

Introduction: anti-fascist resistance fighters, intersectionality and memory

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How do you envision the twentieth-century anti-fascist resistance fighter? Depending on your age, social background, political alignments, nationality, ethnicity, race, sexuality or gender, you might imagine completely different historical characters. Habitually you might think of a partisan or a soldier, but do you imagine a man or a woman? Do you envision someone black, brown or white; is it someone of working-class or bourgeois background? Is the fighter a communist, leftist, progressive or liberal? The stereotypical image of the resistance fighter as a cisgender white male sporting a rifle or other military gear is an archetype that we all need to challenge with diversity and complexity. This special issue explores the lives and legacies of anti-fascist resistance fighters from the Netherlands, France, the United States, Greece and Argentina. Four case studies concern women, while the fifth study deals with the many social identities of the gay poet Jef Last. Although they all had vastly different life trajectories and made very different contributions to the resistance, this special issue, co-edited by Kasper Braskén and Elke Weesjes, argues that they can be included into an expanded category of ‘anti-fascist resistance fighters’.

Our understanding of the resistance fighter – as is the case with most definitions – may be defined within limited and more restricted terms, but can also be expanded to encompass broader and more exploratory categories. But, whatever the definition, there is often considerable debate about who is to be excluded or included as a resister. This can be seen, for example, in cold-war Germany, where restricted definitions came about in the resistance research in both East and West

Germany, which were very different in each country. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the emphasis was placed on the activities on the Communist Party, while other actors were overlooked. In the Federal Republic, the focus was on resistance activities within Hitler's military, and on non-communist groups. It was only in the 1990s that a new consensus was established that recognised that resistance research needed to include the whole spectrum of oppositional activities, and embrace the many different forms of resistance – from every-day activities to subversive militant action. The various historical actors of the resistance did not form a unified coherent resistance movement; rather, they constituted a multitude of forces that shared a common will to overthrow Nazism. The emphasis in Germany thus partly shifted away from the resisters' political programmes and towards a broader appreciation of their general 'insistence on a belief in human dignity and social justice'.¹ Although this diversity is accepted in contemporary historical scholarship, severe tensions and conflicts over the way resistance is remembered still continue today.

Although the concept of anti-fascist resistance has, over time, been widened to include a broader range of groups, our image of the individual anti-fascist resistance *fighter* seems not to have experienced a comparable revision. While there is an increasing number of studies on a wide range of anti-fascist movements and networks, no corresponding reconceptualisation of global conceptions of the anti-fascist resistance fighter has yet been produced. Vital contributions have been made in recent research on 'transnational resisters' in relation to the Spanish Civil War;² but the research has still largely been limited to the classic examples of military volunteers, partisans and soldiers, the notable exception being the 'medical volunteers' in the Spanish Civil War;³ the transnational solidarity networks created to support anti-fascist struggles with humanitarian aid;⁴ and the general procurement of 'soft power' to globally circulate knowledge about the anti-fascist resistance so that it seemed legitimate in the eyes of others.⁵ The first step towards an expanded definition has been to acknowledge other modes of resistance as equally important elements of the resistance, but when will these wider forms of resistance result in a similar change in our categorisation of resistance fighters? While everyday acts of resistance, often led

by women, have been slowly included at the national level in national resistance memory, how will these 'quotidian' dimensions be included in transnational stories of anti-fascist resistance?

The figure of the anti-fascist resistance fighter has traditionally been deeply embedded in national historical contexts, in the national histories and memories of liberation wars against fascist or Nazi occupation powers – though it is important to note that the anti-fascist resistance fighter had already been crafted into a transnational and global figure by the end of the 1930s, especially in the context of the International Brigades in Spain.

