



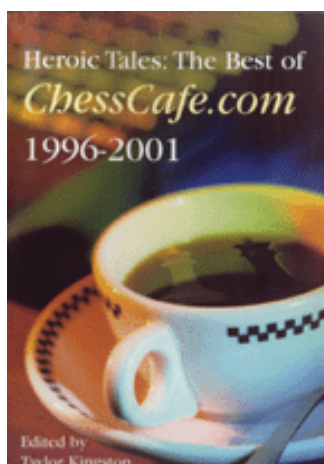
BOOK
REVIEWS

New Convert Preaches BDG Gospel or, Mating in the Most Ghastly Way

Taylor Kingston

Emil Josef Diemer 1908-1990, by Alan Dommett, 2003 Book Guild Ltd., English Algebraic Notation, Hardback, 124pp., \$24.95

“Der Teufel rast über das Brett, der Furor Teutonicus tobt!”
— Emil J. Diemer

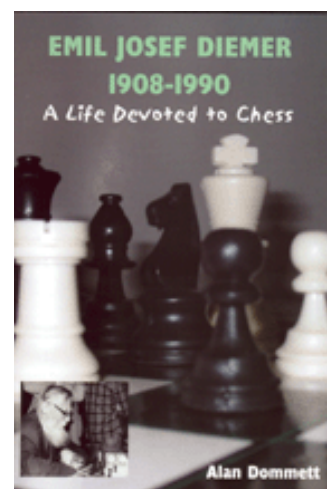


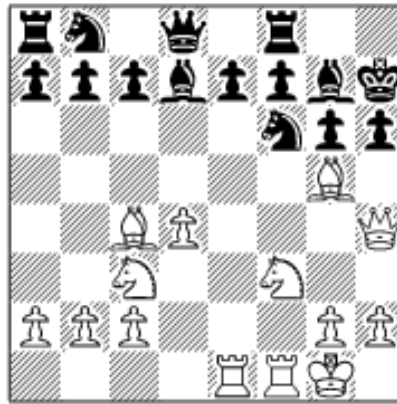
Some openings are almost completely shunned at the top levels of chess, but have strong followings among ordinary players. One will seldom or never see a GM in a major tournament play, say, the Smith-Morra, Latvian, Englund, or Elephant Gambits, but from the national master level on down such lines can be quite popular. A major entry in these “cult openings” is the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit, 1.d4 d5 2.e4 exd4 3.Nc3 and 4.f3.

A recent convert to the BDG is Alan Dommett, chess columnist for the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and editor of *Newsknight*, a local chess magazine. As he explains in the book’s introduction,

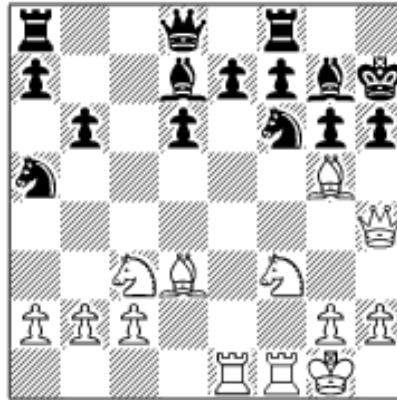
Dommett became attracted to the BDG when he suffered a spinal injury and partial paralysis that made it difficult for him to move the pieces quickly in time pressure. He therefore looked for an opening that led to quick resolutions. The BDG, with its emphasis on open lines, rapid development and all-out attack, was a natural choice, indeed the average game in this book is probably less than 25 moves long.

The author’s passion for his subject is clear, and why not? The BDG can be a lot of fun. With natural, direct developing moves, White can often get an overwhelming attack seemingly before Black has his pieces out of the box. An example is Diemer-Kotek, correspondence, 1987: **1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3 exf3 5.Nxf3 g6 6.Bc4 Bg7 7.0-0 0-0 8.Bg5 Bd7 9.Qe1 h6 10.Qh4 Kh7 11.Rae1**





A typical BDG position: every white piece is active on open lines, while most of Black's are still behind his pawns. **11...Nc6 12.d5 Na5 13.Bd3 b6 14.d6 cxd6**



The stage is set for a typical Diemer lightning strike. As the epigraph above says, "The devil rages over the board, the Teutonic fury roars!": **15.Rxe7! Qxe7 16.Nd5 Qe6 17.Nxf6+ Bxf6 18.Bxf6 Qe3+ 19.Kh1 Kg8 20.Ng5 h5 21.Qxh5!, 1-0.**

Who wouldn't enjoy winning in such fashion? Small wonder BDG partisans are among the most fervid of unorthodox opening enthusiasts, reflecting the almost religious fervor of Diemer himself, whose

battle cry was "Vom ersten Zug auf Matt!" ("Go for mate from move one!") and who claimed "Spielen Sie doch Blackmar, es verwandelt den ganzen Menschen!" ("Play the Blackmar, it transforms one's entire being!").

