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Можно ли делать добро из зла?
(Воспоминания и размышления о последних советских
и первых послесоветских годах)

With a foreword by Peter Reddaway

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…Мы составляем как бы исключение среди народов. Мы принадлежим к тем из них, которые как бы не входят составной частью в род человеческий, а существуют лишь для того, чтобы преподать великий урок миру.

Пётр Чаадаев

Я – свет. Я тем и знаменит,
Что сам бросаю тень.

Борис Пастернак

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Foreword

Andreï Kovalev's two powerful volumes argue that Russia's trajectory since 1985 has been circular. First, Mikhail Gorbachev and his colleagues carried out an improbable series of revolutionary reforms, taking their country all the way – as baseball fans would say – from home plate to first base to second. Then, after a revolution did in fact occur and the Soviet Union fell apart, Boris Yeltsin presided over a Russia that stumbled back and forth on its way to third base, where he handed it over to Vladimir Putin. Then Putin quietly flooded the system with his colleagues from the secret police, thus infusing it with a KGB mentality. In so doing, he took Russia back to a version of home plate, to a rootless, corrupt, authoritarian, de-ideologized version of the Soviet Union.

Regarding the future, Kovalev sees little likelihood of change in the near term. Domestic policy will continue to become gradually more authoritarian, and foreign policy will feature additional unpredictability and hostility towards the West and its allies. Further ahead, he fears, lie greater dangers, including the possibility of territorial fragmentation. But he hopes that eventually Russia will rebuild itself from the bottom up and join the world community. This monumental task will probably take two generations.

In short, Kovalev's book examines how and why, from 1985 to the present, Russia's domestic and foreign policies evolved in the ways they did. Only occasionally does it look at Western policy towards Russia. When it does, the author often chides the West either for not evincing enough interest or generosity towards his homeland, or for showing a disturbing naivety in appeasing hardliners in the administrations of Yeltsin and, especially, Putin.

Although the book's primary audience is educated Russians, Westerners will be perfectly able to understand and benefit from its arguments. Kovalev's lively prose style and the inner freedom of his attractive personality are additional guarantees of this.

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1 See P. Reddaway. Should World Psychiatry Readmit the Soviets? // *New York Review of Books*, October 12, 1989. P. 54-58, and also a detailed analysis of the abuse system in two books co-written by Reddaway and the psychiatrist Sidney Bloch, *Russia's Political Hospitals* (1977) and *Soviet Psychiatric Abuse* (1984). The U.S. government published a 117-page account of the US delegation's visit.

The book refers on occasion to the well-known Russian thinker Pyotr Chaadayev, who, starting in 1836, wrote a somewhat similar work, a series of "Philosophic Letters". In these, he lamented his country's chronic backwardness and inability to govern itself. He saw its future as lying in an eventual reunion with European civilization. For his pains, Emperor Nicholas I declared him to be insane. However, after some minor official efforts to treat him for his non-existent condition, Chaadayev continued to be active in Moscow's intellectual life. Now, 175 years later, Kovalev's diagnosis of Russia's condition evokes Chaadayev's. So does his prescription for a cure.

As a former state official of the USSR and then Russia, Kovalev bases parts of his book on his personal experiences. This applies especially to the years 1986-91, when he was closely involved in the implementation of high-level foreign policy and then worked briefly for President Gorbachev. He also roots his analysis in his training as a historian with a PhD, in the work of Russia's most insightful commentators, and in the experiences of his many friends, including his diplomat father Anatoly Kovalev, who retired as deputy-head of the foreign ministry in 1991.

During his thirty-year career, the author worked for the USA and Canada Institute and the Diplomatic Academy (1977-85), the Soviet UNESCO commission (1985-87), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' division for cultural and humanitarian affairs (1987-91), the USSR President's office (1991), the Russian mission to the UN's Geneva offices (1992-96), the Russian Security Council (1997-2001), the Russian mission to the European communities in Brussells (2001-04), and the Russian Ombudsman for Human Rights (2004-07). Then, finding the Putin administration too politically oppressive, he emigrated to Belgium and settled in Brussels.

