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Introduction: Modern times? Terrorism in Late Tsarist Russia¹

Terrorism studies have long faced major obstacles. As MARTHA CRENSHAW, a doyenne of the field, noted ten years ago, terrorism studies are “plagued by enduring challenges posed by the lack of definition (what terrorism constitutes), the inability to build a cohesive integrated and cumulative theory (built around larger data-sets and over longer time periods) and the event-driven character of much research.”² When Crenshaw reflected on the difficulties scholars face when they think and write about terrorism, the extraordinary boom in terrorism studies that followed 9/11 had not yet happened. Indeed, its wane is not yet apparent: in 2007 alone, major journals published more than 2,300 articles on terrorism. One scholar even noted that a new book on terrorism appears almost every six hours. Undoubtedly the beginning of the twenty-first century may be called a “golden age” for terrorism studies.³ In taking a closer look at the current state of analysis, however, some scholars have noted a tendency “towards a-historicity, presuming that ‘terrorism’ began on September 11, 2001 and ignoring the historical experiences of numerous countries and the already burgeoning literature on terrorism published prior to 2001.”⁴ In fact, only a small number of recent studies on terrorism are devoted to its history. Prior to al Qaeda’s attack on the World Trade Centre, only 3.9 percent of articles on terrorism examined non-contemporary terrorism and less than half of these looked at periods prior to 1960.⁵ This assessment reflects the current state of terrorism studies in general, an academic sub-discipline that emerged in the 1970s with its own academic journals, PhD programs, and research centers worldwide. Yet it further overlooks the fact that 9/11 also triggered a new wave of research among historians, a development leading to a re-assessment of the emergence and the experience of political violence prior to the events of 2001.⁶ This special issue of the “Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas” is devoted to new trends and approaches in the history of terrorism in Imperial Russia.

The Tsarist Empire has been repeatedly labeled the “cradle of modern terrorism.”⁷ Recently, STEVEN MARKS recalled that radicals all over the world borrowed parts of their ideology from Imperial Russia, whether Sergei Nechaev’s revolutionary catechism or Mikhail

- 1 On behalf of all five authors of this special issue, we would like to express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of the essays presented here for their instructive comments on and helpful critiques of earlier versions of all texts.
- 2 CRENSHAW *The Psychology of Terrorism*, p. 406.
- 3 RANSTORP *Mapping Terrorism Studies*, p. 17; SILKE *Contemporary Terrorism Studies*.
- 4 BREEN SMITH *A Critical Research Agenda*, p. 260.
- 5 SILKE *Contemporary Terrorism Studies*, p. 45. By the 1990s, the majority of authors contributing to the field were political scientists, government officials, journalists, and government consultants. Historians formed only a small minority, contributing about five percent of the new publications on terrorism. These numbers are taken from an analysis of papers published in journals on terrorism during the 1990s. Cf. SILKE *The Road Less Travelled*.
- 6 Cf. for example: RAPOPORT (ed.) *Terrorism: Critical Concepts*.
- 7 LAQUEUR *Terrorism*, p. 11; CHALIAND / BLIN *The Invention of Modern Terror*, p. 111.

Bakunin's writings on anarchism. Moreover they also copied the very practice of political warfare, particularly bombings and assassinations, a practice that became widely known as "the Russian Method."⁸ Since the emergence of the first terrorist attacks in Russia in the late 1860s, Western observers have shown a vivid interest in the development of political violence in the Tsarist Empire. Depending on their political affiliation, contemporaries in the West either felt sympathy with so-called Russian nihilists and anarchists and their struggle against the tsar's oppressive regime, or abhorred their violent methods of political warfare.⁹ After the October revolution, exiled Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and other emigrants also influenced Western attitudes toward Russian terrorism. They sympathized with the allegedly "heroic" deeds of "Narodnaya volya" (People's Will) and SR activists and praised their "individual" terrorism in contrast to the "state terror" committed by the Bolshevik or "red" regime.¹⁰

