



The Petroff in One Hour



Learn a solid defense to 1. e4 in one sitting.

BY ICCM NIKOLAOS NTIRLIS



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WHY IS THE PETROFF (1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6!) a great practical choice for chess players of any strength?

SOUNDNESS

It has been chosen as the main defense by the two previous World Championship challengers, GMs Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi. In both matches, GM Magnus Carlsen failed to play anything scary against it.

ROBUSTNESS

If you want to be solid, there is hardly a better choice. Stats from the Lichess online database (lichess.org/analysis) show that it is one of the openings with the lowest win rate from White. To wit — the Marshall has a White win rate of 16%, but White has 32% after 6. d3!?!; Petroff: 26%; Sicilian Najdorf: 28%; Ruy Lopez/ Zaitsev: 29%; Ruy Lopez/ Breyer: 29%.

(Note: the Lichess database is not fully representative, as there are fewer draws in online blitz than slow over-the-board play, but the point remains.)

MAINTAINANCE

There is less theory to learn. There are no Italian and Scotch lines to constantly check any new ideas coming. And in other main lines you can take shortcuts, as we will see in our repertoire choice against the Four Knights.

RICHNESS

My experience has shown that there is rarely

just one move that Black must play in any of the major lines of the Petroff. There is typically a wide range of alternatives that you can study if you feel bored, or if you feel that your opponent might have booked up against a particular line.

MATERIAL FOR STUDY

Engines love the Petroff, and many of today's top players have played a ton of games in every line. Equipped with a modern database and engine, you can create your own repertoire easily with a few hours of dedicated work.



With all of this going for it, why isn't the Petroff the most popular opening at all levels?

REPUTATION

The Petroff has the reputation — partially deserved — of being a dull opening. It is not easy for White to break it, but it is quite hard for White to blunder everything in one move. If you want to win with Petroff, you need to display patience and a decent level of technique in quiet positions.

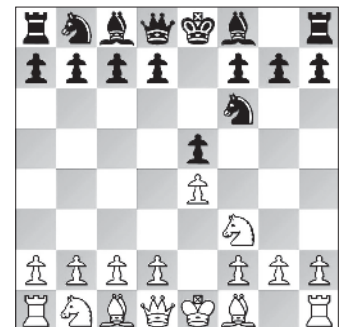
THE BERLIN IS EVEN SAFER!

Responding to the Twitter thread that spawned this article, the well-known theoretician GM Boris Avrukh relayed that he was working with GM Vladimir Kramnik on the Petroff until the great World Champion discovered that the Berlin was an even more solid choice. And indeed, the Lichess stats confirm this, as White is getting just a 19% win rate in the main line of the Berlin!

A BRIEF OVERVIEW — MY ICCF REPERTOIRE

I have played the Petroff in 5 ICCF (correspondence) games in 2021, against players with an average rating of 2411, and I scored five easy draws. Here, I am going to show you how I met, or how I am intending to meet, White's main tries against the Petroff. Let's see a brief summary of my proposals:

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6



3. Nxe5

After 3. d4 Nxe4 4. Bd3 d5 5. Nxe5 I propose 5. ... Bd6!? 6. 0-0 0-0 7. c4 and now 7. ... c5!. If instead White bails out with 3. Nc3, I believe that 3. ... Bb4!? is a good practical choice.

3. ... d6 4. Nf3

I'll show you a rock-solid antidote against Carlsen's favorite: 4. Nd3, and while White has a slightly crazy gambit idea here in 4. Nxf7, I'll share an easy way to play against it.

4. ... Nxe4 5. d4

The tricky 5. c4 is how GM Alireza Firouzja tried to beat Nepomniachtchi in the Candidates, and it backfired badly. Nevertheless, the move is a serious attempt for White, but I've got you covered.

The move 5. Nc3 has been a popular choice of repertoire books and courses against the Petroff. I am proud that I discovered a practical way to meet this which also proved to be sound in my correspondence practice: 5. ... Nxc3 6. dxc3 Be7 7. Be3 Nd7 8. Qd2 Ne5 9. 0-0-0 Nxf3! 10. gxf3 Be6!.