The first part of his book focuses mainly on the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods, the second part on the Putin era. Regarding Gorbachev's so-called perestroika, i.e., "the transition of the USSR from totalitarianism to democracy" in just a few years, the author rightly calls it "probably one of the most interesting, most confused, and most paradoxical periods in the whole history of humanity." Therefore, he goes on, "We should admit – as by no means everyone is ready to do – that each participant and even observer of those extraordinarily gripping and dramatic events possesses his own genuinely lived experience, which sometimes has nothing in common not only with what is conventionally called the truth, but even with simple plausibility. Yet they are all primary sources."

The result, Kovalev says, is a lot of memoirs, journalistic accounts, and academic studies that - either deliberately or through ignorance of aspects of what happened – present distorted pictures of events. He himself has tried to avoid this outcome by writing primarily about things that he did or witnessed. Thus under Gorbachev he was involved in “attempts to dismantle totalitarianism”, and later, as a diplomat and the Security Council official, he witnessed its regeneration.

As Kovalev emphasizes, the launching of perestroika was far from predetermined. There were elements of sheer chance in Gorbachev’s rising to the top and then being able to push perestroika through with the strong support, initially, only of Alexander Yakovlev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and a rather small group of other officials. Since Shevardnadze was foreign minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was put to vigorous use as an instrument of change. Meanwhile, most of the other ministries were much less keen on change, and some, like the ministry of health, surreptitiously sided with the reactionaries.

Among Soviet diplomats, Kovalev stresses, there were both progressives and conservatives. Shevardnadze mobilized the former, including Kovalev father and son, and tried – with decreasing success over time – to neutralize the latter.

The liberals had usually spent years living abroad. This made it easy for them to observe how far, contrary to Soviet propaganda, the USSR was lagging behind the advanced countries in many fields, notably human rights. Helpfully, the author presents at this point some insightful portraits of senior MFA progressives such as his father, Shevardnadze, Anatoly Adamishin, Vladimir Petrovsky, Yuri Kashlev, and Aleksei Glukhov. He notes that the MFA leadership was sometimes referred to as “the Shevardnadze-Kovalev team”, a reflection of his father’s personal authority and closeness to Shevardnadze.

How did it happen that Andreï Kovalev was given important jobs by Shevardnadze? The key reason was the fact that he had been the lead writer for an outstandingly successful speech that Gorbachev gave to the international forum “For a Non-nuclear World, for the Survival of Humankind” in February 1987. In this, Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader to implicitly abandon Marxism and declare that human rights and values were universal. Thus Kovalev was, logically enough, assigned to the MFA team whose charge was to get implemented the massive domestic reforms that the speech effectively

promised. These involved bringing Soviet legislation into line with the international human rights covenants that the USSR under Brezhnev had signed. This was a major task, given the strong incentive possessed by the KGB-aligned leaders of, for example, Soviet psychiatry and the Russian Orthodox Church to prevent anything more than cosmetic changes from being made to the existing laws.

Kovalev found himself dealing with precisely these people. Their fierce opposition meant that change could only be achieved in stages, over three to four years. Even then, some loopholes remained. It was a strange mission for diplomats to take on – domestic legislation in fields where they had no qualifications.

Kovalev's first meeting with the bosses of Soviet psychiatry provoked brazen denials of ethical abuse. Then, after he warned them that reform had been ordered from the top, they collectively walked out. His comment: "We met extraordinary resistance from the Ministry of Health". When asked to supply copies of existing regulations on the procedures for forcible hospitalization, ministry officials replied: "There are no regulations". Kovalev then made the same request in a private meeting with the USSR's Chief Psychiatrist, A. A. Churkin. He got the same answer. However, by this time he had obtained the regulations from a source of his own. He had been shocked by what he read. The document contained no safeguards of citizens' rights, and made it easy for a relative or co-worker or KGB officer to summon a doctor and have any individual, dissident or otherwise, forcibly interned in a mental hospital, without reference to a court. The regulations had been signed by a deputy minister of health in 1984. However, in view of its unconstitutional and KGB-friendly provisions, it had been treated as a state secret.

When Kovalev revealed this knowledge, Churkin sheepishly admitted the document's existence. Then he demanded to know: "How did you learn about it?"

