

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II

ON THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE END
OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR
IN EUROPE

1. Fifty years ago, on 8 May 1945, the Second World War ended in Europe. The conclusion of that terrible calamity not only led people to hope for the return of the prisoners, deportees and refugees; it also awakened a desire to build a better Europe. The Continent could begin once more to hope in a future of peace and democracy.

Half a century later individuals, families and peoples still retain memories of those six terrible years: memories of fear, violence, extreme poverty, death; tragic experiences of painful separation, endured in the absence of all security and freedom; recurring traumas brought about by the incessant bloodshed.

With the passing of time its meaning becomes clearer

2. It was not easy at the time to comprehend fully the many tragic dimensions of the conflict. But the passage of time has brought an increased awareness of the effect of that event on the 20th century and on the future of the world. The Second World War was not only an historical event of the first order; it also marked a turning-point for humanity in our time. As the years go by, the memories of the War must not grow dim rather, they ought to become a stern lesson for our generation and for generations yet to come.

What the War meant for Europe and for the world has come to be understood over the past five decades, thanks to new information which has made possible a better knowledge of the sufferings it caused. The tragic experience of the years 1939-1945 today represents a kind of point of reference necessary for all who wish to reflect on the present and on the future of humanity.

In 1989, on the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the War, I wrote: Fifty years later, it is our duty before God to remember these tragic events in order to honour the dead and to share in the sorrow of all those whom this outbreak of cruelty wounded in body and soul, while at the same time forgiving the offences that were committed".

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The memory of all that took place must be kept alive: this is our clear duty. Six years ago, at the time of the anniversary just mentioned, unprecedented social and political developments were taking shape in Eastern Europe with the rapid fall of the Communist regimes. This was a profound social upheaval which made it possible to put an end to certain tragic consequences of the World War the end of which, for many European nations, had not in fact meant the beginning of a full enjoyment of peace and democracy, as might have been expected on 9 May 1945. Indeed, some peoples lost their power of self-determination and had been enclosed in the constricting boundaries of an empire, while attempts were made to destroy not only their religion traditions but also their historical memory and the age-old roots of their culture. I wished to stress this in my

Encyclical Letter Centesimus annus.{2} For those peoples, in a certain sense it was only in 1989 that the Second World War came to an end.

An incredibly destructive war

3. The consequences of the Second World War for the life of nations and of continents were enormous. Military cemeteries are memorials to Christians and believers of other religions alike, to soldiers and civilians from Europe and other areas of the world. In fact, soldiers from non-European countries also came to fight on the soil of the Old Continent: many fell in the field, while for others 8 May marked the end of a terrible nightmare.

Tens of millions of men and women were killed, not counting the wounded and the missing. Great masses of families found themselves forced to abandon lands to which they had been attached for centuries. Communities and monuments rich in history were devastated: cities and countries were thrown into turmoil and reduced to ruins. In no earlier conflict had the civilian population, particularly women and children ever paid such a high toll in deaths.

The marshalling of hatred

4. Still more grave was the spread of the "culture of war" with its bleak consequences of death, hatred and violence. As I wrote to the Bishops of Poland in 1989 "the Second World War made all people aware of the magnitude, previously unknown, which contempt for man and the violation of human rights could reach. It led to an unprecedented marshalling of hatred, which in turn trampled on man and on everything that is human, all in the name of an imperialistic ideology".{3}

It can never be sufficiently repeated that the Second World War changed the life of so many individuals and peoples for the worse. The point was reached where hellish death camps were built, where millions of Jews and hundreds of thousands of gypsies and other human beings met their death in atrocious conditions; their only fault was that they belonged to another people.

