

Safety Behind Enemy Lines

Rhys Goldstein, August 2012

If you search www.chessgames.com for the phrase “Behind Enemy Lines”, you might discover this amusing final position:



Matschego vs Ernst Falkbeer, Vienna 1853, after 25...Ne8#

Here’s another game that comes to mind:



Edward Lasker vs George Alan Thomas, London 1912, after 18.Kd2#

Moving your king “behind enemy lines”, meaning behind your opponents pawns, is not the kind of maneuver we tend to associate with safety. Yet every now and then, your opponent’s pawns can be an excellent source of protection. Consider this endgame, with Black to move:



Willi Schlage vs Richard Reti, Berlin 1928, after 36.h4

Here a hasty attempt to checkmate the White king could backfire. For example, 36...gxh4 37.g5 Kxe4 38.g6 Kf3 39.g7 Rc1+ 40.Be1 Ba5 41.Re8 h3 42.g8=Q h2 43.Qg2#.

Another plan is to advance the king and the f-pawn. But if 36...Kxe4 37.hxg5 f3 38.g6, White is saved by the open e-file. For example, 38...Ke3 39.g7 Rc1+ Be1 40.f2 Re8+ Kf3 41.g8=Q, and White wins.

Here’s what actually happened.

36. ... Kd4!
37. hxg5 Ke3!



Instead of capturing the e-pawn, Reti moves his king around it! With his own pawn protecting the enemy king, White must now play accurately to defend.

38. Rh3+?

Sometimes one must refrain from giving obvious but unnecessary checks. White should have played 38.Ba3, ready to give check with the bishop if Black takes his rook off the c-file. After 38.Ba3 f3 39.Rc8 Rf2+ 40.Kg1, White still has hope.

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| 38. ... | f3 | |
| 39. Ba3 | Bd6! | |
| 40. b4 | a5 | |
| 41. Rh6 | Bxb4 | |
| 42. Bxb4 | axb4 | |
| 43. Kg1 | b3 | |
| 44. Rb6 | b2 | |
| 45. g6 | Ke2 | |
| 46. g7 | f2+ | |
| 47. Kh2 | f1=Q | 0-1 |

Now let's look at an entertaining game I played a while ago. It provides a good illustration of how kings can find safety in the most unlikely places.

White: Rhys Goldstein (1800)

Black: NN (1686)

Vancouver 1998

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| 1. e4 | c5 |
| 2. Nf3 | Nc6 |
| 3. d4 | cxd4 |
| 4. Nxd4 | Qa5+ |

The first of many unnecessary checks, though this one is not as bad as it looks.

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| 5. Nc3 | Nf6 |
| 6. Nb3 | Qe5? |

Much better was 6...Qc7.

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| 7. f4 | Qc7 |
| 8. Be3? | |

The obvious alternative was 8.e5. At the time, it bothered me that White might later be forced to exchange the e5 pawn. However, 8.e5 Ng8 would have given White has a terrific lead in development, and I soon regretted missing this opportunity.

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| 8. ... | d6 |
| 9. Qf3 | Bg4 |
| 10. Qf2 | |

The intent of this little queen maneuver was to prepare the aggressive 11.Bb5. White cannot play 10.Bb5 immediately due to

10...a6. But after 9.Qf3, 10.Qf2, and 11.Bb5, White is prepared to meet 11...a6 with the annoying 12.Bb6.

- 10. ... g6
- 11. Bb5 Bd7
- 12. Nd5? Nxd5
- 13. exd5 Nb4
- 14. Bxd7+

The point of the 12.Nd5 combination was to keep Black's king in the center. Now after 14...Qxd7 15.Bd4, Black can castle kingside only by weakening the center with 15...f6.

- 14. ... Kxd7!

But now 15.Bd4 would allow 15...Nxc2+, since the Black queen is still on the c-file.

- 15. O-O Bg7!