To break down such resistance, Kovalev and his team collected evidence of different forms of abuse from dissidents, liberal lawyers, and a couple of secretly helpful psychiatrists, investigated lists of abuse victims that had been provided by Western governments and human rights groups, wrote inter-ministerial documents that quoted from the liberal psychiatric laws of Lenin's government, and offered the top psychiatric officials the carrot of diplomatic help to get the USSR readmitted to the World Psychiatric Association (WPA). This was attractive because in 1983 Soviet psychiatry had been

pushed out of the WPA as punishment for using phony diagnoses to intern sane dissidents in mental institutions. Finally, in 1989, after most of these individuals had at last been released, Shevardnadze and Gorbachev forced a still resistant ministry of health to go along with a lengthy inspection visit to the USSR by a large delegation of American psychiatrists. The group's charge was to investigate all aspects of the system of abuse. As a member of this delegation, I witnessed at first hand several attempts by ministry officials to disrupt the visit.[2]

On another topic, Kovalev and his team set about trying to get freedom of religious belief introduced in the USSR and appropriate legislation passed. Predictably, they encountered forms of determined resistance from the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) that closely paralleled the unscrupulous blocking tactics of the psychiatrists. The Orthodox leaders were deeply frightened of freedom being given to, in particular, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. They would lose not only a significant proportion of their flock, but also several thousand physical churches that had been taken from these denominations as a result of Stalin's bans and persecutions. Furthermore, the leaders' goal that the ROC should reacquire its tsarist-era status as Russia's established national church would be seriously jeopardized.

Kovalev describes vividly his meetings with some of the leaders of the ROC and other churches. He observed the predictable effects of their long-term collaboration with the KGB, and was dismayed by "the complete absence of any spirituality in my religious interlocutors". One of the Orthodox hierarchs, while wining and dining him, disturbed him with his worldliness and his enthusiasm over the murder of the dissident priest Alexander Men'.

Gorbachev's fall from power in 1991 evoked Kovalev's regret, but not surprise. From the spring of that year he had observed up close, from his seat outside Gorbachev's office, the rise of the conservative and reactionary opposition. He believes, as did Yakovlev, that Gorbachev's biggest mistake was to steadily emasculate the communist party. As its head, he should rather have maneuvered it into supporting and co-leading his reforms, until enough of a new system was in place. Then he could have gradually disengaged from it. But instead, by eroding and humiliating it, he provoked strong elements within it, in alliance with their comrades in the KGB and the military, to gradually create a hydra-headed opposition.

This opposition made its first major strike in the August 1991 coup. Although the revolt was overthrown in three days by the political resistance of Yeltsin, the Balts, and others, the hardliners never went away. As Kovalev persuasively argues, after the USSR's collapse, they regrouped around the Russian parliament and Yeltsin's crony and personal security chief, the former KGB officer Alexander Korzhakov. Then, even though in 1993 Yeltsin outlawed the parliament and used military force to kill or arrest those who resisted, and even though in 1996 he fired Korzhakov and two of his allies, on each of these occasions the hardliners regrouped and once again advanced. Key landmarks for them were their successes in persuading Yeltsin: in 1994 to invade Chechnya, in 1998 to appoint Putin as FSB head and Yevgeny Primakov as prime minister, and in 1999 to elevate Putin to the premiership.

Kovalev had had misgivings about Yeltsin ever since his political rise in the late 1980s. He had noticed - along with virtues like his inclination to support personal freedoms and free media - his authoritarian personality, his excessive hunger for power, his love of anonymous denunciations of individuals, his readiness to lie when convenient, his toleration of slack and incompetent performance by his staff (a gross example being rhe foreign policy advisor Sergei Prikhodko), and the ease with which his associates could manipulate his decisions when he had drunk too much. All this gave rise to contradictory behavior. He would resist the hardliners in both domestic and foreign policy, but then suddenly give in to them. Moreover, when his popularity slumped, he created the oligarchs, bought their political support, and approved the crude manipulation of the 1996 election in order to get himself reelected as president. Meanwhile, under his rule the Russian intelligentsia felt unprotected. They were besieged from two sides. On the one hand they were scared of any return to communism. On the other, they feared the further impoverishment of themselves and of Russia. Thus they tended to abdicate their traditional independence and just uncritically support the authorities.

