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The Failure of Soviet Orphan Policies, 1918-1939

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The word *besprizornye* meant abandoned and orphans in Soviet Russia. From 1918 to 1939, the massive number of orphans was one of the social problems the Soviet Union was facing. The history of orphans during the interwar period can be categorized into two periods: the first wave from 1918, the establishment of the Soviet Union throughout the civil war, to 1922, the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP) period. This first wave were orphaned due to the disasters caused by the civil war and famine. The Soviet government, saw the large number of orphans as a chance to initiate its Soviet experiment. By employing various policies including opening orphanages, they were able to transform their young population into new citizens of the socialist state. With the coming of NEP, the government achieved mixed results in this Soviet experiment. The second wave of orphans appeared from 1930 to 1939, and this wave was caused by Stalin's policies on collectivization, forced industrialization and terror. The Stalinist government employed a similar strategy as in the NEP period to accommodate these orphans to continue the Soviet experiment. However,

Stalin's government lacked adequate resources, and there was a shifting of the political environment in the 1930s. Orphans tended to be mistreated by the authorities, and the orphanages only became a temporary solution that could not relieve orphans of their misery. Eventually, they became victims of political terror under Stalin's government in the 1930s. This essay will be divided into two parts: the first part will examine the first wave of orphans in the Soviet Union that lived outside the state welfare system from 1918 to 1922 and the government's attitude toward and response to accommodating this large number of orphans. The second part will examine the second wave of orphans generated by Stalin's terror who remained outside the state welfare system and how the government responded to this wave of orphans. Through comparison of the Soviet government's attitude and policy on orphans in the two different periods, it becomes clear that the shifting of the political environment into a more conservative atmosphere in the 1930s victimized children and orphans in the Soviet Union. Eventually the Stalinist government failed in its Soviet experiment, which aimed to transform children into Soviet citizens.

In the 1920s, Soviet cities and towns were filled with abandoned children. Children in the early Soviet period became orphans due to war and famine. The large continuous wave of orphans began in pre-Revolutionary times. When the Russian Empire entered World War One, the imperial government began to conscript adult males into the army. This included

many fathers, and families lost their main source of income.¹ As the German and Austrian armies pushed toward the east in 1916, the Russian government began to evacuate the eastern front, and many families abandoned their children, as they had lost their shelter. With the establishment of a new government and the end of World War One, the economy worsened. Many families had to abandon their children because they lost their sources of income and their homes, so these children had to live on the streets.² However, the end of World War One brought the six-year Civil War beginning in 1917 that introduced epidemics and famine to the newly established Soviet Union. By the end of the Civil War in 1922, there had been eight years of continuous war from World War One to the Civil War. The number of orphans reached its peak in 1921-1922 with the Volga Famine, which pushed the number of orphans to approximately seven million across the Soviet Union.³ These orphans were deprived of adult care and had to survive on their own in the streets of urban areas.

With political turmoil and war beginning in 1918, and continuing to 1922, the Soviet government was not able to accommodate this sudden wave of orphans and abandoned children. Many orphans had to live outside the state welfare system throughout the early 1920s. They had to rely on their own abilities to survive living on the streets. The majority of orphans were living in urban areas and tended to cluster around train stations, restaurants and

¹ Ronald Grigor. Suny, *"The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94.

² Ibid.

³ Alan M Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), introduction, e-book.

garbage sites.⁴ They used different methods ranging from passive to criminal behavior to survive. Gender and age also had an influence on their choices. Younger orphans tended to portray themselves as innocent and seek help from adults. Many of them chose begging as a way to earn their living. Some orphans also worked alongside adults on the street to beg more effectively.⁵ Usually, the adult would keep all the revenue of the day but would provide shelter and food for the young orphans.⁶ Besides begging, another peaceful way to earn a living on the street was to provide entertainment. Orphans would form temporary music groups for a day, as members could come and go freely and provide entertainment at various public locations.⁷ Orphans would sing together at train stations to attract passengers to give them money or perform concerts in markets, courtyards and streets.⁸ Some orphans also simply danced in the street to earn a living. During the NEP, the economic state was more liberalized, and they could obtain a license to sell quite easily.⁹ Some orphans chose to sell hand-made goods or their own clothing in exchange for food. Although many orphans chose to survive on the street peacefully, some orphans, particularly older orphans, chose to become criminals and engaged in various illegal activities.

