

Prisoners of War (Russian Empire)

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This article explores the particularities of the situation of prisoners of war (POWs) in Russia and the implications of the domestic political situation in Russia on the fate of POWs. The upheaval in Russia during the First World War resulted in constantly changing POW regulations as well as in a delay of repatriation. As a direct consequence of these circumstances, camp life developed a high degree of organization. This article describes life both inside and outside of the camp structures, and outlines the fundamental differences of POW experiences due to a hierarchy of ranks and nationalities.

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Introduction

The story of prisoners of war (POWs) in [Russia](#) during and after the First World War is complex. It spans close to eight years, from mid-1914 until 1922, when the last POWs were repatriated. This large time frame coincided with major political changes in Russia, exposing the POWs to three consecutive governments with distinct POW policies. In addition to the volatile political landscape, geographic circumstances played a major role in the fates of POWs, who were sent to such diverse regions as [Ukraine](#), European Russia, Siberia and Central Asia. Climatic conditions were harsh and the infrastructure beyond the Ural Mountains was barely developed. In addition to the location of confinement, factors such as nationality, rank, time of capture, and the disposition of local authorities directly influenced the fate of POWs. These differences were especially pronounced in Russia due to the hierarchical view of different nationalities and the extremely large number of POWs in custody.

This article outlines the situation of the 2.4 million POWs held in Russia. It attempts to relate the individual experiences while underlining the highly heterogeneous circumstances. Special focus will be given to Siberia, where large numbers of POWs were interned in camps for extended periods of time.

During the interwar period a number of predominantly German-language publications described Russian captivity from a first-hand perspective, as well as in the form of novels. Together with *In Feindeshand*, a two-volume collection of articles by returnees, the memoirs of Red Cross nurse [Elsa Brändström \(1888-1948\)](#) remain a valuable source of facts and numbers to this day. The first effort towards a scientific assessment was Margarete Klante's article on German POWs in Russia, published in 1923.^[1] Through much of the second half of the 20th century, historians concentrated on the unprecedented atrocities of the more recent Second World War. Though Russian scholars were among the first to study the presence of POWs in their country, their work concentrated on the role of POWs in the [Civil War](#).^[2] Following pioneering studies by Gerald H. Davis during the 1980s, historians have increasingly addressed the subject of captivity in Russia during the First World War.^[3] Some authors have attempted to give an overall view of the situation based on memoirs and archival material from Austria, Germany and Russia.^[4] The vast majority of studies have a thematic focus, while a number of Russian dissertations published recently provide a regional emphasis.^[5]

Quantities and Hierarchies

Between the outbreak of the First World War and December 1917, Russia took military prisoners, and by 1917 was the country with the second largest number of POWs in custody.^[6] Russia captured an estimated 2.4 million of the over 5 million soldiers who fell into enemy hands along the [Eastern Front](#), and at least 8 million in total in all theatres of the war.^[7]

Over 2 million POWs in Russia – 90 percent of those captured – came from [Austria-Hungary](#).^[8]

Among these, Slavs (Poles, Ruthenians, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes) made up about

one half; ethnic Germans and Hungarians each around one quarter;^[9] and Italians and Rumanians constituted the rest. The second largest group of POWs were members of the German army. At least 168,000 soldiers were captured, including small numbers of [ethnic minorities](#) such as Prussian Poles, Danes from Northern Schleswig, and Alsatians. The number of Ottoman and Bulgarian POWs is estimated at around 50,000.^[10] The POWs' nationality played a significant role in their captivity, as Slavs, Alsatians, and later also Italians and Rumanians received preferential treatment. Their privileges – internment in European Russia, greater freedom and superior accommodation – were expected to encourage defection from the enemy army.^[11] Distinct formations of former POWs, such as the [Czechoslovak Legion](#) or the Serbian Volunteer Corps, fought on the side of Russia and her allies.

