

# Preparing the Boys for War – Compulsion or Coercion? Physical Education and Training, 1919-1939

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Post 1919 saw an emerging organisation of national resources as anticipation of a potential second major war became more widespread. One prime resource was the youth of the nation – and much was achieved through massive investment in physical activity. This paper demonstrates how – through the mechanisms of sport, physical education and outdoor activities – such changing perceptions initiated major developments in schools from curricula to the establishment of school medical services. Evidence is collated from academic research, personal testimonies and records of schools. In the past the widespread view was that fascist and communist states coerced their young men, whilst UK developments were purely voluntary. This paper seeks to challenge that, demonstrating that whilst UK changes might not have been overly directed by law, the full machinery of the state was extensively and actively involved in changing attitudes, beliefs and pursuits.

## *Existing Interpretations*

Examples of the role of the body being used in the service of the state were found in contemporary film,<sup>1</sup> with Mike Huggins examining how newsreels were a powerful means of communicating with mass audiences.<sup>2</sup> Carter demonstrates how concern about fitness in the UK was widespread,<sup>3</sup> allied to very real concerns about developments in Germany,<sup>4</sup> such views being not solely championed by the political right.<sup>5</sup> These worries were fuelled by beliefs about the physical condition of youth based on experience of previous wars.<sup>6</sup> The inter-war response included the 1902 Model course, the school medical services and initiatives such as the National Fitness campaign. Whilst some explore the compulsory nature of change in fascist and communist countries,<sup>7</sup> others refer to developments across the more democratic.<sup>8</sup> These changes were allied to contemporary beliefs in the value of sunlight,<sup>9</sup> leading to significant changes in costume for both men and women.<sup>10</sup> Although primarily concerned about preparing young males for war, this era also saw a huge expansion of activities for girls.<sup>11</sup> Investigating an international dynamic, Bolz, Carter, Jensen and Bonde, Koyagi, and Rowley illuminate changes in diverse countries with considerable elements of similarity.<sup>12</sup>

*The Physical Inheritance*

Will Dyson's famous cartoon "Peace and Future Cannon Fodder" was published in 1919 and aptly summed up the belief some held about the possibility of a further European War. As the 1920s and 1930s progressed, such views became more widespread, crossing state boundaries, so by 1938, there was extensive belief in the introduction of conscription across the UK.<sup>13</sup> Many states developed a well-established system of military service throughout the 1930s, for example Finland where 'military propaganda depicted universal conscription and the conscript army as central instruments for national integration and civic education'.<sup>14</sup> The cumulative result was a period of intense preparedness for war, and nowhere was this more apparent than in the preparation of the bodies of the young. As we shall see, education, and schools were to play a major role. As English Heritage make clear "sport and war were always closely intertwined in the British psyche".<sup>15</sup>

The context was findings from Boer war medical examinations that shocked the nation resulting in major concerns about the physical condition of the young male, with little apparently changed by the onset of the Great War.<sup>16</sup> Government reports provide extensive contemporary evidence, such as the Reports of the Board of Education and Statistics of Public Education for England and Wales, or the Report of the Provost Marshall to the secretary of war on the first draft under the Selective Service Act (1917).<sup>17</sup> Similarly the Committee on Physical Deterioration set up in 1903 reported, and there was significant impact by Circular 1450.

Crowson and Hucker are among many historians who have tracked the debates surrounding conscription in late 1930s UK.<sup>18</sup> There was a clear international dynamic in operation, with other examples of impact and emergence across countries as diverse as Finland,<sup>19</sup> Italy,<sup>20</sup> Iran,<sup>21</sup> and the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup>

*The Background*

The sheer number of rejections of recruits during the Boer war alerted the nation to the serious physical condition of the young. One direct consequence was the 1902 Model course, making components such as drill and exercises compulsory. This use of compulsion to initiate change in the UK should not be ignored. The widely-recognised problems of the Boer campaign, and the huge rejection rate of volunteers, ensured the establishment of the Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1903. This subsequently led to recommendations for the medical inspection of schoolchildren alongside free school meals for the poor. Concern about the impact physical condition might have on fitness to fight continued to fuel debate, with Sir Lauder Brunton M.D., F.R.S., writing to *The Manchester Guardian* that the nation's future would soon be under threat and the 'necessity to physically educate our children and youth in order to counteract the deterioration in our population'.<sup>23</sup> This was a rallying cry from the establishment that further stimulated debate, with a few months later Brunton publicly favouring the Swedish system,<sup>24</sup> already established for girls through the work of Martina Bergman-Österberg at both Hampsted and Dartford. Subsequently she was appointed to the London School Board with the express remit to develop the system.

