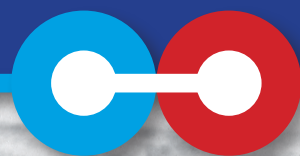


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Higher

# Russia

1881–1921



Euan M. Duncan

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# Contents

## Introduction

<b>Chapter 1</b>	An assessment of the security of the Tsarist State before 1905	1
<b>Chapter 2</b>	An evaluation of the causes of the 1905 Revolution	19
<b>Chapter 3</b>	An assessment of the attempts to strengthen Tsarism, 1905–14	36
<b>Chapter 4</b>	An evaluation of the reasons for the February Revolution, 1917	52
<b>Chapter 5</b>	An evaluation of the reasons for the success of the October Revolution, 1917	67
<b>Chapter 6</b>	An evaluation of the reasons for the victory of the Reds in the Civil War	82
	<b>Index</b>	<b>96</b>



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This book was reviewed by Dr Alex Marshall, senior lecturer in Russian history at Glasgow University. His publications include the monograph *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1800–1917* and *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. He is also a lead editor and contributor for several volumes for the centenary project series on Russia's Great War and Revolution, published by Slavica: ([https://slavica.indiana.edu/series/Russia\\_Great\\_War\\_Series](https://slavica.indiana.edu/series/Russia_Great_War_Series))



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# Introduction

Few moments in history have seen such dramatic change as occurred in Russia during the period of the Russian revolutions. The extreme political change that came about led to the creation of the first communist government, and a political idea that would fascinate those on both the left and the right of the political spectrum.

This book traces back the roots of the revolutions to the decades before the First World War. It sets out the Tsarist system, its authority and its supporters. While pressure was building against Nicholas II, it appeared in 1900 that his rule might survive the growing challenges from the countryside and cities. Karl Marx himself, despairing at the cruel feudal system in place in Russia, called it the last refuge of despots. Marx had been writing about his new theories on communism, though he felt that industrial states like Britain and Germany were most likely to have a revolution.

Of course, Marx was mistaken, and by February 1917 Russia was on the brink of revolution. Economic, social and political challenges all beset the Tsar and his system of government. By 1917 challenges were coming from every class, be it peasant, worker or industrialist. When the Tsar ordered troops in to control riots and unrest, a tactic that had allowed him to survive the 1905 Revolution, they chose to mutiny. Soldiers turned their guns on their own officers and joined the hungry, angry crowds of Petrograd. Seeing his authority evaporate, the Tsar simply abdicated, and this act ended three centuries of Romanov rule in Russia.

Yet this was not the end of the revolution. The Provisional Government that was appointed following this revolution failed to survive the same pressures that had brought down Nicholas II. Soldiers, workers and peasants longed for the simple concept of 'peace, bread, land, and soviet power' that had been set out by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

These April Theses formed the political programme that was used to undermine the Provisional Government, and arguably reflected the changes that so many millions of Russians thirsted for. Lenin grew more and more certain that direct action was needed, until he finally convinced the Bolsheviks to act. They did so in October 1917, quietly pushing aside nine months of Russian democracy. Yet this was not the end of the revolution, and it would take three more years of violence and bloodshed to allow the Bolsheviks to secure their position and establish their communist, Soviet system.

This book discusses each stage of the journey from Tsarism to communism and covers each section of the Higher course. Whether you are revising for an examination, writing an assignment, or deepening your understanding of a particular area, this book will help you. Each chapter covers a specific issue that could appear as a Paper 1 essay question, and the information contained in the following pages will support you in writing a powerful response.

Good luck!

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# Chapter 1

## An assessment of the security of the Tsarist State before 1905

The aim of this chapter is to assess how secure the authority and position of the Tsarist State was before 1905.

### LINK TO EXAM

#### Higher

Key issue 1: this chapter will assist readers in analysing and evaluating how secure the Tsarist State was in Russia in the years leading to 1905. It will assist in judging how secure Tsarism was by the time of the 1905 Revolution.

