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Hanging Pawns

When we refer to hanging pawns we mean a pair of pawns on neighbouring files, cut off from the rest of that side's pawn-structure. Note that I shall use this term a little more broadly than did the great Aron Nimzowitsch, who reserved the label 'hanging pawns' for two such pawns abreast of one another, both on their fourth rank, and referred to them as an 'isolated pawn-couple' when one of them lagged behind on its third rank. Hanging pawns usually occur on semi-open (for the opponent) files, thus receiving the enemy fire without the possibility of being protected by fellow pawns. Thus, they constitute a kind of static weakness.

If they are situated on the same rank, then both pawns will receive pressure from the opponent's pieces, with the ultimate aim of either winning one of them or forcing its advance. Then, the other pawn will become backward and isolated, while the square right in front of that pawn will become a 'hole', and consequently an outpost for the opponent. As a result of the above, the opponent's targets are clarified and his plans made easier.

On the other hand, the hanging pawns, especially when on the same rank, control the centre and are a permanently threatening dynamic force, usually through the advance of one of them – or both.

The exploitation of the advantages and disadvantages of an isolated pawn is clear-cut. In the case of hanging pawns, their dynamic potential lies beneath the surface and is much more difficult to evaluate. As a consequence, they lead to dynamic positions where combinative play is of primary importance.

As mentioned above, possession of hanging pawns creates possibilities of assuming the initiative, usually culminating in an attack against the opponent's king. Therefore, piece exchanges do not favour the side with the hanging pawns, as they decrease their potential.

As is the case in all cases of pawn weaknesses, the negative aspects of hanging pawns become especially evident in the endgame, where the reduced material makes them more vulnerable, precisely because of the lack of defensive pieces, or pieces in general, that could counterbalance the pawns' weakness with a strong initiative.

As a result of this examination we can conclude the following:

1) Hanging pawns 'crave' to be on the same rank, while at the same time strongly 'dislike' piece exchanges. In cooperation with the other pieces they contribute in the fight for the initiative.

2) The hanging pawns may become a serious weakness when one of them is forced to advance or when they become vulnerable targets of the opponent's pieces in general.

Grivas – Needham

Oakham 1984

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 ♙e7 5 ♙g5 0-0 6 e3 ♘bd7 7 cxd5 ♘xd5

The natural 7...exd5 is preferable.

8 ♙xe7 ♚xe7 9 ♙d3 b6

White is better after 9...♘xc3 10 bxc3 e5 11 ♚c2!

10 ♘xd5 exd5 11 0-0 ♘f6 12 ♚a4 ♙d7

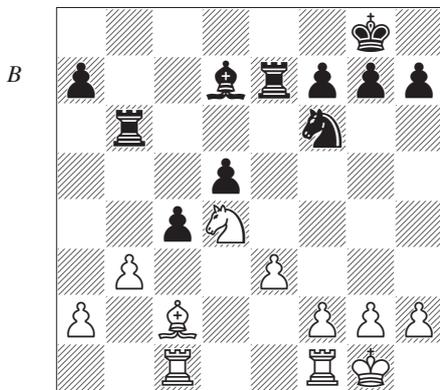
12...♙e6 is more natural.

13 ♚a6 c5 14 ♚a3 ♚fe8?!

A more appropriate idea is 14...♚fc8 15 ♚ac1 ♙f8.

15 dxc5 bxc5 16 ♚ac1 c4 17 ♚xe7 ♚xe7 18 ♙c2 ♚b8 19 b3 ♚b6 20 ♘d4 (D)

The outpost on d4 as well as the better bishop promise White a slight but permanent advantage, and more pleasant prospects in general, without any danger of defeat. That is exactly Black's main problem. Of course, a lot of



work is still required in order to bring the point home.