Auschwitz: a monument to the effects of totalitarianism

5. Auschwitz, along with so many other concentration camps, remains the horribly eloquent symbol of the effects of totalitarianism. It is our duty to make a pilgrimage to these places, en mind and heart, on this 50th anniversary. As I said at the Mass celebrated in 1979 at Brzezinka near Auschwitz: "I kneel at this Golgotha of the modern world".{4} Recalling that pilgrimage, I now go back in spirit to those death camps. I pause especially "before the inscription in Hebrew" which commemorates the people "whose sons and daughters were condemned to total extermination" and reaffirm that "no one is permitted to pass by with indifference".{5} As I did then, I pause before the inscription in Russian, after the changes which took place in the former Soviet Union, and I recall "the role which this country played in the last terrible war for the freedom of peoples".{6} I then pause before the inscription in Polish and I think once more of the sacrifice made by so great a part of the nation, a sacrifice which represents "another painful blot on the conscience of mankind". What I said in 1979 I repeat today: "I have chosen three inscriptions. But we need to stop before every one of

those here".{7} Yes, on this 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, I feel strongly the need to pause before all those inscriptions, including those commemorating the sacrifice of victims little known or even forgotten.

6. This meditation raises questions which humanity needs to ask. Why did things come to the point where man himself and whole peoples were brought so low? Why, once the War was over was there a failure to draw from its bitter lesson the necessary conditions for the whole continent of Europe?

The world, and Europe in particular, headed towards that enormous catastrophe because they had lost the moral strength needed to oppose everything that was pushing them into the maelstrom of war. For totalitarianism destroys fundamental human freedoms and tramples upon human rights. Manipulating public opinion with the incessant pounding of its propaganda, it makes it easy to yield to the attraction of violence and weapons and in the end it overturns our human sense of responsibility.

At the time, unfortunately, people failed to understand that when freedoms are trampled on, the foundations are laid for a dangerous decline into violence and hatred, the harbingers of the "culture of war". This is precisely what happened: it was not difficult for leaders to induce the masses to make that fatal choice, by spreading the myth of the superman, by applying racist or antisemitic policies, by showing contempt for the lives of people considered useless because they were sick or asocial, by religion persecution and political discrimination, by the progressive stifling of all freedom through police control and the psychological conditioning resulting from the unilateral use of the media. These were precisely the stratagems to which Pope Pius XI of happy memory referred when in his Encyclical Letter *Mit brennender Sorge* of 14 March 1937 he spoke of "baleful designs" appearing on the horizon.{8}

A humane society is not built on violence

7. The Second World War was the direct result of this process of degeneration: but were the necessary lessons learned in the following decades? Sadly, the end of the War did not lead to the disappearance of the policies and ideologies which were its cause or contributed to its outbreak. Under another guise, totalitarian regimes continued and indeed spread, especially in Eastern Europe. After that 8 May, in Europe and elsewhere, a number of concentration camps remained open while many people continued to be imprisoned in contempt of every elementary human right. It was not understood that a society worthy of the person is not built by destroying the person, by repression and by discrimination. This lesson of the Second World War has not yet been learned completely and in all quarters. And yet it remains and must stand as a warning for the next millennium.

In particular, in the years preceding the Second World War, the cult of the nation, pushed even to the point of becoming a new kind of idolatry, brought about in those six terrible years an enormous catastrophe. Pius XI, in December 1930, had already warned that "it will be more difficult, if not impossible, for peace to endure between peoples and States if in place of true and genuine love of country there reigns a selfish and intransigent nationalism, that is to say, hatred and jealousy in place of the common desire of the good, distrust and suspicion in place of fraternal trust, competition

and strife in place of harmonious co-operation, the desire for power and mastery in place of respect and protection for all rights, including those of the weak and the small".{9}

It was not by chance that a number of wise statesmen in Western Europe desired, precisely as a result of reflection on the disasters caused by the Second World War, to forge a common bond between their countries. That pact developed in subsequent decades, making clear the will of the nations which became part of it no longer to be alone in facing their future. They understood that in addition to the common good of individual peoples there is a common good of humanity which is violently trampled on by war. This reflection on a terrible experience convinced them that the interests of any one nation cannot be fittingly pursued except in the context of amicable interdependence with other peoples.