Whereas official Soviet rhetoric portrayed SR activists as enemies of the Bolshevik state – think, for example, of Fanny Kaplan's assassination attempt on Lenin in summer 1918 – Soviet historians demonstrated a lively interest in the history of "Narodnaya volya" and its terrorist strategy. Soviet publications about the Russian populist movement of the 1860s and '70s reached a peak in 1929, when various collections of sources and monographs were released in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of "Narodnaya volya."¹¹ The Soviet debates were dominated by the question of whether "Narodnaya volya" should be regarded as a predecessor of the Bolshevik movement or as a bourgeois association striving for liberalism with the help of bombs.¹² The latter position was finally canonized in Soviet historiography by the mid-1930s. Consequently, the history of pre-revolutionary terrorism in the Soviet Union was marginalized with few exceptions until the 1960s.¹³

In the West, the history of terrorism in Tsarist Russia received systematic scholarly research and analysis only after World War Two. FRANCO VENTURI's *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in 19th-Century Russia*, published in Italian in 1959 and subsequently translated into English, soon became a cornerstone of Western scholarship on the history of Russian terrorism. Venturi's study ends with an analysis of the aftermath of "Narodnaya volya's" assassination of Alexander II on March 1, 1881, and can thus be read as a history of the first wave of Russian terrorism. In the 1970s, when a new wave of contemporary political violence worldwide triggered in-

8 MARKS *How Russia Shaped the Modern World*, p. 17; GERNGROSS *Terrorismus im Zarenreich*, p. 147, 157.

9 The terrorists were themselves popularizing the Russian underground in the West: STEPNIAK *Underground Russia*. One example for the sympathetic contemporary perception is: THUN *Geschichte der Revolutionären Bewegung*. Thun gives reference to the huge amount of sources on Russian terrorism accessible to a Western audience by the 1880s.

10 Cf. STEINBERG *Gewalt und Terror*.

11 Cf. K 50-letnemu yubileyu 'Narodnoy Voli'; FIGNER *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy; 1 Marta 1881 goda; TEODOROVICH Istoricheskoe znachenie partii 'Narodnoy voli'*. Cf. also the published source material in the other volumes of *Katorga i ssylka* and in *Krasnyy Arkhiv*. About the publishers cf. JUNGE *Die Gesellschaft ehemaliger politischer Zwangsarbeiter*.

12 JUNGE *Die Gesellschaft ehemaliger politischer Zwangsarbeiter*, p. 265.

13 BARBER *The Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy*. Cf. also: ENTEEN *The Soviet Scholar-Bureaucrat*.

creased interest in terrorism studies, historical research on Russian terrorism also experienced its first boom. Influenced by the seminal works of TED GURR, DAVID RAPOPORT, MARTHA CRENSHAW, PAUL WILKINSON and WALTER LAQUEUR on terrorism in general, specialists of Russian history made valuable contributions to the field.¹⁴ Many of these works focused on aspects of social history, such as ANDREAS KAPPELER's article on the social and national background of activists in "Narodnaya volya."¹⁵ Others chose a more traditional approach, based on individual biographies and the political context of Russian terrorists' activities.¹⁶ Some historians were particularly interested in the involvement of women in the Russian terrorist movement.¹⁷ Moreover, much of the scholarship of the 1970s was likewise crafted within the broader history of protest movements and the formation of political groups and radical parties like the Socialist Revolutionaries.¹⁸ In some cases, the results of research on Russia were put into a larger comparative perspective, such as in the conference volume "Social Protest, Violence and Terror in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe," edited by WOLFGANG MOMMSEN and GERHARD HIRSCHFELD.¹⁹ While the first wave of western historiography on Russian terrorism abated in the 1980s, important contributions by NORMAN NAIMARK, DEBORAH HARDY and others had been made.²⁰

Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev's liberalized cultural policy after 1956 laid the foundation for a revived interest in and new research on non-Bolshevik revolutionary movements in pre-revolutionary Russia.²¹ Despite the fact that official historiography still portrayed SR activists and anarchists as enemies of the Bolshevik cause, the increase of interest in the populist movement of late 19th century among historians was significant. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the de-ideologization of the historical narrative finally led to a fundamental re-assessment of the canonized view of nineteenth-century terrorism and the non-Bolshevik revolutionary movement in Russia. Alongside a new wave of Tsarist nostalgia, Russia's scholarly community evidenced an increasing academic and popular interest in the history of terrorism.²² As in other fields, the publication of primary sources, such as VIKTOR KEL'NER's compilation of materials related to the events of March 1881 or OLEG BUDNITSKIY's publications of historical documents and terrorists' memoirs, opened up new possibilities for reflection on political rad-

