

THE VOLGA GAMBIT



In this positional gambit, Black hopes to obtain compensation by means of the semi-open files on the queenside combined with applying pressure quickly on this side of the board in order to hinder White's development.

A huge number of strong Grand Masters have used this defence over the years and many more have had to play against it with the White pieces.

The Volga Gambit is a versatile opening that can be used as your main weapon with Black, or just an occasional line that you employ when you need to play for a win.

By means of this opening survey you will learn how to play the Volga and also how to play against it: that will depend on your election, if you are playing with White or Black. You will also learn the fundamental strategies that will help you, not only in this opening but also in many others.

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LESSON #1: INTRODUCTION



[B56-B59] **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5!?**

The idea of this apparently strange third move is quite different than the majority of gambits: in this case the player who sacrifices the pawn doesn't obtain any development advantage or a strong attack. This is a positional sacrifice with which Black hopes to obtain compensation by means of the semi-open files on the queenside combined with applying pressure quickly on this side of the board in order to hinder White's development

We should start off by discussing the name with which this gambit is known. We can frequently find two names for this opening: Volga and Benko. Actually we can say that there are two completely different systems, although both of them start with the same move order.

The idea of the first system is to eliminate the c4 pawn, which defends the d5 pawn. Black can then break open the centre with ...e6 and obtain certain pawn centre superiority. A typical variation could be 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 e6 and if White continues with 6.dxe6 fxe6 Black can quickly play ...d5. Actually, this idea is quite similar to the Blumenfeld gambit, 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 c5 4.d5 b5.

Contrary, in the second system Black doesn't play ...e6, or at least not immediately, but instead concentrates on his development with ...g6 and ...Bg7 trying to put pressure on the semi-open files "a" and "b". This system became popular in the 70's by the American player Pal Benko, originally from Hungary, who played it successfully in many games. He demonstrated that it wasn't easy for White to take advantage of his extra pawn. It would be correct to call this idea the "Benko gambit" but actually both Benko and Volga are used, although Benko always used the second plan, not the first.

This second plan, the real "Benko gambit", is the one we shall be covering in this openings survey. I think that the opening has a curious precedent in an old Capablanca game that can be found below.

Capablanca plays badly and loses a pawn (or maybe he sacrificed it?). His opponent, Nimzowitsch, doesn't understand the resources of Black's position (the semi-open files on the queenside) and he slowly ends up in a worse position, without making any obvious mistakes. Black has an obvious compensation that any modern player would understand, but for the players in that time it probably wasn't so clear. I suspect that quite a long time went past before Nimzowitsch realized why he had lost the game:

Nimzowitsch, A - Capablanca, J
St. Petersburg, 1914

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bb5 d6 5.d4 Bd7 6.Bxc6 Bxc6 7.Qd3 exd4 8.Nxd4 g6?! [After this move White can win a pawn. However, Nimzowitsch didn't assess correctly Black's compensation and he decides to capture it. In any case Black's move is dubious as White has a way to obtain advantage. Correct was 8...Be7] 9.Nxc6?! [9.Bg5! Bg7 10.0-0-0 was the best line as 10...h6 (10...0-0? loses to 11.Nxc6 bxc6 12.e5! dxe5 13.Qf3 Qe7 14.Ne4. and Black has to play) 11.Bh4 0-0 12.f4 and he is still in trouble.] 9...bxc6 10.Qa6 Qd7 [Bad is 10...c5? 11.Qc6+ Nd7 12.Bg5! with a big advantage for White.] 11.Qb7 Rc8 12.Qxa7 Bg7 13.0-0 0-0



[Apparently White has a clear extra pawn but nowadays we know that Black has enough compensation. Many of the manoeuvres are typical of Black's play in the Volga (or Benko) gambit] **14.Qa6** [This retreat is unnecessary and 14.f3 must be slightly better. But White still has to solve some problems after 14...Ra8 15.Qf2 Rfb8 16.a4 Qe6] **14...Rfe8 15.Qd3 Qe6! 16.f3 Nd7**



The transfer of the knight to c4 is one of Black's typical plans in this line. **17.Bd2?** Nimzowitsch doesn't appreciate the danger. He could still fight for equality with the move [17.Bf4 with the idea 17...Ne5 18.Bxe5 Bxe5 19.Rab1] **17...Ne5 18.Qe2 Nc4 19.Rab1 Ra8 20.a4?** [Now things get worse. Neither good was 20.b3 Nxd2 21.Qxd2 Ra3! followed by 22...Qe5 recovering the pawn with advantage. The best move was probably 20.Be1 although after 20...d5! 21.b3 Nd6 22.a4 f5 Black has an excellent game.] **20...Nxd2 21.Qxd2 Qc4! 22.Rfd1** [Nimzowitsch is already thinking of giving back the pawn although he won't be able to get the pressure off easily. If 22.Ne2 Rxa4 23.b3 Qc5+ 24.Kh1 Ra2 Black's pressure is very annoying.] **22...Reb8!** Very well played. Capablanca is not in a hurry. He prefers to increase the pressure instead of recovering the pawn. Now the threat is 23...Rxb2 recovering the material with