

An Opening Book for the Computer Age

Reimagining 1. e4 takes on a big task.

BY IM JOHN WATSON

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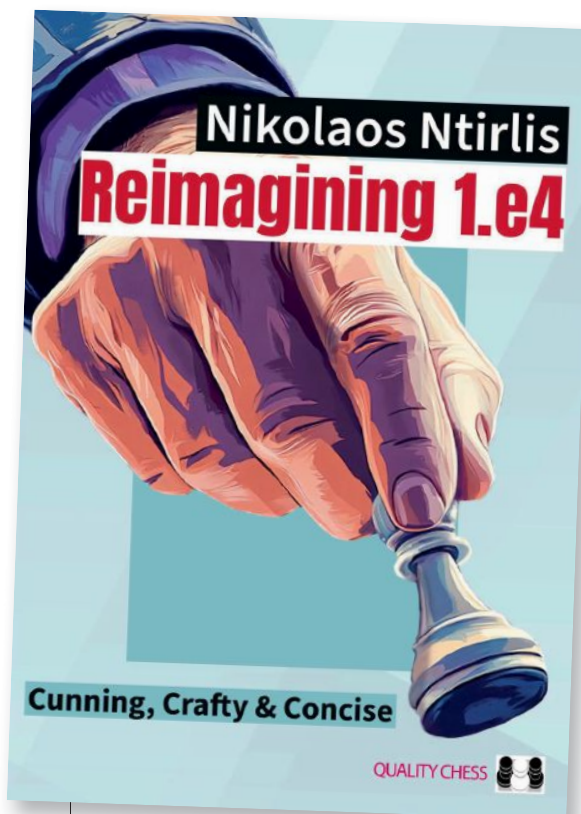
HEN I BEGAN WRITING, there were no engines or databases, and the best opening books were dis-

tinguished by thorough research and original ideas. Authors felt free to suggest an almost unlimited number of moves that players could explore on their own and use, without knowing whether those moves might ultimately be refuted or shown to be inferior. An important function of theoretical works was to point out interesting new paths, be they safe or speculative, leaving the reader to work out which lines would hold up in practice.

Those fun and adventurous times have given way to today's ruthless engines, which eliminate masses of fascinating but flawed moves, as well as by enormous databases, which ensure that any new idea, if not already tried, is instantly known to every player who searches for it.

So what is the role of opening books in our times? That depends upon the audience, of course, but for the serious tournament player, the author's selection of variations is of increased consequence.

Consider a White repertoire, such as ICCF IM Nikolaos Ntirlis constructs in *Reimagining 1. e4*. Everything has to be sound, but so many sound lines are not only equal but allow the opponent to find a solution that is drawish (or draws outright), so the best repertoire choice should guarantee that there is something to play for at the end of every variation. Ideally, even fully equal lines give



White better “practical chances,” or are “easier” or “more comfortable” to play for White.

These latter characterizations (“I’d rather be White here” is another) are increasingly and understandably common in books; I’ve used them myself. They are appropriate in principle, but be aware that almost every author will overreach a little and use them in positions where most players of Black would be equally “comfortable,” have “practical chances,” etc. Sometimes White simply has no advantage of any type, and you need

to be aware of the author’s desire to be a little more positive about his cherished line.

Basing a repertoire on 1. e4 is uniquely difficult. If you use established variations and try to be thorough, your book will require more space than most authors and publishers are comfortable with. Parimarjan Negi ended up with five volumes, totaling well over 2,000 pages, without covering 1. e4 e5! Other 1. e4 repertoire examples are Gawain Jones’ two-volume, 1,000-page work, and Justin Tan’s 1. e4! *The Chess Bible*, which used almost 500 pages without discussing 1. e4 e5 or 1. e4 c5. Christof Sielicki’s “simple” 1. e4 repertoire, which consciously avoids heavy theoretical lines, still stretches to 500 pages.

In *Reimagining 1. e4*, Ntirlis takes a sort of hybrid approach to limit the material to about 300 pages. He boldly chooses the main lines of the Ruy Lopez (more than 100 pages) and Open Sicilian (99 pages), so that 1. e4 e5 and 1. e4 c5 use 3/4 of the analytic content of the book. There’s not a great deal of room for the other defenses, several of which have mind-boggling amounts of theory attached to them. Ntirlis solves this by using a somewhat reduced repertoire versus the French (29 pages) and sidelines versus the Caro-Kann (14 pages), the Scandinavian, Pirc, Modern, Alekhine and others such as 1. ... b6 and 1. ... Nc6. For example, after 1. e4 d5 2. exd5 Qxd5, he chooses 3. h3 (not as slow as it looks, because preventing ... Bc8-g4 is so often desirable in the main lines

anyway). And against 1. e4 Nf6 2. e5 Nd5 3. d4 d6, he opts for 4. exd6. After 4. ... exd6 he goes with 5 Bd3; after 4. ... cxd6 5. Nf3 g6, the odd-looking 6. a4!?. These creative sidelines are part of the fun of the book, and recommended reading.