14 GURR *Why Men Rebel*; RAPOPORT *Assassination and Terrorism*; CRENSHAW *The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism*; WILKINSON *Political Terrorism*; LAQUEUR *Terrorism. On the field of terrorism studies in the 1970s*; RANSTORP *Mapping Terrorism Studies*, p. 19.

15 KAPPELER *Zur Charakteristik russischer Terroristen*.

16 FOOTMAN *The Alexander Conspiracy*. Cf. also: ULAM *In the Name of the People*.

17 ALPERN ENGEL / ROSENTHAL (eds.) *Women against the Tsar*; ALPERN ENGEL *Mothers and Daughters*; KNIGHT *The Participation of Women*; BROIDO *Apostles into Terrorists*.

18 PERRIE *The Agrarian Policy*; HILDERMEIER *Die sozialrevolutionäre Partei Russlands*; AVRICH *The Russian Anarchists*.

19 MOMMSEN / HIRSCHFELD (eds.) *Social Protest, Violence and Terror*. Of particular interest in this volume: BORCKE *Violence and Terror*; PERRIE *Political and Economic Terror*; HILDERMEIER *The Terrorist Strategies*.

20 NAIMARK *Terrorists and Social-Democrats*; BERGMAN *Vera Zasulich*; HARDY *Land and Freedom*.

21 VOLK *Narodnaya volya*; VILENSKAYA *Revolutsionnoe podpol'e v Rossii*; TROITSKIY *Narodnaya volya*; VALK et.al. (eds.) *Revolutsionnoe narodnichestvo*; SEDOV *Geroicheskiy period*.

22 Cf., for example, LEONOV *Partiya sotsialistov-revolutsionerov*; PRAYSMAN *Terroristy i revolyutsionery*, and GORODNITSKIY *Boevaya organizatsiya*; VOLKOVINSKIY / NIKONOVA *Revolutsionnyy terrorizm*.

icalism in Russia before 1917.²³ The declassification of archival materials and more liberal access policies in Russia's archives facilitated research on the history of terrorism by Western and Russian scholars. Several new monographs, most notably ANNA GEIFMAN'S *Thou Shalt Kill! Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia 1894–1917*, published in 1995, give evidence of this path-breaking development.²⁴ The coverage of the events of 9/11 in the Russian media and the excessive use (and abuse) of terms like *terrorizm* and *anti-terroristicheskaya bor'ba* in Russian political discourse of the Putin era has also invigorated the field of terrorism studies in Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Both in Russia and in the West, the “cultural turn” has significantly affected historical research on pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism in recent years. This shift towards a cultural history of Russian terrorism reflects not only a new fashion in historiography but also the fact that previous historical narratives, which had focused on the genesis of terrorist ideologies, on strategies of legitimization of political violence or on the social basis of terrorist movements, had failed to answer crucial questions. Why, for example, did the belief in certain political ideologies trigger some radicals to commit terrorist acts whereas others remained peaceful? How can we explain that the two ‘waves’ of terrorism in Tsarist Russia in the 1860s/70s and after 1902 affected people from a variety of social classes and ethnic groups? To which extent did the spread of political violence in the 19th century relate to technical innovations, like the construction of large scale infrastructure, and broader socio-economic and cultural developments of the epoch? Was the emergence of the modern terrorist also an indicator for the development of the modern ‘self’? How was political violence perceived by its victims, and how did the experience of modern terrorism alter contemporaries’ concepts of personal security and notions of public space? These are just some questions that have been addressed in recent scholarship on the history of terrorism in general and on the Russian case in particular.