More and more evidence surfaced, replacing anecdotal statement as the basis of debate, leading to widespread acceptance that serious problems existed with the

physical condition of many UK children. The Annual report of the Manchester School Medical Officer in 1909 was described by *The Manchester Guardian* as making ‘painful reading’, demonstrating that ‘a large percentage of children are found... to be below the normal in weight and height’.<sup>25</sup> There had already been calls by establishment figures to remedy this well publicised problem. In 1904 the Countess of Warwick supported the TUC call for local authority schools to be allowed to provide food, being supported by Sir John Gorst.<sup>26</sup> Yet whilst some changes were implemented, and a lively discussion ensued through contemporary media, little reform had realistically occurred by the start of the Great War. As Silbey makes clear, early ‘medical exams confirmed what the British had feared after the Boer War’.<sup>27</sup>

In both Europe and America once again there was shock at the physical condition of recruits,<sup>28</sup> lending support to the arguments advanced earlier by Brunton, the Countess of Warwick and others. The recognition of serious problems was compounded when the 1917 Provost Marshall report on the 3 million medical examinations of conscripts in the United States, determined that over a third were physically unfit for service.<sup>29</sup> The report came with a caveat that the statements ‘do not throw any light on the absolute physical condition of draftable men’,<sup>30</sup> issuing warnings about accepting figures presented at face value. Nonetheless it clearly indicated that a significantly large percentage of young American men were rejected outright as medically unfit. The need for remedial action thus became accepted by military, politicians and population. The report identified the major reasons for medical disqualifications were ‘deformities, flat feet, discharging ears, poor physique, defective mentality, hernias, loss of teeth and varicose veins’.<sup>31</sup> A similar pattern was replicated in the UK between 1916 and 1917, where some 2,600,000 medical examinations of young males resulted in comparable findings. What was clear was that many conditions were remediable, demanding immediate and decisive action. Such findings would be vigorously addressed as the inter-war period progressed, and political tension heightened across Europe.

#### *Educational and Medical dynamics in concert*

Beliefs in the moral influences of physical exercise were widespread in the educational press, influencing decision informers between the wars. This proved of major significance in developing a framework for theoretical beliefs that underpinned educational practice. Butler’s handbook for teaching young athletes argued that ‘training will also develop their moral fibre’.<sup>32</sup> In Scotland the development of a curriculum for those between twelve to fifteen years produced in 1931 argued ‘the value of physical education in character training bulks large’.<sup>33</sup> In his speech at the opening of Carnegie College of Physical Education in 1933, Lord Irwin the President of the Board of Education said ‘Physical Education is a vital factor in promoting our national educational aims – the development to the utmost of individual capacities and their use not for self alone but for service’.<sup>34</sup> Nor were such beliefs restricted to the UK, as in the US Rorem published a paper on ‘some social values of the athletic programme’,<sup>35</sup> whilst the Italian Piazonni argued that gymnastics training would develop ‘the qualities mind, muscle and endurance necessary for the warrior’.<sup>36</sup> This belief in the ethical and moral dimension of physical training and education, often informed practise in schools. It heightened the educational purposes of training,



Boys from Manchester Grammar School at camp

giving a clear virtuous and patriotic rationale for the introduction of concepts advanced by the military and politicians. One example will suffice to demonstrate the importance schools attached to physical activities.

In 1922 Manchester Grammar School published a handbook for parents. Discussing Physical Training (PT) it states that whilst pupils might be excused from apparatus training, exemption from free drill would require ‘very special circumstances’.<sup>37</sup> Games were recognised as of major significance – organised every afternoon, with pupils allowed to miss the final lesson of the day (though not the homework) when representing the school. Aware of national concerns about the physical developments of young people, every boy had physical measurements recorded annually. Additional to organised games at school were regular camps (Photograph 1) regarded as of key value. The handbook describes the rationale for camp as ‘to learn the love of fresh air and cold water, to cultivate hardiness and to learn how to depend on oneself’. Further the social side was to ‘cultivate comradeship and the spirit of mutual service’.<sup>38</sup> Such a rationale is indicative of the ideas promulgated by Butler, the Scottish Council, Lord Irwin, Rorem, Piazonni and others.