The image, or idea, of the anti-fascist resistance fighter was connected to historical, often iconic, figures of resistance who had emerged in past centuries during revolts, revolutionary uprisings and liberation movements across the world, especially since the French and Haitian Revolutions. The image of the mid-twentieth century anti-fascist resistance fighter grew from these longer trajectories of liberation struggles and martyr figures who had sacrificed themselves for a greater cause. Recent scholarship has rightly taken note of the direct continuities between interwar anti-fascism and cold-war anti-colonial struggles, but we also need to acknowledge that the image of both anti-fascist and anti-colonial resistance/liberation fighters is a part of a longer global lineage.⁶ However, even in these global histories, masculine liberation heroes have dominated, and it is only recently that this has been challenged by efforts to broaden the pantheon of heroes to include female anti-colonial resisters.⁷ Equally, although anti-fascist resistance fighters emerged as part of an extended historical trajectory consisting of local, national, transnational, regional and global components, they were also constituted in a particular cultural and political moment, created in the unique confrontation with fascism; and the iconography and political culture of the international communist movement played a decisive role in this process.

There are several topical reasons for pushing for a wider understanding the anti-fascist resistance fighter, both in terms of temporal limits and varieties of resistance activities. In both France and Italy, the historiography on the resistance has been closely fixed to the Second World War. The Italian historiography of the *Resistenza* (resistance) has

traditionally only included the last years of the Second World War, after the Italians had turned against the German occupation forces, or 'Nazi-Fascism'.⁸ Indeed, most of the leaders of Italian anti-fascism were forced into exile during the 1920s, and resistance within fascist Italy was ruthlessly crushed. Local anarchists and international adherents of Italian radical working-class culture or the anarcho-sindicalist tradition also found ways to implement militant anti-fascist practices, although their resistance activities have not been memorialised in national resistance narratives.⁹ It is only recently, with the rekindling of the transnational life stories of resisters such as Ada Gobetti, Marion Cave Rosselli and Joyce Lussu, that a broader and more complex image of the biographies of transnational Italian anti-fascist resistance seems to be emerging – and one that also connects with histories of anti-colonialism.¹⁰

Eurocentric and nationally-framed historiographies have contributed to the shaping of the current state of the art, and much remains to be done on the level of global comparison. Still, the European examples show a typical trend: in France only two male figures have been broadly accepted as national resistance heroes: General de Gaulle and Jean Moulin (communist resisters have attracted less national recognition). Research has indeed shown that war conditions gendered the resistance, as combat was deemed the sole duty of men. Some historical exceptions have been uncovered, but a major common factor for the women who were engaged in combat was their association to the communist movement, and this contributed to their later marginalisation.¹¹ New studies on Latin American anti-fascism have indicated that anti-fascism could indeed also 'serve as a vehicle for women and other excluded groups such as laborers to claim citizenship by involving themselves in politics, foreign affairs and aid giving'.¹²

Some might object that the broadening of the category of the resistance fighter from the cisgender white male will relativise the concept itself, but it seems inevitable that the limited and hopelessly dated current understanding the resistance fighter will be abandoned, just as there is no going back to an older research tradition that overlooks the many varieties of anti-fascist activism. Why would not 'verbal bullets' be recognised on equal standing with real gunshots fired for the resistance?¹³ In similar terms, Neelam Srivastava has recently

adapted the term partisan to describe the feminist, communist and anti-fascist campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst. Although the term partisan can in English simply be defined as ‘a strong supporter of a party, cause or person’, in the context of anti-fascist history and memory it refers specifically to a member of an armed group of the resistance in the Second World War; Srivastava’s aim is to connect Pankhurst’s ‘print activism’ in interwar Great Britain with other forms of resistance fighting by trying to broaden the idea of the partisan. In her reading, ‘the partisan is not only a figure to be found in history, “reconstructed” retrospectively, but is also what we might call a “heuristic figure”, a theoretical position that we can use to make sense of a shared “common cause”’.¹⁴ In other words, the idea of the partisan functions as a political metaphor, a trope of transnational resistance that re-configures shared practices of solidarity.¹⁵ Still, it is our view that the term ‘partisan’ strongly connotes militant or military practices, and is exclusively linked to the armed groups in German-occupied Yugoslavia and Italy, and the European Eastern front in the Second World War, and therefore the term ‘resistance fighter’ is a more suitable political metaphor.

