

Vladimir Barsky

The Ragozin Complex

A Guide for White and Black

New In Chess 2011

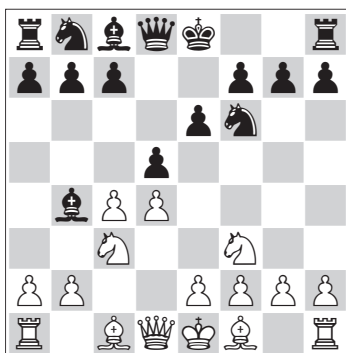
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From the Author

First of all, I would like to say a few words about two people who have made an enormous contribution to this opening, which is so popular in our day. The defence, which nowadays hides behind the faceless Informator index number D38, bears the name of Viacheslav Vasilievich Ragozin (1908-1962), a top grandmaster and theoretician. He was a close friend of Mikhail Botvinnik and helped him in many highly important competitions, including world championship matches. As a practical player, Ragozin probably did not fully realise his potential, but even so, the fact that he played in ten USSR Championships (his best result being shared 2nd-3rd places in 1937) says plenty about his uncommon strength. He was champion of Leningrad, and fought for its defence during the Second World War, experiencing the full horrors of the siege. Soon after the war, he won a match against Bondarevsky and secured the grandmaster title, and in the Chigorin Memorial tournament of 1947, he finished second, ahead of Keres, Smyslov, Boleslavsky, Kotov, and Gligoric. An inventive analyst, he won the second world correspondence championship in 1959.

Let us return to those years, when the aspiring young artist Ragozin was just beginning to develop his formidable opening weapon.



It is interesting that the defence came about in large measure through a feeling of contrariness! In his article 'The Significance of the New York tournament (1924) for Opening Theory', Alekhine discussed various new ideas in the Queen's Gambit, and came to the conclusion that developing the black bishop to b4 did not bring Black anything positive: '...Still less can one recommend the development of the bishop to b4 on move four (as in the game Capablanca-Marshall), since then by the reply 5. ♖a4+! White can force 5... ♘c6, which makes it significantly more difficult for the opponent to achieve the important task of opening lines in the centre. It is remarkable that the world champion did not exploit this possibility.' Viacheslav Ragozin later admitted 'Strangely, it was precisely this note that served as the incen-

tive for Black to research this whole defensive system. Alekhine claimed that after 5.♖a4+ ♘c6 6.e3 White had superior development, but later tournament practice showed that 5.♖a4+ is premature.'

It is interesting that Alekhine soon softened his opinion of the line. In his game against Colle at Hastings 1925/26, he chose the variation as Black, and explained his choice thus: 'Although, strictly speaking, this defence is not fully correct, it is not easy to refute. I chose it specifically in order to convince myself of the practical chances which can arise in the event of inaccurate play by White, and of those dangers which he faces, if White plays correctly.' Be that as it may, the genie was now out of the bottle, and in the 1930s the new defence, through the efforts of Ragozin principally, but also of other Soviet and European players, attracted more and more attention and was tested in tournaments of the very highest level.

Mikhail Moiseevich Botvinnik remembered his friend thus: 'Ragozin was a quiet, careful man of few words. Curly-haired, with rather solemn facial features, he looked as though Mother Nature had started chiselling him a sharp face, and had then been interrupted and never quite finished her work... His chess talent was unusual. One can say that he had a good intuition and combinative vision, but others too have these characteristics. So what specifically did Ragozin's ability consist in? The chess pieces possess two values. One is well-known, one may say their nominal value. Two hundred years ago, the great mathematician Euler estimated the value of the chess pieces as: king 200, queen 9, rook 5, bishop and knight 3 and pawn 1. In general, one can agree with these values; one only needs to make one correction. If the king is worth 200, its actual strength is no more than 4, whilst if the strength of the pawn is 1, its value increases from 2 to 8 (that is, $3-1=2$ to $9-1=8$) as it approaches the eighth rank.

