

My System

A chess manual on totally new principles

Aron Nimzowitsch

Quality Chess
www.qualitychessbooks.com

Foreword

It would be interesting to choose the best chess book from the 20th century. *My System* by Aron Nimzowitsch would certainly be my favourite, and I think this would be a common choice. According to Mikhail Tal, this book is “full of the elixir of chess youth”. What are the secrets behind the powerful effect *My System* has on its readers?

I think that the magical power of this book can be found in the fact that the author managed to be ahead of his time. Already in 1925 he expressed still relevant modern ideas like prophylaxis, pawn activity, and the blockade. The impulse that originated from Nimzowitsch was so immense that the thinking of chess developed in his direction. If you look at the games of Petrosian and Karpov you immediately find the traces of Nimzowitsch’s “system”. These outstanding chess players developed to perfection the prophylactic style of preventing the opponent’s possibilities.

Nimzowitsch’s mark is recognisable to some extent in every top player. When I contemplate the later games of Kasparov, I am convinced that many of his decisions are based on purely prophylactic grounds.

Nimzowitsch did not write a simple handbook of opening lines, but a manual of chess. The opinions, ideas, and generalisations that he describes gave rise to a true revolution, whose consequences we can correctly evaluate today.

Artur Yusupov

From the publishers

When we decided to publish a new edition of *My System* our primary intention was to produce an updated translation. The second issue was which source we should use for this translation. We decided on the 2005 Rattman German edition, which contains a number of improvements from previous editions. We also decided to computer-check, within reason, the games in the book. The Rattman edition already had some interesting observations on the original text, which we decided to retain with their corrections in the text or as footnotes on the page (pages 15, 64, 74, 76, 84, 106, 126, 156) and their references to the editor.

We have also added two small essays at the end of the book. The first is a general discussion about the current relevance of *My System*; the second contains just over a dozen positions from the book where we think a new opinion might interest the reader. These positions have also been marked with superscript throughout the book.

We would like to thank Yuri Garrett of Caissa Italia for his superb efforts in researching Nimzowitsch’s tournament and match results, which are included towards the end of this book as the article “The Chess Career of Aron Nimzowitsch”.

This second print contains minor modifications, most of which will be hard to spot in a comparison. Alas, there is one addition to the *Nimzowitsch for the 21st Century* at the end of the book.

We hope that our new edition of *My System* will reveal this classic to a new generation of young chess players.

December 2006/August 2007

Preface

In general, I am not at all in favour of writing a preface; but in this case it seems necessary because the whole business is so novel, that a preface would be a welcome aid.

My new system did not arise all at once, but rather it grew slowly and gradually, or as one might say organically. Of course the main idea, the thorough analysing one by one of the different elements of chess strategy, is based on inspiration. But it would in no way be sufficient, should I wish to discuss open files, to say that such and such a file should be occupied and exploited, or if talking about passed pawns to say that this particular one should be stopped. No, it is necessary to go into some detail. It may sound somewhat amusing, but let me assure you, my dear reader, that for me the passed pawn possesses a soul, just like a human being; it has unrecognised desires which slumber deep inside it and it has fears, the very existence of which it can but scarcely divine. I feel the same about the pawn chain and the other elements of strategy. I now intend to give to you concerning each of these elements a series of laws and rules which you can use, rules which do go into a lot of detail and which will help you to attain clarity even about the apparently mysterious links between events, such as are to be found over the 64 squares of our beloved chessboard.

Part II of the book then goes into positional play, especially in its neo-romantic form. It is frequently claimed that I am the father of the neo-romantic school. Therefore it should be of interest to hear what I think about it.

Manuals are customarily written in a dry, instructive style. It is thought that one would somehow lose face, if one allowed a humorous tone to appear, because what does humour have to do in a chess manual! I cannot share this point of view. In fact I would go further: I consider it to be totally wrong, since real humour often contains more inner truth than the most solemn seriousness. As far as I am concerned, I am a great fan of parallels with an amusing effect, and thus I like to draw on the events of everyday life in order by doing so to throw some light on complicated happenings over the chessboard.