## Background

In the late nineteenth century, the Russian Empire was the largest land empire in the world, spanning over 6400 km from east to west and 3000 km from north to south. Ruling such a vast empire, containing 120 million people of over 20 different nationalities and languages, presented huge challenges for the **Tsar**. These challenges were worsened by poor communication and weak transport facilities. Unlike other global powers of the time, Russia had been slow to modernise and industrialise. While other powers were far from fully democratic, most did have sitting parliaments with **constitutional** limitations on the powers of monarchs. This was not the case in Russia, however. Russia was an **autocracy**, meaning that the Tsar had absolute power over all laws and governance within Russia. The Russian public were told not just that the Tsar was chosen by God and had a divine right to rule over them, but also that the Tsar was the very **embodiment of God** on earth.



**Figure 1.1** A map of the Russian Empire in 1900. Some of the main ethnic groups of those living in the Russian Empire are listed on this map

Russia's unique social structure (see the table below) was designed to help reinforce the security of the Tsarist State by ensuring that power and influence remained in the hands of an elite few. Beneath the ruling nobility, the army and the Orthodox Church received significant powers in return for maintaining support for the Tsarist State among the masses of peasants and the growing working classes.

### SOURCE 1

#### The social structure of Russia

Section of society	Who was this?	Proportion of Russian population
<b>The ruling class</b>	The Tsar, the Royal Court and government officials	0.5%
<b>The nobility and landowners</b>	Wealthy landowning nobles, the civil service, high-ranking members of the Orthodox Church, and military generals and officers	12%
<b>The middle class</b>	Civil servants, professionals such as lawyers and doctors, and a growing number of merchants and businessmen	1.5%
<b>The working class</b>	Factory workers and small traders in towns and cities	4%
<b>Peasants</b>	Agricultural workers; most were subsistence farmers on small strips of land rented from landowning nobles	82%

Lynch, M. (1992) *Access to History: Reaction and Revolution: Russia 1894–1924, Fourth Edition*. London: Hodder Education

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**Figure 1.2** A Social Democratic Party propaganda poster showing the social structure of the Tsarist State. The text reads, from top to bottom: 'We rule you; We fool you; We eat instead of you; We shoot you; We work for you'

Tsars had traditionally exercised absolute control of government in Russia. However, this had been slightly modified by Alexander II in 1864 and 1870 when he allowed local councils, or *zemstvos*, to be set up. These had no real power other than initiating local improvements and were staffed overwhelmingly by the nobility and *intelligentsia*. Although all classes were represented, 74 per cent of *zemstvo*



members were from the nobility. Despite the promise of further reforms, by the latter nineteenth century several movements developed demanding more radical changes to the way Russia was governed. These movements presented new challenges to the security of the Tsarist State, and included radical revolutionaries who wanted a complete overhaul of the way Russia was governed. They also included a growing number of liberals who wished to see Russia become a constitutional monarchy with a functioning parliament supporting the Tsar, similar to other European nations of the time. In 1881, **The People's Will**, a revolutionary group that sought to end the Tsarist regime through terrorist acts, assassinated Tsar Alexander II. This stunned the Tsarist regime and had a severe impact on the way in which future Tsars governed.

From the assassination of Alexander II until 1905, Russia was ruled by Tsar Alexander III until his untimely death in 1894 and then by Tsar Nicholas II. Both Alexander III and Nicholas II were firm believers in their absolute authority over the Russian people and reversed the reforms of Alexander II. Both believed that the best way to secure the Tsarist State was through increasing the power and authority of the Tsar and through repression and censorship.

This chapter will investigate how successful Alexander III and Nicholas II were in securing the authority of the Tsarist State in the years leading up to 1905.

## 1.1 How secure was the Tsarist regime before 1905?

For the exam, it is important to be able to assess how effectively the Tsarist regime had guaranteed its own security in the years before 1905.

This section will examine the following factors:

The nature of Tsarist rule
The role of the army and the Okhrana
The role of the Orthodox Church
The policy of Russification
Political opposition to the regime

Understanding these issues will allow you to make a judgement on how secure the Tsarist State was before 1905.