Thus, we can agree on the nominal values of the pieces. But as well as the nominal average values, there is another price, depending on the position. It is hard even to give a name to this figure; one might call it the "market value". It is clear that a chess player, sitting at the board, should not only know the average nominal value of the pieces – even beginners know this – but must also be able to divine their market value. This task is very complicated and requires specific ability. Ragozin was able to orientate himself very quickly and dexterously in this marketplace, and excellently understood the market value of the pieces in a given position. Perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems to me that this was the main aspect of his talent, and consequently, he was able to bravely enter into sacrificial variations.'

Incidentally, had it not been for Ragozin's oratorical skill, and his ability to convince people, Botvinnik might never have become World Champion in 1948. It was Ragozin who headed the Soviet delegation to the 1947 FIDE Congress at The Hague, which looked at the question of reconstructing the chess world after the war. Prior to the war, the Soviet Union had not been a member of this 'bourgeois' organisation, but after the death of Alekhine (with whom Botvinnik was negotiating for a world championship match) it changed its position. The Soviet delegation had many adventures getting to The Hague and only arrived on the final day of the Congress. The delegates had already taken the decision to declare Max Euwe World

Champion (as the only living ex-World Champion) and to organise a match between him and the American Samuel Reshevsky, but after Ragozin's speech, they changed their decision. International Master Mikhail Yudovich recalls: 'Many years later, at the 1972 Olympiad in Skopje, having heard that I was working on an article about the world championship, Euwe said to me "Don't forget to mention that I was World Champion twice – from 1935 to 1937, and for one day in 1947, at the FIDE Congress, before the Soviet delegation arrived!'. Euwe said this with a friendly smile, but I remember that back in The Hague at the time, he had been very upset and disappointed.' I will add only that for fifteen years, right up to his death, Ragozin was actively involved in the work of FIDE, as its Vice-President.



Viacheslav Ragozin

I should like to end this short piece about Ragozin with the words of his contemporary and comrade, Salomon Flohr: 'In chess, Ragozin was a fearsome fighter, but even more, in his creative approach, he was an artist, an explorer (and a very successful one) of truth and beauty. At the board, he was never "stingy", never thought only about material, and in life generally, he was no businessman.

Unlike many chess players, Ragozin never worried about losing the exchange. If anything, it was the opposite – he was often keen to sacrifice rooks for minor pieces! In his creativity, richness of ideas, original thoughts and sharp fantasy, he can in my opinion be put on a level with Mikhail Ivanovich Chigorin. Whenever we see a young player with an inventive, sharp style, we describe him as a "typical Chigorinist!". I think we can equally justifiably call him a "real Ragozinist"!



' "Habent sua fata libelli." Books have their fate. This was an old saying. The fate of Lipnitsky's book *Questions of Modern Chess Theory* cannot be described as a happy one, with the best will in the world. It is a legendary book, yet also mysterious and hard to explain.' With these words, Anatoly Karpov opened his Preface to the second edition of the Lipnitsky book. Why is this book so important to us? Suffice it to say that this book, the second half of which is devoted to the Ragozin Defence, made such an impression on the young Bobby Fischer, that largely because of it he

began to play the Ragozin regularly (and in Lipnitsky style) and even went to the lengths of learning Russian!

The Kiev master Isaak Lipnitsky (1923-1959) as a child studied chess in the same section with David Bronstein, under the tutelage of Alexander Markovich Konstantinopolsky. At 16, he was already playing in the Ukrainian Championship, but at 18, the war started, and Lipnitsky was sent to the front. He fought at Stalin-grad, and ended up going all the way from the Volga to Berlin, and was a representative of the Soviet Command in the Berlin control commission. He ended the war as a Major, and was awarded a number of war decorations and medals.

After the war, Isaak Lipnitsky returned to his beloved chess, twice becoming champion of the Ukraine. His greatest achievement was sharing 2nd-4th places in the 1950 USSR Championship, where he finished ahead of (and beat in individual games) Smyslov, Petrosian, Geller, Averbakh... He was only 27 years old, but already soon afterwards, his strength began to ebb away, in the face of a fatal illness...