At many points in the book I have added a schematic diagram so that the structure of my thought can be seen clearly. This step was taken not only on pedagogical grounds, but also for reasons connected with personal security – since less gifted critics (and these do exist) only wish to or only can take into account isolated details and not the more complicated underlying structure which is the true content of my book. The individual parts, apparent by name at first sight, are seemingly so simple, but that is their merit. To have reduced the chaos inherent to a certain number of rules linked to each other in various relationships of cause and effect, that is exactly what I think I can be proud of. For example, the 5 special cases linked to the 7th and 8th ranks sound simple, but how difficult it was to tease them out of the surrounding chaos! Or the open file or even the pawn chains! Of course, at each stage things become more difficult, because the book is intended to be progressive in level. But I do not consider this growing difficulty to be armour which will protect me from the attacks of those critics who use only light weapons. I insist on this only for the sake of my readers. I will also be attacked for making use of a great number of my own games. But I shall not be downcast by this attack either. After all, am I not justified in illustrating *my* system with *my* games?! Moreover, I even include some games (well) played by amateurs, but this does not make me one.

I now confide this first edition to the public view. I do so with a clear conscience. My book will have its faults, it would be impossible for me to cast light into all the corners of strategy, but I consider that I have written the first real manual about the game of chess and not simply about the openings.

CONTENTS

I The Elements

Introduction	15
---------------------	----

1 The centre and development

1	By development we mean the strategic march of the troops towards the border	17
2	A pawn move must not be considered in itself to be a developing move, but rather simply a move which helps development	17
3	A lead in development is an ideal	19
4	Exchanging followed by a gain of tempo	20
	A possible intermezzo between exchanging and gaining a tempo	21
5	Liquidation followed by development or a bid for freedom	21
6	The centre and its urge to demobilise	24
6a	Surrendering the centre	26
7	Pawn grabbing in the opening	28
7a	Take any central pawn if it can be done without too great a danger!	30

2 The open file

1	Introduction • General comments and definition	31
2	How open files occur (or are born)	32
3	The ideal (purpose) behind all operations on a file	33
4	Possible obstacles to operations down a file	34
5	“Restricted” advance on a file in order give it up in favour of another file, or the <i>indirect</i> exploitation of a file • The file as a springboard	37
6	The outpost	38
	Schematic illustration of the open file	42

3 The 7th and 8th ranks

1	Introduction and general comments	43
2	<i>Convergent</i> and <i>revolutionary</i> attacks on the 7 th rank Seizing a square (or pawn) with an <i>acoustic echo</i> (a simultaneous check)	43
3	The five special cases on the 7 th rank	46
1	The 7 th rank “absolute” and passed pawns	46
2	Double rooks ensure perpetual check	46
3	The drawing mechanism of ♖ + ♘	47
4	Marauding on the 7 th rank	47
5	Combining play on the 7 th and 8 th ranks (flanking from the corner)	47
	Schematic illustration for the 7 th and 8 th ranks	52
	Schematic illustration for the 5 special cases	52

Illustrative games for the first three chapters 53

4 The passed pawn

1	Getting our bearings	73
2	Blockading passed pawns	74
2a	The first reason	75
2b	The second reason	79
2c	The third reason	80
3	The main and secondary functions of the blockading piece	80
	The effect of the blockade	81
4	The struggle against the blockading piece	83
	“Negotiations” or uprooting	84
5	Frontal attack by a king on an isolated pawn – an ideal!	86
6	Privileged passed pawns	89
7	When a passed pawn should advance	92
	When can a passed pawn be considered ready to move?	92
	Endgames and games illustrating passed pawns	95
	Schematic representation for the passed pawn (question and answer session)	101

5 Exchanging

1	We exchange in order to occupy (or open) a line without loss of time	103
2	We destroy a defender by exchanging	103
3	We exchange in order not to lose time retreating	104
3a	“He tries to sell his life as dearly as possible”	105
4	How and where exchanges usually take place	105

6 The elements of endgame strategy

	Introduction and general comments • The typical disproportion	109
1	Centralisation	109
	Shelters and bridge building	112
2	The aggressively posted rook as a typical endgame advantage	113
3	Welding together isolated troops and “General advance!”	116
4	The “materialisation” of the abstract concepts: file or rank	117
	Schematic illustration of the “endgame” or “the 4 elements”	119