The concept of an anti-fascist resistance fighter has been shaped not only by the conditions of history but also by mechanisms of memory and memorialisation. Therefore, this special issue introduces three intertwined approaches to study the anti-fascist resistance fighter. Firstly, we have encouraged the authors to take a biographical approach and to reconstruct the often unknown or heavily contested biographical record of the individual resistance fighters: what knowledge do we have of their life trajectories and what can be said about their identities and identifications? Secondly, we have opted for using an intersectional analytical lens to analyse the different power dynamics that conditioned their activism. Lastly, each author was asked to devote serious attention to the commemoration and memorialisation of the resistance fighter in question. Intersectionality, and the hierarchy and mixture of identity markers, as well as their variation over time, is of major consequence here. How were these resistance fighters marginalised, and how were they identified by others? At which points do the biographical histories and memories correlate with each other, and how did post-war, cold-war and contemporary contexts affect the memorialisation practices?

The intersectionality of anti-fascist resistance

The concept of intersectionality is rooted within Black Feminism and it was first used by activists and scholars to analyse the experience of Black women in the United States.¹⁶ It sought to explain the ways in which multiple, simultaneous, forms of oppression interacted with each other to produce a qualitatively different experience of inequality for Black women. Since then it has sparked much important theorising about identity, and for many analysts it has been crucial for discussing the multiple oppressions with which women are confronted, especially around issues of gender and race. But it has also become crucial to discussions on class – which also intersects with other forms of structural inequality. Here it is important to understand that the concepts deployed in discussions on identity – and this includes gender and race as well as class – refer to material structures of inequality.¹⁷ The fundamental question for the editors of this issue has been to understand how multiple forms of identity and identification interact with each other to shape different experiences of resistance, and different perceptions of the nature of resistance; and to bring attention to bear on figures who for a variety of reasons have been downplayed within or excluded from dominant narratives of resistance. In putting together this special issue, the concept of intersectionality has been seen as a vital tool for interrogating how a person's privilege in some spheres of life and oppression in others coalesce in different historical contexts. The contributors have adopted different approaches to intersectionality, and probed several ways through which an intersectional lens can assist in understanding both resistance biographies and the anti-fascist solidarities and memories formed by them.

Louie Dean Valencia-García (alongside others) has recently made an appeal to examine fascism and anti-fascism through an intersectional analysis. He argues that:

from an intersectional analytical perspective, fascism is an extreme form of anti-pluralism that often targets people through ableism, anti-liberalism, classism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, patriarchy, homophobia, racism and xenophobia. Whilst each manifestation

of fascism uses different amounts of each variable, together these oppressions are constituent of fascism. Considering this formula, antifascism can be defined by efforts to combat these oppressions either in one's everyday life or as part of a more explicit political programme.¹⁸

Accordingly, intersectionality offers a methodology for analysing not only how fascist oppression marginalises resistance fighters, but also how it works to alienate and cause divisions between anti-fascists. It seems clear that the anti-fascist resister as a subject does not personally need to be a target of fascist oppression, but the resister can situate him- or her-self in the resistance, in solidarity with those who are directly affected by it. Pinpointing the various and intermixed modes of oppression advanced by the fascist worldview can also explain why some subjects have been mobilised into the anti-fascist resistance. As Christopher Vials notes, anti-fascists themselves have been proactive in emphasising that the understanding of fascism requires the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework (even before the term itself was coined): fascism itself is now fundamentally understood as an intersectional phenomenon.¹⁹

This could lead to various practical consequences. For Communist Party women in the USA in the 1930s intersectional practice could mean that their anti-fascist solidarities oscillated between emphasising the oppression of women under fascism, the class oppression of fascism, or highlighting the significance of white supremacy under fascism.²⁰ By stressing different markers of oppression, the movement could also motivate broader and more diverse anti-fascist solidarities than it would if it only focused on single forms of oppression.

Examples of horrific practices specifically targeted on women can be found in the historical record, as Regina Kazyulina has shown in her research on the territories of the Soviet Union that were occupied by the German Nazis during the Second World War. Such practices also shaped the ways in which women were called on to resist: the Soviets strove to mobilise women to join the partisans by emphasising specific forms of fascist oppression against women, such as the Nazi use of sexual violence and rape to control and dominate Soviet women. The

war produced numerous heroic women partisans, including the iconic *partizanka* Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, whose life story and martyrdom was retold throughout the war to persuade other women to sacrifice themselves for the greater cause.²¹ However, when analysing the postwar memorialisation of Kosmodemyanskaya as a transnational ‘people’s heroine’, it is clear that her memory as a resistance fighter during and after the Soviet era has been variously framed and used for differing political aims.²² For the twentieth century anti-fascist resistance fighter, the ways that memory is employed to marginalise, or to mobilise those who have been marginalised, is of crucial significance. In some cases, history and memory become so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish the life stories from myths and legends, and sometimes we only have scant testimonies and sparse or difficult-to-access archival sources, so that we ultimately need to rely on memory practices of others.