### 1.1.1 The nature of Tsarist rule

There is an argument that the Tsarist system of government made Russia secure because it focused all political power in the hands of the Tsar. The role of a Tsar was in stark contrast to that of other European monarchs of the time. While the powers of most European monarchies were limited by a parliament or a constitution, the Tsar of Russia did not share power with a parliament. According to the coronation oath taken by the Tsar, the Tsar's authority was absolute and unlimited by laws or parliaments. This meant that, as autocrats, Tsars could rule Russia how they wished and there were no constraints on their power. While the Tsar's rule was supported by a ten-man advisory ministerial council, the Tsar had the powers to appoint and dismiss members as he saw fit, ensuring that this council posed him no threat. The nature of

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this autocratic rule was designed to reinforce the authority and security of the Tsarist State. It ensured that there was no legal forum for voicing opposition to the Tsar as the business of government was conducted behind closed doors.

As far as Tsars were concerned, they had not just been appointed by God to lead and rule their people — they were the embodiment of God on earth. As such, to question the Tsar was to question the judgement of God. In a deeply religious society, few were willing to take this risk. Coupled with the fact that Russians were taught that the Tsar was a father-like figure who had their best interests at heart, the majority of Russians saw little reason to question the Tsar or the authority of the Tsarist State.

When opposition did arise, the Tsarist State had developed a legal system that was designed to reinforce the authority of the Tsar and suppress opposition. Here, fear and the role of the secret police, the **Okhrana** (see page 8), played a key role. From 1881 the punishment for suspected revolutionaries was **katorga** — exile to forced labour camps in remote regions of Siberia. The living conditions in these labour camps during the long winter months were particularly brutal. During the 1880s, an average of 11,200 prisoners were transported to these labour camps each year.

*Katorga* was designed to act as a deterrent to potential opponents, as the death rate among transported prisoners was as high as 25 per cent in the 1880s. However, it is important to note that only 6 per cent of prisoners in exile from 1882 to 1898 were political prisoners. This fact could be used to argue the Tsarist State was reasonably secure, as there appears to have been a relatively low number of individuals who were considered a serious revolutionary threat.

As well as the general nature of Tsarism, it is important also to have an understanding of the policies and beliefs of both Alexander III and Nicholas II in order to assess what impact they had on the security of the Tsarist State before 1905.

### Alexander III

Before his assassination, Alexander II had been considering further reform to introduce some publicly elected representatives into the Tsarist government. His son Alexander III believed these attempts to introduce political reforms had been a cause of Alexander II's assassination. Alexander III therefore decided to reject the reforms and to reinforce the principle of autocracy, reaffirming the authority and security of the Tsarist State. He titled his first **manifesto** the 'Manifesto on Unshakable Autocracy' and stated that he had been 'chosen to defend autocracy' and would rule 'with faith in the strength and truth of autocratic power'.

#### SOURCE 2

The base and wicked murder of a Russian Sovereign by unworthy monsters from the people, done in the very midst of that faithful people, who were ready to lay down their lives for Him — this is a terrible and shameful matter, unheard of in Russia, which has darkened Our entire land with grief and terror. But in the midst of Our great grief, the voice of God orders Us courageously to undertake, in deference to Divine intention, the task of ruling, with faith in the strength and truth of autocratic power. We are summoned to reaffirm that Power and preserve it for the benefit of the people from any encroachment.

**Alexander III's 'Manifesto on Unshakable Autocracy', April 1881**

In 1881 Alexander introduced the Statute of State Security. This granted the government a series of repressive emergency powers, including powers to: declare martial law; prohibit gatherings of more than 12 people; close schools and universities; censor newspapers; and dismiss elected *zemstvo* officials. The Statute also saw the establishment of special courts operating outside the legal system to quickly deal with individuals charged with political crimes. These laws greatly reinforced the security of the Tsarist State, providing even more control to Tsarist officials and increasing the obstacles facing opposition groups.