Stealing was one of the most common activities, but if they got caught, they would

⁴ Alan M Ball, "Survival in the Street World of Soviet Russia's 'besprizornye'," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, 39, no. 1 (1991): 34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41048535>.

⁵ Ibid, 35

⁶ Ibid, 35

⁷ Ibid, 36

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 39

depend on the mercy of the victims. They were often beaten badly before being handed in to police.¹⁰ The police also did not receive adequate training in handling juveniles and tended to mistreat them by locking them up together with adult criminals.¹¹ Some orphans preferred more aggressive methods. They worked in groups and knocked down people who walked by or chased single people walking in the street and took away their belongings.¹² Orphans also conducted burglaries, targeting windows or doors of apartments and houses that were open so they could slip in.¹³ For girls, many of them chose to become prostitutes.¹⁴ Many of the girls would try begging or other non-criminal activities, but after a few months, due to failure or being raped by passers-by, they chose to become prostitutes.¹⁵ In a survey in the 1920s, of the 55 percent of the participants under the age of 15, 88 percent had turned to prostitution.¹⁶ These prostitutes usually worked at train stations or near market locations in urban areas. No matter what criminal act they engaged in, orphans who were attracted to criminal activities or decided to conduct a trade usually formed groups to survive living on the streets.

Orphans who decided to enter into commercial or criminal activities tended to form groups to protect themselves from fellow competitors, including adults, and to give them protection from police prosecution. For commercial activities, orphans formed guild-like

¹⁰ Ibid, 40.

¹¹ Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviets*, chap. 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ball, "Survival in the Street World of Soviet Russia's 'Besprizornye'," 48.

¹⁴ Ibid, 40.

¹⁵ Ibid, 41.

¹⁶ Ibid, 42.

groups which not only acted as an early warning mechanism for competitors but also for police prosecution of illegal sellers. Different guilds also worked together to set prices for goods.¹⁷ Juvenile delinquents formed gangs to rob people in the street or were recruited as prostitutes.¹⁸ These guild-like groups and gangs shared similar characteristics. They were extremely hierarchical and had extensive networks in the cities. These groups attracted children from ages 10 to 18. Children joined these groups for a simple reason – it gave them a place to sleep.¹⁹ These groups developed a complicated social structure of networks built on obligation and trust.²⁰ Children in these groups developed quasi-family relationships and became like families. These groups offered protection and shelter to their members, while commercial guilds helped their members obtain licenses for themselves and provided protection from police blackmail.²¹ The large number of orphans on the street became a serious social problem. By the early 20s, as the Civil War was coming to an end and society was becoming more stable, the Soviet government began the project of educating orphans into a new generation of Soviet citizens.

With the end of the Civil War in 1922, the Soviet government introduced the NEP and began to liberalize and rehabilitate their devastated economy. However, the most important aspects concerning orphans were the liberal, radical and experimental ideas about family and

¹⁷ Ball, "Survival in the Street World of Soviet Russia's 'Besprizornye'," 38.

¹⁸ Ibid, 38.

¹⁹ Svetlana Stephenson, "Street Children in Moscow: Using and Creating Social Capital," *The Sociological Review* 49, no. 4 (2001): 538.

²⁰ Ibid, 540.