The memorialisation of the anti-fascist resistance fighter

The memorialisation of the anti-fascist resistance fighter needs to be perceived as part of a fluctuating stream of transnational memory politics. Memory studies deals with the ways in which memories are constructed, staged, used and abused for political action, and thereby are connected to the formation of group identities on a national or international level.²³ Anti-fascist resistance has been part of a global social, political and cultural memory, albeit with different generational and national variances. As Zoltán Kékesi and Máté Zombory have recently noted, we need to differentiate between the memory of anti-fascist resistance and Holocaust memory. To clarify, this is needed because: ‘unlike our contemporary regime of memory, antifascism remembered fascism, not the Holocaust’. Anti-fascist memory regards genocide as central to fascism in a number of significant ways, but the inclusion of memories of the anti-fascist resistance can offer a more diverse range of ways to remember war and genocide, which are relevant to both past and contemporary political struggles.²⁴

The transnational commemoration of fascist and anti-fascist martyrs had already started by the 1920s.²⁵ However, the fascist side quickly started

attaching marginalising identity markers to the anti-fascists, in an effort to delegitimise them. For example in Italy, anti-fascists were *ethnified* by the fascists to delegitimise them; they were called foreign traitors to fascist Italy, thereby leading a process of marginalisation from above. Through similar mechanisms, anti-fascists could be condemned as ‘disguised’ communists to justify fascist state oppression of the resistance;²⁶ or their foreignness could be asserted, through calling all anti-fascists agents of a foreign power: the USSR. Such processes of marginalisation played a significant role in both the historical record and the way in which stories live on in contemporary, global memorialisation practices.

In the West, women resisters’ association with communism had already complicated their inclusion in broader memorialisation practices during the cold-war period. In France, as we have noted, a major common factor for the women who were engaged in armed combat was their association with the communist movement, and this led to their marginalisation. Many of the anti-fascist resistance fighters in the West and other non-communist countries did not fit into the limited framing of national resistance and liberation memory in their home countries, and were therefore consigned to oblivion.²⁷ Others were later framed as traitors, though a few were recognised as martyrs within subcultures of the left or in communist states around the world.

During recent decades, debates in Italy have led the way in a global wave seeking to undermine the moral high ground of anti-fascist resistance fighters. The resistance during the Second World War to the fascists has been rebranded as an Italian civil war with two evenly condemnable totalitarian sides. This trend has been echoed in memorialisation cultures across the world, where systematic attempts have been made to equate ‘antifascism to a form of totalitarianism because of its proximity with the communist ideology and movement’; while there have been efforts aimed at ‘equalising fascist and antifascist violence’, so that both can be evenly condemned.²⁸ As Enzo Traverso argues, the trend has led to a situation where ‘the only legitimate resistance was the civil one, the resistance of rescuers, not of combatants’. Significantly, Traverso emphasises that any separation between the civilians’ resistance and the armed resistance is highly problematic and artificial, as, despite different practices and methods, both forms of resistance shared central values and objectives.²⁹

As a consequence of these debates the memorialisation of the anti-fascist resistance has been challenged on different levels. In the best-case scenario, even though anti-fascist partisans, the classical figures of the armed anti-fascist resistance, have been delegitimised as ‘violent’ or ‘totalitarian’, this can make room for memories of a different set of quotidian, civilian or non-violent resistance fighters, among whom women played a more prominent role. In the worst case, this memory shift can simply mute or marginalise the collective memories of anti-fascist resistance and redirect focus to the ‘suppressed’ histories and memories of fascist suffering under the hands of the partisans, as some dangerous and forceful revisionist trends in Italy have attempted to argue. It remains to be seen how the global far right will seek to mobilise this memory shift more broadly.³⁰ The fall of Soviet memory culture in the hands of Putin’s Russia has made the memory wars in Eastern Europe even more dramatic, and since Russia’s war on Ukraine in 2022 it has sparked important debate on Soviet imperialism in the region. As A. Dirk Moses somberly notes, this discussion may perhaps correct some blind spots in the competing narratives, giving space to mourn all victims, but the battle between anti-Soviet and anti-fascist memory will remain intense in the foreseeable future.³¹