Alexander believed universities were responsible for the spread of ‘dangerous’ liberal ideas of representative democracy. In 1884 he passed the University Statute, which gave the government control over what was taught in universities. In Alexander’s eyes, this helped to secure the Tsarist State by preventing the teaching of revolutionary or anti-Tsarist content. In addition, Alexander oversaw the formation and the expansion of the Okhrana and used them to target and destabilise the anti-Tsarist revolutionary movements. The effectiveness of this in helping secure the Tsarist State can be seen in the 10,000 arrests that followed the Okhrana’s nationwide crackdown on the People’s Will, the movement that had been responsible for Alexander II’s assassination.

Alexander III also cut the power and influence of the *zemstvos*, accusing them of encouraging revolutionaries. Their powers and budgets were reduced and their meetings were harassed by police units. The number of people eligible to vote in *zemstvo* elections was cut drastically. In Moscow and St Petersburg only 0.7 per cent of the population could vote for *zemstvo* representatives. These actions helped further secure the Tsarist State by reinforcing the principle that the Tsar had total control over Russia.

Alexander also sought to increase control in the countryside. He established the position of Land Captains, members of the nobility who were given significant control over the lives of peasants in their district. The Land Captains were strongly pro-Tsar and their introduction was designed to allow the Tsarist State even more control over the lives of the peasantry. Overall, Alexander’s reign was a period in which the power of the Tsarist State was greatly increased. Through censorship of the press and oppressive powers, revolutionary movements were hampered and, for the majority of his reign, there was little in the way of public opposition.

## Nicholas II

Nicholas II came to power in 1894 following the unexpected death of his father. Nicholas intended to continue his father’s approach of expanding the powers of the Tsarist State, stating:

### SOURCE 3

Let it be known to all that I shall devote all my strength ... to maintaining the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as it was preserved by my unforgettable father.

**Speech given by Nicholas II in St Petersburg in January 1895**

In terms of policies, Nicholas changed little from his father, maintaining censorship and repression while continuing to weaken the powers of *zemstvos*, ridiculing their wishes to play a greater role in the work of government as ‘senseless dreams’. That he was able to rebuff the demands of liberals in such a dismissive manner shows

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the effectiveness of the autocratic power handed to the Tsar. Nicholas is generally considered a weaker and less decisive ruler than his father; however, he did possess a vicious and merciless streak when it came to putting down opposition protests. Furthermore, he was strongly **antisemitic** and encouraged attacks and **pogroms** on Russia's Jewish community as a way of diverting attention from problems that arose during his reign. His unshakable belief in autocracy and his ruthless attitude to protests helped to secure the Tsarist regime by diminishing the chances of any opposition developing, either through protests or through the liberal-leaning *zemstvos*.

Nicholas was heavily influenced by his wife, Tsarina Alexandra, and relied on her advice when faced with difficult decisions. The Tsarina was deeply religious and a firm supporter of autocracy. The Tsarina urged Nicholas not to dilute his autocratic powers with any moves towards a constitutional monarchy. She regularly urged Nicholas to assert his autocratic authority without regard for the constraints of the law. Both the Tsar and Tsarina were fully committed to the principles of autocracy and to ensuring the security of the Tsarist State.

### On the other hand...

Alexander III was a formidable man: a strong, imposing figure who gave the impression of immense power. In this sense, Alexander gave the impression of a secure leader with little opposition. However, in 1891 prolonged extreme weather created famine in 17 provinces, and the effects of this famine had contributed to nearly 500,000 deaths by the end of 1892. Many placed the blame for the famine with Alexander's government. His government had been slow to react and had banned newspapers from using the word 'famine' to describe the situation. The government had not banned the export of cereals until weeks into the crisis, so food that could have been used by starving peasants had instead been sent abroad. The famine was a crucial moment in shifting public support away from the Tsar. In the absence of government action, liberal members of the middle and upper classes organised a public response to the crisis. In doing so, many came to question the competence of the Tsarist regime. Historian O. Figes argues that Alexander's inability to meet the expectations of the upper classes 'made the famine crisis revolutionary', showing that Alexander's poor handling of the crisis turned even the usually supportive upper classes against the Tsarist State.

Nicholas II commanded far less respect than his father. He was viewed by many as a weak and indecisive ruler. One cabinet minister described him as 'unfit to run a village post office'. Nicholas had a tendency to change his mind frequently, often agreeing with the last person he spoke to. As a result, many have argued that during Nicholas's rule the Tsarist State was far from secure as he lacked the strong and decisive personal qualities needed by an effective autocrat.

