

Benjamin and Brecht

Attrition in friendship

During the summer months of 1934, Walter Benjamin stayed with Bertolt Brecht in Svendborg, Denmark. The charm of Erdmut Wizisla's book, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship* (reviewed above), is deepened by a set of three photographs showing the two absorbed in the early stages of a single chess game. The first (right) is well known and was used as the backdrop at a recent conference prompted by Wizisla's book (from which all correspondence citations here are taken). The second photograph, not shown here, is one move further on: Benjamin, moving a knight, cups it in his hand while pondering the square on which it should land. The third photograph, taken from behind Benjamin (below), is the key.

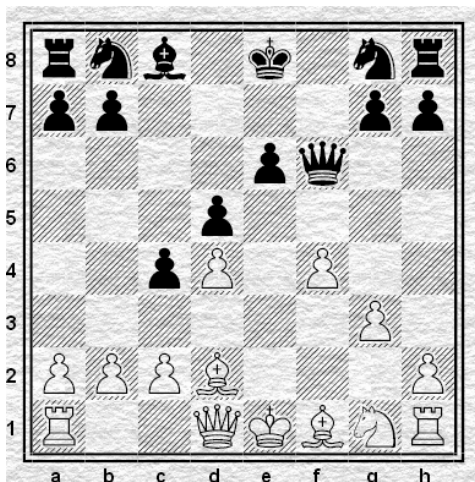


The change of angle reveals a black pawn, which is obscured by the queen in the other two photographs. This small detail opens the game to interpretation.



It is now possible to represent the position from the first photograph. Brecht has the white pieces, Benjamin is black. The position is distinctive and suggests that both are more than 'idlers in the garden of chess'. The configuration of the central pawns – white's placed on the dark squares and black's on the white squares forming a chain – proves sufficient to identify the game as having begun with the opening known as the French Defence. (Brecht, with the white pieces, opened the game by moving his king's pawn two squares forward, to which Benjamin replied by moving his equivalent pawn, but only one square forward.) Moreover, it

is possible to reconstruct these first moves. In English algebraic notation:



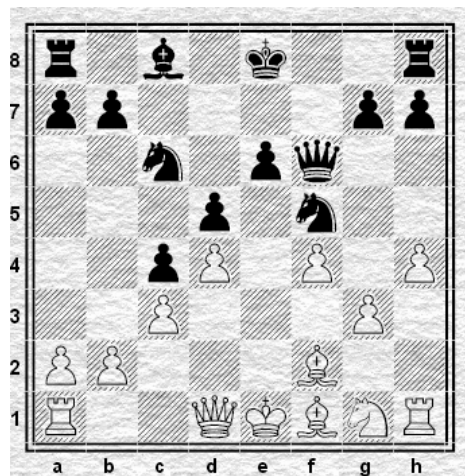
1 e2–e4 e7–e6 2 d2–d4 d7–d5 3 e4–e5
c7–c5 4 f2–f4 c5–c4 5 g2–g3 Bf8–b4
check 6 Nb1–d2 Bb4xd2 7 Bc1xd2 f7–f6
8 e5xf6 Qd8xf6

Slight variations in move order are possible.* It should be underscored that the possibility of reconstructing the game means that the position on the board reveals a certain logic: the play is beyond that of the beginner, or 'wood-pusher'. Wizisla records that the daily routine

in Denmark (to which Benjamin returned in 1936 and 1938) included ‘after a meal, one or two lengthy games of chess’. These games were played without accompanying conversation, but the significance this repeated, taciturn struggle held for each opponent can be gauged by the references we find in various items of correspondence. Brecht writes *twice* to Margarete Steffin about the new chess set he had purchased cheaply: ‘My chess pieces are as big as Benjamin’s.’

Besides regular play, the choice of the French indicates possible contact with the chess theory of the time. First played in a correspondence match between Paris and London in 1834, the theory of the French was largely developed in the 1910s and 1920s by Aron Nimzovich (or Nimzowitsch), whilst the Latvian grandmaster was living in exile in Copenhagen. Nimzovich is the author of what is generally recognized as the first modernist work of chess theory, the 1925 *Mein System*. (Marcel Duchamp is reported to have said, ‘Nimzowich is my God’.) Brecht’s third move (3 e4–e5) initiates the Advance variation, also championed by Nimzowich when facing this defence.