7 The pinned piece

1	Introduction and general remarks	125
2	The concept of the completely or partially pinned piece	126
	The exchanging combination on the pinning square	128
3	The problem of unpinning	130
a)	Challenging	131
b)	Ignoring the threat or allowing our pawns to be broken up	133
c)	The reserves rush up to unpin in a peaceful way	133
d)	Tacking (manoeuvring) and keeping open the options a, b, c!	134
	Games involving pins	135
	Schematic representation to illustrate pinning	141

8 Discovered check

- 1 The degree of relationship between the “pin” and the “discovered check” is defined more closely • Where is the best place for the piece which is discovering the check? 143
- 2 The treadmill (windmill) 144
- 3 Double check 145

9 The pawn chain

- 1 General remarks and definitions • The base of the pawn chain 149
 - The idea of two separate battlefields 149
 - The idea of building a chain 149
 - Towards the kingside 150
 - Towards the centre 150
 - 2 Attacking the pawn chain 151
 - 3 Attacking the base as a strategic necessity 153
 - 4 Transferring the rules of blockading to the pawn chain 154
 - 5 The concept of a surprise attack compared to that of positional warfare, as applied to chains • The attacker at the parting of the ways! 156
 - 5a The positional struggle, or put simply the slow siege of the unprotected base 158
 - 6 Transferring the attack 161
- Schematic representation of pawn chains 164
- Games to illustrate pawn chains 165

II Positional Play

1 Prophylaxis and the centre

- 1 The reciprocal links between the treatment of the elements on one hand and positional play on the other 177
 - 2 Offences against sound positional play, which should be weeded out in every case as a *sine qua non* to the study of positional play 177
 - 3 My novel conception of positional play as such 179
 - 4 Next to prophylaxis, the idea of the “general mobility” of the pawn mass constitutes one of the main pillars of my teachings on positional play 183
 - 5 The centre 184
 - 6 What should be the *leitmotiv* behind true strategy 189
 - 7 Giving up the centre 191
- The “surrender of the centre” – a prejudice 192
- Roads to the mastering of positional play (schematic representation of chapter 1) 200

2 Doubled pawns and restraint

- 1 The affinity between “doubled pawns” and “restraint” 201
 - 1a The only true strength of doubled pawns 203
- 2 A review of the best-known doubled pawn structures 203
 - The doubled pawn complex in diagram 391 as an instrument of attack 209

3	Restraint • “Mysterious rook moves”	211
4	Clarification of the nucleus of a manoeuvre designed to restrain a pawn majority	216
5	The different forms of restraint are more clearly explained	216
	a) The mobile central pawn	217
	b) The struggle against a qualitative majority	218
	c) Restraining doubled pawn complexes	219
	d) My own special variation and its restraining tendencies	220

3 The isolated queen’s pawn and its descendants

a)	The isolated queen’s pawn	229
	1 The dynamic strength of the d4-pawn	230
	2 The isolani as an endgame weakness	230
	3 The isolani as an instrument of attack in the middlegame	231
	4 Which cases are favourable to White and which to Black?	232
	5 A few more words about the creation of a <i>related weakness</i> among White’s queenside pawns	232
b)	The “isolated pawn pair”	233
c)	Hanging pawns	234
	From the “isolani” to “hanging pawns”	235
d)	The bishops	238
	1 Horowitz bishops	239
	2 A pawn mass directed by bishops	240
	3 Cramping the knights while at the same time fighting against a pawn majority	241
	4 The two bishops in the endgame	242

4 Overprotection and weak pawns

	How to systematically <i>overprotect</i> your own strong points and how to try to get rid of weak pawns or squares	247
a)	Overprotection of the central squares	249
b)	Overprotection of the centre as a protective measure for your own kingside	251
	How to get rid of weak pawns	252