Nicholas had served in the army when he was younger and had a great personal attachment to the military. He saw it as his area of expertise and frequently appointed friends and family to high-ranking positions. More often than not, these individuals had no military expertise and damaged the army, in turn damaging one of the key pillars of the Tsarist State.

The refusal of both Nicholas and Alexander to work with the *zemstvos* led to increased political challenges for the Tsarist State. Many members of the *zemstvos* were liberals, seeking only mild reform to the Tsarist regime. However, the more they were denied a voice, the stronger their opposition to the Tsarist State became.



## Overall

The Tsarist State could be viewed as an inflexible, ‘fossilised’ system that did not allow for any political change or release of pressure at all. This created on-going tensions that contributed to protests such as in the aftermath of the famine of 1891–92.

However, the nature of Tsarist rule was fundamentally effective in securing the Tsarist State. It provided a powerful system of government, reinforced by the use of oppression. Tsars could not be legally challenged and there was no forum for political complaint or criticism.

### 1.1.2 The role of the army and the Okhrana

Repression and fear were key weapons of the Tsarist regime. The Tsarist State could rely on a powerful army and a secret police force to suppress any opposition. The army remained immensely loyal to the Tsar and this support was crucial in preventing opposition. The Okhrana was the Russian secret police and it was extremely effective in infiltrating opposition groups.

#### The army

The Russian Army was the largest in Europe and was crucial to the survival of the Tsarist regime. The army was the Tsar’s go-to weapon to help suppress disturbances and protests in order to stop these developing into revolts. From 1883 to 1903 the army was used to crush over 1500 domestic protests. The Peasant Uprising of 1902 is a notable example of this, where 40,000 peasants took part in a revolt against landlords in Poltava and Kharkov provinces. This was brutally put down by the army through a mixture of executions and arrests. Such tactics were effective as they ensured that any opposition to the Tsar had to remain ‘underground’. The army was controlled by officers who were mainly from upper-class noble backgrounds; usually these officers had been appointed due to their personal relationship with the Tsar and so their loyalty was unquestionable.

The **Cossacks** were viewed as the most loyal and most brutal section of the army. Cossacks came from the Don area of Russia and had gained a reputation as the fiercest and most reliable cavalry units in the Russian Army. The Cossacks were frequently deployed to crush revolutionary protests, usually with disproportionate violence. A large, loyal army with the ability to effectively prevent protests and disturbances developing into revolts was clearly crucial to the security of the Tsarist State as it stopped any chance of protests gaining the momentum and support needed to become a serious revolutionary threat.

#### The Okhrana

The Russian Secret Police was established through the Security Law of 1881, which had been introduced by Alexander III in response to his father’s assassination. This law provided the Okhrana with wide-ranging powers of arrest and detention and the ability to bypass the Russian legal system. The extreme powers afforded to the Okhrana by the Security Law were used immediately in ten of Russia’s most important regions, including St Petersburg and Moscow. The chief aim of the Okhrana was to provide security for the Tsarist State by destroying the enemies of Tsarism.

The Okhrana was highly effective and arguably the most skilled secret police force of its era. Its principal tactic was to use undercover agents to infiltrate opposition movements like workers’ unions and political parties. Leaders of opposition groups were often sent into exile, preventing revolutionary groups from developing effective leadership. For example, Chernov, one of the leaders of the Socialist Revolutionaries,