I was most impressed with his analysis of traditional 1. e4 e5 lines, particularly in view of how established theory is here.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6 5. 0-0 Be7 6. Re1 b5 7. Bb3 d6 8. c3 0-0 9. h3 Na5

The Chigorin Variation has been the most popular line in the Ruy Lopez for more than 100 years. Ntirlis' solutions to other main lines are practical and safe. Versus the Breyer Variation (9. ... Nb8 10. d4 Nbd7), he suggests 11. c4 c6 12. Qc2 Bb7 13. a3, which bypasses a lot of theory and has done well over the board. His main line goes 13. ... d5 14. cxd5 cxd5 15. exd5 Rc8 16. Nc3 Nxd5 17. Bxd5 Bxd5 18. Nxe5 Nxe5 19. dxe5 with an extra pawn versus two powerful bishops. Ntirlis says "I much prefer White," whose moves are "simpler to come up with," and suggests Qc2-f5, Bc1-e3, and Ra1-c1/d1.

Yes, the pawn is a definite advantage, but I suspect that Black is the one with the simpler play; e.g., 19. ... Bb7 20. Qf5 Rc4 21. Be3 Qa8 22. f3 Bc8 (or even 22. ... Qc8 23. Qxc8 Rfxc8) 23. Qd3 Rd8 24. Qe2 h6 25. Red1 Bf5 with active play and compensation for the pawn. It's a matter of taste.

10. Bc2 c5 11. d4 Qc7

The old main line, trusted by many of the greatest players in chess history.

12. d5



I was surprised to see that my two strongest engines have this as their top choice. For well over 100 years, 12. Nbd2 was practically automatic here, with innumerable legendary advocates. Until recently, it remained by far the most popular move, but just a few years ago that began to change, and last year is the first in which my database which shows

12. d5 catching up with 12. Nbd2.

12. ... Bd7

One interesting line goes 12. ... c4!? 13. b4! cxb3 e.p. 14. axb3 Bd7 and the knight on b1 turns out to be well placed. Now 15. Ba3 and 15. Bd2 have had great success, but Ntirlis' own suggestion is 15. Bd3!, intending the remarkably strong Re2-a2. This has a winning percentage over 80 percent, with more than a 500-point performance rating advantage!

13. b3!

Playing against the plan of ... Na5-c4-b6. Now Black's knight is very badly placed, and White has prospects on both wings. This system with 12. d5 is currently scoring spectacularly well for White and calls into question the practical value of Black's venerated Chigorin setup. A great choice by Ntirlis.

It's a real challenge to suggest anything useful against the notoriously sound Berlin Defense. Ntirlis gives an option that bypasses well worked-out lines and avoids simplification:

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6 4. 0-0 Nxe4 5. Re1 Nd6 6. a4

Hardly ever seen for the first 150 years of practice, this move is still very rare compared to the near-automatic 6. Nxe5. In the past few years, however, it has caught the attention of some strong players.

6. ... Be7

Almost certainly the best move.

7. Nc3

Defending against 7. ... e4, which would be a good response to moves such as 7. Bf1.

7. ... a6 8. Bf1 e4

Black has a playable alternative in 8. ... f6 9. d4! Nf7, but even so 10. Bc4 d6 11. Nd5 gives White good attacking chances.

9. Nxe4 Nxe4 10. Rxe4 d5 11. Re1 Bg4

Or 11. ... d4, a decent alternative.

12. h3 Bh5 13. c3 d4!

Or else White plays 14. d4.

14. d3

This position has arisen a number of times. Ntirlis subjects it to serious analysis and shows that White has at least achieved an unbalanced position with mutual prospects. The position and the variation in general are fully equal, but it's a refreshing option to the exhaustively analyzed main lines.

Playing the Open Sicilian with 2. Nf3 and 3. d4 is a brave choice that few authors of one-volume 1. e4 repertoires make; it's simply too much work and violates the usual claims that the repertoire is "easy to learn" and/or "requires little memorization." Ntirlis' solution to the Sveshnikov Sicilian is a sterling example of making a lesser-known move into a practical weapon. In this case, Ntirlis himself was responsible for bringing grandmasters' attention to the idea; in the foreword, super-GM Anish Giri admits to lifting this solution for his own Chessable 1. e4 repertoire.

