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# Isolani Strategy

## Strengths and Weaknesses of the Isolated Queen's Pawn

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# Introduction

Anyone who fears an isolated pawn should not  
play chess  
*Siegbert Tarrasch*

Aaron Nimzowitsch, one of the outstanding chess researchers, considered that the problem of the isolated pawn was one of the cardinal problems of positional play. We are talking about a central d4-pawn for White or a d5-pawn for Black, the isolation of which is characterised by the absence of the pawns of this colour on the e- and c-files.

From the dialectical point of view, the specific nature of the isolated pawn is the assessment of its inherent contradictions – strengths and weaknesses, or in other words, dynamics and statics. In the opening stage of the game this is an assessment of the advantage of the first move, although for the modern state of theory the creation of dynamically balanced positions is more typical.

From the dynamic point of view, the advantage of the isolated pawn, let's say a pawn on d4, is that it is an outpost, controlling the central c5-

and e5-squares, on which a knight can be established, supporting an attack on the king, and the presence of the open e- and c-files assists the rapid activation of the rooks. From the static point of view, the defects of the isolated pawn are that it needs defending, especially when it is not supported by the bishop, and above all that it can be blockaded by a piece, usually a knight, occupying an important outpost (in our case this is d5), which is not easy to eliminate. The benefits of controlling this outpost become especially apparent when the material is reduced, since the weakness of the squares e4 and c4 is felt.

The first to begin studying the topic of the isolated pawn was the first world champion Wilhelm Steinitz, who encountered this problem in his match for the world title with Johann Zukertort. Here is this historic 9th game of their match, in which the method of playing against

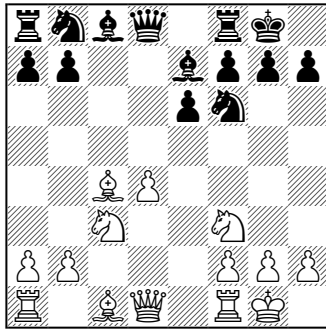
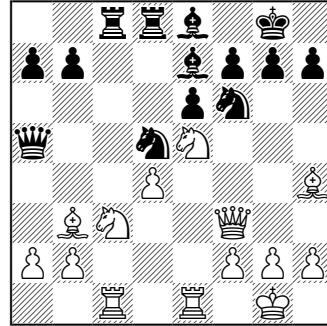
the isolated d4-pawn was convincingly demonstrated.

### ZUKERTORT – STEINITZ

New Orleans 1886

*Queen's Gambit Accepted D26*

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6  
4.♗f3 dxc4 5.e3 c5 6.♙xc4 cxd4  
7.exd4 ♙e7 8.0-0 0-0.



A typical position with an isolated d4-pawn, characteristic of the Queen's Gambit Accepted.

9.♙e2 ♘bd7 10.♙b3 ♘b6  
11.♙f4. Nowadays the development of the bishop at g5 is preferred.

11...♘bd5 12.♙g3 ♙a5 13.♖ac1 ♙d7 14.♘e5 ♖fd8! 15.♙f3 ♙e8! Note the manoeuvre ♖f8-d8 followed by playing the bishop to e8 – this is an important positional idea, which is still practised today. Such a regrouping of the pieces is useful both for attack, and for defence.

16.♖fe1 ♖ac8 17.♙h4.

17...♘xc3! Today the positional ideas of fighting against the isolated d4-pawn are known to many players, but when they were employed by Steinitz they were a revelation. After Black has securely defended his kingside, he switches to an attack in the centre and creates a so-called isolated pawn pair d4-c3. The d4-pawn is defended, but there is now a new weakness – the c3-pawn, which needs defending.

18.bxc3 ♙c7. One of the elements of modern technique is the fixing of the isolated pawn pair, which in the given position could have been achieved by 18...b5!?, but Steinitz carries a different plan against the weaknesses. He aims to simplify the position, reckoning that the hanging pawns (if White plays c3-c4) will remain a target.