5 Manoeuvring

1	What are the logical elements on which manoeuvring against a weakness is based? The concept of the “pivot”, around which manoeuvring takes place.	255
2	The terrain • The rule for manoeuvring • Changing place	255
	a) A pawn weakness, which is attacked in turn from the (7 th) rank and from the file	256
	b) Two pawn weaknesses, in this case c3 and h3	256
	c) The king as a weakness	257
3	Combining play on both wings, when for the moment the weaknesses either do not exist or are hidden	258

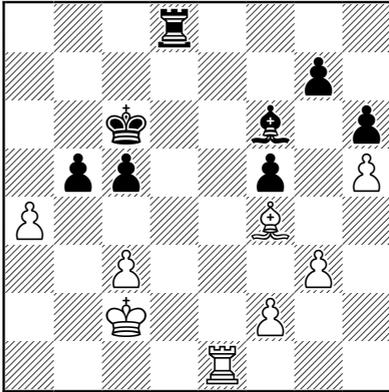
4	Manoeuvring when circumstances become difficult (your own centre is in need of protection)	260
Postscript: The history of the revolution in chess from 1911-1914		
1	The general situation before 1911	269
	Does "The modern game of chess" by Dr Tarrasch really correspond to the modern conception of the game?	270
2	The revolutionary ideas	276
3	Revolutionary theory put into revolutionary praxis	277
4	Other historical battles	279
5	Extension and development of the revolution in chess in the years 1914 to 1926	282
The chess career of Aron Nimzowitsch		285
Index of players		300
<i>My System</i> in the computer age (or footnotes)		303
Nimzowitsch for the 21st Century		313

Endgames and games illustrating passed pawns

Nimzowitsch – Rubinstein

Breslau 1925

180



White had the move and played an exchange sacrifice, which despite the length of the combination can be expressed in no other terms than: White is aiming for the ideal position (the frontal attack against an isolated pawn – see section 5, page 86). I managed to carry out the deeply laid plan (although it could have been refuted) since Rubinstein seemed handicapped by not being as familiar as I was with the well-known rules of my system. Moreover, I know no other ending in which this precise striving for “the ideal position” is more clearly illustrated than in the one which follows.

Things proceeded as follows: **1. ♖e6† ♕d5** **2. ♗xf6 gxf6** **3. axb5** (threatening **4. c4† ♕xc4** **5. b6** etc) **3... c4** And now White took the **♗h6**, although he had to give up the b- and h-pawns; there followed **4. ♕xh6 ♖h8** **5. ♕g7 ♖xh5** **6. ♕xf6 ♕c5** **7. ♕d2!** The key idea. All that has happened up till now was solely and simply to clear the way for the king to get to f4. **7... ♕xb5?** An error. Here Black could prevent the king journey planned by White by **7... ♖h6** **8. ♕d4† ♕xb5** **9. ♕e3 ♖e6†** **10. ♕f4 ♖e4†** then **♖xd4** and wins. Note that **10. ♕f3** (instead of **10. ♕f4?**) would

not have saved White either, because then there would have been at the correct time **♖e4** then **♕xb5** and the king would have marched to e1 followed by **♖e2** etc.

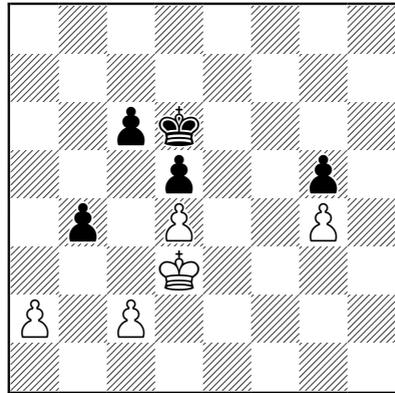
In the game, there followed **8. ♕e3 ♕c5** **9. ♕f4!** And things are all right again. **9... ♕d5** **10. f3** And it ended in a draw after a few moves, since the rook and black king cannot both be liberated at the same time. (Or else there could be a double attack on c3 followed by an exchange sacrifice.) An instructive ending!! How keenly the king tried to get to the frontal attack we have described! Why? Well, because such efforts form part of the king’s innermost being (and one of the rules of the blockade).

The second example shows a simple case of flanking.