Once again let us give the microphone to Anatoly Karpov:

‘Realising what was happening, Lipnitsky gradually gave up practical play. He concentrated on coaching and writing his book. It appeared in 1956, but very much in a peripheral way – published in Kiev, in what by Soviet standards was a very small print-run, littered with misprints. It seemed that at the very moment of its publication, the book was doomed to oblivion. But then something strange started happening..’

‘Lipnitsky recommends’... ‘In Lipnitsky’s opinion’ – such phrases are to be found in the writings of Botvinnik and Fischer. Two great champions, quite different from one another, yet both took Lipnitsky’s book very seriously. ‘Widely known in a narrow circle’, not reaching the mass of readers, the book occupied a significant place in the home libraries of grandmasters and trainers. But the biggest fuss was made amongst people who had not even read the book, and had only heard about it or seen the odd extract quoted somewhere. The book became a legend.

What is so special about it?

It is amazingly, fantastically ‘non-banal’. Just flick through and read any couple of pages at random, and you will soon convince yourself of this. There are plenty of books which are honestly put together, and whose authors work hard to convince you that two plus two equals four, and the Volga flows into the Caspian. And then there are books which awaken the mind...

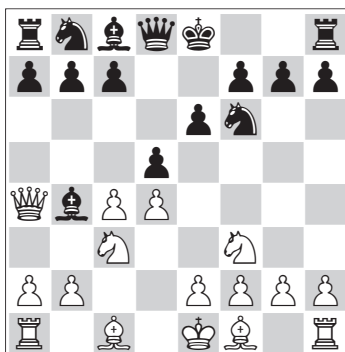
So, at the beginning of the 21st century, the book received a second life. But only part of it – as the blurb explains, ‘the outdated section on the Ragozin Defence has been replaced by a selection of Lipnitsky’s best games, with his own annotations..’



I was lucky. I became acquainted with Lipnitsky’s book when I was young, when I myself was an active player. To be honest, I do not recall who recommended me to read this rare book, but it made a deep impression on me. I immediately wanted to

Chapter One

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 d5 3.c4 e6 4.♘c3 ♞b4 5.♚a4+



We have already spoken of how this queen check, forcing the opponent to play ♘c6 and in the process to obstruct his pawn on c7, was for a long time considered to be the demonstration of the incorrectness of the entire black set-up. Later, thanks to the efforts primarily of Viacheslav Ragozin, it was established that this plan is not so terrible for Black; no sort of *blitzkrieg* is about to happen, and the queen often proves to be unstably placed on a4. Chess players go from one extreme to the other, and in the 1960s, this move was practically never seen.

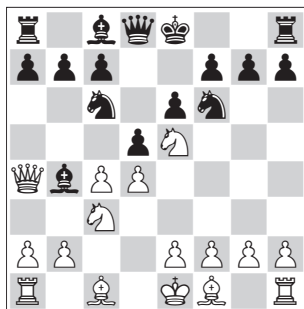
But gradually, passions cooled and emotions calmed down, and the queen check began again to have its adherents. For example, it has been played a good deal by such strong players and theoreticians as Michal Krasenkow and Vadim Malakhatko. In recent years, when the main line 5.cxd5 exd5 6.♞g5 has attracted too much theoretical development, interest in the move 5.♚a4+ has grown. This system has been seen in tournaments of the very highest level, and has been played, for example, by Magnus Carlsen, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, Ruslan Ponomariov, and Hikaru Nakamura. History develops in spirals, and it is not impossible that in the near future, this line could become the epicentre of Ragozin theory.

Game 1

Freiman, Sergey
Ragozin, Viacheslav

Leningrad 1934

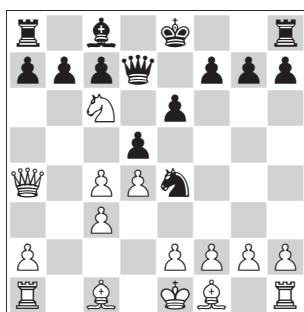
1.♘f3 d5 2.d4 ♘f6 3.c4 e6
4.♗c3 ♙b4 5.♚a4+ ♗c6 6.♗e5



First of all, we should check out this active knight jump – can we just refute the black set-up at once, winning a piece or pawn, or at least obtaining the bishop pair ‘free of charge’? But in reality, this move leads, in the main, to a loss of time, and allows Black to seize the initiative.