19.♙d3 ♘d5! (nowadays a typical exchanging manoeuvre) 20.♙xe7 ♙xe7 21.♙xd5. White falls in with Black's plans, and commits a serious positional mistake.

21.♙g3 would have retained roughly equal chances.

21...♖xd5 22.c4. White plays too actively – the advance of the c-pawn merely weakens his pawn centre.

22...♖dd8 23.♖e3. This attack on the securely defended king is not realistic. White should have supported his d4-pawn with 23.♖ed1, intending ♗d3-b3 with the idea of c4-c5 and ♘e5-c4-d6, or, in some cases, d4-d5.

23...♗d6 24.♖d1. 24.♖h3 ♗xd4 25.♗xh7+ ♕f8 is not dangerous for Black.

24...f6 25.♖h3 h6 26.♘g4 ♗f4! Black has repelled White's attack and he now launches a counterattack, which gains in strength because the rook at h3 coordinates poorly with the remaining pieces.

27.♘e3 ♙a4! The need to defend the d4-pawn forces the white rook to abandon the first rank.

28.♖f3 ♗d6 29.♖d2 ♙c6 30.♖g3. Nothing is given by 30.♖xf6 gxf6 31.♗g6+ ♕f8 32.♗xf6+ ♕e8 33.♘f5 exf5, but 30.d5 ♗e5 31.♖g3 exd5 32.♗g6 came into consideration, although even here after 32...♖c7 Black has the advantage.

30...f5 31.♖g6 ♙e4 32.♗b3 ♕h7 33.c5 ♖xc5 34.♖xe6 ♖c1+ 35.♘d1 ♗f4 36.♗b2 ♖b1 37.♗c3 ♖c8 38.♖xe4 ♗xe4. White resigned.

A convincing win, wouldn't you agree? Johann Zukertort clearly failed to cope with the problem of the isolated d4-pawn, which he **deliberately** (we must emphasise this) went in for in the opening, hoping to benefit from his advantage in space, which was greatly valued in the romantic 19th century. It was no accident that one of the faithful followers of Steinitz's teachings, Siebert Tarrasch, vigorously stood up for the isolated pawn: 'I think that the player whose queen's pawn is isolated has a clear advantage. The point is that this pawn may serve as the starting-point for a very strong attack.' Tarrasch's belief in the virtues of the isolated pawn was so great, that he was also prepared to have one with Black, by playing in the Queen's Gambit 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c5! (Tarrasch's evaluation), thereby agreeing to the isolation of his d5-pawn after 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♘f3 followed by the exchange on d4. Nowadays the Tarrasch Defence to the Queen's Gambit is regarded as a sound opening, where Black achieves a position of dynamic balance.

In modern practice the appearance of an isolated pawn is the result of an opening variation being chosen, in which the possessor of the pawn hopes in return to exploit his advantage in time or space. It is well known that the advantage of

the first move affects the possibility of exploiting the dynamic and static features of an isolated pawn when there are still a large number of pieces on the board. Therefore we think it is logical to consider separately positions from the opening

obtained with isolated d4- and d5-pawns. In isolated pawn positions with reduced material and stable in character, the strategy of the play, irrespective of the colour, has its general rules, both in the middlegame, and in the endgame.

# PART I

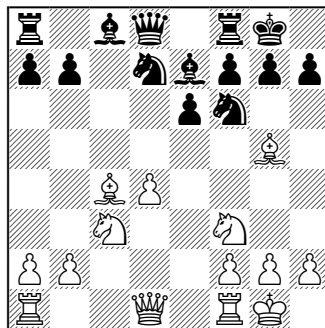
## THE ISOLATED D4-PAWN

The study of modern chess takes account of the interconnection of the opening with the middlegame, since the pawn structure arising after the opening largely determines the further development of the game. As regards our theme, Tarrasch remarked: 'If for an isolated pawn one can obtain an advantage in time or position, such an operation is advantageous and becomes an important feature for the creation of an attack. But if the opponent has a lead in development, the isolating of the pawn is unfavourable.'

