

Rook vs. Two Minor Pieces

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Chapter 1 Theoretical Foundation

To begin with, I will make a statement that might seem like an oversimplification. The point is that it makes it easier to organize the material.

Of all the material written on the subject rook vs. two minor pieces, it seems that “older” material mainly concentrated on the material correlation between the rook and the two minor pieces, whereas the “modern” view takes a more dynamic approach. Let us start out with Berger’s *Theorie und Praxis der Endspiele* from 1913:

“A rook and two pawns are considered to equal two minor pieces.” (page 269)

So Berger writes directly that a rook and two pawns are the right equivalent for two minor pieces. He does not differentiate between two knights, two bishops, or bishop and knight.

He then gives an example of this configuration in a basic endgame from the 13th game of the Steinitz - Zukertort World Championship match of 1886. This endgame has some interesting features and will be studied in the chapter on Fundamental Endgames.

Another example of a material comparison is taken from Suetin’s book *Schachlehrbuch für Fortgeschrittene*:

“The two minor pieces are usually stronger than the rook in the opening and during the middlegame, even if two pawns are added to the side with the rook.”

As Suetin states, this is a guide rather than an absolute rule, but it also depends on how you define the endgame and the middlegame.

If you add a rook and queen to each side, is it then still an endgame, or have we entered middlegame territory? And does the number of pawns count for anything - how many pawns must be on the board to call it an endgame?

In my view, it is not so important how we categorize the positions, and working with many hundreds of positions has taught me that what counts – besides activity and other general features of the position – is the number of open files for the rooks in the position. This usually decides exactly how strong the rook is compared to the two minor pieces.

Suetin, like Berger, does not differentiate between the three possible configurations of minor pieces. Later on the same page he writes:

“Despite this general guideline, such an exchange operation is desirable if the coordination of the minor pieces is disrupted, or if the opponent is left with lasting structural weaknesses in his position.” (page 181)

To expand on this, there can be exceptions to his guideline if the side with the two minor pieces lacks coordination (dynamic feature of the position), or if he has pawn weaknesses (static feature).

This point is interesting and shows that he is, of course, aware of the dynamics of the position. As a general theme Suetin sees the coordination of the pieces as perhaps the most important feature in his book.

Both Berger and Suetin give two pawns as possible compensation for rook vs. two minor pieces - to be fair to Suetin, he gives

1-2 pawns, which can be seen in the title of the section in his book: Two minor pieces vs. rook and pawn(s).

Rook and one pawn is usually not enough compensation for a bishop and knight. But if we compare in simple material terms (knight or bishop=3, rook=5) then material is equal with 6 points.

Many authors have pointed out that such a rigid comparison of pieces and pawns is unsatisfactory and everything depends on the position.

Of the above-mentioned authors, Jon Tisdall touches upon this subject, and he finds such materialistic evaluations inadequate unless they add a dynamic evaluation (and he is, of course, right). The following quote is from his excellent book *Improve Your Chess Now*:

“I can remember that I had a very exaggerated sense of the power of two minor pieces against a rook and pawn. My education lacked an understanding of how much stronger the rook became in an ending, and I can clearly remember having to learn this by trial and error as a youngster.”

And then he adds:

“This can be most drastically seen when a bishop and knight battle against rook and two pawns. Often this is decided in the favour of the pieces in a complicated middlegame. In an ending, a rook and two pawns tend to steamroll a bishop and a knight.” (page 146)

The following quote from Mihail Marin’s excellent book *Learn from the Legends – Chess Champions at their Best* concerns the same subject of how many pawns should be accepted as the right measure:

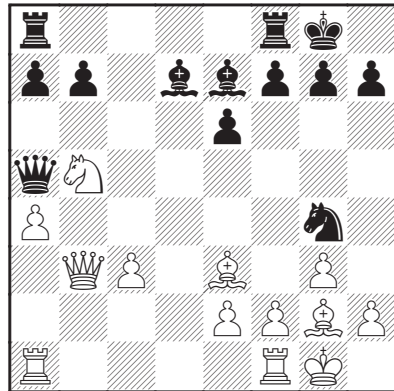
“In the middlegame the relative value of pawns is somewhat smaller and we could consider that two minor pieces should match a rook and two pawns. It is, however, appropriate to point out that such strict evaluations are not very reliable. Each position has to be estimated in accordance with the concrete structure and piece disposal.” (pages 119-120)

Again the magical number of two pawns appears...