The cultural turn in terrorism studies triggered, for example, new research on the imagery and discourses of terrorism, modes of perception of political violence, and concepts of modern subjectivity and their expression in terrorist biographies – just to name a few aspects.²⁵ Moreover scholars have recently reflected on the communicative dimension of terrorist strategies and activities,²⁶ the ‘performativity’ of the terrorist act and the perception and experience of violence in Russian history in general.²⁷ Inspired by a new interest in questions of subjectivity and in the genesis of modern concepts of ‘self’, some scholars

23 KEL'NER (ed.) *1 marta 1881*; BUDNITSKIY (ed.) *Krov' po sovesti*; BUDNITSKIY (ed.) *Istoriya terrorizma*; BUDNITSKIY (ed.) *Zhenshchiny-terroristki v Rossii*. In 2000 Budnitskiy published his monograph: *BUDNITSKIY Terrorizm v rossiyskom osvoboditel'nom dvizhenii*; MOROZOV (ed.) *Individual'nyy politicheskii terror*; STEPNYAK-KRAVCHINSKIY *Grozovaya tucha Rossii*; SHCHERBAKOVA (ed.) *Politicheskaya politsiya*; SHCHERBAKOVA (ed.) *Agenturnaya rabota*; CHERNOV *V Partii sotsialistov-revolutsionerov*.

24 GEIFMAN *Thou shalt kill!*; GEIFMAN (ed.) *Russia Under the Last Tsar*; cf. also by GEIFMAN *Entangled in Terror*.

25 Cf. for example: MOGIL'NER *Mifologiya „podpol'nogo cheloveka”*; MEDZHIBOVSKAYA *Tolstoy's Response to Terror*; SHCHERBAKOVA *“Otshchepentsy”*; LOUNSBERY *Dostoevskiy's Geography*; COLE *Dynamite Violence*.

26 HILBRENNER *Gewalt als Sprache der Straße*; SAFRONOVA *Vernopoddannicheskie adresa*. There is also a research project by Carola Dietze (Washington) focusing on the influence of mass media on the emergence of political terrorism in international perspective.

have chosen a biographical approach for their research. Apart from the biography of Dmitriy Karakozov, who in 1866 committed the first assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II, predominantly female Russian terrorists like Vera Zasulich, Vera Figner, and Mariya Spiridonova have (again) become objects of biographical and micro-historical studies.²⁸ – This short overview can only indicate the rich and multifaceted character of current research on the history of Russian terrorism both in Russia and in the West, and the goal of our special issue is to give a glimpse into this very dynamic field of historiography. The volume comprises five articles, each of which takes in some way a ‘cultural’ approach but which nevertheless follows its own path towards a new understanding of the history of politically motivated violence in Tsarist Russia.

Before summarizing briefly the narratives and the main arguments of the five articles, two preliminary remarks should be made. The first one concerns the definition of the term ‘terrorism.’ As the quotation from MARTHA CRENSHAW’s work given above suggests, one of the major difficulties scholars face when they write about terrorism is how to define this term. Without pretending to solve this dispute within the broader field, it makes sense to reflect briefly on how the concept of terrorism is understood in the following articles. Although the five authors of this issue were not bound to a specific definition, all of them use the term in a similar way, conceiving it as a form of irregular political violence committed by non-state actors who work in conspiracy and target representatives or institutions of their political and social order and who count on the dissemination of information about their activities in modern mass media.²⁹ Such a focus, it should be noted, seeks neither to ignore nor to deny the importance of violence committed by the state as a counterpart and a source of political militancy from the ‘underground.’³⁰

The second preliminary remark relates to periodization. It is commonly accepted that the development of terrorism in the Tsarist Empire may be divided into two parts.³¹ The

27 Cf. Violence, “Political” Violence, and Terror in Russian History. Cf. also the articles of LAURA ENGELSTEIN and SALLY BONIECE in this special issue of the journal “Kritika” on violence.

28 HOOGENBOOM Vera Figner; SILJAK Angel of Vengeance; Sally Boniece’s book on Spiridonova is still to come, but cf.: BONIECE The Spiridonova Case; VERHOEVEN The Odd Man Karakozov. – The “biographical turn” in historical studies on Russian pre-revolutionary terrorism corresponds with a similar development in the broader field of terrorism studies after 2001. Cf. RANSTORP Mapping terrorism Studies, p. 22.