Modern opening theory includes a quite extensive range of openings, where White goes in for an isolated d4-pawn, with the hope of exploiting its dynamic features. Here are a number of typical positions, arising in the popular openings.

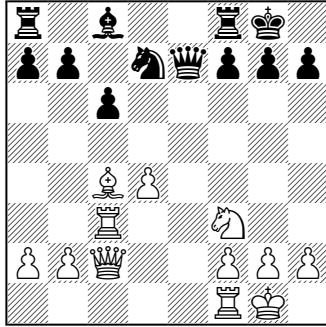
### Queen's Gambit, Orthodox Defence

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 ♙e7 5.♗f3 0-0 6.e3 ♞bd7 7.♙d3 dxc4 8.♙xc4 c5 9.0-0 cxd4 10.exd4.



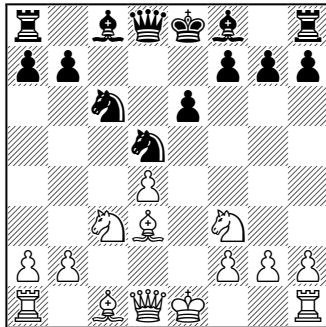
### Queen's Gambit, Capablanca Variation

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 ♙e7 5.♗f3 0-0 6.e3 ♞bd7 7.♖c1 c6 8.♙d3 dxc4 9.♙xc4 ♞d5 10.♙xe7 ♜xe7 11.0-0 ♞xc3 12.♖xc3 e5 13.♞c2 exd4 14.exd4.



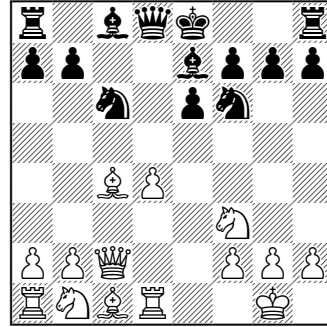
### Queen's Gambit, Tarrasch Defence Deferred

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6  
4.♘f3 c5 5.cxd5 ♘xd5 6.e3 ♘c6  
7.♙d3 cxd4 8.exd4.



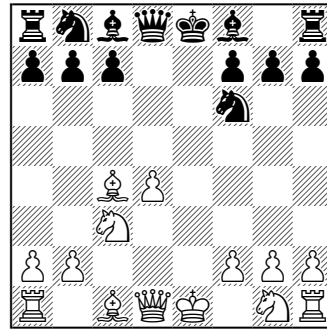
### Queen's Gambit Accepted

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘f3 ♘f6  
4.e3 e6 5.♙xc4 c5 6.0-0 ♘c6 7.♚e2  
cxd4 8.♖d1 ♙e7 9.exd4.



### Queen's Gambit Accepted

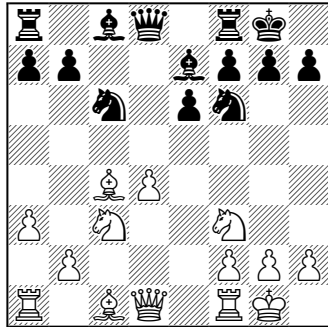
1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘c3 e5 4.e3  
exd4 5.exd4 ♘f6 6.♙xc4.



### Nimzo-Indian Defence

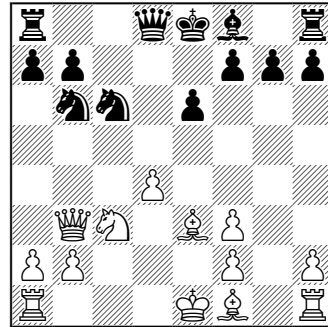
1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♙b4  
4.e3 0-0 5.♙d3 d5 6.♘f3 c5 7.  
0-0 ♘c6 8.a3 cxd4 9.exd4 dxc4  
10.♙xc4 ♙e7.