The Church listens to the plea of the victims

8. Many are the voices raised on this 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in an effort to overcome the divisions between victors and the vanquished. There are commemorations of the courage and sacrifice of minions of men and women. For her part the Church wishes to listen in particular to the plea of all the victims. It is a plea which helps us understand better the scandal of those six years of conflict. It is a plea which asks us to reflect on what the War meant for all humanity. It is a plea which serves as a denunciation of the ideologies which led to that immense catastrophe. In the face of every war, we are all called to ponder our responsibilities, to forgive and to ask forgiveness. We feel bitter regret, as Christians, when we consider that "the horrors of that war took place on a continent which could claim a remarkable flowering of culture and civilization—the continent which had remained so long in the light of the Gospel and of the Church".{10} For this the Christians of Europe need to ask forgiveness even while recognising that there were varying degrees of responsibility in the events which led to the war.

War is incapable of bringing about justice

9. The divisions caused by the Second World War make us realize that force in the service of the "will to power" is an inadequate means for building true justice. Instead, it sets in motion a sinister process with unforeseeable consequences for men, women and whole peoples, who risk the complete loss of their dignity, together with their property and life itself. We can still appreciate the stern warning which Pope Pius XII of venerable memory voiced in August 1939, on the very eve of that tragic conflict, in a last-minute attempt to prevent recourse to arms: "The danger is imminent, but there is yet time. Nothing is lost with peace; all may be lost with war. Let men return to mutual understanding. Let them begin negotiations anew".{11} Pius XII was here following in the footsteps of Pope Benedict XV who, after making every effort to prevent the First World War, did not hesitate to brand it a useless slaughter''.{12} I myself reaffirmed these principles when on 20 January 1991, on the eve of the Gulf War. I observed that "the tragic situation of recent days makes it even more evident that problems are not resolved with arms, but that new and greater tensions among peoples are thus created".{13} This is something which the passing of

the years proves ever more correct, although in some regions of Europe and elsewhere in the world fresh outbreaks of war continue to occur. Pope John XXIII, in his Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris*, listed as one of the signs of the time the growing conviction that disputes which may arise between nations must be resolved by negotiation and agreement, not by recourse to arms".{14} Despite all human failures, there are many events, even in recent times, which serve to show that honest, patient negotiations which respect the rights and aspirations of all involved can lead to a peaceful resolution of even highly complex situations. In this spirit I express my deep appreciation and strong support to all modern peacemakers.

I do so especially by reason of the haunting memory of the atomic explosions which struck first Hiroshima and then Nagasaki in August 1945. They bear witness to the overwhelming horror and suffering caused by war: the final toll of that tragedy—as I recalled during my visit to Hiroshima—has not yet been entirely determined, nor has its total cost in human terms yet been calculated, particularly when we consider what effect nuclear war has had and could still have on our thinking, our attitudes and our civilization. "To remember the past is to commit oneself to the future. To remember Hiroshima is to abhor nuclear war. To remember Hiroshima is to commit oneself to peace. To remember what the people of this city suffered is to renew our faith in man, in his capacity to do what is good, in his freedom to choose what is right, in his determination to turn disaster into a new beginning".{15}

Fifty years after that tragic conflict which ended some months later also in the Pacific with the terrible events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and with the subsequent surrender of Japan, it appears ever more clearly as "a self-destruction of mankind".{16} War is in fact, if we look at it clearly, as much a tragedy for the victors as for the vanquished.

The Propaganda Machine

10. A further reflection is called for. During the Second World War, in addition to conventional, chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, there was widespread use of another deadly instrument of war: propaganda. Before striking the enemy with weapons aimed at his physical destruction, efforts were made to annihilate him morally by defamation, false accusations and the inculcation of an irrational intolerance, by means of a thorough programme of indoctrination, directed especially to the young. It is in fact characteristic of all totalitarian regimes to create an enormous propaganda machine in order to justify their own crimes and to provoke ideological intolerance and racial violence against those who do not deserve—it is claimed—to be considered an integral part of the community. How distant all this is from an authentic culture of peace! Such a culture presupposes a recognition of the intrinsic link between truth and love. The culture of peace is built by rejecting at the outset every sort of racism and intolerance, by withstanding racist propaganda, by keeping economic and political ambition within due limits and by decisively rejecting violence and all forms of exploitation.