Over the four years from 1997, Kovalev observed some revealing aspects of Yeltsin's dysfunctional administration from his job in the Security Council. He depicts the Council mostly through his sketches of five of the six heads of this body that he worked under. (He was ill during most of Putin's brief tenure). His first boss was the former speaker of the Duma, Ivan Rybkin. Rybkin apparently liked the work of Kovalev's group in fending off the hawks in the government who wanted to re-launch the war in Chechnya, and in care-

fully planning the delivery of humanitarian aid to a region ravaged by two years of destructive Russo-Chechen war.

Kovalev made a trip to Grozny to ensure that the convoy of trucks would receive safe passage. However, when all was set to go, some unknown intervention occurred and Rybkin refused to sanction the operation. He gave no explanation. Evidently the business or other interests of some powerful individual or group would have been harmed, if the small token of Russia's atonement for the war that the aid represented had been delivered.

Andreï Kokoshin came next, a rude and arrogant egocentric, according to Kovalev, who thought he didn't need help from his staff. He soon left, after writing bad reports on the staff that he hadn't used. Most of the president's orders to him had just piled up on his desk untouched. He was interested only in issues of nuclear non-proliferation and export controls, the field for which Kovalev was the responsible official. But he did not consult Kovalev, who, it happened, had uncovered a dangerous situation in which Russian scientists were being driven by poverty to sell classified information.

This was the time when the scandalous case of a senior Yeltsin official, Yevgeny Adamov, came to light. He was widely suspected of commercially motivated crimes in the field of arms exports. Kovalev says that the evidence he found on this subject pointed to criminal activity. In 1998 he was appointed as Security Council representative on prime minister Primakov's commission of enquiry into the Adamov case and related issues. Kovalev writes that Adamov apparently had active links with well-known figures in the world of organized crime, and that he set up ten companies in the US with a Russian émigré partner. Also, the impression grew in informed circles that the secret proliferation of nuclear materials might actually, de facto, be part of Kremlin policy. The commission's report, signed by Primakov, recommended that Adamov be fired. However, all this work came to nothing, because Adamov's partners included Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana Dyachenko and other members of the president's political "Family". Apparently these people barred any action.

In 2005, however, the Americans, who had long been on Adamov's trail, got him arrested by the Swiss police. After a period in jail he was turned over to the Russians rather than the Americans. He was tried, sentenced, but, thanks to his high-level associates, soon released.

The next head of the Security Council, a former KGB general called Nikolai Bordyuzha , was the only one of the six to leave with a positive reputa-

tion. Apparently honest, he also showed himself to be both focused and hard-working. His successor was Putin, who, on becoming prime minister four months later, passed the torch to his close associate Sergei Ivanov, who served from 1999 to 2001. Kovalev found Ivanov to be a remarkably superficial and hypocritical person, with deep prejudices and the cunning of a fox. He was also a narcissist who wore bright pink and blue shirts and ties to the office.

However, the most incompetent of the six was the last, a former police chief called Vladimir Rushailo. He knew nothing about international affairs and wasn't interested in them. At his first meeting with foreigners, he read out loud every word of his briefing paper, including the reference section at the end. He didn't realize that this section included some classified information. The unsuspecting Rushailo was happy with his performance – and the foreigners were even happier.

In 1999 Russia's mounting political chaos and bureaucratic paralysis, both aggravated by Yeltsin's deepening problems with alcohol, produced a situation that played into the hands of the already prospering reactionaries. Hence Yeltsin's calculated early resignation and the orchestrated election of Putin. This was followed by Putin's cleverly judged measures to "restore order" and by a gradual, mostly disguised trend towards reaction over the next few years From 2003, Kovalev argues, the reaction steadily discarded its disguise as being unnecessary, given that most of the Russian people actually supported or tolerated it.

Here Kovalev displays the insights of a social psychologist. It is difficult, he argues, for human beings to accept and adapt to large-scale change. In the late 1980s communist dogmas and idols were destroyed wholesale. For a time, the people rejoiced that they could now express their resentments and hatreds of the communist regime, could exercise some choice and enjoy some personal freedoms.