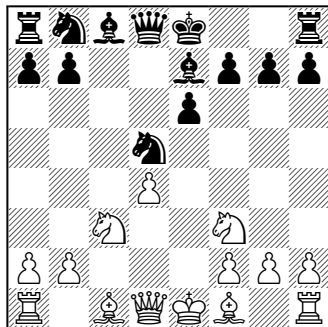
**Caro-Kann Defence, Panov Attack**

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 e6 5.Nc3 Nf6 6.Nf3 Be7 7.cxd5 Nxd5 .



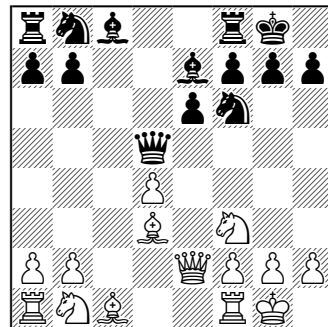
**Sicilian Defence, Alapin Variation**

1.e4 c5 2.c3 d5 3.exd5 Qxd5 4.d4 e6 5.Nf3 Nf6 6.Bd3 Be7 7.O-O O-O 8.Qe2 cxd4 9.exd4.



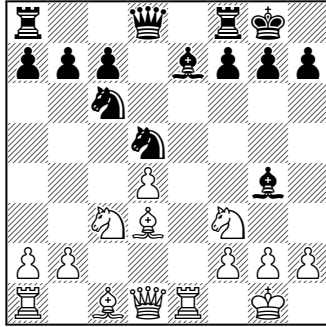
**Caro-Kann Defence, Panov Attack**

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 Nf6 5.Nc3 Nc6 6.Nf3 Bg4 7.cxd5 Nxd5 8.Qb3 Bxf3 9.gxf3 Nb6 10.Be3 e6.



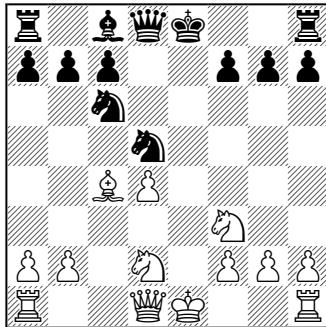
**Petroff Defence**

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.d4 d5 6.Bd3 Be7 7.O-O Nc6 8.Re1 Bg4 9.c4 Nf6 10.Nc3 O-O 11.cxd5 Nxd5.



### Gioco Piano

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5  
4.c3 Nf6 5.d4 exd4 6.cxd4 Bb4+  
7.Bd2 Bxd2+ 8.Nbxd2 d5 9.exd5  
Nxd5.



By agreeing, on emerging from the opening, to a position with an isolated pawn, White hopes to exploit its dynamic features. What do they comprise?

1) The d4-pawn ensures control of the e5- and c5-points. Of particular importance is the e5-outpost, from which a knight, supported by active bishops (in particular the light-square bishop) assists the mounting of a kingside attack.

2) A dynamic feature of the d4-pawn is the potential energy of its advance, comprising the d4-d5 breakthrough, which leads to the opening of the position and is especially apparent when White has a lead in development.

3) If Black is behind in development, an attack on the piece blockading the d4-pawn may lead to a favourable change in the pawn structure by means of exchanges on d5.

## Chapter 6

# Dynamic potential of the d5-pawn

In the mid-20th century the prevalent opinion was that you could allow yourself an isolated pawn, only if you had a lead in development. This caution was removed by the Petrosian – Spassky 1969 World Championship Match, in which the challenger employed the Tarrasch Defence to the Queen’s Gambit with Black in five games and achieved a positive result (−0=4+1). After this match the number of supporters of the isolated pawn in Black’s position increased considerably.

In the examples examined in Chapter 1, Black went along with White by not objecting to reduction in the material. However, the strategy of playing with an isolated pawn envisages not a passive striving for a draw, but above all the exploitation of its dynamic potential to create active piece play and, if possible, the d5-d4 breakthrough.