5. ... d5 6. Bd3 Be7!? 7. 0-0 Bf5!

This is a very solid way to meet the main line that has served me well. Of course, White has a few more lines that they can throw at you, but typically they aren't too challenging, and you can study them on your own.

One final note before we continue: please remember that opening preparation is a personal responsibility! Build your own files and put your own ideas in them. Play the lines, see how they feel in real games and how you perform with them, and then adapt!

MEETING THE FOUR KNIGHTS

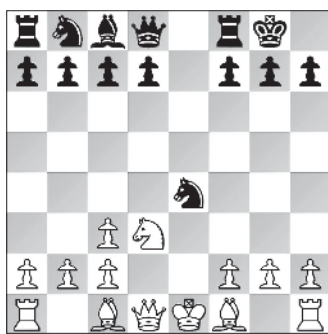
1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nc3

With this move White is hoping to transpose to the Four Knights Game after 3. ... Nc6!, which is best. But Petroff players have proved that Black is also solid with:

3. ... Bb4!?

Your engines will tell you that White is a bit better after the following line, and I think that they aren't wrong. But Black has a simple positional concept in mind that makes the whole line attractive in my eyes:

4. Nxe5 0-0 5. Nd3 Bxc3 6. dxc3 Nxe4



7. Be2

Another plan is 7. Be3 Re8 8. Qe2 planning to castle long. A good antidote is 8. ... d5! 9. 0-0-0 Nd6! with counterplay, threatening ... Nd6-c4 or ... Nd6-f5.



ICCF IM Nikolaos
"Nikos" Ntirlis

7. ... d6!

Black has lost their dark-squared bishop, so they'll continue by putting as many pawns as possible in the dark squares (h6, b6, a5).

8. 0-0 Re8 9. Nf4

This is how White usually plays. They may start with f2-f3, or a2-a4, or Rf1-e1. It doesn't matter. Black's plan remains the same.

9. ... Nd7

Black plays ... b7-b6 next, or may even start with ... Nd7-c5 and ... a7-a5. If White plays f2-f3, we retreat the e4-knight to f6. In all cases Black has good counterplay.

3. d4

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. d4

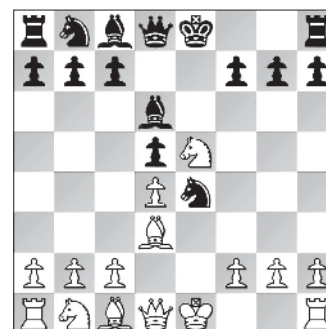
This is a challenging continuation, one that I've always respected a great deal. This is why I spent an enormous amount of time and energy finding a comfortable way to deal with it.

3. ... Nxe4 4. Bd3

Here 4. dxe5 is met by 4. ... Bc5! (4. ... d5 is the alternative way, but White may hope for a small edge after 5. Nbd2) and the established main line goes 5. Bc4 Nxf2 6. Bxf7+ Kxf7 7. Qd5+ Kg6 8. Qxc5 Nxh1 9. Nc3 h6 with equality. Black hides the king on h7 and, being a rook down, White should better start thinking about giving a perpetual quickly.

4. ... d5 5. Nxe5 Bd6!?

Currently 5. ... Nd7 is the popular main line. One of the downsides is that White can more or less force a draw with 6. Nxf7!?. My move avoids that problem.

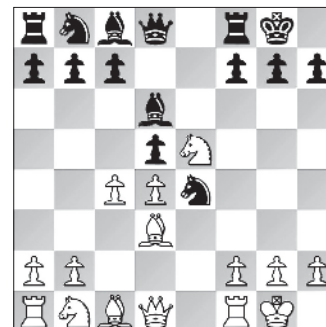


6. 0-0

An engine favorite is 6. Nc3 but after 6. ... Nxc3 7. bxc3 Nd7! 8. 0-0 0-0 9. Re1 c5! Black has done well in recent high-level games, and engine analysis confirms that Black has no problems. My main line runs 10. Qf3 c4 11. Bf5 Nxe5 12. dxe5 Bc5 13. Bxc8 Rxc8 14. Be3 Re8 with equality.