Though the number of POWs employed in the Russian war effort was large compared to other countries, its significance was on the whole fairly negligible. Still, Russia violated the stipulation that POW labour should “have no connection with the operations of the war.”^[12] Following army ethics and the [Hague convention](#), military hierarchies were observed amongst POWs. Hence, from the moment of their capture, officers received preferential treatment. Their privileges were reflected in the circumstances of their transportation, living conditions, and most crucially in the fact that they were exempt from [forced labour](#), while receiving a monthly salary. Confusion over determining rank equivalents between the Austrian and Russian armies caused a “promotion” of cadets and ensigns, ensuing in the inflated number of 54,000 officers among Austro-Hungarian POWs.

Captivity as War Experience

From the Trenches to the Rear

The way the Russian military saw after its POWs depended greatly on the circumstances of their capture. Small groups of POWs were treated in an orderly fashion, whereas prisoners taken in “great catches” of hundreds of thousands, as many Austro-Hungarians were, suffered from Russia's organisational deficits.^[13] After being captured, the POWs travelled for one to three months before reaching their place of internment. They were interrogated and the wounded singled out for treatment. The rest were marched to the rear, where trains took them to the main assembly stations in Kiev (Darnitsa) and Moscow (Ugrezhskaia and Kozhukhovo). There, the POWs were registered and their place of internment appointed according to their nationality. However, dividing ethnicities proved to be complex: while some Slavs refused to identify themselves as such, others benefited from their Slavic sounding names. Thus many Slavs ended up in Siberia and Central Asia instead of remaining in Central Russia. Next, the soldiers were piled into *teplushki*, so-called “warm waggons”, which usually transported Russian soldiers. They were fitted with two to three rows of bunks, a stove and a latrine bucket. Despite their names, these cars were cold in winter – and unbearably hot during summer. They tended to be loaded beyond capacity, carrying around thirty to forty men, and ridden with vermin, giving rise to disease.^[14]

The only provision regularly supplied was the hot water available at train stations. The POWs were meant to receive a daily payment in order to procure their own food, but as this money was rarely paid out, the men were sometimes forced to resort to begging.^[15] During these transports the POWs were unaware of their destination or the length of their journey.

Living Conditions

When POWs started pouring into Russia, there was no strategy in place to accommodate them. Beginning in the autumn of 1914, POWs were sent to Siberia with no regard for capacities, leaving the local administrations to devise ad-hoc solutions.^[16] In certain places, the number of POWs exceeded the local population. No provision for accommodation had been made for POWs, and after military quarters were full, any large buildings available were used for housing. The makeshift quarters were overcrowded, and the fact that the large majority had either limited sanitation facilities or no running water at all furthered the outbreak of infectious epidemics. During the early stages of the war, disease killed thousands of POWs, notably in the camps of Omsk, Novo-Nikolaevsk, Sretensk and Totskoe.^[17] Russian authorities failed to grasp the extent of the problem and reacted so sporadically that epidemics continued to spread throughout 1916. Responding to the enormous death tolls and growing international pressure, the [Russian government](#) eventually developed a camp system with significantly improved living conditions.

By 1917, Russia had more than 400 internment facilities.^[18] The size of POW camps was usually smaller in European Russia (between 2,000 and 5,000 men) than in Siberia (up to 35,000 men).^[19] The number of prisoners in camps often fluctuated and POWs tended to be moved repeatedly between camps. These consisted of log or brick barracks, *zemlianki* (huts dug into the ground), or other buildings such as stables and warehouses. Soldiers' barracks varied greatly in size, holding between 500 and 1,000 men, notably fewer in the case of officers.^[20] According to Elsa Brändström, "rooms were overbooked by 50-100 percent without exception."^[21] Furniture was scarcely provided beyond bare bunks and stoves for heating.