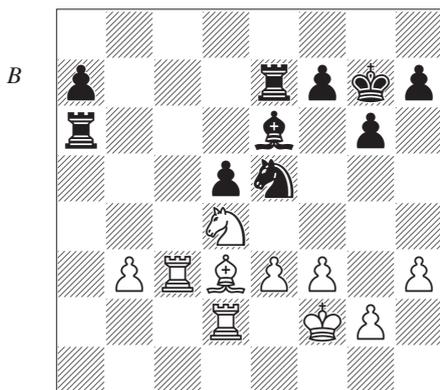
20...♙e6 21 ♖fd1 g6 22 f3!

Controlling more squares and opening a path for the white king, who wishes to join the proceedings.

22...♗a6 23 ♙b1 ♖d7 24 ♔f2 ♔g7 25 ♖d2 ♗b6 26 ♖c3 ♖e5 27 h3 cxb3?

Black should have continued with 27...a5! 28 f4 ♖c6 29 ♖xc6 (29 ♖xe6+ fxe6 30 e4 a4!) 29...♗xc6 30 bxc4! dxc4 31 e4 ±. With the text-move, Black leaves herself with an isolated pawn on d5, at the same time also opening the c-file, which White can immediately put to good use.

28 axb3 ♗a6 29 ♙d3! (D)

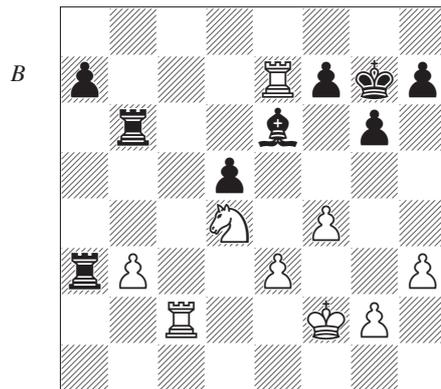


The exchange of the white bishop for the black knight will increase White's superiority, as the remaining pair of minor pieces is definitely in his favour (good knight vs bad bishop).

29...♗a1 30 ♙b5! ♗b7 31 f4 ♖d7 32 ♙xd7 ♙xd7 33 ♖c5 ♙e6 34 ♗c6 ♙d7 35 ♖c5 ♙e6 36 ♗dc2 ♗a3 37 ♖c7! ♗b6

Black's problems increase as the alternative 37...♗xc7 38 ♗xc7 ♔f6 39 g4! h6 40 ♔f3! ♗a1 41 h4! is hardly pleasant.

38 ♗e7! (D)



The threatened 39 ♗cc7 and 40 ♖xe6+ is decisive. Thus Black resorts to an exchange sacrifice, without however being able to change the outcome of the game.

38...♗axb3 39 ♖xb3 ♗xb3 40 ♗cc7 ♔f6 41 ♗xa7 ♗b2+ 42 ♔f3 h5 43 g4 hxg4+ 44 hxg4 ♗b6 45 g5+ ♔g7 46 ♗e8 ♖d6 47 ♗aa8 f6 48 ♗e7+ ♙f7 49 ♗aa7 1-0

Grivas – Alexakis

Athens 1994

1 d4 ♖f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♖f3 c5 4 g3 cxd4 5 ♖xd4 ♖c6 6 ♙g2 ♙b4+ 7 ♙d2 ♗a5 8 ♖c2 ♙xd2+ 9 ♖xd2?!

A better option is 9 ♗xd2! ♗xd2+ (9...♗c5 10 ♖e3) 10 ♖xd2 ± (10...d5?! 11 cxd5 ♖xd5 12 ♙xd5 exd5 13 ♖b3).

9...d5! (D)

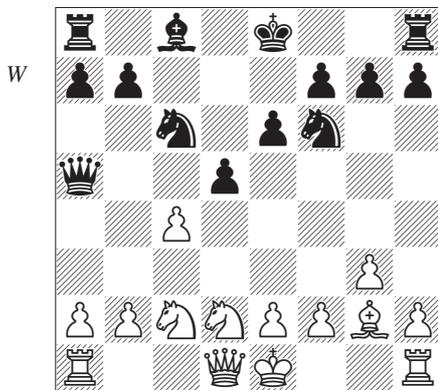
10 0-0 0-0 11 cxd5 exd5

Black could also try 11...♖xd5 12 ♖b3 ♗d8 13 ♖cd4!, with just a slight advantage for White.