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6

The section on the Taimanov Sicilian is



creative and relatively straightforward for such a heavily analyzed variation: 2. ... e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nc6 5. Nc3 Qc7 6. Ncb5!? (a good practical choice, and very fresh in practice) 6. ... Qb8 7. Bd3 a6 (or 7. ... Nf6 8. 0-0 Be7 9. b3 0-0 10. Bb2 Ne5 11. c4 b6) 8. Nxc6 bxc6 9. Nd4 e5 10. Ne2 Nf6 11. 0-0 Be7 12. c4 with a very minimal edge for White but plenty of play.

3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 e5 6. Ndb5 d6 7. Bg5 a6 8. Na3 b5 9. Nab1!?

A surprising retreat (because it's so slow), instead of the normal choices 9. Bxf6 and 9. Nd5. In my database, 9. Nab1 is played in only 0.5% of the games, well over half of those in the past two years because of Ntirlis' advocacy. White's simple idea is to play a2-a4 and weaken Black's queenside, which has had excellent practical results.



9. ... Be7

9. ... Ne7 has recently scored well. Ntirlis gives 10. Nd2 d5 11. exd5 Nexd5 12. Nde4! with a "small but pleasant advantage." Still, Black should hold easily in forcing sequences such as 12. ... Nxc3 (12. ... Bb4 is also good in view of 13. Bxf6 Bxc3+ 14. Nxc3 Nxf6 15. Qxd8+ Kxd8 16. 0-0-0+ Kc7 17. Re1 Re8) 13. Qxd8+ Kxd8 14. Nxc3 Bb7 15. 0-0-0+ Kc7 16. Bxf6 gxf6 17. Nd5+ Bxd5 18. Rxd5 h5 and the opposite-colored bishops should split the point, e.g., 19. Bd3 Bh6+ 20. Kb1 Kc6!? (20. ... Rhd8) 21. c4 Rad8 22. Be4! Rxd5 23. Bxd5+ Kc5 24. Bxf7 bxc4 25. Bxh5 Bf4. White might want to look at alternatives to 10. Nd2.

10. Bxf6 Bxf6 11. a4

A key position that has arisen often. Here Ntirlis brushes by an obscure dynamic option that I'll make the main line:

11. ... Nd4!?

You're more likely to encounter 11. ... b4 12. Nd5 0-0 13. Bc4 Be6 14. 0-0 Bg5, which may ultimately be playable for Black, but now 15. Qd3! gives White smooth play and arguably a small advantage. Another excellent Ntirlis suggestion.

12. Bd3

Ntirlis stops here and assesses the position as slightly better for White. The tactics after 12. axb5 Bg4! apparently lead to equality after 13. Be2! (Black is slightly better after 13. Qd3 axb5 14. Rxa8 Qxa8 and winning after 13. f3? Bh4+) 13. ... Nxe2 14. Nxe2 axb5 15. Rxa8 Qxa8 16. Qxd6 Bxe2 17. Kxe2 Qxe4+ 18. Kd1 Qxg2 19. Re1 Qf3+ 20. Re2 Qh1+ 21. Re1 Qf3+ etc.

12. ... b4 13. Nd5 Rb8 14. 0-0 0-0

This is Laddha – Poormosavi, Dubai 2024, a typically balanced Sveshnikov position. White shouldn't expect any advantage, but a complex game lies ahead and both sides can play for a win.

To meet the French Defense, Ntirlis again sticks to known theoretical lines for the most part, but less original ones than versus 1. ... e5 or 1. ... c5. His choice against the Winawer Variation is solid but a bit uninspiring:

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. Nge2

This move has been used by masters since the Winawer first appeared. It has never disappeared from practice, but I don't believe any elite player has ever used it on a regular basis, and relatively few grandmasters have even made it their primary weapon against the French for more than a short period. Here we look at Ntirlis' suggestion in the most popular line.