Hansen – Nimzowitsch

Denmark (simultaneous)

181



Black played **1... ♕c7** (he has to do something against the threat of c3 with the distant passed pawn which would result from it) and the ending went as follows, simply and effectively: **2. c3** (or **2. c4 ♕b6** **3. cxd5 cxd5** **4. ♕c2 ♕a5!** – tempo!) **2... ♕b6!** **3. cxb4 ♕b5** **4. ♕c3 ♕a4** and the flanking works perfectly in spite of

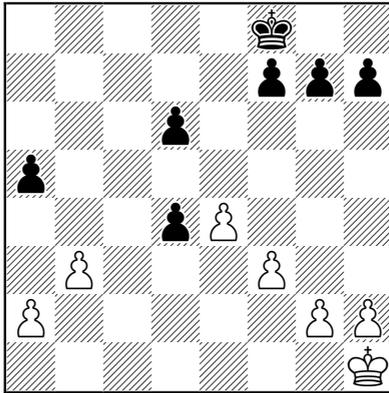
allowing White to win the pawn, since White has been crippled which favours Black's flanking manoeuvre.

Example 3 illustrates how a distant passed pawn can deflect a king.

Tarrasch – Berger

Breslau 1889

182



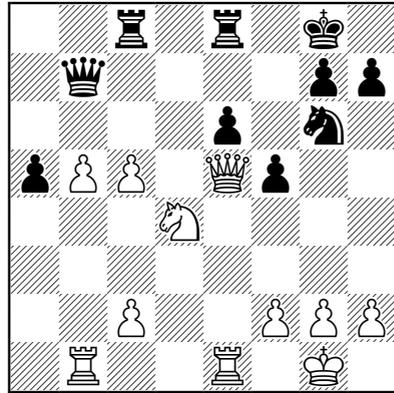
After an exchange of queens (see game 6, page 60) there now followed: **37.♔g1 ♖e7** **38.♕f2 d5** **39.e5** (there was also the simpler 39.exd5 ♔d6 40.♕e2 ♕xd5 41.a3 ♖c5 and White will also succeed with f2-f4 and finally a deflection by b4†) **39...♗e6** **40.♕e2** (40.f4 would be weaker on account of 40...g5 41.g3 gxf4 42.gxf4 ♕f5) **40...♗xe5** **41.♕d3 h5** **42.a3** (42.h4! first would have been preferable) **42...h4!** Black creates a chance for later. **43.b4 axb4** **44.axb4 ♔d6** **45.♕xd4 ♕c6** **46.b5†** White does not use the zugzwang. 46.f4 would have brought about zugzwang and a pawn advance by Black; this would have decisively favoured the later king excursion by White and the execution of the black pawns which follows it. **46...♗xb5** **47.♕xd5 ♕b4!** And now the deflection is of lesser importance in that Black, after the taking of the g- and h-pawns, needs only a few tempi for his own h-pawn. The ending is instructive on account of the errors. The position reached was finally won by White, after Black had overlooked the chance of a draw.

Example 4 is important for the way linked passed pawns move (see section 6, page 89).