Everyday life was very different for the rank and file than for officers. Officers received a monthly salary from which they had to procure their own food and other necessities, initially allowing them to get by comfortably. Rachamimov even describes their standard of living as "considerably higher than that of their home states' civilian population."^[22]

The food for enlisted POWs was provided by the detaining power. At the outset, quantities were ample, equalling those of the Russian military, but soon both the quality and quantity of food deteriorated. Many men were repulsed by the fact that they had to share their bowls, as was customary in the Russian military.^[23] While officers were allowed orderlies, the soldiers themselves were in charge of the upkeep of their camps. Suspicious of the POW officers' authority, regulations were introduced in 1915 segregating them from their men.^[24]

Despite international regulations, the situation varied greatly between camps, which was partly due to complex political hierarchies.^[25] Bilateral agreements, customarily reached at the numerous [Red Cross](#) conferences held in [neutral countries](#), also played a significant role in the treatment of POWs, as a system of reciprocity applied between detaining powers. Because Russia disapproved of the way Germany treated the POWs in its custody, the situation of German POWs in Russia was particularly deplorable.^[26] Overall, with over 400,000 deceased, the death rate of POWs in Russia was among the highest of all countries.

Camp Organization

POW communities developed according to factors such as nationality, ethnicity and language.^[27] Contact between nationalities seems to have been strained by communication barriers, whereas the relationship of enlisted men and officer ranks of the same origin were marked by camaraderie. Especially in times of hardship, officers joined forces to support their men financially. Gradually, POWs developed an organized camp structure, incorporating individual skills in order to meet collective needs.

To escape the dreary life in the camps, diversions played a crucial role in maintaining the well-being of POWs. In fact, the term “[barbed wire](#) fever” was coined to designate the state of dejection characterising everyday camp life. Classes were set up covering a vast range of subjects, such as languages, science, law and art. They followed a curriculum and in certain cases resembled proper [universities](#), with standards of education high enough to warrant accreditation upon the prisoners' repatriation. Even leisure developed an organised character. Facilities were set aside for sports, theatre companies and music groups; POWs ran cafes and “photo studios”; and they even published newspapers.

Next to their recreational value, these activities permitted POWs to learn and exercise a profession. Especially with the disruption of cultural life in Siberia due to the Civil War, camp theatres and POW musicians were popular among the local Russian society. The lack of available goods, as well as the growing need to supplement their income led the POWs to set up workshops where they produced their own commodities. Gradually, these developed into full-fledged enterprises that were part of camp industries, which came to play an important role during the Civil War.

To ensure diplomatic communication channels, the [US](#) represented German and Austro-Hungarian POWs in Russia until entering the war in April 1917. Thereafter, [Denmark](#) became the protecting power of Austro-Hungarian interests in Russia and [Sweden](#) that of Germany's. However, early on national organizations and Red Cross societies played a much larger role in directly improving the situation of POWs.^[28] The fact that they inspected camps and reported back to the Central Powers put pressure on the Russian authorities to respect international conventions. Moreover, relief organizations – such as the American Young Men's Christian Association ([YMCA](#)) and the private Tientsin Relief Organization (*Hilfsaktion Tientsin*) – provided POWs with necessary goods and

financial aid and helped create an infrastructure that would make camp existence more tolerable. This included asserting the right to attend religious services, setting up libraries, and delivering sports equipment. The Bolsheviks were highly suspicious of these activities and severely complicated their work. Although the Red Cross continued to play an important role, its focus shifted towards repatriating POWs.

POW Labour and Life beyond Camps

According to pre-war agreements, captive soldiers could be used as labourers, whereas the officers were exempt from this obligation. Beginning in the spring of 1916, Russia systematically used POW labour in agriculture, industry and the public sector.^[29] This meant that large numbers of POWs left the camps, and many were moved westward. Within one year, half of all enlisted men were used as cheap labour. By 1917, POWs constituted 20-25 percent of Russia's workforce.^[30] For many men employed in construction, scandalous working and living conditions were life threatening.^[31] In other cases, leaving the large Siberian camps meant an improvement in their situation, especially if they worked as farm hands and lived with peasant families.

Some officers had the privilege of living under strict surveillance in private housing. They were initially permitted to leave their accommodation for the purpose of shopping. When restrictions loosened under the provisional government, they were also allowed to visit towns for purely recreational ends. In contrast to governmental campaigns in the early stages of the war, the Russian population tended to approach POWs with interest and compassion. Following the [February Revolution of 1917](#), the war ministry started granting permission for marriages between Russian women and POWs.