The Soviet and Yugoslav partisan women who for decades were celebrated and honoured in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are among the ranks of today’s contested anti-fascist fighters.³² The battle over memory in Eastern Europe is especially complex and problematic, and it must be seen as part of a global anti-communist agenda, which has led to the erasure or even criminalisation of anti-fascist memory within the framework of right-wing populism and the far right’s memory policy.³³

Another example of the contested nature of anti-fascist resistance fighters in contemporary contexts is the case of the Bulgarian-Jewish female partisan Violeta Yakova, which has recently become the centre of controversy. During the communist regime she was celebrated as a martyr of the anti-fascist partisan struggle and became a part of the foundational myth of postwar Bulgaria. Today, however, she is demonised by the right wing as a terrorist assassin, discredited due to her Jewish origins, and despised due to her alleged lack of loyalty to Bulgaria.³⁴ The analysis of intersectional markers of marginalisation

could help us understand similar cases and the broader mechanisms of memory politics.

National memories of anti-fascist resistance often focus on the last years of the Second World War, but a corresponding and party-inter-twined memory culture was created by the international left that had a broader remit. A global memory tradition was produced through the commemoration of the anti-fascist fighters of the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades. Leading Spanish communist figures like Dolores Ibárruri, *La Pasionaria*, have even been described as ‘embodiments’ of the resistance of the Spanish people, but *La Pasionaria* in her role as a leading woman remains an exception.³⁵ Most resistance fighters have been marginalised, either for traditional political reasons or because of the marginalisation of the groups with which they were identified, but their stories deserve a serious re-examination, so that we can gain a broader impression of the resistance fighters as a collective. In most cases, the intersecting markers of marginalisation in public memory have been related to resisters’ status as women, their class position, or their belonging to racial/ethnic or sexual minorities. The role of communism in this context is fascinating, as it has worked both as a political stigma and a badge of honour in transnational memory politics. Memories of anti-fascist resistance by communists that were marginalised by the mainstream were also in many cases first kept alive thanks to the confined but rich subcultures of the left – but sometimes they were later integrated or accepted as parts of the larger national resistance narratives.

Anti-fascist memories remain gendered; and even in the former Soviet bloc, as a recent study shows, the memory of the anti-fascist resistance was in general dominated by narratives of male martyrdom, despite the official efforts to ‘liberate women from their traditional roles’. The discrimination based on gender then persisted, as memories of female survivors were neglected across the board, which is why there is a continuing need to bring the stories of women resisters into public memory.³⁶

Despite the strong tradition of analysing memory within national frameworks, a central aspect of the memory cultures after the Second World War was that the surviving resistance fighters became ‘resistance veterans’ who engaged in transnational memory networks. Maximilian Becker has recently shown that in these spaces resistance fighters were

consistently described as ‘heroes’ and noble ‘martyrs’ in *both* communist and non-communist contexts and political differences were glossed over. As expected, the anti-fascist veterans emphasised the importance of the armed struggle, but in fact they understood resistance in a much broader sense, which included passive resistance, sabotage and other forms of opposition. Indeed, all the victims of Nazism were remembered indiscriminately under the label ‘resistance fighter’, providing a further impetus to the attempts of this special issue to broaden the notion of the anti-fascist resistance subject.³⁷

Overview

The special issue starts with Christina Chatzitheodorou’s article on the Greek resistance fighter Ilektra Apostolou. Apostolou was a member of the Communist Party of Greece during the interwar period, but was executed by the collaborationist security forces in Greece during the Second World War. In the article Ilektra Apostolou becomes a *lieu de memoire*, a site of memory: the politics of memory directly influence her biography. Apostolou’s memorialisation is analysed through the lens of intersectionality, and the article investigates some of the ways in which the inclusion of different identity criteria, such as gender, race, age and political identification, have been vital for the understanding of the memorialisation processes.