Nimzowitsch – Alapin

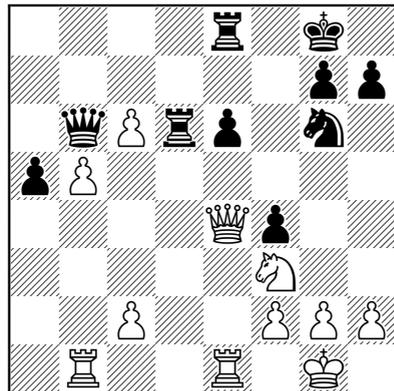
St Petersburg 1913

183



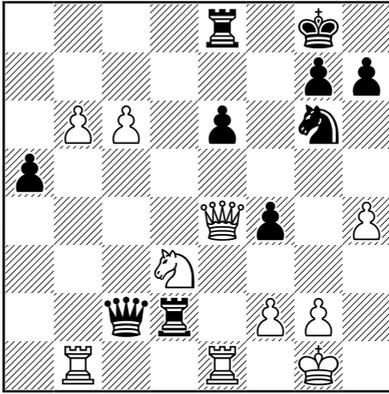
Play went: **1.c6!** Here the choice of which pawn to advance first is made not so much on account of which is under the greater or lesser danger of blockade but because White would otherwise lose the c-pawn. **1...♗b6** (if 1...♗xc6 2.bxc6 ♗xb1 3.♗xb1 ♕xe5 then 4.c7 with a passed pawn and the 7th rank absolute [page 46], e.g. 4...♕d7 5.♕c6 and wins) **2.♗e3** Now the blockader on b6 must be chased away so that the somewhat backward b-pawn can advance (section 6, page 90). **2...f4** (the threat had been ♕xf5) **3.♗e4 ♗cd8** **4.♕f3 ♗d6**

184



5.h4! With his strong position in the centre (♖e4), White now wishes to prove that the defending pieces are hanging in mid-air. **5...♗c5** It has worked. The blockader has become more accommodating! **6.♗e5** (the move 6.h5! would also be good and logical; 6...♗xh5 7.b6 and the two friends meet up again) **6...♞d4** (the main line would be 6...♞d2 7.♗d3 ♗xc2 8.b6!,

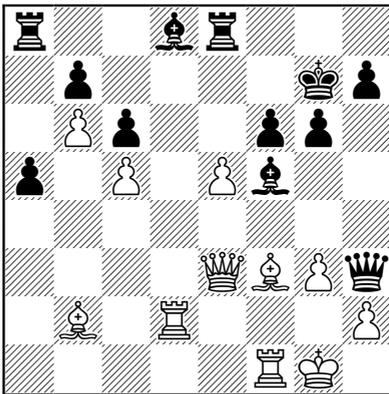
185



and without worrying about the loss of a piece the pawns march on to queen) **7.♗e2 ♗xh4 8.b6** (according to book, the way things should go!) **8...♞b4 9.♞xb4 axb4 10.b7 ♗c3 11.♗e4 ♗f5 12.♗d7 1-0**

Example 5 (Nimzowitsch – Amateur, odds game, Nuremberg 1904) shows how impetuous a passed pawn can become. Usually you cannot guess at its temperament, but we do know about its lust to expand. So the example which follows will not come as a surprise.

186



Next came **1.g4 ♗xg4 2.exf6† ♗f7**. Here, the king is a bad blockader because of its sensitivity. The danger of mate means that his blockading effect is pure illusion. **3.♗d5†!** To create a zone of activity for the f-rook without loss of time. It is now supporting the passed pawn to the best of its ability. **3...cxd5 4.♗xe8† ♗xe8 5.f7† ♗f8** The last attempt at a blockade. But now the piece behind (♗b2) is brought to life by the lengthening of the diagonal thanks to 5.f7. It makes its presence felt, most uncomfortably for Black. **6.♗g7†! ♗xg7 7.f8♗ mate.**

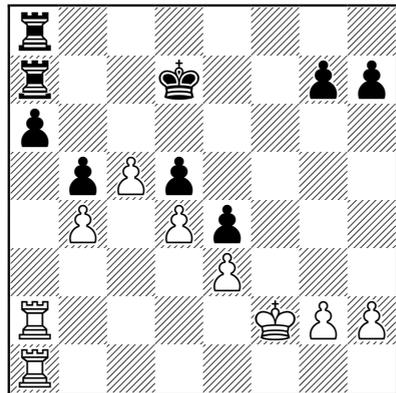
This ending is a pragmatic demonstration of the lust to expand.

Example 6 is characteristic of the flexibility required of the blockader. The subject is an endgame which has come down to a blockade. We shall only look at the most important aspects.

Nimzowitsch – A. Nilsson

Nordic Master Tournament 1924

187



White wishes to play down the f-file with something like **1.♗g3, 2.♞f1**. He wishes to create for himself an entry point on f6 by advancing his h-pawn h2-h4-h5-h6, and for that reason the presence of the white king on the kingside is necessary. But despite the fact that the f-line dominates play, White found the courage to resist its lure and quietly played **1.♞a2-a5** and only then started the struggle for the f-file. The blockade on a5 is possible here, because the blockading piece