4. ... dxe4 5. a3 Bxc3+

Black can also preserve the bishop pair with 5. ... Be7. Ntirlis gives 6. Nxe4 Nd7 7. N2c3 Ngf6 8. Bd3 as "plus-equal," when one simple idea is 8. ... 0-0 9. 0-0 e5 10. Nxf6+ (10. Be3 Nxe4 11. Bxe4 exd4 12. Bxd4 Nf6 with equality) 10. ... Bxf6 11. Ne4! exd4 12. Bf4 (or 12. Qh5 g6 13. Nxf6+ Qxf6, also with equality) 12. ... g6 13. Nxf6+ Qxf6 14. Bxc7 Nc5 15. Re1 Nxd3 16. cxd3 Bd7 17. Be5 Qg5 18. Bxd4 Rfe8 and the opposite-colored bishops neutralize White's chances. Of course, White has options such as 7. N2g3 and 7. Bf4, which are also equal but potentially more interesting.

6. Nxc3 Nc6 7. d5

7. Bb5 Nge7 has been played and analyzed for years and is proven to give equal chances.

7. ... exd5 8. Qxd5

(see diagram top of next column)

8. ... Be6

Two ideas that Ntirlis neglects are 8. ... Bg4 (discouraging 9. Qxd8+), as Nikolas Yap



POSITION AFTER 8. Qxd5

analyzes extensively in his 1. ... e6 repertoire book, and the wild (and rare) 8. ... Qxd5!? 9. Nxd5 Nd4!, which I first saw recommended in a Soviet publication over 50 years ago.

A fairly "natural" continuation is 10. Nxc7+ Kd7! 11. Nxa8 (11. Bf4 Nxc2+ 12. Kd2 Nxa1 13. Nxa8 Nb3+ 14. Kc3 Nc5! 15. Bb5+ Ke7 16. Rd1 Nd3!? 17. Bxd3 exd3 18. Rxd3 Bf5 heads towards an opposite-colored-bishops draw) 11. ... Nxc2+ 12. Kd2! Nxa1 13. Bc4 Kc6 14. Kc3 Be6 15. Bxe6 fxe6 16. Bf4 Ne7 17. Nc7 Rf8 18. Bg3 e5 with equality.

There's also 10. Bg5!? Nxc2+ (10. ... Ne6 is also possible) 11. Kd2 Nxa1 12. Nxc7+ Kf8 13. Nxa8! (13. Be3?? loses to 13. ... Rb8 14. Bxa7 Nb3+) 13. ... Nb3+ 14. Kc3 Nc5.

9. Qxd8+

Ntirlis' recommendation. 9. Qxe4 Nf6 usually leads to 10. Qa4 Qd4 (or 10. ... 0-0 11. Bd2! Bg4! 12. Be3 Bh5, which is more fun for both sides) 11. Bb5 Qxa4 12. Bxa4 0-0-0 13. Bxc6 bxc6, an ending which should be drawn but should be studied in advance.

9. ... Rxd8 10. Bf4!

If 10. Nxe4?! Nd4.

10. ... f5

In this position the performance rating of both players is dead even. Black can also play 10. ... Nf6, which is also satisfactory but more difficult: For example, 11. Bxc7 Rd7 12. Bf4 0-0 13. Bb5 Rc8 14. Bg5 Ng4! (Ntirlis gives 14. ... Ne8, which isn't as clear) 15. h3 Nge5 16. Bd2! a6 17. Bxc6 Nxc6 18. 0-0-0 (18. Nxe4?? Nd4) 18. ... f5, which must be drawn.

11. Bxc7

Black gets a slight advantage with 11. Nb5 Ke7 12. Bxc7?! (12. Nxc7 Bf7 is equal) 12. ... Rd7 13. Rd1 a6 14. Bd6+ Kf6.

11. ... Rd7 12. Bf4 Kf7 13. Rd1

Black also equalizes after 13. Bb5 Nge7, or 13. Na4 Nd4 14. 0-0-0 Nb3+! 15. cxb3 Rxd1+ 16. Kxd1 Bxb3+ 17. Kd2 Bxa4 18. Bc4+ Kg6.

13. ... Nd4 14. Rd2 Nf6 15. Nb5 Nxb5 16. Bxb5 Rxd2 17. Kxd2 Rd8+ 18. Kc1 Rc8 19. Be2 Bc4

This is equal. White's whole approach here is rather unambitious.

After 3. Nc3 Nf6, Ntirlis returns to main lines with the Steinitz Variation:

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. e5 Nfd7 5. f4 c5 6. Nf3 Nc6 7. Be3



I'll show just a couple of lines.

7. ... cxd4

Ntirlis suggests 7. ... Be7 8. dxc5 Bxc5 9. Qd2 Qb6 10. Bxc5 Nxc5 11. 0-0-0 0-0 (11. ... Bd7 12. Be2 0-0-0 is a solid alternative) 12.