It is further possible to trace consequent changes in UK government attitude through the annual reports of the *Board of Education for England and Wales*. Whilst some historians make clear the restrictions on funding for physical training and exercise at this time,<sup>39</sup> in 1932 the Board reported that despite financial restrictions there had still been approval for new schemes aimed at improving child health.<sup>40</sup> By 1934 they reported almost total provision across England and Wales of routine medical

examinations of schoolchildren.<sup>41</sup> Attention turned to areas such as malnutrition, cleanliness, dental health and newly emerging medical priorities. By 1935 there was virtually universal supply of milk in elementary schools.<sup>42</sup> There was also the first move by the schools medical service to recognise the significance of Physical Education in 1936, with a whole section of the report devoted to the subject for the first time. New architectural developments also emerge with designs for schools regularly including gymnasiums and shower baths. Similar developments were to be found across the world. In New South Wales, Australia, the school medical service was at its height for staffing between the 1920s and 1930s and had instituted medical examinations of school children.<sup>43</sup> In the United States by 1923 ‘many states had laws requiring annual school medical inspection’.<sup>44</sup>

### *The expansion of sport and physical training*

Some views of the past report investment in sport at this time as strictly limited, but this usually comes from an analysis of governmental spending in isolation.<sup>45</sup> Across many nations this was actually a period of rapid expansion of programmes of physical education, training and sports, both official and voluntary. The growth reflected a significant number of dual level reasons. At one level were multiple local dynamics in operation. For example in the US the inter-war period was ‘the so-called Golden Age of American sport, athletic sports of all types were of increasing interest to the public’.<sup>46</sup> Voluntary organisations such as *The National Playing Fields Association* and the *King George Vth Memorial Fund* purchased land for playing fields across the UK.<sup>47</sup> In Iran 1927 saw the establishment of compulsory physical education whilst in 1934 the *National Society of Physical Education and Scouting* was established. At Copenhagen Lindhard was pursuing his aim of developing gymnastics as a university subject. In 1933, India opened its first College of Physical Training at Madras.<sup>48</sup> As I shall demonstrate, there was also an overwhelming political dynamic in place to support expansion of these and other programmes.

One of the first nations to react to future demands was Germany where major changes were instituted in schools. Here the incidence of weekly Physical Training increased and it became possible for a pupil to be excluded purely on the grounds of consistent poor performance in PT. It was instituted as an examination subject on the school leaver’s certificate. Those starting work often discovered apprenticeships involved elements of compulsory physical education and drills. Many universities developed ‘voluntary’ sports activities that were almost impossible for students to neglect due to social pressure. As in other parts of the world huge tracts of land were given over to physical recreation and training.<sup>49</sup> Such activities fuelled a worldwide explosion in physical activity, with the Germans very proactive. For example in 1937 they sent Dr Carl Dim to Sofia to ‘organise a plan for physical training of the youth of Bulgaria’.<sup>50</sup> As Newman was to observe in 1939 ‘there is now no question that under the new German Reich physical training has become ... a vast national practice which is changing the whole people’.<sup>51</sup> The overriding aim of the programme had previously been described by *The Lancet* as seeking ‘cultivating health, and the burning will to health and good physique that seems to live in the German population of to-day’.<sup>52</sup>

Such views came to be reinforced across the UK after the 1936 Olympics, where the availability of images through the medium of newsreels had a major impact on the consciousness of the nation. Carter makes the point that ‘images of healthy, fit Germans from the Hitler Youth and ‘Strength Through Joy’ movement, not only created anxieties in Britain over the state of the nation’s fitness but how British soldiers may perform in a future war.’<sup>53</sup> Nor were such concerns restricted to the UK. Italy believed sport was ‘a leading means to transform Italians from peasants into soldiers’.<sup>54</sup> France regarded the significance of sport as a facet of patriotism, where ‘sporting events became opportunities to demonstrate the strength and vitality of a nation’.<sup>55</sup> In short physical training across Europe and America developed at a much enhanced rate compared with previous years. Coupled with increasing fears of a new War, the physical development of the male body took on a pressing and urgent dimension. ‘Physical training was patriotic: it prepared men’s bodies for war’.<sup>56</sup>