## ACTIVITIES

- 1 Describe each of the following terms in your own words. Add a one-sentence summary to each explaining how it helped increase the security of the Tsarist State.
  - a The Tsar as the embodiment of God
  - b *Katonga*
  - c The Statute of State Security
  - d Land Captains
- 2 Consider the role played by the army and the Okhrana.
  - a Describe three ways in which the Okhrana and the army helped improve the security of the Tsarist regime.
  - b Explain three counter-arguments that show the army and the Okhrana were not fully effective in securing the Tsarist regime.
  - c 'The army was more important to the survival of the Tsar than the Okhrana.' Do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with two pieces of evidence.
- 3 Find one piece of evidence to support each of the following statements:
  - a The Orthodox Church was one of the most powerful propaganda tools available to the Tsarist regime.
  - b The influence of the Orthodox Church over the Russian public was decreasing in the years before 1905.
  - c Russification helped to reinforce the influence of the Orthodox Church.
  - d The policy of Russification was ultimately a failure for the Tsarist regime.
- 4 Create a fact file on each of the three political opposition groups. Include the following information:
  - a Name
  - b Reasons for opposing the Tsar
  - c Aims
  - d Reasons why they presented a threat to the security of the Tsarist State
  - e Reasons why the threat from this group was limited
- 5 Using your completed fact files to help, explain which opposition group presented the biggest threat to the Tsarist State. Make sure you explain your answer.
- 6 Rank the following sections of society from the most to the least severe threat to the security of the Tsarist State before 1905. Write a sentence to justify each ranking.
  - a Peasants
  - b Urban workers
  - c Liberals
  - d National minorities
  - e Revolutionary groups
- 7 Create a concept map summary of the chapter, with the question 'How secure was the Tsarist State by 1905?' as the midpoint. Use the five factors as branches and include at least three points per factor. Make sure you include a mixture of evidence that shows ways in which the state was secure and ways in which the security was threatened.

## GLOSSARY

Term	Meaning
antisemitism	Prejudice towards Jewish people.
autocracy	A system of government where the ruler has absolute power.
Bolsheviks	Russian for 'majority'. A faction of the SDs who supported Vladimir Lenin's belief that they should not wait for popular support to start a revolution.
Caucasus	A region between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea.
communism	A political system where property, businesses and goods are owned by the state, not by individuals.
constitutional	Relating to a constitution — a set of laws about how a country should be run.
Cossacks	An ethnic group from Ukraine and Southern Russia noted for their horsemanship and military skill.
covert surveillance	Gathering information on people or groups of people without their knowledge.
embodiment of God	A physical representation of God.
espionage	Spying.
intelligentsia	A group of intellectuals and highly educated individuals.
<i>Iskra</i>	The underground newspaper of the SDs.
<i>katorga</i>	A system of penal labour. Prisoners were sent to labour camps in remote areas of Russia.
liberal	In a Russian context, liberals were a group of mainly middle-class, well-educated people who wished to see Russia become more democratic.
Lutherans	Followers of Lutheranism, a branch of Protestant Christianity.
manifesto	A public declaration of policies and aims by a political figure or party.
Marxism	The political views of Karl Marx. Karl Marx is considered the founder of communist beliefs.
Mensheviks	Russian for 'minority'. A faction of the SDs who did not believe in Lenin's approach to starting a revolution in Russia.
Okhrana	The secret police force of the Russian Empire.
Pale of Settlement	A region of Western Russia in which the majority of Russian Jews were forced to live.
pogrom	A violent attack aimed at massacring an ethnic group or forcing them to flee.
populism	A political group or movement that tries to side with the interests of common people.
Russification	A process of forcing the Russian language and culture on non-Russian parts of the Russian Empire.
Social Democrats	A political party that wished to carry out a communist revolution in Russia.
Socialist Revolutionaries	A political party that wished to see the establishment of a socialist democratic republic in Russia.
The People's Will	A radical opposition group to the Tsar who believed that terrorist attacks and assassinations could spur Russia into revolution.
Tsar	Title given to the ruler of the Russian Empire.
Union of Liberation	An underground political party that aimed to advance liberal views.
<i>zemstvos</i>	Local assemblies that could oversee local improvements like road maintenance, education provision and medical services.
Zubatov Unions	Pro-Tsarist trade unions established by Sergei Zubatov in an attempt to prevent workers joining radical revolutionary movements.

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# Russia 1881–1921

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## What does the cover photo show?

Vladimir Lenin giving a speech to conscripts to the Red Army during the Russian Civil War in Red Square, Moscow, 25 May 1919. The Russian Civil War was a key event in consolidating Lenin's control over Russia.

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