The perverse techniques of propaganda do not stop at falsifying reality they also distort information about where responsibility

lies, thus making an informed moral and political judgment extremely difficult. War gives rise to a propaganda which leaves no room for different interpretations, critical analysis of the causes of conflict, and the attribution of real responsibility. This emerges quite clearly from our information about the years 1939-1945, and from the documentation concerning other wars which broke out in subsequent years. In every society, war leads to a totalitarian use of the means of communication and propaganda, which fails to inculcate respect for others and esteem for dialogue, but rather encourages suspicion and a desire for reprisals.

War has not disappeared

11. After 1945, wars unfortunately did not come to an end. Violence, terrorism and armed attacks have continued to darken these last decades.

We have witnessed the so called "Cold War", in which two opposing blocs preserved a dangerous balance of power thanks to a continual arms race. Even when this bilateral confrontation disappeared, armed clashes did not come to an end.

Today too many conflicts are still raging in different parts of the world. Public opinion, shaken by the horrible pictures which enter homes each day via television, reacts emotionally but all too quickly grows accustomed to these conflicts and comes to accept their inevitability. Besides being unjust, this attitude is extremely dangerous. We must never forget what happened in the past and what is still happening today. These are tragedies which affect countless innocent victims, whose cries of terror and suffering are a challenge to the consciences of all decent men and women. We cannot and must not yield to the logic of arms!

The Holy See, in addition to being a signatory of the major International Treaties and Conventions, has tirelessly sought to remind the international community of the urgent need to strengthen guidelines for the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and for the elimination of chemical and biological weapons, especially those which are especially deadly and which strike indiscriminately. The Holy See has also recently invited public opinion to become more aware of the continuing phenomenon of the arms trade, a grave matter urgently calling for serious ethical reflection.^{17} Nor should it be overlooked that not only the militarization of States but also the easy access to arms enjoyed by private individuals or groups, which favours the spread of organized crime and terrorism, represents an unpredictable and constant threat to peace.

A school for all believers

12. War never again! Yes to peace! These were the sentiments commonly expressed after the historic date of 8 May 1945. The six horrible years of conflict provided everyone with an opportunity to grow in the school of suffering. Christians too were able to draw closer together and question their own responsibilities for their disunity. They also discovered anew the solidarity of a destiny which they share in common and with all men and women of whatever nation. An event which marked the depths of strife and division between peoples and individuals thus proved for Christians a providential opportunity to become aware of their profound communion in suffering and in bearing witness. Beneath the Cross of Christ, members of all

the Churches and Christian communities were able to resist even unto the supreme sacrifice. Many of them, with the peaceful weapons of witness in suffering and of love, stood up in an exemplary way to their torturers and oppressors. Together with others—believers and nonbelievers, men and women of every race, religion and nation—they held aloft very clearly, above the mounting wave of violence, a message of brotherhood and forgiveness.

On this anniversary, how can we fail to remember those Christians who, bearing witness in the face of evil, prayed for their oppressors and bent down to bind the wounds of all? By sharing in suffering, they saw one another as brothers and sisters, and fully experienced the unreasonableness of their divisions. Shared suffering made them feel ever more deeply both the weight of the divisions still existing among Christ's followers and the negative consequences which these divisions entail for the building of Europe's spiritual, cultural and political identity. Their experience serves as a warning for us: we need to continue along this path, praying and working with fervent confidence and generosity, in expectation of the fast-approaching Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. May Christians set out towards that goal on a pilgrimage of penance and reconciliation, {18} in the hope of being able at last to restore full communion between all believers in Christ, a step which will assuredly benefit the cause of peace.