²¹ Ball, "Survival in the Street World of Soviet Russia's 'Besprizornye'," 38.

children proposed in the pre and early revolution that were manifested and reappear in the NEP period. From the establishment of the Soviet Union, the regime maintained a positive attitude toward orphans and were willing to accept them into the new society. They viewed orphans as victims of the bourgeois regime and, despite the fact that they had committed crimes on the streets, they deemed them innocent because their misery had been created by bourgeois deprivation.²² The idea that every child was innocent was very progressive, even in the view of western democracies, as in the same era, the west still looked upon juvenile criminals as needing only to be punished. Many communists believed that orphans who had no undesirable social origins were not influenced by the culture of the bourgeoisie and were potentially perfect Soviet citizens.²³ Thus, the project to rehabilitate orphans was not simply solving a social problem but was part of the “Soviet experiment” to create the world’s first communist state. Bukharin, one of the old Bolsheviks in the Politburo, believed many orphans were not influenced by the church, so they could easily be educated to become perfect citizens. This also matched the goal of Soviet education to separate church from school to create a modern socialist state.²⁴ Bukharin and other communists also valued “self-autonomy” in education, which meant an ideal soviet citizen should be able to motivate themselves to become part of the socialist community and people should be trained in this

²² Alan M Ball, "State Children: Soviet Russia's Besprizornye and the New Socialist Generation," *Russian Review* 52, no. 2 (1993): 235.

²³ Ibid, 236.

²⁴ Nikolai, Bukharin, *Church and School in the Soviet Republic*, (1919), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1919/churchandschool.htm>

attribute in childhood through education.²⁵ Many communists could see this attribute demonstrated in street orphans, as they organized various groups in the street to protect themselves.²⁶ Thus, the Soviet government in the 20s saw orphans as having positive attributes, and they began the experiment by providing institutional welfare to help them grow into socialist and modern citizens.

The policy on orphans' welfare during the NEP reflects the goal of the Soviet experiment. In 1919, the Soviet government enacted a decree requiring the Soviet Union to provide all necessary resources and education to minors and outlawed beating in child institutions.²⁷ In terms of state-sanctioned facilities for orphans, the Commissariat of Health was responsible for taking care of abandoned children aged from 1 to 3 years old.²⁸ The Commissariat of Health also provided health care services for sick and handicapped children. They also provided special treatment for children who were psychologically abnormal due to unpleasant experiences in the streets.²⁹ *Narkompros* was responsible for establishing *Detdom* (children's home) to accommodate teenage orphans. The structure and organization of *Detdom* reflected liberal ideas and were a major instrument of the Soviet experiment toward children. In organizing the structure of *Detdom*, the authorities emphasized collective and self-governing ideals. Orphans were required to form a collective society so they could

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ball, "State Children: Soviet Russias Besprizornye and the New Socialist Generation," 237.

²⁷ Ibid, 230.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

govern themselves. They were responsible for organizing various clubs such as reading, sports and music clubs. Orphans were also responsible for the administration of *Detdom*, as this allowed them to be self-sufficient in that they were motivating themselves to contribute to the collective, not being forced by adults.³⁰ As they formed a self-governing collective, they were also required to form an assembly in which all members discussed affairs within the orphanage regularly, and all had an equal voice.³¹ This policy aimed to create an idealist citizen who could motivate themselves in the course of history and become a subject in a socialist society, which is part of Marxist ideology. In terms of education in *Detdom*, *Narkompros* emphasized “socialist labour education”, which focused on vocational training rather than traditional academics. This distinguished it from the tsarist education where students had to sit and recite textbooks and were beaten if they did not.³² Besides establishing the *Detdom*, the Soviet government also employed various measures to re-educate orphans.

With the large influx of orphans due to famine and war, the established children’s homes were insufficient, so the Soviet government began to employ foster parents and experiment with child colonies in the mid-20s to help orphans become Soviet citizens. In the mid-20s, the government began to encourage adults to adopt orphans. Among the different social groups, peasants were the most enthusiastic. They wanted to have more hands to help on their farms.

³⁰ Ibid, 231.

³¹ Ibid, 231.

³² Ibid, 232.