After achieving my goal of keeping Black's king in the center, there's no obvious way to attack it. In fact, Black is better now. His

pieces are more active, and he is threatening three of White's pawns.

- 16. Bd4

I had thought this would save all three pawns, but I miscalculated.

- 16. ... Bxd4
- 17. Qxd4 Nxc2

Grabs a pawn and forks White queen and rook. But did Black just fall into a trap?

- 18. Qa4+ Kd8
- 19. Rac1

Pins the knight, and threatens to win it with 20.Rf2.

- 19. ... Qb6+



Before I played 16.Bd4, my queen was on f2 and my bishop was on e3. With those two pieces protecting my king, I completely

overlooked the fact that this check would later be possible. Now things are looking miserable for White. After 20.Rf2, Black has 20...Ne3 threatening both 21...Ng4 and 21...Nxd5. Or if 20.Kh1 instead, then after forcing the exchange of queens with 20...Qb4, Black heads to the endgame with an extra pawn. But what choice does White have other than 20.Rf2 or 20.Kh1?

20. Nc5!

I was lucky to find this ridiculous-looking move. White's knight goes from complete safety to a square where it is attacked twice, defended by nothing, pinned, and can be captured with check. But this is the only way to get rid of Black's active knight while keeping the queens on the board, the configuration most likely to produce a draw.

20. Qxc5+

Not 20...dxc5, as White would just capture on c2 then look for an opportunity to expose the Black king with d6. And of course not 20...Nb4, intending to win a piece with 21...dxc5, as 21.Qd7 is mate!

21. Rf2

The move 20.Nc5 not only restored the pin on the c-file, but discovered an attack from the White queen on the c2 knight. The rook on f2 hits the knight a third time, so White will regain the piece with drawing chances.

21. ... Rc8

22. Rxc2 Qb6

Avoiding 22...Qxd5 23.Rfd2, which was probably good for Black but complicated.

23. Kf1

Not 23.Kh1, as 23...Qxf2! wins a whole rook.

23. ... e6

24. Rxc8+ Kxc8

25. Rc2+ Kb8

Ironically, Black's king is now in a castled position while White's king is trapped in the center.

26. Qd7 exd5

27. Qxf7 Qb5+

Not at all useful, but Black has no obvious way to force a win.

28. Kf2 Qb6+

29. Kf3?!

Black almost certainly expected 20.Kf1, after which I imagine he would have played for a win with 29...d4 instead of repeating moves. It's unusual to advance a king to the third rank in a relatively open position with queens and rooks on the board, but I felt my king was just as vulnerable on f1.

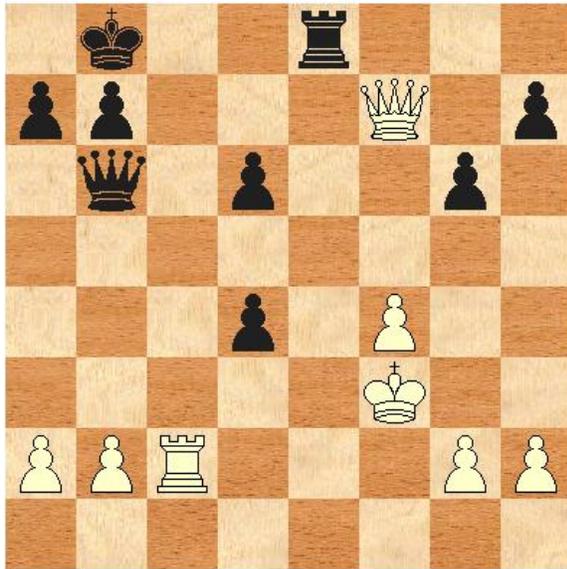
29. ... d4

30. Qf6

This allows Black to activate the rook on h8, but it wasn't clear how to best prevent 30...d3. The alternative was 30.Qd5, but that seemed to give Black more options.

