation of players, it was hard to find any strong player who had not read these books.

Given the wealth of literature on Nimzowitsch (see the Bibliography for the main sources used in this book), I see no point in giving too much biographical information here. Suffice it to say that he was born on 7th November 1886 (new style) into a Jewish family in the city of Riga, which was then part of the Russian Tsarist Empire. Of course, Nimzowitsch's name is indelibly associated with Denmark, but he did not settle in that country until after the First World War. Bent Larsen, who was greatly influenced by Nimzowitsch, famously joked that while he doubted that there really was a 'Soviet School of Chess' ("How can Tal and Petrosian belong to the same school?"), there is a Danish school, "even if it was founded by a Jew from Riga!".

Although a strong master before the Great War, it was in the mid-1920s that Nimzowitsch really started to flourish as a player, and was one of the top 4-5 players in the world during the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, like some other possible challengers of the pre-1948 period, he was destined never to get a shot at the world championship, although it is probably fair to say that his eccentric and somewhat unstable play would not have given him much chance in a match against such titans as Capablanca or Alekhine. He died in Denmark on March 16th, 1935, at the sadly early age of 48.

As a player, Nimzowitsch is inextricably associated with the Hypermodern School, that group of highly gifted young masters (including also Réti and Breyer), who emerged to prominence after 1918, with their revolutionary ideas regarding chess strategy. These masters challenged the accepted idea that 1 e4 and 1 d4 were the only truly correct opening moves, and more generally the theory that one should seek to occupy the centre with pawns in the opening. They developed new opening systems, based on piece control of the centre from a distance, and propagated their ideas in what became classic works of chess literature, such as Réti's *Modern Ideas in Chess* and Nimzowitsch's *My System* and *Chess Praxis*.

As with most such movements (e.g. modern art, atonal music, etc), there was fierce resistance to the new ideas from certain of the 'old guard', but gradually the effectiveness of the new approach became understood, and a Hegelian synthesis took place, with the best of the new methods being incorporated into the play of leading stars, such as Capablanca and Alekhine, whilst the more extreme and eccentric aspects were left to die a natural death. The eventual result was a great enrichment of our understanding of the game.

In Nimzowitsch's case, it was ideas such as restraint, blockade and over-protection which were the most dominant, although he also laid enormous stress in his writings on centralization. His contribution to modern opening theory was huge, with a large number of systems that today are taken for granted, being originally based, to a greater or lesser extent, on his ideas. Pride of place goes to the Nimzo-Indian Defence, which remains to this day possibly the single most popular and respected defence to 1 d4 at GM level, but one can also throw in the Queen's Indian, the Winawer variation of the French, various lines of the English and Réti Openings, as well as a host of other, less popular variations, such as 1 e4 ♘c6. Few great masters in history can have contributed more to the openings.

Given the wealth of material available, both by and about Nimzowitsch, I should say a word about what I see as the aim of the present volume. What I have sought to do here is present a selection of Nimzowitsch's best and most instructive games, annotated for the less experienced player, in the style of the *Move by Move* series. Famous though Nimzowitsch's own books are, he was not always the easiest of commentators to follow, and tended to wrap many of his ideas in rather flowery language. Furthermore, few of his most famous games have been re-evaluated in the light of the computer's analyses, which so often throw a completely new light on games we know so well. Kasparov's *Great Predecessors* series, for example, only includes three Nimzowitsch victories, two of those being the immortal games against Johner and Sämisch (Games 13 and 21 respectively, in the present volume). There are many other famous Nimzowitsch games, where the computer throws up interesting discoveries, and I have presented many of these in this volume.

I should also comment on the sources which have influenced this book. Readers familiar with Ray Keene's book *Aron Nimzowitsch: A Reappraisal* will easily see that this is the volume to which I owe the greatest debt. That book just happened to be one of the first chess books I ever obtained, for the simple reason that it was one of the very few serious chess books to be found in the Dorchester branch of the W.H. Smith bookshop chain, to which I repaired as a chess-mad 13-year-old, holidaying in Dorset and clutching the accumulated pocket money I had saved up for the purpose. It was a fortunate choice, because I found the book enormously inspiring, and after reading and re-reading it, soon reached the point where I could remember vast swathes of it by heart. The passage of four decades since that time has still not materially dimmed its influence.