6. ... 0-0 7. c4

In this position, the top Chinese players discovered that Black has a great resource:



7. ... c5!

The old line 7. ... Bxe5 8. dxe5 Nc6 9. cxd5 Qxd5 10. Qc2 Nb4 was seen in many top level

games in the late 80s and 90s, with names like Kasparov, Tal, Timman, Karpov, and Yusupov on the scoresheets. This line still produces draws in correspondence games, but it is hardly fun to play over the board.

8. Nc3

White has many tries here, and if you want to build a serious repertoire, you'd need to check them all. One particularly worth noting is a variation that Stockfish insists is great for White, even if left overnight to analyze the position (I checked!): 8. cxd5 Nf6 9. Bg5 cxd4 10. f4 Nbd7 11. Nd2 Be7 12. d6 Bxd6 13. Ne4 Be7 14. Qf3 Nxe5 15. fxe5 Nxe4 16. Qxe4 g6 17. Bh6 and now 17. ... Be6! 18. Bxf8 Bxf8 is a great Exchange sac. If Black manages to play ... Bf8-h6-e3 and ... Be6-d5, White will even be worse!



POSITION AFTER 18. ... Bxf8

Here Bd3-c4 is a key move, so White needs to threaten it with 19. b3!. Black should reply with 19. ... Qd7!, when Bd3-c4 will be met by ... Be6xc4 and ... Ra8-e8. I think that Black has solid compensation after 20. Rad1 Rd8! (as in Hess – González Sánchez, ICCF 2021) when Bd3-c4 is met by ... Be6xc4 and ... d4-d3.

Black has a pawn for the Exchange and a weakness on e5 to target, while on the queenside we can play ... a7-a6 and ...b7-b5 to reduce the scope of White's remaining bishop.

8. ... Nxc3 9. bxc3 cxd4 10. cxd4 Bxe5

11. Qh5!?

The alternative 11. dxe5 dxc4 12. Bxc4 Qxd1 13. Rxd1 Nc6 14. Ba3 Rd8 proved to be fine for Black in a couple of high-level correspondence games. After 15. Bd6!? Be6! (Dunlop – Klügel, ICCF 2021) White must either give up the bishop pair, or allow Black's bishop to always threaten the a2-pawn.

11. ... g6 12. Qxe5 Nc6! 13. Qxd5 Nb4

14. Qxd8 Rxd8 15. Be2 Nc2! 16. Bg5 Re8

17. Bf3 Nxd4 18. Bd5 Be6 19. h4 Bxd5

20. cxd5 Re5

This is Bakulin – Ntirliş, ICCF 2021. Black has both short-term play against the d-pawn,

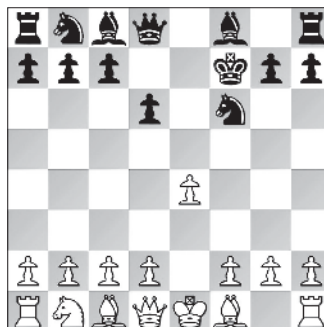
and long-term potential here with the queenside majority.

THE COCHRANE GAMBIT

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nxf7?!

I think that there are better ways to challenge the Petroff, but I have to admit that this isn't entirely stupid. White gets decent positional compensation for the sacrificed piece.

4. ... Kxf7



5. d4

Both this move and 5. Nc3 are correct. Inferior is 5. Bc4+?, which should be met with 5. ... d5! 6. exd5 Bd6 with advantage to Black, or the more sophisticated 6. ... Qe8+.

5. ... Be7!? 6. Nc3 Re8

That's the simple way I want to meet the gambit. Next comes ... Kf7-g8, so White is forced to play...

7. Bc4+

Here now I like the simple:

7. ... Be6!? 8. Bxe6+ Kxe6

Soon we will hide the king on the g8-square, when White may have just enough for their knight, but certainly no more. If you ask your engine, it will suggest that White play 9. 0-0 followed by f2-f4 and g2-g4. This looks cool, I admit, but I'd prefer to be Black with my extra piece.