6...♙d7

At first, this move was played almost automatically, but then Black began to think whether he had any reliable alternatives. The attempt to go over to a counterattack at once with **6...♗e4?** turns insufficient because of the simple **7.♗xc6 ♙xc3+ 8.bxc3 ♚d7**



Analysis diagram

Thanks to this pin, Black regains his piece, but by exploiting the unstable position of the knight on e4, White takes the initiative in the centre:

9.f3! ♗f6 9...♗xc3? loses after **10.♚b4. 10.cxd5 exd5** (Scalcione-Roberti, Salsomaggiore 2005) **11.e4! dxe4 11...♚xc6? 12.♙b5; 11...bxc6 12.e5±. 12.♙b5 a6 13.0-0 axb5 13...0-0 14.♙a3+-.** **14.♚xa8** White has an extra exchange, without any particular compensation.

It seems too submissive to play **6...♙xc3+?! 7.bxc3 ♙d7 8.♗xd7 ♚xd7** Black exchanges his bishops for knights one after the other, but what does he get in return? **9.cxd5** Also not bad is **9.♙a3 ♗e7 10.♚b4 b6 11.e3 a5, 12.♚b3±. 9...exd5 10.♚b1 b6 11.e3 ♗a5 12.♚xd7+ ♗xd7** (Hamilton-Mills, Exmouth 2009) **13.f3±.**

The battle assumes a similar character after: **6...0-0?! 7.♗xc6 ♙xc3+ 8.bxc3 bxc6** He has to weaken his pawns, since after **8...♚d7?** there is the nice blow **9.♗e7+! ♚xe7 10.♙a3 ♚e8 11.♚b3±** Camara-Alves, Rio de Janeiro 1974, and White keeps an extra exchange. **9.e3 ♗e4 10.♙d3 f5** The exchange of the pawn on c3 for that on d5 is even less appealing for Black: **10...♗xc3 11.♚c2 ♗e4 12.♙xe4 dxe4 13.♚xe4±. 11.0-0** Also good is **11.♚xc6 ♙d7 12.♚a6 ♚f6**, Engel-Opocensky, Sliac 1932, **13.cxd5 exd5 14.♚a5±. 11...♗xc3 12.♚xc6 ♙d7 13.♚a6 ♚f6** (Henley-Rohde, Lone Pine 1977), and here White could have achieved an advantage by **14.cxd5 ♗xd5** (14...exd5 15.♚a5±) **15.♚b1 ♙e8 16.♙a3±;** Even so, Black does have at his disposal an interesting resource, which in my view remains under-estimated: **6...a5!?**

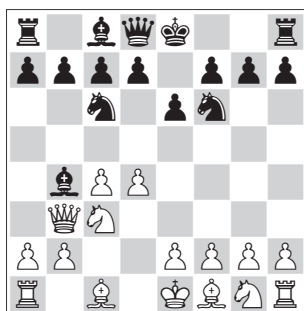
Game 27

Capablanca, José
Ragozin, Viacheslav

Moscow 1936

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♘b4
4.♞b3 ♗c6

‘This system of defence was worked out by Soviet players and was played by them a number of times in the 1935 Moscow tournament. The results of both those, and the present game, show that it is not easy for Black to overcome his opening problems’ – Capablanca.



‘This move was introduced into practice by me in 1932, during the Leningrad Championship. The aggressive 4...c5 may seem more consequential, but the many games played with this move have seen Black face permanent worries over the backward d-pawn. The clear advantage, which White obtains on the d-file after 4...c5, led me to try the text move.

The move 4...♗c6 firstly pursues a strategy of the most rapid possible development of the pieces, and, secondly, prepares central counterplay with the advance ...e6-e5, which I think is more dangerous to White than the play after 4...c5’ – Ragozin.

From the position of today, I can add that 4...c5 and 4...♗c6 remain the two

main answers to 4.♞b3, but the former is played almost five times more often than the latter.