I was also fortunate in the timing of the present book. A year or so before I started work, the Danish chess enthusiasts Per Skjoldager and Jørn Erik Nielsen produced their monumental volume *Aron Nimzowitsch: On the Road to Chess Mastery, 1886-1924*, the fruit of many years' diligent research. This made available to me many hitherto unseen games and

annotations, both by Nimzowitsch himself and other contemporaries. Then, just weeks before I put pen to paper (or, more accurately, fingers to keyboard), New in Chess published German enthusiast Rudolf Reinhardt's similar volume, *Aron Nimzowitsch 1928-1935*, which did much the same job for Nimzowitsch's later years. Admittedly, there is a gap of four years between the periods covered by these two volumes, but they were both enormously useful nonetheless, and the chess world owes their authors a profound debt of gratitude for many years of painstaking research.

This has been a very enjoyable book to write, and I hope my readers will derive similar pleasure from reading it. Nimzowitsch was a great player, whose best games are wonderfully instructive and also highly entertaining. The reader will find powerful attacks, fearless defences, the deepest positional manoeuvres and filigree endgame technique. Most amazing of all are some of the positions Nimzowitsch was able to bring about – I know of no other master who could so often reduce opponents to zugzwang on a full board, or achieve such visually striking positions, often even against opponents of the front rank. Enjoy!

Steve Giddins
Rochester, Kent,
May 2014

Game 4
A.Nimzowitsch-A.Olson
Copenhagen 1924
Sicilian Defence

1 f4 c5 2 e4

Transposing into a position, which became quite popular in the 1980s, thanks to the efforts of various English players, principally Mark Hebden.

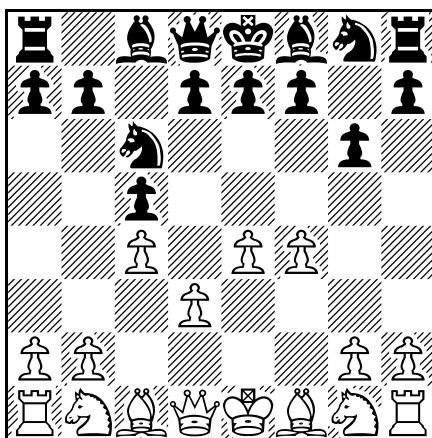
2...♘c6

Eventually, it was established that the gambit 2...d5 3 exd5 ♗f6! is quite promising for Black, as a result of which the popularity of 2 f4 has declined markedly.

3 d3!?

A very modest approach by White, but one which conceals a specific and quite revolutionary idea for the time. The usual move is 3 ♘f3.

3...g6 4 c4!?



Question: This looks a strange way to play. White moves only pawns, and creates a hole on d4. What is he playing at?

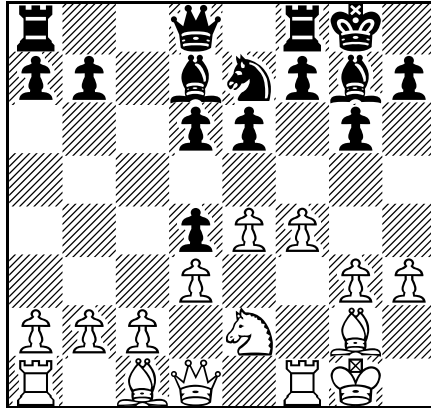
Answer: Nimzowitsch himself was very proud of this idea, and awards his last move two exclamation marks. Objectively, of course, that is a wildly hyperbolic piece of punctuation, but in some ways, the move 4 c4 does deserve to be hailed as something quite extraordinary. As usual with Nimzowitsch, prophylactic thinking lies at its heart.

Question: You mean he wants to stop Black playing ...d5?

Answer: No, no, nothing so crude. As Nimzowitsch himself points out, there is no hope of

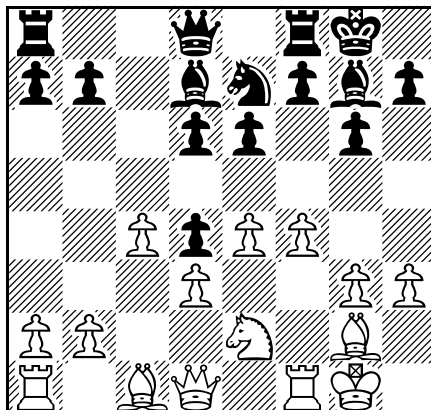
doing that anyway, as Black can just prepare the advance with ...e6. His idea is much deeper than that. Basically, he wants to play a kind of Closed Sicilian set-up, but with a prophylactic eye on Black's counterplay.