Such passion can carry a book to a certain extent, and Dommett is successful on several counts. He presents an informatively broad (though not deep) survey of BDG theory, along with other openings in Diemer's repertoire. He provides many entertaining games. And his zeal will likely be contagious to many readers who will feel inspired to take up the BDG themselves. However, perhaps because of his very enthusiasm, Dommett is also insufficiently critical, and superficial both in terms of biography and chess analysis.

The book's full title, *Emil Josef Diemer 1908-1990: A Life Devoted to Chess*, led us to think that perhaps this was the first serious biography of Diemer in English. It is nothing of the kind. All but about ten pages are devoted to games, the actual biographical material adds up to perhaps half a page, and that little is so cursory as to fail even as thumbnail sketch. Dommett completely fails to mention the most salient and notorious facts about Diemer, such as that from 1931 on he was an avid member of the Nazi Party, that he retained his admiration for Hitler even after the war, or that in the 1950s he led a vociferous, paranoiac campaign against an imagined homosexual conspiracy in German chess, which he took to such offensive extremes that he and his entire local organization were expelled from the German Chess Federation. If Dommett were to do a comparable "biography" of, say, Richard Nixon, it might go something like "Born in 1913, Nixon eventually entered politics and held various posts in government. He was known to dislike the Watergate Hotel. The End."

And what little Dommett gives of Diemer as a man is inconsistent with other writers' accounts. For example, he writes "[A]t this stage of his chess career, he was always the centre of attraction at any event. His long white beard and distinguished, if eccentric, manner gave him a certain star quality ...". A contrasting view comes from Dutch GM Jan Donner, who unlike Dommett knew Diemer personally:

"His gaunt shape clothed in a suit clearly indicating he has given up the idea that appearances could possibly matter, his pointed beak conspicuously jutting out and a twisted grin around his toothless mouth — that's how he moves about, with a slightly dancing gait. He is the type of man — we all know the sort — who is always knocking cups off the table. At the Beverwijk tournament, recently, he fell from the stage. It was an accident, of course, but if the question had been asked before the tournament: 'Which of the participants will fall from the stage?', insiders would have intoned in unison: 'Diemer.'" — "The Prophet From Muggensturm", *De Tijd*, February 1958, anthologized in *The King*, New In Chess, 1997.

Hardly a description of "star quality." In fact Diemer was in some ways a rather pathetic figure: frequently gripped by irrational obsessions, prone to occasional mental disturbance, incapable of holding a steady job, dependent on the charity of friends and patrons.

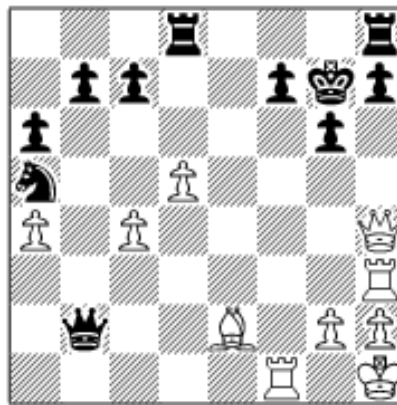
One might suspect Dommett of whitewashing his hero's image, but it seems more likely that he is simply unfamiliar with the facts of Diemer's life. He makes no mention of the definitive work on the subject, Georg Studier's 280-page *Emil Joseph Diemer: Ein Leben für das Schach im Spiegel seiner Zeit* (Schachverlag Mädlar, 1996). Therefore we presume he has not read it, or perhaps is even unaware of its existence, although a photo on Dommett's cover is credited to Studier and Dommett practically copies Studier's title ("A Life for Chess in the Mirror of his Times"). Presumably Dommett does not speak German, but he might have consulted someone who does, or at least have read Hans Ree's summary of the book in the **ChessCafe** Archives (www.chesscafe.com/text/hans07.txt). For Dommett to ignore this book is like writing about Jesus without reference to the Bible.