5.♗f3

5.d5 is not dangerous for Black because of 5...exd5 6.cxd5 ♗d4 7.♞d1 (Dittmann-Bachtiar, Leipzig 1960) 7...♗b5, and after the best reply 8.♞b3 Black can force a draw by repetition of moves (8...♗d4), but in fact, the advantage is already on his side after 8...♗xc3 9.bxc3 ♘a5.

5...d5 6.e3

White can also determine the bishop’s position at once with 6.a3.



Analysis diagram

Black then has a choice – to take or to keep the bishop.

A) After the retreat 6...♘e7 we reach a position, similar to the Queen’s Gambit, but with the knight on c6. Admittedly, the white queen on b3 is also not ideally placed, since it is constantly vulnerable to a fork on a5. Overall, though, White retains a small opening initiative:

A1) **7.e3 0-0 8.♞c2 a5 8...dxc4 9.♘xc4 ♘d6 10.0-0 e5 11.h3 a6 12.♘a2 ♞d7 13.d5 ♗e7 14.♗d2 ♞f5 15.♞xf5 ♘xf5 16.e4 ♘g6** Annakov-Shtern, Dallas 2000. **9.♘d3 dxc4 10.♘xc4 ♘d6 11.0-0 e5 12.h3 h6**

13.♞d1 Worthy of consideration was 13.d5 ♘e7 14.e4±; in this pawn structure, Black does better to have his pawn on a6 than a5. Now the square b5 is in White's hands and he can create unpleasant pressure on the c-file. **13...exd4 14.exd4 ♘e7 15.♘e5 c6 16.♙f4 ♘ed5 17.♘xd5 ♘xd5 18.♙g3 ♙e6**⇒ Eingorn-Beliavsky, Odessa 2006 (rapid);

A2) **7.♙g5 0-0 8.cxd5 ♘xd5 9.♙xe7 ♘cxe7 10.e3 b6 11.♙e2 ♙b7 12.0-0 ♘g6 13.♞ac1 ♞c8 14.♞fd1**± Pavlovic-Maksimovic, Kladovo 1991;

A3) **7.cxd5 exd5 8.♙g5 8.♙f4 0-0 9.e3 a6 10.♙d3** – White is slightly better, but with accurate play, Anand neutralises his opponent's slight initiative – **10...h6 11.0-0 ♙d6 12.♘e5 ♘e7 13.h3 c6 14.♞ac1 ♞c7 15.♘a4 ♙f5 16.♘c5 ♙xd3 17.♘exd3 ♙xf4 18.♘xf4 ♞ab8 19.♞c2** draw, Kramnik-Anand, Monaco 1996 (rapid). **8...0-0 9.e3 ♘a5 10.♞c2 ♙e6 11.♙d3 h6 12.♙f4 ♘c6 13.h3**± Ehlvest-Rozentalis, Groningen 1993. The white pieces are more harmoniously placed, and Black has not yet managed to relocate the knight from c6 and put the pawn on c6 in its place;

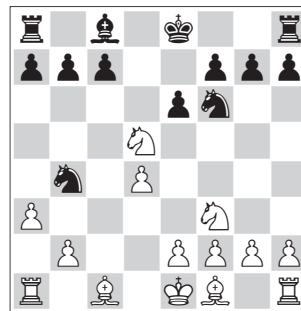
B) **6...dxc4** A perfectly sensible interpolation, since White now has to recapture with the queen. **7.♞xc4**:



Analysis diagram

B1) Spassky once transferred the bishop to b6 here, but there it has little to do. I believe White can then obtain the advantage: **7...♙a5 8.e3 0-0 9.♙e2 ♞e8 10.b4 ♙b6 11.0-0 e5 12.d5** Interesting complications lead to mass exchanges and simplification. At the same time, the pawn on e3 leaves its position and the bishop's position on b6 starts to take on some sense. It was probably simpler to exchange on e5 and then bring the dark-squared bishop onto the long diagonal: **12.dxe5 ♘xe5 13.♘xe5 ♞xe5 14.♙b2 ♙e6 15.♞h4**±. **12...♘e7 13.♘xe5 ♘exd5 14.♘xf7 ♘xf7 15.e4 ♙e6 16.exd5 ♘xd5 17.♘xd5 ♙xd5 18.♞f4+ ♘g8**⇒ Averbakh-Spassky, Leningrad 1960;