13. The wave of suffering with which the War engulfed the earth has impelled believers belonging to all religions to put their spiritual resources at the service of peace. Every religion, albeit in historically different ways, has had this singular experience in these past five decades. The world can bear witness that, after the enormous tragedy of the War, something new was born in the hearts of members of the different religion denominations: they feel more responsible for peace on earth and they have begun to co-operate with one another. The World Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi on 27 October 1986 publicly ratified this attitude born of suffering. Assisi revealed "the intrinsic link between an authentic religious attitude and the great good of peace".{19} In the subsequent Days of Prayer for Peace in the Balkans (held in Assisi on 9-10 January 1993 and in St Peter's Basilica on 23 January 1994) particular attention was given to the specific contribution asked of believers for the fostering of peace through the weapons of prayer and penance.

The world as it travels toward the end of the second millennium expects from believers more resolute action on behalf of peace. As I said to the representatives of the Christian Churches and major religions assembled in Warsaw in 1989 for the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the war: "From the heart of our various religious traditions flows the testimony of compassionate sharing in the sorrows of mankind, of respect for the sacredness of life. This is a great spiritual force which makes us more confident for the future of humanity".{20} Even after 50 years, the unfortunate events of the Second World War still make us acutely aware of the need to unleash these spiritual energies with rekindled power and commitment.

In this regard we need to recall that it was precisely the terrible experience of the War which led to the birth of the United Nations Organization, which Pope John XXIII of venerable memory considered a sign of our times for the "maintenance and consolidation of peace among peoples".{21} From the cruel contempt for people's dignity and rights there was also born the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights. The 50th anniversary of the United Nations, being celebrated this year, should be an occasion for consolidating the international community's commitment to the service of peace. For this to happen, the United Nations Organization will have to be granted the instruments which it needs in order to carry out its mission effectively.

Some are still preparing for war

14. During these days, in many parts of Europe, celebrations and commemorations are taking place in the presence of civil authorities and leaders from every community and county. As I join in this commemoration of the sacrifice made by the many victims of the war, I wish to invite all men and women of good will to reflect seriously on the connection that must exist between the memory of that terrible world conflict and the aims which should inspire national and international policies. In particular, it will be necessary to ensure effective means of controlling the international arms market and to make joint efforts to set up adequate structures for intervention in case of crises, in order to persuade all those involved to prefer negotiations to violent confrontation. Sadly, while we are celebrating the return of peace, is it not a fact that there are people who continue to prepare for war, both by promoting a culture of hatred and by distributing sophisticated weapons of war? In Europe, is it not a fact that painful conflicts which have gone on for years still await peaceful solutions? Unfortunately the 8 May 1995 is not a day of peace for some areas of Europe! I am thinking especially of the tormented lands of the Balkans and the Caucasus, where arms are still roaring and human blood continues to be shed.

Twenty years after the end of the Second World War, in 1965, Pope Paul VI, addressing the United Nations Organization, asked: "Will the world ever come to change the selfish and bellicose outlook that has spun out such a great part of its history up to now?"^{22} Thus question still awaits a response. May the memory of the Second World War rekindle in all—according to their possibilities—a resolve to work for a firm political commitment to peace in Europe and in the entire world.

A special significance for youth

15. My thoughts now turn to the young people who have had no personal experience of the horrors of that War. To them I say: dear young people, I have great confidence in your ability to be authentic witnesses to the Gospel. Make a personal commitment to serve life and peace. The victims, the combatants and the martyrs of the Second World War were for the most part young people like you. For this reason I ask you, the young people of the 21st century, to be particularly alert to the signs that the culture of hatred and death is growing. Reject sterile and violent ideologies. Renounce every form of extreme nationalism and intolerance. It is along these paths that the temptation to violence and war slowly but surely appears.

You have been given the mission of opening new paths to fraternity among peoples, building a single human family, and coming to understand more deeply the "law of reciprocity in giving and receiving, of self-giving and of the acceptance of others".^{23} This is demanded by the moral law written by the Creator in the heart of every person, a law confirmed by God in the Revelation of the Old

Testament and then brought to perfection by Jesus in the Gospel: You shall love your neighbour as yourself (Lv 19:18; Mk 12:31); "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). A civilisation of love and truth can only be built if openness to others extends to the relations between peoples, nations and cultures. May this appeal resound in the heart of everyone: Love other peoples as you love your own. The path of humanity's future is that of unity; and authentic unity—so the Gospel proclaims—is found through Jesus Christ, our reconciliation and our peace (cf. Eph 2:14-18).