30. ... Re8
31. Qf7

Black is offered an irresistible check.



31 Re3+
32. Kg4 h5+?

When hunting a king, it is often better to cut off the flight squares before giving check. Notice how White's king has two possible flight squares, h4 and g5. The correct move for Black was 32...Qd8!, covering both of these squares and forcing White to play 33.Qxh7 to prevent 33...h5#. White's pieces would then remain tied down the defense of their exposed king.

33. Kg5 Qb5+
34. Kh6!



Before making this move I remembered Reti's game, where he maneuvered his king around a pawn instead of capturing it. Here White could have played 34.Kxg6, but instead the Black pawn is kept alive to serve unwittingly as the White king's defender.

For the first time since move 12, White is better. His king is safe, and he threatens mate on the back rank. Note that if Black defends with 34...Re8 or Qe8, 35.Qc7+ followed by 36.Qc8+ wins.

34. ... a6
35. Qc7+ Ka7
36. Qxd6 d3

Black overlooked the fact that his king was still in great danger. Best was probably 36...Qb6, when play might have continued 37.Qxb6+ Kxb6 38.Kxg6 d3 39.Rd2 Re2 40.Rxd3 Rxg2+ 41.Kxh5+ Rxh2+ 42.Kg5. Black must then remain a pawn down, for

after 42...Rxb2 43.Rb3+, the rooks come off the board and White's f-pawn queens.

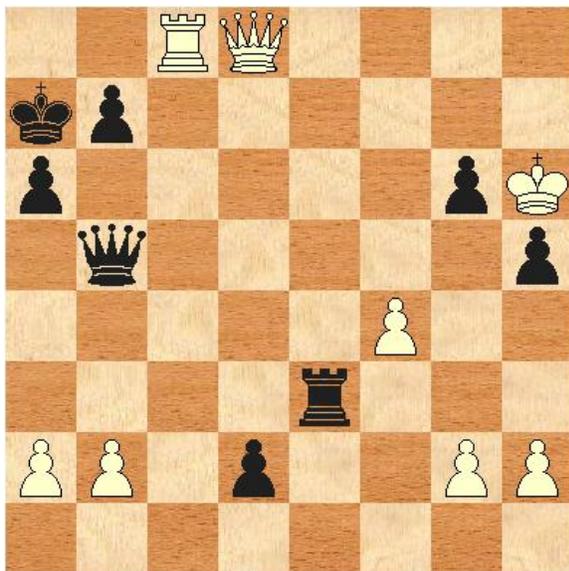
Though 36...d3 loses, it's understandable that Black wanted to keep the queens on board. Once the queens trade off, White's king is free to start collecting pawns while Black's king seems relatively harmless.

37. Rc8 d2

Allows a quick finish, but Black had no defense to White's next move. An attempt to trade queens with 37...Qb6 allows 38.Qb8#. And if 37...g5 to expose Black's king, then even if White misses 38.a4!, the obvious 38.fxc5 is good enough to win.

38. Qd8 1-0

White's last move keeps the flight square on b6 covered. Next is 39.Ra8#. The final position illustrates how a king placed behind enemy lines may be safer than a king surrounded by loyal subjects.



I recently found a modern grandmaster game with a similar theme:



Vugar Gashimov vs Alexander Grischuk, Bursa 2010, after 31...K(a4)b3

White has sacrificed a piece and two pawns to chase Black's king to b3. But now Black's king is safer than White's. Observe how Black relies on White's b4 pawn to protect his king as he simplifies the position.

32. Rxc3+ Qxc3+
33. Bd2 b6!
34. Qxb6 Qe5+
35. Kd1 Bb7!

Black gives back some of his extra material to quickly activate his rooks.

36. Qxb7 Rhd8
37. Rf3+ Ka2
38. Rf2 Kb1
39. Qf3 Rac8
40. Qb3+ Qb2
41. Qxb2+ Kxb2 0-1