In his book *Secrets of Chess Defence* Marin suggests 1½ pawns to equalize material (page 128). Comparing the different views is difficult (and interesting!), and while I delve deeper into the discussion I will start out with two games from my own experience. I will refer to the more “modern” view while annotating these games:

Lund – Ejsing

Copenhagen 2002



Black has just played 16...d4. White now transformed the position into rook vs. two minor pieces with:

17. ♕xa7! ♜xa7 18. ♖xa7 ♙xa7 19. ♙xb7 ♕c5 20. e3

White now has rook and two pawns for bishop and knight. White’s two extra pawns

on the queenside are passed, but at the same time they are also both isolated. We should note immediately that one of them is a rook's pawn, and knights have great problems with such pawns.

In his book *Secrets of Chess Training*, Mark Dvoretsky touches upon the subject of the value of a rook compared to two minor pieces in the chapter "The strongest piece is the rook!" The title has nothing to do with the evaluation of rook vs. two minor pieces, but is no less than a chess joke (!), as earlier in the same book he presented the reader with a position where the weaker side was able to construct a fortress with bishop and knight vs. queen. He gives an example of the rook being stronger than the two minor pieces, and hence the rook must be stronger than the queen!? Hmm. (By the way, Jacob Aagaard mentioned the book *School of Chess Excellence I* by Dvoretsky for a more recent reference on the subject.)

Anyway, this small chapter is quite instructive. Instead of the *material balance* - the question of the number of pawns - Dvoretsky focuses on the *dynamic potential* of the pieces. He points out that:

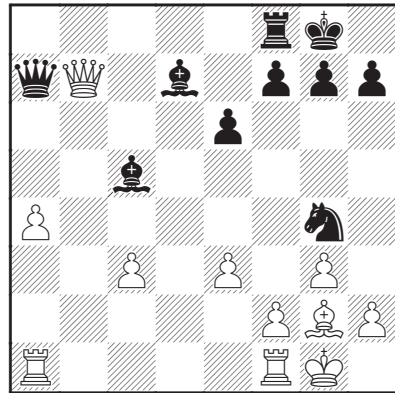
- 1) If the rook penetrates into the opponent's position, or
 - 2) If he can create a passed pawn that restricts the minor pieces,
- then the rook can prove no weaker than the two minor pieces.

Jon Tisdall also covers this subject in *Improve Your Chess Now*. In the chapter "Rook vs. knight and bishop" he writes more specifically about the role of pawns (yes, Jonathan does differentiate between the three possible minor piece configurations):

"Pawns on the side of the outnumbered piece have two key roles. The first is to displace the enemy forces and drive them

away from active posts. The second is to play an active role themselves as passed pawns, and again this becomes more marked as the position simplifies and it becomes easier to push them, and to risk exposing the king more." (page 146)

Wise words. Let's have a look at the position after **20.e3**



White is the side with the outnumbered piece (the rook), so in principle I would be glad to exchange pieces and go into the endgame. Black cannot avoid the exchange of queens as the bishop on d7 is hanging.

The exchange of queens is always important, as the absence of the strongest piece changes the evaluation of the position considerably. The main reason for this is that the king can be a strong piece, especially in the endgame, and in general it can be a strong supporter of the minor pieces.

With the queens still on the board it is often difficult for the king to take an active part in the game, as the king is the ultimate goal to attack: annoying checks and the danger of checkmate often force the king to seek shelter when the queens are still present on the board.

Later White would like to exchange one pair of rooks as well. The queen as a supporter

of the minor pieces can be a very dangerous weapon, but a rook is also a strong supporter, therefore I would be happy to exchange rooks here. Also, the exchange of light-squared bishops would be profitable for me.

Black should definitely avoid further piece exchanges. In an article in *Schacknytt* (a Swedish chess magazine), Mihail Marin wrote about this problem of exchanging as well. He writes that a rook is a “bra spelfördelare för de lätta pjäserna” - that is, the rook as a “coordinator of play” for the minor pieces...I like this analogy (the expression is taken from Mihail Marin’s *Secrets Of Chess Defence*, page 128). By themselves the minor pieces are restricted (compared to the rook), as they can only protect one colour complex at a time. But with more pieces on the board - and especially heavy pieces - the minor pieces cooperate well on both colours and the advantage of being one piece up can be felt. The subject of exchanging will be discussed intensively later.

Back to the game: Black has a dark-squared bishop and knight for a rook and two pawns. White should use his pawns to restrict or dominate the enemy forces, and as I miss my dark-squared bishop it is logical to place my pawns on dark squares. This reduces the scope of Black’s dark-squared bishop considerably. After 20.e3 my pawn structure begins to restrict the bishop.