Here is the position from the third photograph. In the interval, Brecht has moved his bishop twice (d2–e3, e3–f2) and made two pawn moves (one of which, the move of the rook’s pawn, is weak). Benjamin, generating persistent threats against Brecht’s pawns, has developed both knights to strong squares. It is Benjamin to move. The following sequence is likely:



9 Bd2–e3 Ng8–e7 10 h2–h4 Ne7–f5 11 Be3–f2 Nb8–c6 12 c2–c3

The final position is roughly equal (material is level), but Benjamin’s play between the photos has been the more focused. Benjamin appears to be the stronger player, though in a letter to Gretel Adorno in 1938 he admits that

he ‘seldom wins’. Perhaps the competitive Brecht, who would hustle for gingerbread or whisky, practised assiduously in the intervening four years. In 1936, Steffin alludes to his improving play: ‘[now] he frequently beats [Hanns] Eisler’.

Brecht has moved only one of his remaining pieces, the bishop; the rest wait on their original squares. We are provided with a grounding reference for Benjamin’s diary entry from 12 July 1934. There he records Brecht’s musings on the new game they should devise for Karl Korsch’s visit: ‘where the function of every piece changes after it has stood in the same square for a while: it should either become stronger or weaker. This way the game doesn’t develop, it stays the same for too long.’

If the preceding play here is indicative, then the game in the photos may indeed have stayed the same for a long time. The dynamic tension in position has twice been prematurely released – Benjamin’s pawn move c5–c4 and Brecht’s exchange of pawns on the f6 square. The white pawns and black pawns are now locked in place across the centre of the board: the pawn structure acts as a barrier, keeping the opposing pieces apart and leading to a drawn-out game. It is even possible that Benjamin’s seventh move was 7 ... f7–f5 seeking total closure of the centre (Brecht would then have captured on f6 *en passant*).

Wizisla cites a letter to Benjamin from Steffin: ‘As far as your chess-playing is concerned, I still remember your “attrition tactics” [*Ermüdungstaktik*]. Do you still practise them?’ (27

*As depicted in the diagrams, English algebraic notation labels each column of the chessboard with a letter (a–h) and numbers each rank (1–8) beginning at the bottom left-hand corner from white’s point of view. Each square is thereby identified through a coordinate: white’s queen’s rook stands on square ‘a1’, his queen on ‘d1’, etc. Each piece is accorded a letter: K for king, Q for queen, R for rook, B for bishop, N for knight (the pawns receive no initial). Each move is then numbered in turn and notated by starting with the piece moved followed by the coordinates for its original square and ending with the destination square. Moves that capture opposing pieces are marked by the x symbol. ‘1 e2–e4’ records that for his first move, Brecht moved his king’s pawn two squares forward.

October 1937). This judgement on his preferred style is corroborated by Helene Weigel's teasing: 'I would like to know how you are ... with all your unfriendly peculiarities. I have begun to learn how to play chess, and so there would be an opportunity for you to annoy me to death' (20 January 1935).

If this is a typical game, then this would be a fair description of its likely course; the play allowed its full, grinding character given that no chess clock can be seen in the photo. Without such a device to regulate the speed of reply, Benjamin sank into thought. As Brecht wrote in 1936, when inviting him back to stay in Denmark, 'The chessboard lies orphaned, and every half hour a tremor of remembrance runs through it: that was when you made your moves.'

In the second half of 1941, on learning belatedly of his friend's fate, Brecht wrote four poems in tribute to Benjamin. One, a brief quatrain, begins with a word similar to Steffin's, who had also died shortly before. These lines belong with the photos and game considered here.

Ermattungstaktik war's, was dir behagte
Am Schachttisch sitzend in des Birnbaums Schatten.
Der Feind, der dich von deinen Büchern jagte,
läßt sich von unsereinem nicht ermatten.
'An Walter Benjamin, der sich auf der Flucht vor Hitler entleibte'

Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed
At the chessboard seated in the pear tree's shade.
The Enemy then drove you from your books;
The likes of us? Ground down, outplayed.
'To Walter Benjamin Who Killed Himself While Fleeing Hitler'

As Stanley Mitchell noted in his introduction to the New Left Books edition of Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht*, this pessimism has its dialectical complement in Benjamin's 1939 commentary on Brecht's poem 'Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao Te Ching on Lao Tzu's Way into Exile'. Here, *Ermattungstaktik* patiently wear down the hard and the imposing as 'yielding water in motion ... wears down granite and porphyry'. Benjamin's concluding sentence of his 'Commentaries on Poems by Brecht' caps this thought with its vital component: 'Whoever wants to make the hard thing give way should miss no opportunity for friendship.'

Note

The chess diagrams were prepared using Diag Transfer 3.0.1 by Alain Blaisot. Photographs courtesy of Akademie der Künste, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv, Berlin (photographer unknown).

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