The easiest way to understand his line of thinking is to consider a typical Closed Sicilian structure, such as the following: 1 e4 c5 2 ♖c3 ♘c6 3 g3 g6 4 ♕g2 ♕g7 5 d3 d6 6 f4 e6 7 ♗f3 ♗ge7 8 0-0 0-0. One of Black's main ideas in such positions is to put his knight on d4, and invite White to take it. Let us assume (without pretending that the next few moves are necessarily terribly good) that this happens at once: 9 h3 ♘d4 10 ♗xd4 cxd4 11 ♗e2 ♕d7.



Looking at this structure, we can see that, as a result of the exchange, White has a marked weakness on c2. Black has the obvious plan of putting his rooks on the open c-file, pressing against the backward c2-pawn. For this reason, White usually cannot afford to exchange off the d4-knight in such positions, but must either live with it, or go to elaborate lengths to remove it, by moving his knight from c3 and then playing c2-c3.

But now imagine the last position, but with the white pawn on c4.



That would be an altogether different kettle of fish, as there would be no weakness on c2 for Black to aim at.

Question: So that is the idea of Nimzowitsch's set-up?
Just to avoid a possible weakness on c2 later on?

Answer: Effectively, yes. It is simple prophylaxis against the enemy plan of ...♘d4, which will now be met by just taking on d4, without any worry over the recapture ...cxd4 creating a target on c2.

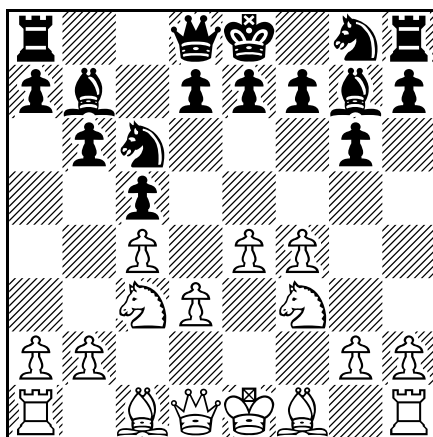
Question: OK, I see that, but what about the hole on d4?

Answer: Nimzowitsch is hoping that this will not matter too much. As we have remarked elsewhere in this book, one can sometimes afford to accept one weak square, if there are sufficient chances to cause trouble for the opponent on the other 63. Nimzowitsch's strategic idea, although not necessarily all that strong in this specific position, is a deep and profound one, and is the forerunner of the so-called Botvinnik System in the English Opening: 1 c4 e5 2 ♘c3 ♘c6 3 g3 g6 4 ♙g2 ♙g7 5 e4.

4...♙g7 5 ♘c3 b6?!

Not an especially impressive response. Both 5...e6 followed by ...♘ge7, and 5...d6 followed by ...♘f6, are more natural-looking alternatives, which would give Black a perfectly satisfactory position.

6 ♘f3 ♙b7

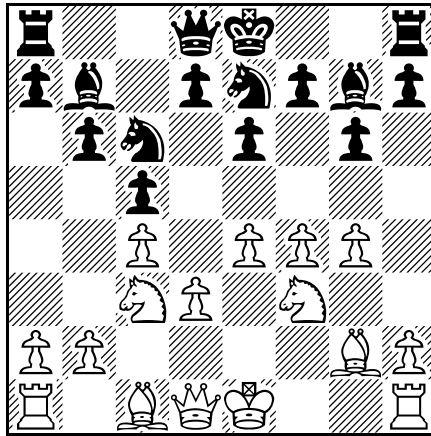


7 g4!?

Question: Goodness me! That looks pretty extravagant.

Answer: Yes, but it makes some sense. The natural English Opening/Closed Sicilian approach would be 7 g3, but later in the middlegame, White often ends up advancing g3-g4 anyway, as part of a kingside pawn-storm. The text seeks to economize a tempo, by playing the pawn to g4 at once. Nimzowitsch was no doubt encouraged in this by the fact that the enemy queen's bishop has gone to b7, with the result that a subsequent ...d6 will not attack the g4-pawn.

7...e6 8 ♖g2 ♗ge7?!



9 ♗b5?!

Another very surprising move, fully in accordance with Nimzowitsch's predilection for such 'bizarre' moves.

Question: He threatens 10 ♗d6+?

Answer: Yes, but that is easily dealt with by the reply in the game. Nimzowitsch explains that the real purpose of ♗b5 is to weaken b6.

Question: What?

Answer: That is right! The idea is that Black will sooner or later be unable to resist kicking the knight away by ...a6, which will weaken the b6-pawn.

Question: But that can hardly matter, surely?