The other role of the pawns that both Dvoretzky and Tisdall mentioned was that of passed pawns creating threats and thus making the opponent’s minor pieces passive.

Black still has a rook, and if he can exert pressure along the c-file my c-pawn could prove very weak. I really want to exchange this rook, but unfortunately this aim cannot be achieved in the near future. However, I saw that it was difficult for Black to organise pressure along the c-file.

20...♖e5 21.♞xa7

Bad is 21.♞fb1? ♞a5!. Black avoids the exchange of queens and the evaluation of the position changes completely! Black has possibilities of creating threats against the white king later in the game, and thus I cannot turn my attention completely to the queenside. Black is in fact better.

The exchange of queens is always a very important decision that has to be taken, and this certainly applies to positions with rook vs. two minor pieces. Marin in his book *Learn from the Legends – Chess Champions at their Best*, at the beginning of the chapter on “Tal’s Super Rooks” writes:

“The presence of queens can change the character of the position dramatically. As we know already, the minor pieces feel much safer with a “big brother” (or sister!) around, but on the other hand the queen and rook tandem is able to display an irresistible force when attacking the enemy king.” (page 120)

The queen is the strongest piece, and if it is exchanged then the direct attack on the king usually vanishes (although occasionally a rook can be a fine substitute!). This exchange has to be considered carefully. In the game it was in White’s favour to exchange queens, as the “big sister” would work well with the black minor pieces against the white king. White forestalled this, and the focus shifted to the queenside instead.

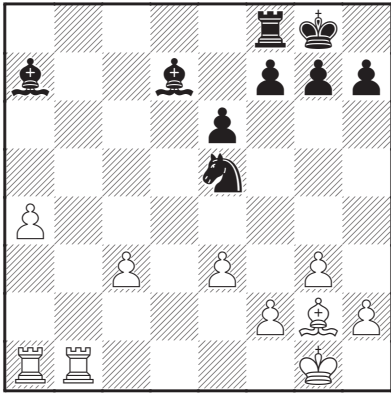
Another reason why a queen exchange should be considered twice is that, with the queens off, the king will be able to participate actively in the game. The king is a strong piece and with his help the overall coordination of the minor pieces will improve.

With the quote from Marin’s book I have already mentioned the subject of piece exchanges. This will be a theme of discussion later. For the moment it should be borne in mind that an attacking force of just a rook,

bishop and knight can still create real danger for the opponent's king, as we shall see in the next game.

21...♙xa7 22.♖fb1

I want to penetrate with my rook.



22...♙c6?

A bad move, as it was White who wanted to exchange pieces. The bishop should be kept as a defender of the light squares. Now Black faces problems with the b7-square.

The right move was 22...♙c8! and Black avoids immediate penetration. The idea is 23.♙b7 ♙d7! and if 24.♙a6 then 24...♙c6! 25.♙b7 ♙d7!. So after 22...♙c8! what should White play?

a) One example of incautious play by White is 23.a5? ♘d3 Black relocates his knight to c5. 24.a6 f5! (This continuation is more promising than 24...♘c5 25.♖a5 ♙d7 26.♖d1 ♙c8 27.♖d6 ♙xa6 28.♖dxa6 ♘xa6 29.♖xa6 ♙c5 where Black has some drawing chances due to the opposite coloured bishops.) 25.♖a5 ♘f7 26.♙b7 ♘f6 27.♙xc8 ♖xc8 28.♖b7 ♖a8!. At first this move looks passive, but it is very hard to break through Black's defences once the knight goes to c5.

But Black has some active ideas himself: White placed his pawns on dark squares to dominate the bishop, so Black should try to fight against this concept! This is done by

advancing the pawns on the kingside with ...g5 and ...f5-f4. This idea of exploiting the "missing" bishop is a very important theme as well. White misses his dark-squared bishop, so he should try to cover the dark squares somehow – and a natural way to do this is with the pawns. And so Black should fight for the dark squares. I believe that Black has enough counterplay in this line.

b) White's best move is probably 23.♖b5!. Now the knight manoeuvre to c5 is impossible. After 23...♘d3? 24.♖ab1 ♘c5 25.♖a5 Black loses material.