The government also began to experiment with a new institution - the child colony. The child colony was built on a larger scale than *Detdom*, as they authorised groups of more than 300 children to form collective towns.³³ The Soviet educator Makarenko was a strong advocate of the child colony and was the administrator of the Gorky colony.³⁴ In a child colony, the orphans formed a collective and self-governing body to administer the town. Children were responsible for disciplining each other and assigning roles in the town.³⁵ Makarenko viewed the child colony as an ideal institute in which to train socialist citizens, as it allowed them to further their self-governing skills since they had to manage not only a political institution but an entire town. They also had the opportunity to contribute to the state, as they established production facilities to produce daily necessities for themselves and any produce over quota was exported to other towns.

With different measures and positive intentions from the government, the “Soviet experiment” with orphans in the 20s achieved mixed results. Many *Detdom* in the early 20s did not receive adequate resources, and the environments inside these *Detdom* were noxious. With the Volga famine creating additional orphans, children housed in *Detdom* did not receive enough resources or food.³⁶ This situation persisted through the mid-20s, as foreign journalists saw that many *Detdom* in the Volga region were still lacking enough clothing and

³³ Andrew B. Stone, “Growing up Soviet? The Orphans of Stalin's Revolution and Understanding the Soviet Self,” PhD diss (University of Washington, 2012), 26.

³⁴ A. S. Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), chap 2, e-book

³⁵ *Ibid*, chap 7, 8.

³⁶ Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviets*, chap.7

food.³⁷ To solve this problem, the government allowed foreign charities such as the American Red Cross, under official sanction, to provide food to the orphans. In 1924, Children's Friends was established with encouragement from the government to gather women to work as volunteers in Detdom.³⁸ As the government focused their labour on education, many children still could not read or write when they left the orphanage. However, they were allowed to obtain a job in a farm or factory to ensure their livelihood, as the government guaranteed employment for children graduating from Detdom. Maksimovskaia was one example; she was living in an orphanage in the 20s and was illiterate after she left the facility, but she was able to become a brigade leader on a dairy farm in the 30s.³⁹ The foster parents program also greatly decreased the burden on the government, but some peasants abused the adopted children and forced them to work on the farm for long hours.⁴⁰ Some children also experienced psychological trauma on the streets and could not adapt to ordinary family life or escape from their foster family.⁴¹ The experimental child colony also played a positive role in the 20s. Makarenko stated that the Gorky colony was a stronger organization than Komsomol and the villages around it, and different villages were willing to establish connections with the colony. Children in the colony were enthusiastic to go to

³⁷ Anna Louise Strong, "Education in Soviet Russia," in *The First Time in History: Two Years of Russias New Life*, chap XI, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/strong-anna-louise/1925/first_time/index.htm

³⁸ Catriona Kelly, *Childrens World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 208.

³⁹ Lewis H Siegelbaum et al., *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 349.

⁴⁰ Ball, "State Children: Soviet Russias Besprizornye and the New Socialist Generation," 238.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 238.

different villages to educate Komsomol on how to become “self-governing”. With different measures and forward-looking intentions for the orphans from the government, the number of street orphans began to slowly diminish in the mid-20s. As the orphans began to obtain jobs, the Detdom began to close in the late 20s, and the Soviet experiment had thus made some achievements while also contributing to other problems in the era. However, a new wave of children orphaned due to political turmoil in the 30s was awaiting, and once again, the orphan problem reared its head in the 30s.

As Stalin consolidating his power in the 1930s, he initiated the new collectivization policy and terror, which created a new wave of orphans that lived outside the state welfare system. A new group of orphans emerged: repressed children whose situation was produced under Stalin’s terror and the collectivization policy of the 30s. They were different from the orphans from the late 10s and early 20s. They were often from Kulak families, professional class families or from Bolshevik party members who ranked high in the red aristocracy.⁴² They were from wealthy families in the Soviet Union, well-educated and not aware of the situation in the streets. When their parents were arrested, families fell apart and the children became abandoned or orphans. However, the majority of them did not necessarily live on the street like the orphans in previous decades. With the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) operational order 00486, repressed children could live with a relative who