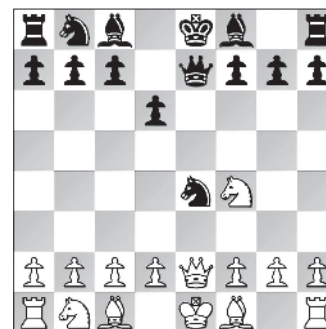
4. Nd3!?

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nd3!?

Similar is 4. Nf3 Nxe4 5. Qe2 Qe7. My advice to Black here is to remember to do something similar to the main line: exchange queens and play a solid set up with ... c7-c6.

4. ... Nxe4 5. Qe2 Qe7 6. Nf4

White's idea is not without venom. Carlsen tried this both against Caruana and Nepomniachtchi during their matches.



6. ... c6!?

I believe that this is the most solid.

Caruana played 6. ... Nc6 7. Nd5 Nd4 8. Nxe7 Nxe2 9. Nd5 Nd4 10. Na3 against Carlsen in 2018. Later, GM and Carlsen second Jordan van Foreest discovered the interesting idea 10. d3!? (Van Foreest – Bjerre, Germany 2022) giving up an Exchange for good play. This line was pointed out to me in my Twitter thread, and I agree that it would be better for Black to avoid it for practical reasons. Good job Twitter!

Nepomniachtchi played 6. ... Nf6, and after 7. d4 White was probably a tiny bit better in the 10th game of the Carlsen – Nepomniachtchi match. I believe that we should encourage White to play f2-f3 to kick our knight.

7. f3 Nf6 8. h4

Here 8. d4 h5 followed by ... Bc8-f5 is similar.

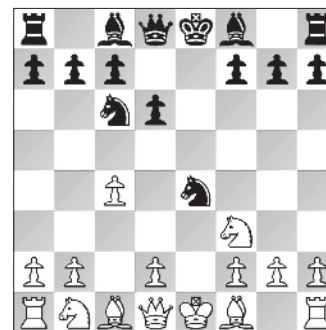
8. ... h5! 9. d4 Bf5 10. c3 d5

This is Klimczak – Leisner, ICCF 2021. Black follows up with ... Qe7xe2 and ... Bf8-d6 with a solid and balanced position.

5. c4!?

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4

5. c4 Nc6



6. d3

If 6. Nc3 Nxc3 7. dxc3 g6!? with counterplay.

6. ... Nf6 7. d4 d5!

The alternative 7. ... Be7 8. d5 Ne5 9. Nd4 was seen in Firouzja – Nepomniachtchi, Madrid

2022, but my engine claims that White may hope for a small edge after 9. Nxe5!?

8. c5

Black takes the initiative after 8. Nc3?! Bb4.

8. ... a6! 9. Nc3 g6

This is an easy way to counter this line, as shown in Neto – Finocchiaro, ICCF 2017. Black follows up with ... Bf8-g7 and ... b7-b6 at the right moment.

5. Nc3!?

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4 5. Nc3

This line used to be recommended in many repertoire books!

5. ... Nxc3 6. dxc3 Be7 7. Be3



White's plan is simple and straightforward: play Qd1-d2, 0-0-0, h2-h4 and build an attack at the kingside.

Black has tried a wide variety of defensive schemes and move orders. When I discovered the one I recommend here, I felt that at last I'd found something I really liked. It's a set up that will certainly put White under pressure in an over-the-board game.

7. ... Nd7!

Only hard-earned experience showed me that the move order with 7. ... Nd7 isn't equivalent to 7. ... Nc6. If (a) 8. Qd2 Ne5, but I got tricked in one of my games: (b) 8. Bd3!? Be6 9. Qe2 and, faced with a position that I didn't enjoy at all, I had to work to escape with a draw in Martín Molinero – Ntirilis, ICCF 2021.

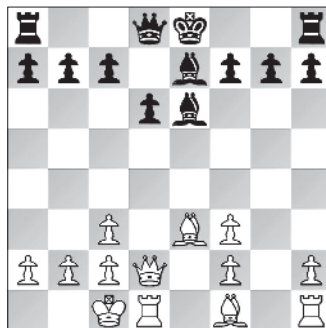
8. Qd2

Now if 8. Bd3 we play 8. ... 0-0! 9. Qd2 (in this order 9. Qe2?! Nf6! followed by ... Rf8-e8 is awkward for White) 9. ... d5! 10. 0-0-0 Nc5 with counterplay, showing the downside of White's move order as in Muljadi – MiETTinen, ICCF 2021.