In the Soviet Union the role of women was seen as crucial, with their role in parachuting and rifle-shooting especially encouraged.<sup>57</sup> Similarly in the UK some physical culture movements involved women, with the *Health and Strength League* opening membership to women in 1919. By 1930 Mary Stack was leading the *Women’s League of Health and Beauty* with its motto ‘movement is life’ which encouraged such activities as Pilates, yoga and aerobics. By 1937 the League boasted some 166,000 members. Fiona Skillen argues that ‘the inter-war years were an important watershed in many ways for modern women’s sport’.<sup>58</sup> Further, she makes reference to the centrality of sport in many women’s lives,<sup>59</sup> reflecting on changes in ‘fashion and consumer culture and further frames these ideas and developments within the simultaneous development of sport for women in Inter-War Britain’.<sup>60</sup> The role of schools might not have been particularly beneficial to a positive relationship between schools and young women.<sup>61</sup>

Claims that major reductions in government expenditure in the UK meant less money spent on sport and training are more complex than at first appears, with massive changes enacted between the wars. Government spending has to be augmented by spending of local authorities, arms-length boards and voluntary bodies. Between 1927/9 and 1938/9 expenditure on Physical Education by Local Education Authorities nearly doubled.<sup>62</sup> In the six years prior to 1930, Birmingham bought 216 acres of land to provide new playing fields whilst Sheffield transported some 96,000 children every week to playing fields. Extensive developments were taking place parallel to education, with the *National Playing Fields Association* founded in 1925 and *National Fitness Council* in 1938. Whilst the relationship between the military and educational services was sometimes fraught, by 1923 it is estimated that one third of all PT instructors in schools were ex-army/navy instructors.

Nor was government idle in encouraging change. Circular 1450 made explicit suggestions about the role and methodology to be applied in Physical Education, leading to substantial debate and multiple questions in the House of Commons. In particular it recommended specific dress and the use of shower baths as integral to Physical Education. It also made grants available to assist provision for ‘necessitous’ children of clothing and footwear for use in physical education. There was a clear aim that poverty should be no bar to taking part in physical activity and that the government would ensure that all children had access to the curriculum. How widely appropriate schemes were implemented depended upon the support and commit-



ment of local authorities. Whilst enactment may not have been backed with legal force, this was one of many occasions where official suggestion led to pressure being applied by central government.

Similarly the National Fitness Campaign launched by the government in the late 1930s 'spurned an identification with militarism and emphasised the importance of voluntary organisation as more in tune with national character'.<sup>63</sup> In fact the government consistently denied there was any compulsion inherent in the campaign. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, it is also the case that the government threw its propaganda machine fully behind the campaign: for example there was an official endorsement by King George VI followed by a personal message at the 1939 Health and Strength display. The Prime Minister spoke on the need for such a movement on significant occasions that would gain the utmost publicity, such as the Conservative Party Conference in 1936. These were endorsements of the campaign at the highest level. Whilst it is true that public consciousness might have eschewed any obligatory system, the government managed to achieve their aims through propaganda and peer pressure – it became a loyal duty to engage in physical activity.

#### *The emergence of outside activities*

The popularity of outside activity, both physical education in schools and voluntary outdoor activities like rambling, cycling, camping and swimming became widespread and not just in fascist or communist states. It became directly related to contemporary ideas about the benefit of sunlight, which were as strongly encouraged and developed in the UK, US and France as they were in Italy, Germany or Russia. In many ways it demonstrates that key elements of physical training emerged regardless of legal force, and that what was really influential was cultural change rooted in established 'good practice' of the day. Whilst there might have been no legislation insisting on outdoor activity, the law laid down by the teacher, camp or scout leader would have appeared just as compulsory to the young child being instructed. Compulsion takes many forms. The growth was a response to social pressure and contemporary research and beliefs promulgated and disseminated by decision makers in the medical, sporting and educational fields.