In fact for purposes of biography Dommett's sources are badly inadequate — his bibliography lists only three books (all BDG opening manuals), two websites (the University of Pittsburgh chess archives and Tom Purser's BDG page), and one video on the BDG. To give such skimpy research a title and chapter headings that clearly imply a full biography is irresponsible, even deceptive. So as a portrait of Diemer and an account of his life, we must deem the book a serious failure.

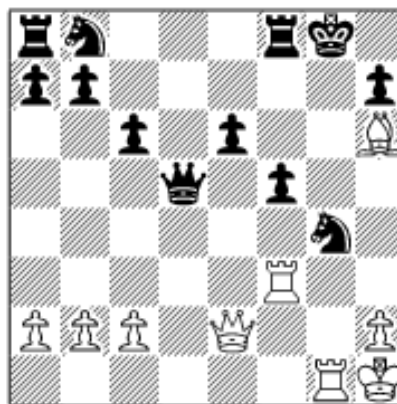
It does better as portrait of Diemer's chess. There are about 120 of his games, almost all Diemer wins, arranged chronologically, plus a few by other players. Dommett tries to illustrate a wide variety of Diemer-related theory. A breakdown of the variations listed in the index:

- BDG Accepted (1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3 exf3):
- Ryder Gambit (5.Qxf3): 12 games
- BDG proper (5.Nxf3):
- Bogolyubov Defense (5...g6): 15 gms
- Euwe Defense (5...e6): 13 gms
- Tartakower Defense (5...Bf5): 8 gms
- Teichmann Defense (5...Bg4): 9 gms
- Ziegler Defense (5...c6): 3 gms
- BDG Declined (Black avoids 4...exf3):
- Vienna Defense (4...Bf5): 20 gms
- Lamb Defense (4...Nc6): 2 gms
- Langenheinecke Defense (4...e3): 4 gms
- Weinspach Defense (4...e6): 4 gms
- O'Kelly Defense (4...c6): 1 gm
- Elbert Countergambit (4...e5): 1 gm
- Related Variations:
- Lemberger Countergambit (1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 e5): 10 gms
- Von Popiel Attack (3...Nf6 4.Bg5): 3 gms
- Zeller Defense (3...Bf5): 2 gms
- Fritz Attack (3.Bc4): 2 gms
- Diemer-Duhm Gambit (1.d4 d5 2.e4 e6 3.c4): 3 gms
- Alapin-Diemer Gambit (1.d4 d5 2.e4 e6 3.Be3): 7 gms
- Hübsch Gambit (1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 d5 3.e4 Nxe4): 3 gms

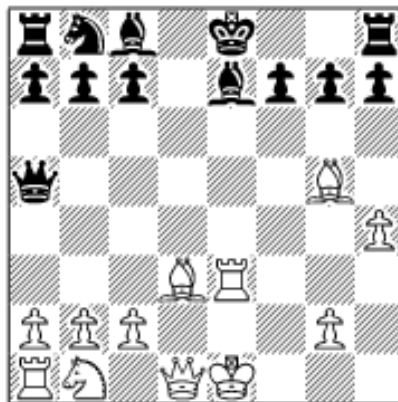
A few sample games and excerpts:



Diemer-Vetter, 1953: **25.Rxf7+! Kxf7**
26.Rf3+, 1-0.



Diemer-Ludwig, 1972: **21.Rxg4+! fxg4**
22.Qxe6+! Qxe6 23. Rxf8#,



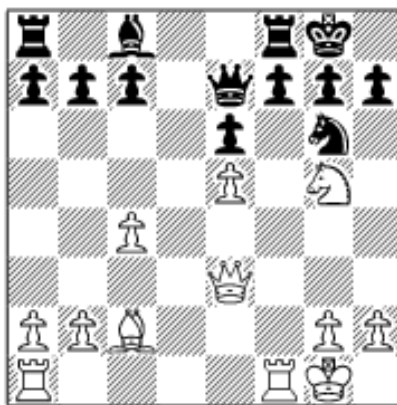
Diemer-Otto, Munich 1954: **13.b4! Qxb4+ 14.c3 Qb2 15.Bb5+ Nc6 16.Rxe7+ Kf8 17.Qd8+!, 1-0.**



Diemer-Durao, Beverwijk 1956: **1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 d5 3.e4 Nxe4 4.Nxe4 dxe4 5.Bf4 Nd7 6.f3 exf3 7.Nxf3 Nf6 8.Bc4 e6 9.0-0 Be7 10.Qe1 0-0 11.Bd3 Nd5 12.Be5 Bf6 13.c4 Bxe5 14.dxe5 Nf4 15.Bc2 Qe7 16.Qe3 Ng6**

Dommett comments “Black seems secure, but appearances can be deceptive, and Diemer wraps up the win in just a half a dozen moves!” **17.Ng5 h6 18.Nxf7! Rxf7 19.Bxg6 Rxf1+ 20.Rxf1 Bd7 21.Rf7 Qd8 22.Qf3, 1-0.** Most of the games in the book are like this, quick wins decided by combinational strokes, with all credit going to Diemer’s theoretical concepts and attacking skill.