⁴² Cathy A. Frierson, *Silence Was Salvation: Child Survivors of Stalins Terror and World War II in the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 39.

was not repressed, if they accepted the child.⁴³ After temporary halt of forced collectivization during NEP, collectivization became state policy again as Stalin applied Ural-Siberian method of force grain collection in fall of 1929.⁴⁴ With collectivization in full swing, the children of Kulaks were the first group of victimized children among the repressed children, as collectivization was in full swing by 1930. Maria Solomank was a daughter of a Kulak family. Her family was transferred to a special settlement camp, her father disappeared and her mother died in childbirth. As her parents were dead, the OGPU sent her to a relative who was willing to take care of her.⁴⁵ Another group of repressed children was produced in the mid-30s due to Stalin's terror.

The coming in 1937 of Stalin's Great Purge meant a second group of repressed children had come on to the scene. They were the children of professional families and party members. Similar to the Kulak children, they were allowed to transfer to their relatives if they were willing to accept them as long as they were not the children of "very important people". The majority of children were allowed to live outside the state-operated Detdom if the NKVD found someone to take care of them. Maya Rudolfovna Levitina was the daughter of a doctor, and both her parents worked in the field of medicine and were of German ethnic origin. Her

⁴³ Cathy A. Frierson and S. S. Vilenskii, *Children of the Gulag* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 161.

⁴⁴ Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, 222.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 158.

father was also a member of the Bolsheviks.⁴⁶ Her father was arrested in 1937 and executed shortly after, and her family moved north to Dogla, just outside Moscow. Her mother died shortly after due to the harsh environment and depression. Her mother's friend Dora Minkina adopted her and took care of her.⁴⁷ Inna Aronovna Shikheeva-Gaister was another example of a repressed child of a professional family. Her father was former SR and worked in a credit cooperative in the 30s. Her father was arrested due to his former SR background. Her grandmother took her up to her apartment in Stalingrad, along with her nanny. She was living with another thirteen cousins, some of whose parents had also been arrested, and they were all repressed children. Throughout the terror, her nanny and grandmother took care of her, while her father was arrested, and her mother was working outside Stalingrad. To some extent, her teacher also helped her, as her teacher often gave her bread and allowed her to attend school when she not able to pay the fees. Inna was reunited with her parents in the 50s, and she continued to maintain contact with the nanny for the rest of her life.⁴⁸ However, not all repressed children were lucky enough to have a stranger or relative to help them, and they continued to be victimized in state-sanctioned facilities.

The end of NEP in the 30s saw the Soviet experiment come to a halt as Stalin abandoned the progressive idea on children and society became more conservative. The positive outlook

⁴⁶ Frierson, *Silence Was Salvation*, 196.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 199

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 121

on orphanages in the 20s began to disappear as Stalin re-asserted family values.⁴⁹ Orphans were viewed as “morally defective”⁵⁰ and unable to be transformed into law-abiding citizens instead of Soviet citizens in the Stalinist view of a military, disciplined society. The shift in the political environment ended the Soviet experiment and impacted the child welfare policy. A decree in 1935 stated that the age for criminal responsibility should be lowered to 12, and youth criminals were to be sent to labour colonies or subject to the adult penal system.⁵¹ Detdom and child labour colonies were beginning to be seen as sources of cheap labour and began to assign production quotas.⁵² As society placed a greater emphasis on discipline and a military-like atmosphere, rewards and punishments, which were discouraged in the 20s, began to be enforced. Staff were allowed to beat children if they did not fulfill quotas.⁵³ Although physical punishment was outlawed again in 1936, this only expanded the “culture of blame” of the terror, which encouraged lower-rank employees to denounce their director.⁵⁴ As the government used child facilities as a source of cheap labor, it was not willing to invest in these child facilities and was not able to train enough workers. Many staff were incompetent and abused their power to beat orphans or conduct criminal behavior such as stealing property of the facilities or stealing orphans’ bread.⁵⁵ Children often had to write

⁴⁹ Kelly, *Childrens World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991*, 221.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 222.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 230.