1928 saw the formation of *The Sunlight League* in the UK, with exposure to sunlight 'regarded as crucial for wellbeing' as 'exposure to sunlight would cure a wide range of illnesses'.<sup>64</sup> It was also regarded as a major therapy for use on elite athletes of the day, particularly in the USA, and so gained further academic, sporting and medical credence. Adverts existed eulogising the benefits of UV as 'both the healing virtues and training possibilities of ultra-violet rays were extolled in advertisements that appeared in the *Athletic Journal* of 1928'.<sup>65</sup> This belief in the benefits of outdoor activity and in particular the impact of sunlight became widely accepted. So 'everywhere it seemed there was evidence of fresh air as the source of strength and enjoyment... young people made for the country and seaside in weekends and holidays, and went camping, swimming and sunbathing'.<sup>66</sup> Whilst such activity may have been compulsory in some countries, it was encouraged in others with all the energy propaganda machines could muster – and this included the UK.

Such beliefs also led to the development of the open air school movement, with external activity seen as almost a panacea for a vast number of issues. Indeed the

1931 Hadow Report suggested that new primary schools should replicate many of the features of open air schools – bringing fresh air, sunlight and outdoor experiences to all children in the country. The corridor schools were designed, where whole walls could be opened to admit fresh air and sunlight. In other developments sanatoriums with open-air wards were still the major treatment for TB and the development of sun trap buildings like lido swimming pools had their peak of construction.<sup>67</sup>

This increased popularity of physical activity allied to beliefs about beneficial characteristics of sunlight, led to new costume styles and activities. Wherever possible changes were made to expose as much of the body as possible to sunlight. Activities that took place in the open air were encouraged – cross country running, rambling, cycling, swimming outdoors and so on.

Women started wearing shorts or short skirts – arms of costumes were often cut off – the development of the single piece swimming costume was born. Fiona Skillen makes the point that many changes for women's clothing came about because there were 'practical considerations which underpinned the development of many of the new styles of sports clothing'.<sup>68</sup> Skillen further suggests there was a 'trade-off' between the practical and the socially acceptable. For men the use of shorts became standard, and they became shorter than previously worn. In the military and most schools shirts were dispensed with for physical activity. The aim was to expose as much of the body to the benefits of sunlight as was possible, within the newly acceptable limits of decency. The traditional restrictions on showing flesh were often compromised in this new world, since the overriding imperative was the physical development of boy into man able to fight – nothing, even previous concepts of modesty, was to stand in its way. Such standards continued throughout the war (and immediate post war period), as the photo of the Keighley Grammar School gymnastics team taken in 1942 demonstrates (Photograph 2).

These changes in perceptions of the beneficial influence of sunlight had further implications for the body, especially the male body. In the past the typical signifier