However, as with the biography, Dommett’s discussion is superficial. Some games last only nine or ten moves, due to grossly unsound play. These are useful for showing thematic traps one can likely use in club-level play, but Dommett often fails to mention good alternatives to the blunders. The annotations are lighter than balsa wood, and in rushing to praise Diemer they skip over important errors. For example, at this point in the above game Diemer-Durao,



Dommett ignores the fact that **17...h6??** was a dreadful mistake, and that with **17...Bd7!** Black could have held the balance. A similar case is Diemer-Heinz, Baden-Baden 1953.



Here Black played **14...Nc6**. Dommett comments “Every facet of the plan carried out, all that remains is to see the Master BDGer deliver the *coup de grace*.” Which he did with **15.Rxh5! gxh5 16.Rg1 Qxd4 17.Rxg7+ Qxg7 18.Bxg7 Kxg7 19.Qg5+ Kh8 20.Qh6 1-0**. Busy painting Diemer in glowing colors, Dommett neglects to mention that had Black played the fairly obvious **14...Qxd4** instead of **14...Nc6??** the Master BDGer’s *coup de grace* would have been *ne pas possible*. And in the



at this point (after **10.Qe1-h4**) Dommett says nothing about **10...hxg5**. Though Black did not play it, our version of *Fritz* would, and even if **10.Qh4** does deserve the “!” IM Gary Lane gives it in *Blackmar-Diemer Gambit* (Henry Holt & Co., 1995) most readers would like to see some supporting analysis.

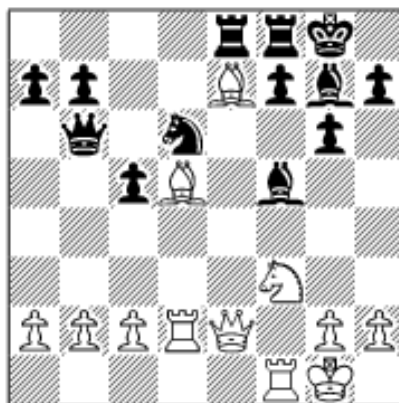
It also appears Dommett is not up to date on BDG theory, which like most other openings is in occasional flux. For example, he states “A fianchetto at g7 usually sees [White’s] king’s bishop at c4 as opposed to d3 in other lines, where sacs on h7 are frequent.” While this had been the conventional wisdom for years, it has recently been challenged. In the article “Kritische Varianten im BDG”, *Kaissiber* magazine #4/1998, Stefan Bucker, discussing the line **1.d4 d5 2.e4 dx4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3 exf3 5.Nxf3 g6**, in fact gives **6.Bc4** a “?”. *Kaissiber* and other German magazines are a rich source of BDG material. As for English sources, Dommett also makes no mention of the recent series “Is It R.I.P. for the BDG?” in Tim Harding’s *Chess Mail* magazine, nor of Glenn Budzinski’s “BDG Bust: The Huebsch” (ChessCafe.com Skittles Room, 11/1999), to name only a few articles skeptical of Diemer’s brainchild.

Dommett tries to justify this superficiality, saying “[My] annotations ... are clearly those of the enthusiast, and not the expert. This is not only of necessity, but design, and there are valid reasons ... it would be a comparatively easy exercise to run the games past Fritz, but I doubt if some would stand up under close scrutiny ... I believe it goes against the grain of all that Diemer stands for to pick holes in his play when he would be the first to admit that a risk must be taken to produce the type of positions seen on the pages that follow.”