Political Frameworks

Political Turmoil

During the war Russia underwent fundamental changes of regime. Not surprisingly, the political transformation of Russia between 1917 and 1920 had immediate implications for the treatment of POWs. Whereas Tsarist Russia had trouble coping with organisational deficits but indulged in an ethnic segregation of POWs, the [Provisional Government](#) aimed at intensifying POW discipline and using POW labour more efficiently for the war effort. This pragmatic approach, however, largely failed due to the revolutionary mood and war weariness in the country.

The February Revolution of 1917 loosened camp restrictions to some extent, but on the whole the policies of the Provisional Government were more incoherent than alleviating. While some POWs were temporarily granted greater freedom of movement, others suffered reprisals under [Alexander Kerensky \(1881-1970\)](#) as a consequence of the renewed offensive against the Central Powers.

Though the use of POW labour was regulated, inflation precipitously decreased the value of wages.

Conditions in the camps worsened. During this period, camp industries became a crucial factor in the material survival of POWs and played an important role in local economies. Among POWs, successful entrepreneurs emerged, producing and selling various goods and even taking on government contracts.

The October Revolution altered the situation drastically. After initial chaos, the Bolsheviks declared POWs free citizens and officers were theoretically declared class enemies. However, “freedom” also meant that POWs no longer received government support and were obliged to fend for themselves. The Bolsheviks turned camp economies into cooperatives with stocks and commodity-based currencies. Former POW employees were now on par with Russian workers and received representation on all political levels.^[32] A large number of POWs welcomed the Bolsheviks, albeit less for political reasons than from a longing for peace and rapid repatriation.^[33] Only a minority of POWs joined the Russian Communist Party or fought in international divisions of the Red Army during the Civil War.^[34]

The Bolsheviks initially only established their power in Western Russia, while much of Siberia was shaken by Civil War until 1920 leaving POWs in Eastern Siberia under the jurisdiction of the US and Japan. Thus ensued a period of constant changes and utter insecurity for the 430,000 POWs in Siberia who were caught between two fronts and opposing policies.^[35] The White forces, for their part, sent POWs back to prison camps and halted the repatriation process that was expected with the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty. Approximately 70,000 POWs joined the abovementioned Czech Legion, which constituted a major political force against the Bolsheviks and whose members were notorious for their brutality towards POWs. The seizure of the Trans-Siberian railroad by the Czech Legion in May 1918 blocked off Siberia from Europe and halted the official repatriation of POWs until 1920.

Repatriation

The repatriation of POWs from Russia was a convoluted process initiated by the exchange of invalids with Germany in September 1915.^[36] By the autumn of 1918, most POWs had left European Russia: in addition to some 22,000 invalids exchanged by the end of 1917, over 670,000 POWs were able to return home.^[37] Of these, only 200,000 were repatriated through official channels, while the rest returned on their own, partly taking advantage of lax supervision during periods of political disarray. Between November 1918 and the summer of 1920, official repatriation dwindled as a result of the Bolsheviks’ reluctance to part with the POW labour force. Thus in 1920, when the Civil War ended and POW camps were finally dissolved, close to 500,000 POWs were still in Russia. In addition to Red Cross Societies, Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, played a major role in arranging for the repatriation of POWs.

In 1920, approximately 30,000 Germans and 118,000 former Austro-Hungarians returned from Siberia and Central Asia. The process slowed down until finally, in 1922, only 6,850 POWs were

repatriated via Vladivostok. Between 1921 and 1922, 13,000 Austro-Hungarians returned home from southern Russia and Ukraine. An unknown number of POWs decided to stay in Russia.^[38] Apart from political reasons, many had families with Russian women and held jobs, while the future in their home countries was uncertain.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the diverse situation of more than 2 million POWs held throughout Russia during and after the First World War, whose numbers were decimated by extraordinarily high death tolls in comparison with POWs held by other warring powers. The POWs themselves constituted an important economic force, both as labourers within the camps, as well as in agriculture and industry outside of them. Their existence was thus not entirely isolated from Russian society. They were always at the mercy of a political climate in flux. This contributed to the considerable delay in repatriation after the end of the War, and meant there was a great deal of uncertainty for POWs, whose hopes for speedy release were raised and dashed time and time again.