In the second article, Sandra McGee Deutsch analyses Ana Rosa Schlieper, who was the president of the Popular Front movement Junta de la Victoria (Victory Board, JV) in Argentina. The organisation attracted about 45,000 women from a diverse range of backgrounds, and it challenged local fascism by modelling a genuine democracy based on pluralism, solidarity, freedom and women’s political incorporation. Schlieper does not easily fit into the narrow category of resistance fighter: initially her main identities were those of wife, philanthropist and upper-class socialite. Her whiteness, beauty and charm enhanced her prestige. Still, the mid-1930s Schlieper added anti-fascist and feminist to her intertwined identities. She worked alongside communists and was persecuted and jailed for heading a movement that included many

communists; and she confronted repression and male chauvinism in her struggles to keep the JV's mission alive, pushing for freedom against tyranny and fascism. However, her efforts – like the JV's history overall – were largely ignored after the defeat of the Axis powers. It was only in the 1980s that they started to be slowly rediscovered and once more remembered.

Kathryn Everly's article analyses Salaria Kea, a prominent African American figure of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades both during and after the Spanish Civil War. Kea was the only black woman to serve in the Brigade nursing unit in Spain. Everly shows how Kea countered misogynist racism both in the Jim Crow US and abroad. Her passion for politics and justice first led her to sympathise with the plight of the Ethiopians suffering under the Italian invasion of 1935, and eventually led her to travel to Spain as part of the Lincoln Brigade. Kea's position as a Black woman meant that she was subject to both racial and gender-based discrimination, both within the military structure of the Brigades and later when she lived in Ohio during the 1950s. Her experience was doubly marginalised, and it has since then been appropriated, debated, archived and even rejected as invention.

Danielle Casanova (1909-1943) is the subject of Amy Morrison's study. Casanova was a leading activist in the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s. She became an active member of the French communist youth movement, represented France at international conferences, and was the first to suggest forming a women's section. When war broke out she contributed to establishing the underground PCF and continued in her leadership role of communist women and the youth movement. Casanova was arrested as a member of the communist resistance in 1942 and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in February 1943. She died there of typhoid three months later. The article demonstrates how Casanova's legacy and commemoration has been dependent upon whether the context has been within or outside of the communist movement; and how it has also been shaped by gender. Those within the communist women's movement immediately raised Casanova up as a martyr of their anti-fascist campaign. They mentioned her in women's underground newspapers to inspire continued resistance activity and included her story in a series of booklets published in 1946

which featured female communists who had died for the cause. Outside of the communist movement, her commemoration has depended upon how the legacy of communist resistance has been evoked, and the extent to which the contribution of female resisters has been integrated into the narrative of anti-fascist action in France – which has varied in different periods. This article deploys intersectional perspectives in considering the interplay of Casanova's identities as a communist and as a woman through the resistance and collaboration paradigm; and within this it also considers how gender is understood within this history.

The special issue concludes with an article on the Dutch writer, poet and translator Jef Last. In this article Rudi Wester and Elke Weesjes analyse a subject who was always willing to give his life for his ideals, but who followed his own conscience and his own sense of justice, and was driven by an intense dislike of hypocritical bourgeois morality. Having become a committed socialist at a young age, he involved himself in everything: he pioneered avant-garde films in the Netherlands, smuggled German/Jewish intellectuals and artists into Belgium and France in the early 1930s, fought in the Spanish Civil War, was active in the Dutch resistance during the Second World War, fought against colonialism and for the independence of the Dutch East Indies, broke the taboo on homosexuality, and spoke out against the horrors of the Cultural Revolution in China. Last insisted on the indivisibility of his identity and experiences as an antifascist fighter and a gay man. As he put it after his stay in Spain: it had transformed the very nature of his anti-fascism: 'it is no longer intellectual: it has gone over into my blood'.³⁸

The articles represent a broad palette of resistance subjects, all with their individual life trajectories, and now included as a collective into the contemporary rekindling of transnational memories of the anti-fascist resistance fighter. They were in many ways distinct products of their own historical time, but they still form an integral part of how we continue to re-imagine the global resistance fighter.

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Notes

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