The need for a new heart

16. "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8:2-3).

We have not yet entered the "promised land" of peace. The memory of the painful journey of the War and of the difficult journey of the second post-war period is a constant reminder of this. This journey, in the dark days of the war, in the trying post-war years, and in our own uncertain and problematic times, has often shown that in human hearts, including those of believers, there is a strong temptation to hate, to despise others and to deceive them. But on this same journey the Lord has not failed to help us; he has brought about attitudes of love, understanding and peace, and a sincere desire for reconciliation and unity. As believers, we know that man lives by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord. We also know that peace takes root in the hearts of all who open themselves to God. Remembering the Second World War and the subsequent post-war decades cannot fail to evoke in Christians the desire for a new heart, capable of respecting man and of promoting his true dignity.

This is the basis of true hope for peace in the world. As Zechariah prophesied: "The day shall dawn upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:78-79). In this Easter season, which celebrates Christ's victory over sin, the source of division, grief and injustice, let us repeat the prayer with which my venerable Predecessor Pope John XXIII closed his Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris*: "May the Lord enlighten the minds of rulers, so that, besides caring for the proper material welfare of their peoples, they may also guarantee them the great gift of peace.

Finally, may Christ inflame the desires of all to break through the barriers which divide them to strengthen the bonds of mutual love to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong. Through his power and inspiration may all peoples become as brothers, and may the peace they long for ever flourish and even reign among them".{24}

May Mary, the Mediatrix of grace, ever watchful and concerned for all her children, obtain for all humanity the precious gift of harmony and peace.

From the Vatican, 8 May 1995.

Ioannes Paulus PP. II

NOTES

1. Message on the 50th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Second World War (27 August 1989), n. 2: AAS 82 (1990), 51.
2. Cf. n. 18: AAS 83 (1991), 815.
3. Letter to the Bishops of Poland on the 50th Anniversary of the Beginning of World War II (26 August 1989), n. 3: AAS 82 (1990), 46.
4. Homily at Brzezinka concentration camp (7 June 1979), n. 2: Insegnamenti, II (1979), 1484.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., loc. cit., 1485.
7. Ibid.
8. N. 11: AAS 29(1937). 186.
9. Address to the Roman Curia (24 December 1930): AAS 22 (1930), 535-536.
10. John Paul II, Letter to the Bishops of Poland on the 50th Anniversary of the Beginning of World War II (26 August 1989), n. 3: AAS 82 (1990), 46.
11. Radio Message "Un'ora grave" (24 August 1939): AAS 31 (1939), 334.
12. Exhortation to Leaders of the Nations at War (1 August 1917): AAS 9
13. Angelus Appeal (20 January 1991): Insegnamenti, XIV, 1(1991), 156.
14. N. 3: AAS 55 (1963), 291.
15. John Paul II Address at "Peace Memorial Park" Hiroshima (25 February 1981), 4: AAS 73 (1981), 417.
16. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Centesimus annus (1 May 1991), n. 18: AAS 83 (1991), 816.
17. Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, The International Arms Trade (1 May 1994), Vatican City, 19,°4.
18. Ct. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Tertio millennio adveniente (10 November 1994), n. 50: AAS 87 (1995) 36.
19. John Paul II, Address at the Conclusion of the World Day of Prayer for Peace, n. 6: AAS 79 (1987), 868.
20. Television message to those taking part in the international meeting of prayer for peace on the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War (1 September 1989): Insegnamenti, XII, 2 (1989), 421.
21. John XII, Encyclical Letter Pacem in terris (11 April 1963), n. 4: AAS 55 (1963), 295.
22. Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (4 October 1965), n. 5: AAS 57 (1965), 882.
23. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Evangelium vitae (25 March 1995), n. 76: L'Osservatore Romano 31 March 1995, 10.
24. N. 5: AAS 55 (1963), 304.

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