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1. ↑ Kern, Leopold / Weiland, Hans (ed.): *Feindeshand. Die Gefangenschaft in Einzeldarstellungen*, Vienna 1931; Brändström, Elsa: *Unter Kriegsgefangenen in Rußland und Sibirien 1914-1920*, Berlin 1922; Klante, Margarete: *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Russland*, in: Schwarte, Max (ed.): *Der Grosse Krieg 1914-1918*, Vol. 10, Leipzig 1923, pp. 182-204.
2. ↑ See for example: Birman, Mikhail A. (ed.): *Internatsionalisty v boiakh za vlast' Sovetov* [Internationalists in fights for the power of the Soviets], Moscow 1965. Klevanskii, Aleksandr Kh.: *Chekhoslovatskie internatsionalisty i prodannyi korpus* [Czechoslovak internationalists and the sold corps], Moscow 1965.
3. ↑ Publications by Gerald H. Davis include *Sport in Siberia 1917. A Rare Document*, in: *Journal of Sport History* 8 (1981), pp. 111-114; *The Life of Prisoners of War in Russia. 1914-1921*, in: Williamson, Samuel R. / Pastor, Peter (ed.): *Essays on World War I. Origins and Prisoners of War*, New York 1983, pp. 163-197; *Resort to Eloquence. Amateur Writers of German in Russian POW Camps 1914-1921*, in: *Germano-Slavica*, 5/3 (1986), pp. 89-105. See selected bibliography for more titles.

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6. ↑ Davis, Life 1983, p. 165.
7. ↑ For statistics see Nachtigal, Reinhard: Zur Anzahl der Kriegsgefangenen im Ersten Weltkrieg, in: Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift 67/2 (2008), pp. 345-384.
8. ↑ Gerald H. Davis asserts 80-85 percent. Davis, Life 1983, p. 163. For exact numbers see: Nachtigal, Anzahl, 2008, p. 365 and Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen, 1922, p. 8.
9. ↑ See Pastor, Peter: Hungarian POWs in Russia During the Revolution and Civil War, in: Williamson/Pastor (ed.), Essays 1983, pp. 149-150.
10. ↑ There is still no verified data on the number of Ottoman POWs in Russia; estimates vary up to 90,000. See Nachtigal, Anzahl, 2008, p. 366 and Yanıkdağ, Yücel: Ottoman Prisoners of War in Russia. 1914-1922, in: Journal of Contemporary History 34/1 (1999), p. 69.
11. ↑ See Nachtigal, Reinhard: Privilegiensystem und Zwangsrekrutierung. Russische Nationalitätenpolitik gegenüber Kriegsgefangenen aus Österreich-Ungarn, in: Oltmer, Jochen (ed.): Kriegsgefangene im Europa des Ersten Weltkriegs, Paderborn et al. 2006, pp. 181-187.
12. ↑ Quoted from Davis, Life, 1983, p. 174; Banac, Ivo: South Slav Prisoners of War in Revolutionary Russia, in: Williamson/Pastor (ed.), Essays, p. 120; Kalvoda, Josef: Czech and Slovak Prisoners of War in Russia During the War and Revolution, in: Ibid., pp. 222-223.
13. ↑ Most Austro-Hungarian prisoners were taken in Galicia in 1914, at Przemyśl in 1915, and in the Carpathians in 1916. At least 380,000 were captured during the Brusilov offensive. Davis, Life 1983 pp. 165-166.
14. ↑ The bunks were so crowded that when sleeping, the POWs could only turn around all at the same time. Rachamimov, POWs 2002, p. 52.
15. ↑ The rank and file were to receive twenty-five kopecks, officers initially seventy-five kopecks and later 1.5 roubles. Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 1922, p. 22.