8. ... Ne5 9. 0-0-0

The alternative 9. Nxe5 dxe5 followed by ... Bc8-e6 is totally fine for Black. I doubt many people will play this way against you.

9. ... Nxf3 10. gxf3 Be6



And here it is! This position is dramatically underestimated by the engines, which believe that White has a healthy advantage. But I concluded that Black is OK after extensive analysis, and in most positions, White has to live with their bad structure until the end of the game. Your opponent will not play like an engine in an over-the-board game, so you have even more chances to play for the win.

11. Qd4

The alternative here is 11. Rg1 g6 12. Qd4 (12. Bc4 Bxc4 13. Qd4 0-0 14. Qxc4 Qd7 15. h4 b5 16. Qf4 Qe6 was fine for Black in Krejčíř – Stukalov, ICCF 2020, as ... Be7-f6 comes and Black has enough counterplay) 12. ... Kd7!. This is the key move in this line! The king will hide on c8 and later b7, especially if the light-squared bishops get exchanged. Play continued 13. Bc4 Kc8 14. Bd5 a5 in Włodarczyk – Pundak, ICCF 2020, where Black followed up with ... Be6xd5, ... f7-f5 and ... Be7-f6.

11. ... Bf6 12. Qb4 b6 13. Rg1

I carefully analyzed 13. Bb5+ Kf8 14. Qe4 Rb8 and Black is fine, playing ... h7-h5 and, if allowed, ... h5-h4 and ... Rh8-h5.

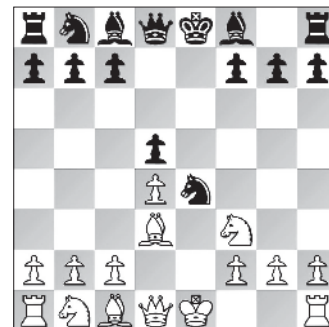
13. ... 0-0 14. h4 c5 15. Qe4 d5 16. Qf4 Qe7 17. h5 Rad8 18. Bd3 Kh8 19. h6 g6 20. Kb1 Bc8

I continued in this position with ... Qe7-d6 in Castro – Ntirilis, ICCF 2021. As we saw in all these lines, White has to live with a bad structure for the rest of the game.

MAIN LINE — WHITE PLAYS Nb1-d2

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4 5. d4 d5 6. Bd3

This is the traditional main line.



6. ... Be7!

A modern move order.

Another modern variation begins with 6. ... Bd6, a move that that recently has been championed by Nepomniachtchi. The old main line is 6. ... Nc6 7. 0-0 Be7, but White has recently found a lot of success with 8. Nbd2!.

7. 0-0 Bf5!

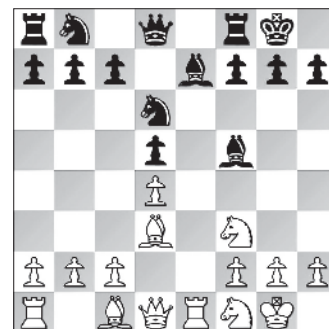
This is the key to the solid and easy setup I propose.

8. Re1 0-0 9. Nbd2!?

As in the old main line, this concept is critical here too. But I think Black has easier ways to meet it in this variation.

9. ... Nd6! 10. Nf1

When I was preparing this line for my correspondence games, I realized Black had a strong move with ...



10. ... Bg6!

We will continue with ... Rf8-e8, ... Nb8-d7, ... c7-c6, and either ... Nd7-f8 or ... Be7-f8, while the modern concept of ... a7-a5-a4 is typical and worth remembering. I haven't had the chance to play this in one of my correspondence games (yet!), but the young American GM Jeffery Xiong has tested this in his own practice.

11. Bf4

Only after 11. Ne5 we will play 11. ... Bxd3 as now we can challenge the knight with ... Nb8-d7 next.