29 Walter LAQUEUR wrote in 1977, “There is no general definition of terrorism and there will not be one in the near future. To claim that terrorism cannot be analyzed without such a definition is obviously absurd.” The impossibility of a definition and the subjective character of the term have been generally accepted, but nevertheless there have been a number of attempts to at least frame some important characteristics of terrorism. Martha Crenshaw has pointed to the communicative impact of the terrorist act; CRENSHAW The Causes of Terrorism. More recent definitions have privileged this aspect out of a complex of approaches to terrorism. Cf., for example, WALDMANN Terrorismus und Bürgerkrieg. On terrorism and mass media cf.: GLAAB (ed.) Medien und Terrorismus. For the multitude of aspects to be taken into account cf., for example, GIBBS Conceptualization of Terrorism.

30 The construction of terrorism as a form of non-state political violence is challenged by proponents of the “critical terrorism studies” approach. Cf. JACKSON Knowledge, Power and Politics, p. 70; TOROS / GUNNING Exploring a Critical Theory, p. 95. Cf. also MILLER Ordinary Terrorism.

31 NAIMARK Terrorism and the Fall of Imperial Russia.

first period began either with Karakozov's failed assassination attempt on Alexander II in 1866, Vera Zasulich's assault on Saint Petersburg Governor Trepov in 1878, or the formation of "Narodnaya volya" in the summer of 1879. It culminated in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March 1881. After the terrorists' "death sentence" of 1879 had been 'successfully' executed, the Tsarist authorities detained a large number of members of the terrorist underground and thereby successfully destroyed the network of clandestine groups committing large scale political violence for about two decades. The second wave of terrorism in the Tsarist Empire emerged when the SR Party followed in "Narodnaya volya's" footsteps and murdered the Minister of Interior Dimitriy Sipyagin in 1902. This event encouraged the assassinations of other representatives of the Tsarist regime, including Sipyagin's successor Vyacheslav von Plehve in 1904 and the governor-general of Moscow, Grand Duke Sergey Aleksandrovich, in 1905. These spectacular assassinations were accompanied by a large number of terrorist attempts targeting Cossacks, policemen, local officials, and so-called "capitalists" throughout the Tsarist Empire. When anarchists entered the stage in 1903 and especially during the first Russian Revolution of 1905–07, Russia's age of mass terrorism began. Political violence became a widespread phenomenon both on the streets of provincial cities and in the major urban centers of the empire. Despite the fact that each of these two phases is quite distinct, they are nonetheless inter-related in many ways. Not only did the activists of the 'second wave' frequently refer to the 'heroic' terrorism of their predecessors and try to perpetuate their traditions; some of the older members of the SR Party had in fact been previously active in "Narodnaya volya". Since both waves can be regarded as parts of the history of Russian pre-revolutionary terrorism, the articles of this volume try to shed light on both episodes.

SALLY BONIECE's article on a small group of female activists of the SR Party focuses on the years 1905–06. Following a biographical approach, she examines the lives of six terrorists who later became famous as the *shesterka*. With an emphasis on personal emotions and connections as motivating factors in female terrorism despite the self-renunciation required by the revolutionary code of ethics, Boniece is particularly interested in how these women became militant political activists, how male comrades influenced their decision to enter the revolutionary underground, and to what extent they adhered – before and after detention – to the unwritten rules of SR terrorist conduct. Her essay draws a detailed picture of terrorist motivations and choices and how these interact with issues of gender, milieu, social identity, and politics. LYNN PATYK analyzes the performative and communicative function of dress in the context of the terrorist act, both with regards to the (female) activists of the "Narodnaya volya" and SR terrorists alike. Like Boniece's contribution, her essay foregrounds the way gender norms played a role in devising the "code" underlying strategies of non-verbal communication as it was forged by members of the terrorist underground, on the one hand, and deciphered by 'the public', on the other hand. ANKE HILBRENNER's study offers a thick description of a notorious case of "motiveless" terror: the anarchist bombing of the Café Libman in Odessa in December 1905. She focuses on the violent elements of the terrorist deed, examines the social relations between victims, perpetrators and spectators of the assault, and situates the violent experience of the historical terrorist attack in the context of the epidemic violence in Odessa during the 1905 revolution. FRITHJOF BENJAMIN SCHENK's article on railroads and terrorism tries to bridge the gap between the two phases of the history of Russian terrorism. His analysis explores the ex-