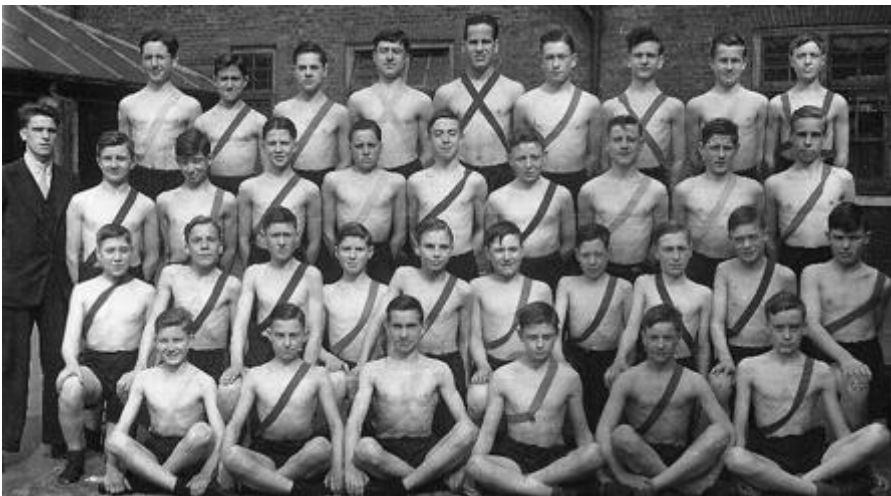


Gymnastics team from Keighley Grammar School in 1942



of beauty had been white porcelain-like skin. This had traditionally been a means used by the wealthy to distance themselves from the weather-beaten and sunburnt skin of labourers who worked long hours outside. The changes being promoted by the government were demanding a heavy political investment, so there was a need to alter public perception. People had to believe the changes were working, and the most apparent visual change was the skin, where new social mores meant a tanned body began to take on differing and significant connotations. As a result 'now it was bronzed skin, a 'sporty' appearance which exuded social prestige'.<sup>69</sup> Having tanned and muscular young men exercising shirtless or posing at the new lidos reinforced the image of a strong and healthy cohort of national youth. It signified both that the government were achieving their aims, and the young people of the nation were taking their responsibilities seriously. These young men looked much more like the German youth seen in newsreels than previous generations – here was clear evidence that the future of the nation was in safer hands. The dress changes therefore had a dual functionality. They fitted with contemporary perceptions of the power of the sun as beneficial for the body, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the physical capabilities of this cohort of young people were far superior to previous generations. Such beliefs were consistently supported by the media through films such as *Olympia* in 1936, where 'the mobilisation of a body aesthetic in the service of the power interests of the political body' were becoming deeply influential.<sup>70</sup>

Such changes were lauded and promoted using every method available. The aim was to influence the general population by validating the effectiveness of change and the role this played in physical training of youth. Every method possible was used to demonstrate to the wider population that the nation was making significant progress. Photograph 3 shows the PT squad from Battersea Central School in 1936. Cliff Douthwaite (personal communication) recalls the photograph being taken, when he went with his friend to London University Gym and made an eleven-minute film for *British Movietone News* for the 'Keep Britain Fit' campaign. His friend Vic Myers recalls the Minister of Health and the President of the Board of Education were



Battersea Central School Physical Training Team in 1936

present, with the film being shown across the nation on the cinema circuit. The presence of important politicians and luminaries at filming speaks volumes for the significance the government placed on the newsreel as a method of publicising the campaign.<sup>71</sup> Mike Huggins demonstrates the influence of newsreels over this period, arguing 'newsreels provided powerful ideological reinforcement of wider cultural sporting attitudes'.<sup>72</sup> Though Huggins is arguing the case specifically about football, it is fairly clear that such influence would not solely be restricted to one sport. Additionally the impact of Reifentahl's work, *Triumph of the Will* in 1934 and *Olympia* in 1936, had established film as a potent means of demonstrating physical culture to millions of people across the world. This was utilising cutting edge technology as mass communication. The volume of people exposed to campaigns through the medium of newsreels, is a clear indication of the importance attached to the message.

The Battersea team were subsequently asked to perform at the *Congress of Physical Medicine*. The pride the members of the troop must have felt is obvious. It is also most significant that the image portrayed illustrates the classic aims of the now integrated approach to physical development of the young. This demonstrated to the general public the new priority attached to physical training, and the belief in sunlight being a significant component in physical development.

Such changes in dress were to become more widespread as the war came nearer. Much military training was conducted with the same dress code, and the style became the basic code for school's physical training. Many schools enthusiastically embraced many facets of the new physical culture movement. More and more athletic and gymnastic activities appeared on school timetables. The incidence of time devoted in the curriculum increased. Regular medical examinations leading to corrective activity became systematically organised in schools. The full force of the media was employed to promote the changes. Whilst there might have not been as much explicit legislation by the UK government as in Germany or Italy, the propaganda machine of state powers were in overdrive to demonstrate the benefits to individual and country inherent in the new physical culture movement.

### *Conclusion*

Whilst traditional views have argued that developments of fitness in the United Kingdom were mainly voluntary, this paper demonstrates that the British Government achieved their aims through the more subtle dimension of peer pressure and state propaganda. The use of cutting edge technology such as newsreels was used to reach the maximum number of people. Major political figures and members of the Royal family supported the campaigns. Newspaper articles consistently reminded the population of developments overseas. Further, by linking to the growing belief of the benefits of sunlight, the Government were able to appear attuned to state of the art thinking. All these influenced decision makers in the Education and Medical world, as well as garnering a substantial critical mass of public support and participation.

Whilst there might not have been overt use of the law (although much compulsion did exist – for example new curricula and the development of school medicals), the state effectively used all other political, campaigning and patriotic means they could. Quite simply, all avenues open were exploited by the British Government – and that included the extensive use of influence and propaganda.

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