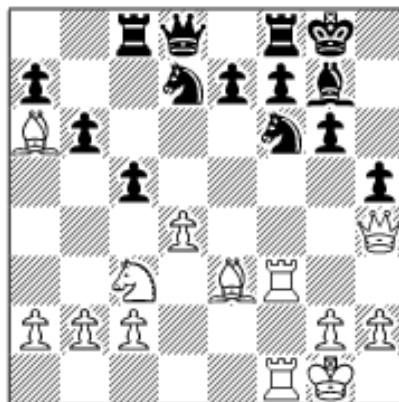
This smacks of transparent excuse-making. We don’t expect that a book of this type, intended more as a light introductory survey, should examine every nook and cranny of BDG theory, discussing all earlier literature and analyzing each game exhaustively like a Hübner monograph. However, the fact remains that Dommett is letting himself off easy. To rationalize fluff, and disparage depth as merely “picking holes” reminds us of the time it was argued that a

particularly second-rate jurist should be appointed to the US Supreme Court on grounds that most people are mediocre, so they should have a mediocre judge.

And by ignoring virtually everything that might bring the BDG into question, Dommett misleads the reader by painting an overly rosy picture. The blithe innocent inspired by the book's parade of quick, flashy wins may be in for a rude shock when he comes up against an opponent who knows what he's doing, as in this game: **1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3 exf3 5.Nxf3 g6 6.Bc4 Bg7 7.0-0 0-0 8.Bg5 c5 9.d5 Nbd7 10.Qe2 Nb6 11.Rad1 Bf5 12.Rd2 Nc8 13.d6 Nxd6 14.Nd5 Nxd5 15.Bxd5 Qb6 16.Bxe7 Rae8**



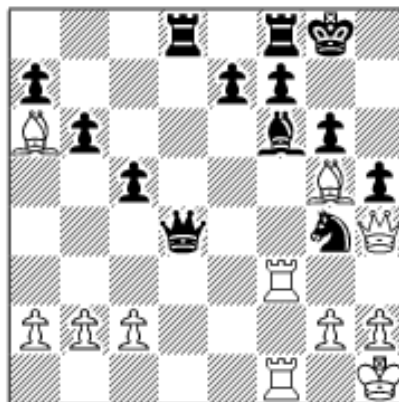
12.Raf1 c5 13.Rhf3 Rc8 13.Ba6



and Black was winning in Diebert-Silman, World Open, Philadelphia 1989 (0-1, 30). It should be noted that White was Charles Diebert, whom Glenn Budzinski called "perhaps the strongest over-the-board player who regularly essays the Blackmar-Diemer." And here is a loss by Diemer himself:

1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3 exf3 5.Nxf3 g6 6.Bc4 Bg7 7.0-0 0-0 8.Qe1 b6 9.Qh4 Bg4 10.Be3 Bxf3 11.Rxf3 Nbd7

13...Ng4! 16.Nd5 Ndf6 17.Nxf6+? Bxf6 18.Bg5 Qxd4+ 19.Kh1 Rcd8



White is busted. **20.Bxf6 Nxf6 21.Rf4 Qxb2 22.Qg5 Rd5 23.Qg3 Kg7 24.c3 Rfd8 25.Qf3 R8d6 26.h3 Qc2 0-1**, Diemer-Fuster, Beverwijk 1958. Perhaps this was the occasion Diemer fell off the stage. Dommett includes neither of these, and does not mention much about this sort of game.

However, we don't wish to bury the book too deeply. It has some value, if only as a pep talk, and nobody giving a pep talk wants to throw too much cold water on his audience. We agree with Dommett when he says:

“We can all marvel at a Grandmaster’s vast theoretical knowledge, but can the average club player realistically seek to emulate him ... Perhaps he would be better served by going back to his roots — the early days of innocence, of fun chess. The good news is that, if he can overcome the fear of giving up a pawn in the opening, the Diemer legacy ... gives him the opportunity to enjoy attacking play and have excellent chances of winning.”

Interestingly, Donner said much the same thing in 1958:

“Diemer may be a fool, [but] his style of play is not foolish at all but highly instructive! I would recommend this book by Diemer to anyone who wants to improve his chess. You won’t find the secrets of the isolated pawn or the bishop pair in it, but you will find something that forms the basis of every chess game: the attack on the king. In this book you will find three hundred games in which the enemy king is mated in the most ghastly way. Every chess player must be able to do that before he can even start to think about pawn structure.”

So for the aspiring attacker, especially younger and less experienced players, this book can be instructive and motivational, a good introduction to one of the more interesting and exciting byways of chess theory, from which one can move on to more detailed works such as those by Lane, Diebert, Tim Sawyer and other BDG partisans. Readers expecting anything resembling proper biography or analytical depth are advised to look elsewhere, but those who enjoy the primal pleasure of “mating in the most ghastly way” will find that basic appetite both fed and stimulated. As long as they add the proverbial grain of salt to this sanguinary diet they should come to no harm and may well benefit.

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by Alan Dommett

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