Nd4, when White doesn't have much after 12. ... Rd8 with the idea of ... Nc5-e4, but it's a position with chances for both sides.

After the popular move 7. ... a6, he suggests 8. Be2 b5 (8. ... cxd4 9. Nxd4 Bc5 is a good option) 9. a3 Qb6 10. Bf2!, with sharp in-depth analysis.

He should probably mention 7. ... h6!?, which has done reasonably well, and give more details about 7. ... Qb6. Having devoted so much space to 1. e4 e5 and the Sicilian, you begin to see the effect of the reduced coverage in other openings.

8. Nxd4 Qb6

This is an extremely fashionable variation. Ntirlis' main line goes ...

9. a3! Bc5 10. Ncb5 Nxd4

Several games have shown that 10. ... a6 11. b4 axb5 12. bxc5 Qxc5 13. Qd3! (13. Nf5 d4! 14. Nxd4 Ra4!) is only slightly in White's favor after 13. ... Qe7 14. Nxb5 0-0 and 15. ... f6 next.

11. Bxd4 0-0 12. b4 Bxd4 13. Qxd4 f6 14. exf6 Rxf6 15. g3 a5! 16. Qxb6 Nxb6 17. Rb1

This is from Macieja – Luther, Bundesliga 2009. "White's position is the easier to play in practice," Ntirlis says, but I don't see that after, for example, 17. ... axb4 18. axb4 Bd7

19. Nd6 Ra7!? (or 19. ... Rb8) 20. Kd2 Kf8 21. Bd3 Ke7 22. Nb5 Bxb5 23. Bxb5 Ra8 (23. ... g5!?) 24. Rhe1 h6 25. h4 Rc8 26. Re2 Nc4+ 27. Bxc4 Rxc4.

I read *Reimagining 1. e4* from cover to cover and enjoyed it a lot. I'm not sure Ntirlis' suggestions against lesser variations are always optimal in a theoretical sense, but they are fascinating, practical, and often ingenious. To me, the lasting value of the book resides in the way he has found solutions in major openings that are both simpler to play and more challenging than heavily analyzed main lines. I think most of Ntirlis' suggestions have legs and will persist even after they have been played more. In these days of obsessive opening preparation, that's saying a lot. ♠

Ntirlis, Nikolaos. Reimagining 1. e4. Quality Chess, 2024. 304 pp. ISBN: 978-1784832438. [Available at uscfsales.com. Product Code B0251QT, \$32.95]

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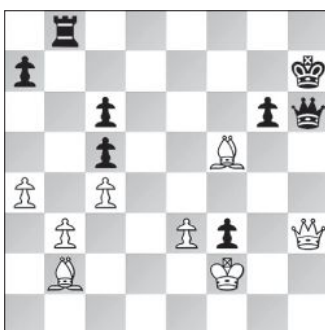
(Benjamin, continued from page 17)

SOMETHING ABOUT TRIANGLES

GM Arjun Erigaisi (2801)

GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov (2768)

Tata Steel Masters (12), Wijk aan Zee, 02.01.2025



WHITE TO MOVE

The suddenly former 2800 picked things up at the end after a nightmarish start.

42. Bxg6!

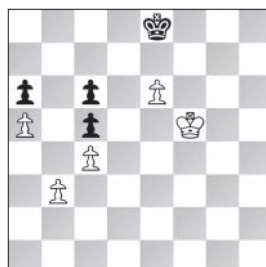
White can win without this tactic, but it definitely simplifies matters.

42. ... Kxg6 43. Qe6+ Kh5 44. Bf6!

This nice touch is the only game-winner. The tables would completely turn after 44. Qh3+ Kg6 44. Qg3??? Qg5.

44. ... Qh7 45. Qe5+ Kg6 46. Qxb8, Black resigned.

But why? Because queen endings can be tricky, but pawn endings have well-established, immutable rules, as we would have seen from the likely continuation 46. ... Kxf6 47. Qd6+ Kg5 48. Qf4+ Kg6 49. Qe4+ Kg7 50. Qxh7+ Kxh7 51. Kxf3 Kg6 52. Kf4 Kf6 53. a5 a6 54. e4 Ke6 55. e5 Ke7 56. Kf5 Kf7 57. e6+ Ke8!



POSITION AFTER 57. ... Ke8

Students of Endgame School should be familiar with this tried-and-true pattern. After 58. Ke4 Kf8 59. Kf4 Ke8 60. Kf5 Black is in zugzwang: 60. ... Kf8 61. Kf6 or 60. ... Ke7 61. Ke5. ♠

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