GM Jeffery Xiong at the 2022 Saint Louis Rapid and Blitz

11. ... Nd7 12. Ng3 Re8 13. c3 Nf8
The position was equal in Aronian – Xiong, Saint Louis (Rapid) 2022.

MAIN LINE – WHITE PLAYS c2-c4

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4 5. d4 d5 6. Bd3 Be7! 7. 0-0 Bf5

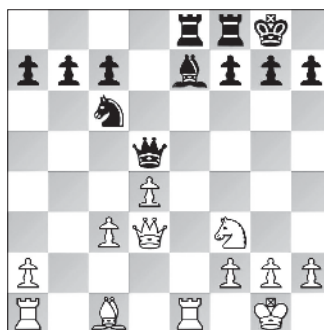


8. Re1
Another line is 8. c4 dxc4! 9. Bxc4 0-0 10. Nc3 Nc6 11. Re1 Nd6 with counter-chances in Dunlop – Mulligan, ICCF 2021. Typical for this line (and the repertoire in general), Black has long term chances against White's sub-optimal structure.

There is a story behind a famous mistake that was recently made at the U.S. Championship: after 8. c4 0-0? 9. cxd5 Qxd5 10. Bxe4! Black could only resign in Dominguez Perez – Moradiabadi, U.S. Championship 2022. I worked on this line with Elshan a few years back, and I know for certain that his prep files contained the correct move 8. ... dxc4.

Outsiders criticized Elshan after the game, wondering why on earth he trotted out this opening against one of its leading theoreticians from the Black side. The answer is simple and poignant. He did this to honor the Russian GM Konstantin Landa, a noted Petroff expert and Elshan's former coach, who died the day before the game.

8. ... 0-0 9. c4 Nc6! 10. cxd5 Qxd5 11. Nc3 Nxc3 12. bxc3 Bxd3 13. Qxd3 Rae8
What I like in this line is that Black only needs a couple of moves to take over the initiative. If we are allowed to play ... Be7-d6 and ... Nc6-a5, we are simply better. If White plays then Bc1-e3, we push ... f7-f5. So White needs to act fast.



14. Rb1
Typical, but not the most challenging according to my analysis.
I spent a lot of time analyzing 14. Bf4 here. While 14. ... Bd6 is known to theory, I believe Black's best is 14. ... Qd7! 15. Rad1 h6!. Please make sure you commit this to memory.



POSITION AFTER 15. ... h6!

We are now threatening ... Be7-d6, and there is only one concrete variation to remember. It is found in a recent correspondence game: 16. d5 Nb8 17. h3 Bd6 18. Be3 Na6! 19. Bxa7 (if White doesn't take the pawn, Black will take over) 19. ... Rxe1+ 20. Rxe1 Qa4! and an equal position in Jiménez Molina – Kuntze, ICCF 2021. Black is threatening now to trap the bishop with ... b7-b6. White needs to move it, and we then take the a2-pawn.

14. ... Bd6 15. Be3
Not 15. Rxb7? Nxd4 and Black wins.

15. ... b6 16. c4 Qe4 17. Qb3 Bf4!? 18. Rbc1 Bxe3 19. Qxe3 Qxe3 20. fxe3 f6 21. Rc3 h5 22. Kf2 g5 23. d5 Ne5 24. Nd4 Rf7
The position was equal in Pheby – Ntirilis, ICCF 2021. A patient, technical player would try to squeeze a win with Black here over-the-board. This rarely happens in a correspondence game, so ... a draw!

SUMMARY

The repertoire described here has served me (and many others) well over the last couple of years. It is not based on what chess engines consider "best," but instead considers elements such as ease of development and pawn structure that are even more important in over-the-board-chess.

For this reason, I am confident that not only you will be able to learn the lines with minimal effort, but you also won't face serious problems finding the right moves in your own games.

It might not impress your bloodthirsty friends when you tell them that your main opening is now the Petroff, but you will frustrate your opponents and you'll have a new opening for life. Trust me: play 2. ... Nf6! and don't look back! ♠

For a Tarrasch Defence repertoire by FM Alex King, see the March through August 2022 issues of *Chess Life*.