12 ♖b3 ♗b6! 13 ♖cd4!

Certainly not 13 ♙xd5? ♗d8 14 e4 ♙e6 15 ♖e3 ♖xe4! with advantage for Black!

13...a5!



Black develops a strong initiative on the queenside, trying to harass the white knights away from the d4-square. Moreover, it must be noted that White lacks the necessary time to focus on Black's isolated pawn, as he is constantly required to solve other problems.

14 ♖c1 a4 15 ♘xc6 bxc6 16 ♗d4!

The point of White's play, retaining a slight plus. The hanging pawns that have been created in Black's camp require protection.

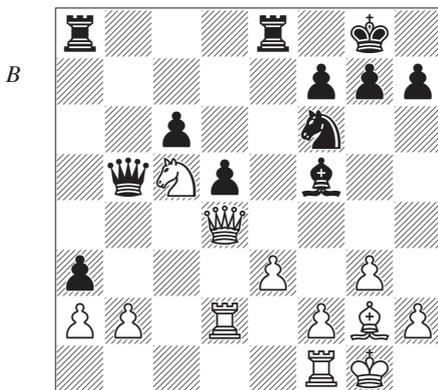
16...♗b5

Black has no choice as 16...♗xd4? 17 ♘xd4 costs him at least one pawn.

17 ♘c5 a3!

After 17...♗xe2?! 18 ♘xa4 White's queenside pawn-mass will prove more dangerous than Black's blockaded hanging pawns.

18 ♖c2! ♙f5 19 ♗d2 ♗fe8 20 e3 (D)



Black has reacted correctly and still enjoys the initiative. White has also played properly

and, as a consequence, we have a dynamic position where White retains a minimal advantage.

20...♘e4

20...axb2 21 ♖xb2 ♗a5 is interesting. After 22 ♖c1, Black's hanging pawns are hardly inferior to the white a2-pawn, which cannot really be described as 'passed' in any meaningful sense.

21 ♘xe4 ♙xe4 22 b3

Not, of course, 22 ♖c1?? ♙xg2 23 ♗xg2 ♖e4! 24 ♗c3 ♖c4!

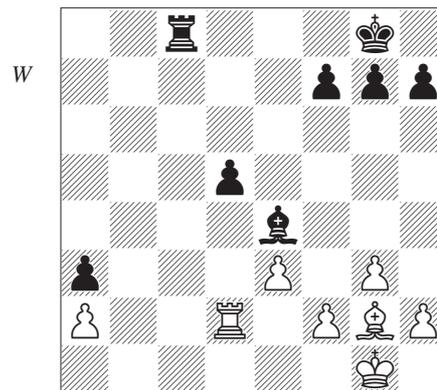
22...c5 23 ♗c3 c4! 24 bxc4

24 ♙xe4?! ♖xe4 is not satisfactory for White, as after a possible 25 bxc4 Black will recapture with 25...♖xc4.

24...♗xc4 25 ♖c1! ♗xc3

After 25...♙xg2 26 ♗xg2 ♖ec8 27 ♗xc4 dxc4 28 ♖c3! White has the upper hand.

26 ♖xc3 ♖ec8! 27 ♖xc8+ ♖xc8 (D)



28 ♙xe4

28 f3?! ♖c1+ 29 ♗f2 ♖c2! 30 ♗e1 ♖xd2 31 ♗xd2 ♙b1 32 ♗c3 ♙xa2 33 ♗b4 would be an easy draw and would thus be a mistaken choice on White's part. The rook ending that now arises is very close to drawn, but Black must play with extreme accuracy.

28...dxe4 29 ♗d7 g6 30 ♖a7 ♖c1+ 31 ♗g2 ♖c3 32 g4!

Trying to isolate the black pawn on e4 and also create other problems for Black's pawn-structure by means of 33 g5!

32...g5! 33 ♗f1 ♖c1+ 34 ♗g2 ♖c3 35 h4 gxh4?!