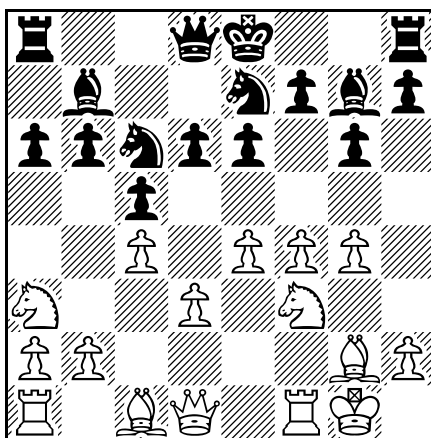
Answer: I am inclined to agree that it looks a bit fanciful, but Nimzowitsch was so pleased with himself that he again gave the move two exclamation marks! However, I would suggest that the straightforward 9 0-0 would be the choice of most players.

9...d6 10 0-0 a6

Allowing himself to be provoked. No doubt Nimzowitsch felt a glow of self-justification at seeing this move, but I am not convinced that there is any objective reason for such a feeling. Black is doing fine.

11 ♖a3

Continuing the idea begun at move 9. The knight heads towards c2, from where it covers the d4-square, and also helps support a possible break with b4 later on, trying to expose the 'weakness' at b6.



11...0-0

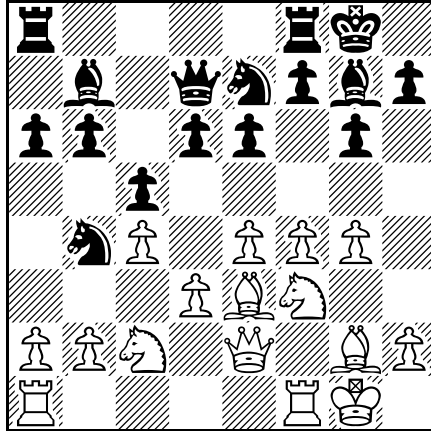
Question: Can't Black play more energetically than this?

Answer: Yes, indeed, and possibly he should. The computer likes the counterattack 11...h5!? 12 g5 and now 12...♖c7, intending long castling. After 13 ♖b1 0-0-0 14 ♙d2 d5! Black looks to be doing fine, which just underlines the rather eccentric nature of White's 9th move.

12 ♗e2 ♗d7 13 ♙e3 ♖b4!?

Nimzowitsch writes: "Otherwise there follows ♗ad1 and d4, with advantage to White", but this seems rather an optimistic assessment. I don't see any problems at all for Black after either counterblow in the centre, with 13...f5 or 13...d5.

14 ♖c2!



Question: Doesn't this lose a pawn?

Answer: Yes, it is a positional sacrifice, which, Nimzowitsch says, "...is only possible because b6 is undefended". Tactically, this is true, but it seems a rather slim justification for the rather fanciful manoeuvre ♖b5-a3-c2.

14...♗xb2 15 ♖ab1 ♗c3 16 ♘xb4 ♗xb4

16...cxb4 17 ♗xb6 is the point of Nimzowitsch's play.

Question: What does White have for his pawn?

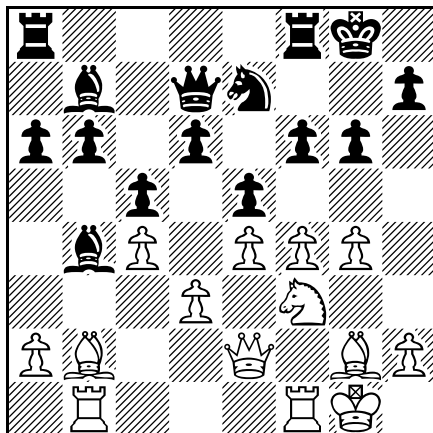
Answer: Nimzowitsch's idea is that, in order to hang on to the extra pawn without losing b6 in return, Black has been forced to misplace his dark-squared bishop, which in turn leaves his kingside dark squares weakened.

17 ♗c1?!

Question: This looks rather slow!

Answer: It does, although it was all part of Nimzowitsch's plan, and earns another exclamation mark from him. However, the direct 17 f5 is certainly a more natural way to follow up the pawn sacrifice, and leaves White with reasonable compensation after 17...exf5 18 gxf5.

17...f6 18 ♗b2 e5?



Question: What is wrong with this? It looks logical to shut out the enemy bishop.