### 6.1. Active piece play for Black

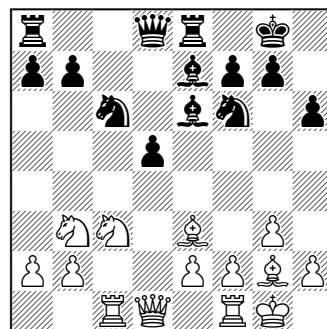
The control by the isolated d5-pawn of the central e4- and c4-points allows Black to develop his pieces in

active positions, combining threats on the kingside with the possibility of counterplay on the queenside. Pressure on the d4 blockading point is important, tying White down by the threat of the d5-d4 breakthrough.

#### PETROSIAN – SPASSKY

World Championship Match,  
4th Game, Moscow 1969  
*Queen’s Gambit D34*

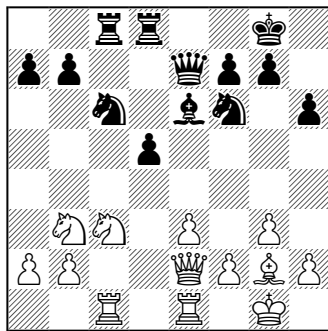
1.c4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 c5  
4.cxd5 exd5 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.g3 ♘f6  
7.♙g2 ♙e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.♙g5 cxd4  
10.♘xd4 h6 11.♙e3 ♙g4 (in recent times 12...♖e8 was preferred)  
12.♘b3 ♙e6 13.♖c1 ♖e8.



Black has completed his development, and although for the moment the e-file is blocked by the bishops, this is only a temporary phenomenon. For example, if 14. ♖c5 there can follow 14... ♗xc5 15. ♗xc5 ♘e4 with active play for Black.

14. ♖e1. A prophylactic move, against the threat of ♗d7 and ♗h3. After 14. ♗b5, which was played in the 2nd game of the match, there followed 14... ♗d7 15. ♗bd4 ♗h3 16. ♗xc6 bxc6 17. ♗d3 ♗xg2 18. ♖xg2 a5! with good play for Black.

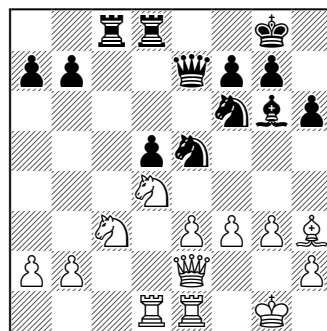
14... ♗d7 15. ♗c5! (the exchange of the dark-square bishops is advantageous to White) 15... ♖ac8 16. ♗xe7 ♗xe7 17. e3 ♖ed8 18. ♗e2.



18... ♗g4! 'There was no point in Black relieving himself of his isolated pawn by 18...d4. You don't play the Tarrasch Defence, in order to be thinking about the weakness of the isolated d5-pawn! Consistent

play by Black should be aimed in the first instance at exploiting its strength.' (Bondarevsky)

19. f3 (19. ♗f1 ♘e4) 19... ♗f5 20. ♖cd1 ♘e5 21. ♗d4 ♗g6 22. ♗h3.



22... ♖c4!? A sharp move; 22... ♖b8 would have led to quiet play.

23. g4. If 23. f4 there could have followed 23... ♗h5 24. ♗f1 ♗c6! 25. g4 ♗xg4 26. ♗xd5 ♖xd5 27. ♗xc4 ♗h4! 28. ♗xg4 ♗xg4+ 29. ♖h1 ♖xd4 with a guaranteed perpetual check.

23... ♖b4 24. b3 ♗c6 25. ♗d2 ♖b6 26. ♗ce2?! 26. ♗a4 ♖a6 27. ♗f1 ♗xd4 28. exd4 was correct.

26... ♗h7 27. ♗g2 ♖e8 28. ♗g3 ♗xd4 29. exd4 ♖e6 30. ♖xe6 ♗xe6 31. ♖c1 ♗g6 32. ♗f1? 32. ♖f2! would have consolidated the position. Now Black seizes the initiative.

32... ♗h7 33. ♗f4 ♗f8 34. ♖c5 (34. ♗e5! was stronger) 34... ♗b1! 35. a4 ♗g6 36. ♗d2 ♗f6 37. ♖f2