But then Russia's status as a super-power vanished. And then the economic disasters of the early 1990s struck most of the population. They had to struggle just to survive. They could do nothing to right the wrongs of communism. As time went by, they began to want relief from their sense of guilt and helplessness. They craved freedom from responsibility, conscience, and choice, and protection from knowledge about the past. They consciously or subconsciously desired strong leadership and censorship of the media.

All this was highly convenient for Putin, who declared off the record in December 1999: “Order number one has been carried out. The FSB has successfully embedded itself in the government.” Kovalev argues convincingly that this was probably the first real chance for the secret police to take power themselves. He dismisses, as do I, the theory that Andropov had a chance to do it in 1982. He points out that in 1956 Andropov had his eyes opened by the Hungarian revolution, when he was Soviet ambassador in Budapest. Also, in 1975 he had supported Soviet acceptance of the human rights provisions of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. And he had backed the promotion of “within-system dissidents” like Fyodor Burlatsky and Georgi Arbatov. None of this indicated a man who favored a dictatorship run by the secret police.

Much of part two of Kovalev’s book consists of his long cry of lamentation for the fate of his country under Putin. It is a terrifying and all too justified indictment. He goes to the heart of the matter by quoting Nikolai Nekrasov. In 1875 the poet said that Russia had endured harder times in the past, but not times that were morally more despicable (*podlei*). This judgment, which Kovalev finds even more applicable to the present than to 1875, evokes another example of Putin’s astounding good luck. His rule has coincided with an unprecedented rise in the world prices for oil and gas. The resulting financial windfalls enabled the government to pay off its debts, fill the coffers of the treasury, and start spending serious money on remilitarization (much of it fortunately embezzled). Remilitarization was considered essential to the overarching project of “restoring Russia’s greatness (*velichie)*”.

Kovalev’s succession of laments is a long one. The regime took control of the national TV channels and imposed on them an effective censorship. Dissent and opposition were isolated in a small “informational ghetto”, where they could do little harm. The Kremlin dubbed Putin “the national leader” and photographed him in a wide variety of heroic roles and meetings with bikers, submariners, sportsmen, and entertainers. It promoted the Stalinist practice of voluntarily informing the authorities about suspicious or undesirable activities (*stukachestvo*). It organized and indoctrinated groups of young stormtroopers, sometimes called Putinjugend, who flexed their muscles on demonstrating dissidents and wayward foreign ambassadors. It sponsored the development of a “national ideology” (previously attempted in vain by Yeltsin), partly to make it easier to identify and target “enemies” among the population. Candidates for this status have included Caucasians, Central Asians,

Islamists, and “political extremists” of various stripes, especially radical liberals and radical Russian nationalists. And it stepped up the amount of secret police eavesdropping on citizens’ phone conversations and various means of electronic communication.

The regime also set up a commission under President Medvedev to counter attempts to falsify history by putting Russia in a bad light. And it tried to prevent the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe from passing a resolution condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It promoted the Russian Orthodox Church as being, in all but name, the country’s established national church, and plied it with both material and non-material privileges. As a result, the church’s leaders routinely bless the government in public and vote for its nominees in elections.

On the political side, Putin’s regime eroded democratic institutions by abolishing the popular election of governors, banning the formation of blocs of parties, removing the line “Against all” on election ballots, forbidding candidates to attack each other on television, narrowing the possibility of calling a referendum, reducing the minimum turn-out needed for elections to be valid, and reintroducing the Soviet practices of falsifying election results and requiring state employees to vote for the main government party. It also expanded the use of violence and murder against political opponents (Anna Politkovskaya, Alexander Litvinenko) and “inconvenient people” (Ivan Kivelidi, Roman Tsepov), and used massive violence and state terrorism in the north Caucasus, especially Chechnya, and in emergency situations like the Nord-Ost and Beslan tragedies.

In the field of illegal arms sales, the Kremlin protected practitioners of sales from exposure, and when Kovalev worked in the Security Council he saw materials that provoked grave doubts in him as to whether the government was covertly proliferating nuclear materials.