⁵² Stone, “Growing up Soviet?” 200.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 208

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 361

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

letters to Stalin or other government leaders to request food and clothing.⁵⁶ The proposed utopianism of Detdom for orphans in the 20s began to disappear.

The radical ideas of self-governing and the collective system proposed in the 20s to create self-motivated socialist citizens only existed in name by the 30s. As orphans began to be seen as a labor source, orphanages were turned into factories for production. Staff began to use the collective system to advance the reputation of their institution in the “socialist competition” system for more resources. The collective was divided into different groups to compete with each other to produce more or obtain better grades in class. This produced better results in grades and production output but also created a hierarchy in the collective system. The group that had better results often had more bread, and orphans who did not meet their quota were beaten and deprived of food.⁵⁷ As new groups of repressed children entered into orphanage facilities, this further divided the collective system. The facilities were often divided into two groups: orphans who had more “desirable” origins were in one group, and orphans from repressed families were in another. The children from repressed families often had better education, but the violin lessons or the reading of literature could not help them survive in the facilities.⁵⁸ The senior children who had desirable backgrounds often used the collective system to bully newcomers who were often repressed children from wealthy families. The collective system aimed to help repressed children to transfer their love of

⁵⁶ Siegelbaum et al., *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents*, 402-404.

⁵⁷ Stone, “Growing up Soviet?” 200.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 234.

family to the collective, but it failed in its aim. Many children found the collective experience horrific. Obolenskaia, one of the repressed children in the Shuia children's home, remembered the collective as being a painful experience and complained that the lack of parental guidance gave her an awful childhood. She explained that older children who had criminal backgrounds in the collective often beat her and took away her bread.⁵⁹ Uborevich and Nikolaev were other examples. They were children from the Gorky colony, and they remembered that children were divided into two groups: the criminal group and the repressed children group. These two groups were always hostile to each other, but staff tended to help the former group. As children in the collective never cooperated, the so-called self-government system did not work in Gorky colony.⁶⁰ As the political atmosphere became complicated, this also affected the operation of orphanages and orphans fell victim to the Stalinist terror. With terror in full swing, the idea of rehabilitating orphans and turning them into socialist citizens had already disappeared in the 30s due to the conservative environment.

In the 30s, the Stalin's government had already relinquished the liberal idea that "every orphan is innocent" and able to be re-educated, as had been proposed in the pre-revolution period. The Soviet government in the 30s marked the end of the "Soviet experiment" and failed to create a "happy childhood" to help orphans and children become future members of Soviet society. As Stalin began to promote conservative values in society, the public began to

⁵⁹ Ibid, 254.

⁶⁰ Frierson and Vilenskiĭ, *Children of the Gulag*, 189-190.

view orphans as criminals. They often called them monsters when they encountered them in public places.⁶¹ They began to abandon the policy to re-educate orphans into socialist citizens. In comparison with policy in the 20s, the orphans were not seen as potential members of a socialist society. This led to the general public and the government refusing to invest in orphanage facilities. The facilities were turned into factories to fulfill quota and to isolate the little enemy from society. The happy childhood depicted in Soviet public life that aimed to turn children into socialist adults through self-organizing clubs to provide entertainment activities in children's facilities was not occurring in orphanage facilities due to a lack of investment.⁶² This led to orphans missing the opportunity to be re-educated and become a member of Soviet society. Furthermore, children were becoming victimized, as their parents were arrested in the 30s, and they became orphans. Children only suffered under the political games and personal interest of Stalin, as authorities encouraged orphans to compete with each other in the collective system of the orphanage. With the terror policy, the welfare of children was put aside, as the main aim of the government was to eliminate the enemies in the country. Therefore, Stalin's government failed in the "Soviet experiment" that began in the 20s to transform orphans and abandoned children into Soviet citizens.

⁶¹ Ball, "State Children: Soviet Russias Besprizornnye and the New Socialist Generation", 240.

⁶² Stone, "Growing up Soviet?" 362.

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