B2) Interesting, but insufficient for equality, is **7...♞d5 8.♞xb4** Lipnitsky recommends the straightforward **8.♞d3 ♙xc3+ 9.bxc3**± and considers that White's chances are preferable, because of the unstable position of the queen on d5: White will gradually prepare c4 or e4, bringing his bishops to life. **8...♘xb4 9.♘xd5**



Analysis diagram

9...♘bxd5 Worth considering is **9...♘c2+ 10.♙d1 ♘xa1 11.♘xc7+ ♙e7 12.♘xa8 ♙d7 13.♘b6!**? axb6 **14.♙g5 ♙a4+ 15.♙d2**, and here after **15...♞c8** or **15...♘b3+** the position re-

with Kramnik... mmm... you even played it consistently!” – Grischuk.

Game 64

Kramnik, Vladimir
Mamedyarov, Shakhriyar

Dortmund 2010

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 d5
4.♗c3 ♙b4 5.♙g5 ♗bd7 6.cxd5
exd5 7.e3 c5 8.dxc5!?



This very concrete move was played almost a hundred years ago by Showalter and Euwe, but its current popularity dates from the 1980s, and is due to Grandmaster Igor Novikov, who now lives in the USA. In our day, the Novikov Variation (as I think it deserves to be named) has become a favourite weapon of Vladimir Kramnik. White draws the fire on himself, inviting his opponent to fight for all he is worth for the square c3, and in many cases his king remains uncastled. What is he counting on? Mainly on the depth and quality of his home preparation, which allows him to repulse the opponent’s rather hasty attack and retain his extra material.

8...♞a5 9.♞c1

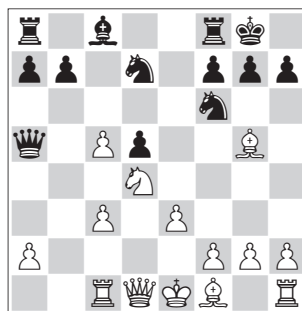
9.♗d2 ♗e4 10.♗dxc4 dxc4 11.♞d4
0-0 12.a3 12.0-0-0 ♗xc5 13.♗d5 ♗e6

14.♞xb4 ♞xb4 15.♗xb4 ♗xg5
16.♙e2±. 12...♙xc3+ 13.♞xc3
♞xc3+ 14.bxc3 ♗xc5 15.♙e7! ♗b3
16.♞d1 ♞e8 17.♙b5 ♙g4! 18.♙xe8
♙xd1 19.♙xd1 ♞xe8 20.♙b4 ♞c8=
Karpov-Lautier, France 1993.

9...♗e4

Taking the a2 pawn is not to be recommended: **9...♞xa2?! 10.♙xf6 ♗xf6**
11.♙b5+ ♙d7 12.0-0 ♙xc3
13.♙xd7+ ♗xd7 14.♞xc3 0-0 15.b4±
Lingnau-Gebhardt, Dortmund 1992.

At the present moment (May 2011) it is considered that in the variation with **9...♗e4** the last word was spoken by White in the game we are examining. Therefore Black players (including Kramnik himself) have switched to **9...♙xc3+ 10.bxc3 0-0** White is better after **10...♞xc5 11.♞d4±** and even more so after **10...♗e4? 11.♞xd5±. 11.♗d4!** White gets nothing from **11.♙d3 ♗e4 12.0-0 ♗dxc5 13.♙b1**
♗a4 14.c4 ♙g4 15.♞xd5 ♞xd5
16.cxd5 ♙xf3 17.♙e7 ♗ec3 18.♙xf8
♙xd5 draw, I.Novikov-Blatny, Budapest 1991.



Analysis diagram

A) **11...♞xa2** ‘If Black manages to place his knights on c4 and e4, then he will be fine, but this is not so easy. For a long time, it seemed to me that Black