If 23...♘d7!? White has a strong reply in 24.♖ab1!. Black cannot avoid the exchange of light-squared bishops, and after this move Black's piece coordination is poor. (24.♙b7 ♘c5 25.♙xc8 ♖xc8 26.a5 is possible as well, with a position similar to one we discussed before. Black is not far advanced with his plans on the kingside, but the question is if White can use the extra time reasonably. White is slightly better in this endgame.) If, for example, 24...h6 (we already know 24...♘c5 25.♖a5) then 25.♙c6 is decisive.

Black should continue 23...♘c4 24.♖b4 ♘d6. The position of the black knight on d6 is shakier. White has the better prospects.

23.♙xc6 ♘xc6 24.♖b7

Now White penetrates easily.

24...♖c8 25.♖d1

The other rook penetrates as well.

25...♙c5 26.♖dd7 ♘d8 27.♖bc7

Logical and strong. It was also possible to use the cramped position of the black pieces with 27.♖b5 ♘f8 (27...♙f8 28.a5 ♘c6 29.a6 is winning) 28.♖xd8† ♖xd8 29.♖xc5 ♖d1† 30.♘g2 ♖a1 31.a5 ♘e7. Black has some counterplay in this rook endgame, but White is probably just winning. Anyway, the game continuation is clear-cut, as I wanted to exchange rooks – to remove Black's "Coordinator of Play." One should not be too dogmatic though, and the alternative is also strong.

27...♞xc7 28.♞xc7 ♟b6 29.♞c8 ♔f8 30.♞a8 ♔e7 31.a5 ♟c5 32.♞c8

Black is not allowed to play ...♗c6. By the way, note how restricted Black's bishop is. Now it has to give up control of a7. This moment in the game is the total triumph of White's strategy!

32...♟d6

32...♟a7 33.♞c7† drops the bishop.

33.a6 ♔d7 34.♞xd8†

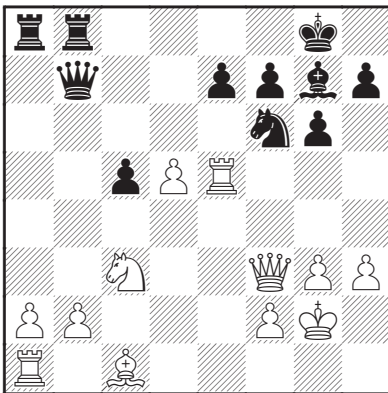
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Black was rated about 2300, so even quite strong players are not comfortable with these strategic themes.

22...♟c6? was a bad move and perhaps even the decisive mistake. After the game, Esben Ejsing thought that 16...♗g4 was the decisive mistake, allowing White to play 17.♟xa7. This is, of course, nonsense; maybe he was just frustrated about losing the game. In any case, this game proved to me that these themes are worth learning.

Now we have a game from the Copenhagen Championship 2002:

Lund – M. Nielsen
Copenhagen 2002



Position after 17.♞f3

Black has played the rather strange idea ...♗d8-b6-b7, instead of the more normal ...♗a5 and either ...♞a7 or ...♞b7 to protect the pawn on e7.

17...♗g4

The alternative was to continue play as in the position mentioned before: 17...♗e8 18.♞e2 ♗d6 19.g4, but here Black is more passive than usual, so he goes for another option.

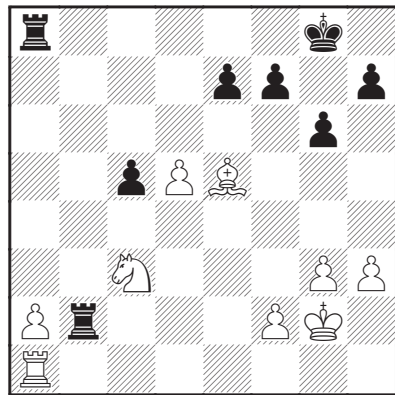
18.♞e2 ♗e5 19.♞e4 ♗b4

This leads almost by force to the next diagram position. A possible improvement was 19...♗a6.

20.♟f4 ♗xe4† 21.♞xe4 ♞b4

Of course 21...f6?! 22.♟xe5 fxe5 23.♞b1 is terrible for Black.

22.♞xe5 ♟xe5 23.♟xe5 ♞xb2



White has the advantage with bishop and knight vs. rook, but how should he convert it? The black rooks are very active, and the knight is tied to protecting the pawns on a2 and d5.

The bishop could end up in some trouble if Black manages to dominate the dark squares - as he attempts in the game. White has a few coordination problems. I came up with a strong reply:

24.♞c1!

This is without doubt the strongest move. The alternative was 24.♟f4, but after