tent to which the construction of railroads contributed to the development and spread of modern terrorism both in Tsarist Russia and in other countries. Schenk's essay emphasizes that technical innovations were a prerequisite for modern terrorism, as well as for new forms of vulnerability in modern societies and the transformation of social space in times of increased geographical mobility. Lastly, CLAUDIA VERHOEVEN's paper, which focuses on the first phase of pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism, considers the notion, feeling and concept of temporality, an issue also touched upon briefly in Schenk's article. Verhoeven argues that terrorism is a revolutionary attempt to alter the course of time. Analyzing proclamations, diaries and other ego-documents of Russian terrorists, she discerns the omnipresence of feelings of restlessness, nervousness and impatience in these sources and reads this new notion of temporality as a signifier of the "modern experience" at the end of the nineteenth century.

This collection of essays neither pretends to cover exhaustively the currently expanding field of historical studies on Russian terrorism nor to suggest a coherent new methodology for the future study of the history of political violence in Tsarist Russia. Our modest goal is to present a selection of new perspectives and approaches which are characteristic of the multi-faceted development of this academic sub-discipline in general and of the "cultural turn" in terrorism studies in particular. But apart from the variety of topics, time frames and approaches found in the five essays, several common questions bridge the gaps between them. All five authors strive to integrate their analysis of the respective examples of political violence into a larger narrative, focusing on historical circumstances which either led to or set the framework in which the event in question should be looked at. In this context all articles stress the specific 'setting' of terrorist activities and analyze modern concepts of 'self', gender, dress and time. Some essays pay particular attention to the question of how terrorism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was influenced and fuelled by new technical developments like the building of modern infrastructure or the development of mass media. From this perspective all five articles can also be read as contributions to the ongoing discussion about the complicated and multifaceted relationship of "terrorism" and "modernity", a debate which has reached the historiography on Russian terrorism.³² When asking our authors to reflect on how their contribution could enrich our understanding of the interconnectedness of "terrorism" and "modernity" we deliberately did not confront them with a pre-formulated definition of the term "modernity" and left our inquiry as a kind of 'food for thought.' From our perspective, the impulse we gave led to a number of extraordinarily interesting observations. As all five articles show, terrorism, which evolved as a new strategy of political violence in the second half of the nineteenth century in Russia, soon became part of the "modern experience" in many countries. The way terrorists behaved and dressed, how they reflected on their role in history, how they used technical innovations and addressed a national and international audience

32 Cf. for example the conference "Terrorism and Modernity: Global Perspectives on Nineteenth Century Political Violence" (October 2008), Tulane University, New Orleans. A conference volume will be published. In particular Claudia Verhoevens seminal study VERHOEVENS *The Odd Man Karakozov* has triggered a new debate on the "modern" character of the Russian terrorist movement in late 19th century: Cf. the reviews of this book by PETER WALDMANN, in: *H-Soz-u-Kult*, URL: <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2009-3-162> (17.03.2010) and by MARINA MOGIL'NER, in: *Ab Imperio* (2009) no. 2, p. 367–380.

via mass media, how they understood their social role as men or women all give ample evidence of the emergence of concepts of a modern ‘self’ in an allegedly ‘backward’ country like Russia.³³ At the same time, the experience of political violence in public space and its representation in media reports altered significantly the authorities’ and the public’s understanding of the political act and its star actor in times of accelerated social and cultural change. In sum, the phenomenon of terrorism embodied the intriguing ambivalence of modernity. If one takes these observations seriously, it will be impossible to talk about the emergence of modern terrorism without taking into account its roots reaching back into nineteenth century Russia.

Abbreviation

SR *Sotsialisty-revolutsionery* (Socialist Revolutionaries)

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33 On this debate cf. HOFFMANN / KOTSONIS (eds.) *Russian Modernity and Fox Multiple Modernities vs. Neo Traditionalism.*

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