16. ↑ In the summer of 1915, the number of POWs in Irkutsk military district increased from 71,000 to 200,000. Wurzer, Kriegsgefangenen 2005, p. 84.
17. ↑ Nachtigal, Reinhard: Seuchen unter militärischer Aufsicht in Rußland. Das Lager Tockoe als Beispiel für die Behandlung der Kriegsgefangenen 1915/16?, in: Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 48/3 (2000), pp. 367-368; Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 1922, pp. 41-48.
18. ↑ There were 128 in the Moscow Region, thirty around Irkutsk and twenty-eight around Omsk alone. Grekov, N. V.: Germanskie i avstriiskie plennye v Sibiri (1914-1917) [German and Austrian prisoners in Siberia (1914-1917)], in: Vibe, P. P. (ed.): Nemtsy. Rossiia. Sibir' [Germans. Russia. Siberia], Omsk 1997, p. 159.
19. ↑ At times of extreme surcharge European facilities held up to 10,000 captives. Davis, Life 1983, p. 167. Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 1922, p. 25; Rachamimov: POWs 2002, p. 92.
20. ↑ In some places field-officers even had single rooms. Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 1922, p. 31. Wurzer, Erfahrung 2006, p. 105.
21. ↑ Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 1922, p. 27.
22. ↑ Rachamimov, POWs 2002, p. 98. Low-ranking officers received fifty roubles a month, field-officers seventy-five, generals 125.
23. ↑ Soldiers' daily rations consisted of bread, meat or fish, buckwheat, potatoes, cabbage or beets, fats, sugar and tea. Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 2002, pp. 27-28.
24. ↑ In Krasnoyarsk, a four-meter high fence was erected to create two distinct sections. Ibid., pp. 33-34. Davis, POW Camps 1986, p. 152.
25. ↑ Policies were made in Petrograd (the first decree regulating POW treatment was passed on October 1914), but could be altered by the military districts and were implemented by the camp commanders. Brändström, Kriegsgefangenen 1922, p. 7.
26. ↑ E.g. German POWs could be subjected to longer working hours. Wurzer, Kriegsgefangenen 2005, p. 171. See also: Klante, Kriegsgefangenen 1923.
27. ↑ Peter Pastor describes nationalism as the "primary ideology" of the camps. In: Pastor, Hungarian POWs 1983, p. 150. According to G. H. Davis, "seeking the company of their own national or ethnic groups" was the primal instinct of new POWs. In: Davis, POW Camps 1986, p. 149.
28. ↑ For more information, see corresponding chapters in: Wurzer, Kriegsgefangenen 2005, pp. 409-441 and 497-503; Rachamimov, POWs 2002, pp. 161-190. Davis, National Red Cross Societies 1993.
29. ↑ For a detailed study see: Moritz, Verena: Die österreichisch-ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen in der russischen Wirtschaft. 1914 bis Oktober 1917, in: Zeitgeschichte 25 (1998), pp. 380-389.
30. ↑ Pastor, Hungarian POWs 1983, p. 150. G. H. Davis talks about 1,500,000 POWs employed by October 1916. Davis, Life 1983, p. 174.
31. ↑ See Nachtigal, Reinhard: Die Murmanbahn. Die Verkehrsanbindung eines kriegswichtigen Hafens und das Arbeitspotential der Kriegsgefangenen (1915-1918), Remshalden 2007.
32. ↑ At least in theory, they received wages equal to Russian workers, could chose their place of work, and their work day was limited to eight hours.
33. ↑ Pastor, Hungarian POWs 1983, pp. 151 and 154. For more on the involvement of POWs in the Russian Revolution see Leidinger, Hannes/Moritz, Verena: Gefangenschaft. Revolution. Heimkehr. Die Bedeutung der Kriegsgefangenenproblematik für die Geschichte des Kommunismus in Mittel- und Osteuropa 1917-1920, Vienna et al. 2003.

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35. ↑ Rachamimov, POWs 2002, p. 4.
36. ↑ For detailed studies of repatriation see: Nachtigal: Repatriation 2008. Leidinger, Hannes/Moritz, Verena: Österreich-Ungarn und die Heimkehrer aus russischer Kriegsgefangenschaft im Jahr 1918, in: Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur 41/6 (1997), pp. 385-403.
37. ↑ Leidinger/Moritz: Gefangenschaft 2003, p. 463.
38. ↑ According to Fridtjof Nansen's repatriation efforts, 4,000 POWs were left in all of Russia in March 1922. Davis, Life 1983, p. 189.

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