Answer: It is in principle, but tactically, the blockade on e5 can be undermined. I think Black should just get on with something on the queenside, such as 18...b5, which has the merit of removing the weakness on b6. I assume Nimzowitsch would have played something such as 19 g5 fxg5 20 ♖xg5, trying to attack the dark squares, but it is not particularly convincing after, for example, 20...h6 21 ♗h3 d5.

19 g5!

Hammering away at the dark squares.

19...♗c6?!

Nimzowitsch gives 19...fxg5 20 ♗xg5 (threatening ♗h3) 20...♗c6 21 f5. This certainly gives White compensation, but is no worse for Black than the game.

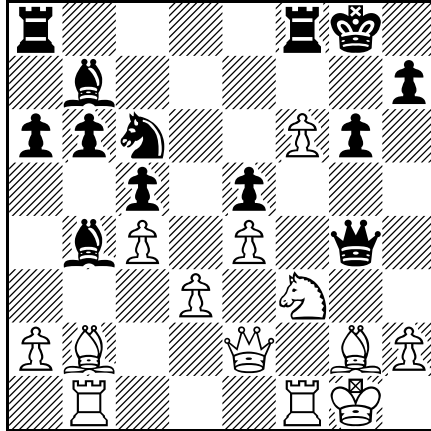
20 gxf6

Now the barricades on the long dark-square diagonal a1-h8 start to crumble, and the fact that the black bishop on b4 is out of play really begins to be felt.

20...♗g4

20...♗xf6 21 fxe5 dxe5 22 ♗xe5 ♗xf1+ 23 ♗xf1 ♗xe5 24 ♗f6 is winning for White – a striking illustration of how quickly Black's position can collapse, once the long diagonal is opened.

21 fxe5 dxe5



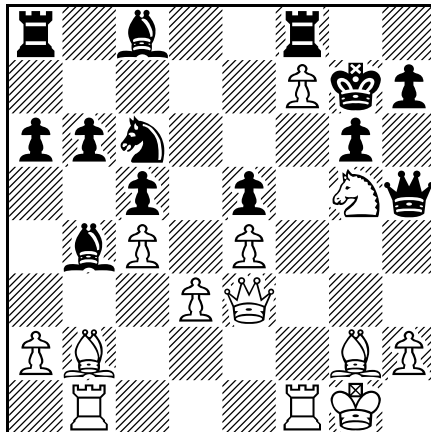
22 ♕e3!

An excellent move, which unpins the knight and aims the white queen at the weakened kingside dark squares. White has conjured up a winning attack, almost from nowhere.

22... ♖h5

22... ♖xf6 23 ♘xe5 ♗xf1+ 24 ♖xf1 ♘xe5 25 ♙xe5 ♕e6 26 ♙a1 is no better. Then, after 26... ♕e7 White has a choice between 27 ♖f2 and the more striking 27 ♕c1! when Black is defenceless against the queen and bishop battery on the long diagonal.

23 ♘g5 ♙c8 24 f7+ ♚g7



Exercise: Can you spot a neat way to crown the attack?

Answer: 25 ♕f4!!

The prelude to a delightful finish.

25...♖h6 26 ♘e6+! exf4 27 ♗g7# 1-0

A lovely final mate.

Question: Hmm...This was a strange game. It looked as though Nimzowitsch's fancy ideas were really not at all convincing, yet suddenly, it all fell into place beautifully.

Answer: Yes, I find this quite a difficult game to understand. In fact, the whole plan of weakening b6 and then using that weakness to lure the enemy bishop to b4, so as to mate him on the kingside dark squares, looks so far-fetched, that it makes one suspect it is the sort of thing that was dreamt up after the game, in a bid to pretend that what happened rather randomly in the game was really all pre-planned.

Answer: Is that what you think?

Answer: I am not sure. Some players, notably Botvinnik, have been accused of this, with some justification, I believe. In the present case, though, the move 9 ♘b5 is actually rather hard to explain in any other way, if one discounts Nimzowitsch's own explanation, so I am inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. Whatever the truth about the 9 ♘b5 adventure, the game is a very notable one, if only for the plan of e4-d3-c4, which has proved to have an enduring legacy in the English Opening to this very day.

Game 5

A.Nimzowitsch-A.Rubinstein

Berlin 1928

Réti Opening

1 ♘f3 d5 2 b3 ♗f5

Unlike Wolf in Game 3, Rubinstein seizes the opportunity to develop his bishop outside the pawn chain, rather than shutting it in with ...e6. However, as we will see, the harassing of this bishop forms a major part of White's subsequent plan.

3 ♗b2 e6 4 g3 h6