Putin and his associates, by their example, caused corruption to become rampant in almost all spheres of life, and encouraged xenophobia. They failed to discourage the highly dangerous practice of *dedovshchina* or systematic bullying in the military. They pumped streams of money into an irretrievably demoralized army and a grossly inefficient weapons industry, with negligible results. They neglected the renewal of Russia’s infrastructure and the building of badly needed new roads. And they allowed the education and health care sectors to provide declining levels of service to people who could not afford to pay for privatized services.

The most serious broad problems, in Kovalev's view, are first that the authorities act as they wish, with no sense of being accountable to the law; and second that the population has been demoralized and rendered passive and manipulable by its political emasculation and its sense of helplessness in the face of police power and all-pervasive corruption.

In foreign policy, Kovalev sees the picture as equally gloomy. Through the regime's unearned sense of entitlement, Russia became "a danger to itself and those around it". Toward the West, Putin's administration was markedly more hostile than Yeltsin's was, but still contrived on most occasions to mask the extent of this hostility. It also offered the West its cooperation in certain limited spheres. Putin was astute to seize the opportunity presented by Al Qaeda's attack on the US in September 2001, to promote the convenient Russian line that extremist Muslim terrorism is a single, inter-connected, worldwide phenomenon, and therefore the West should cooperate with the Kremlin in combating such terrorism inside Russia.

In the face of all this, Kovalev retains the hope that there are in fact some limits to the Putin regime's anti-Western policies. He argues, plausibly, that the Russian ruling class has deposited its capital in the West for safe keeping, and cannot therefore afford to go too far.

As for Russia's neighbors in the CIS, Kovalev recounts the manifold ways in which the Kremlin has alienated them through its bullying, political interference, and use of such tools as: gas supply blackmail, trade embargos, encouragement of regional secession (contrary to Russia's traditional position), and, in the case of Georgia in 2008, outright military force.

As mentioned earlier, Kovalev rebukes the West for not opposing seriously enough the unrealistic but dangerous grandiosity of the Putin regime's foreign policy. The grandiosity obtains in regard both to the CIS and to the world at large. In some cases like that of Georgia, the West's lack of concern is "amoral". More broadly, however, the West is indulging in a morally dubious Realpolitik that is likely to contain the seeds of danger for the West itself. It does not understand that, as Kovalev perceptively writes, Russia is currently led by individuals whose personalities display "a childish willfulness" (*infantilizm*). This willfulness comprises egocentricity, cruelty, an inability to take account of the views and interests of others, hysteria, theatricality, an imperviousness to reason, irresponsibility, emotional immaturity, an inability to separate fantasy from reality, and a lack of concern for other people's suffering.

Kovalev sees Russia – with such an albatross of a leadership around its neck – as having entered a second period of “stagnation” (*zastoi*). The first was under Brezhnev and his successors in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Today the country’s leaders are even more incompetent than were the Brezhnevite gerontocrats. They can tighten the screws, but will continue to use terror only against individuals and small groups. They “simply won’t be capable of indulging in mass repressions”. These people have taken Russia into a dead-end, and so far there is no sign of a new group of Gorbachevites waiting in the wings, preparing to extract it. Moreover, Russia is like “a disintegrating, delayed-action bomb”. Thus internal upheavals and/or territorial fragmentation are conceivable and even likely in due course. Eventual hope lies in an arduous and protracted rebuilding of society and state from below.

Kovalev ends with some words from Chaadayev. His choice of quotation, like the themes of his eloquent book, show how closely, across nearly two centuries, he and Chaadayev are in tune with each other. “It is permissible, I think,” writes Chaadayev, “ in the face of our tribulations, not to share the aspirations of the unbridled patriots who have brought our country to the edge of the abyss, and who believe they can muddle through by persisting in their illusions and not caring to notice the desperate situation that they themselves have created.”

It would have been pleasant if Kovalev could have reached a less harsh conclusion. But, like Chaadayev, he believes that a cure can proceed only from a diagnosis that discerns correctly the core of the disease. In this book he offers an unflinching, perceptive, and compellingly written diagnosis.

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