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Books to the Masses! An Investigation of Russian WWI 'Dime Stories'

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Abstract: The impact of WWI on Russian society was immediately disruptive. This effect affected every sphere of social and cultural environs. Although previous research has established that WWI was a major topic of the cultural discourse of that time, the way in which WWI literature, and in particular consumer literature, contributed to the representation of war among the mass population deserves further research. By drawing a parallel with the phenomenon of the American dime novel, this study is grounded on the analysis of the style, content, structure, and even of the 'mere' appearance of some 1914–1916 'mass' publications aimed at the broader public. The goal of this article, therefore, is to stimulate a consistent re-evaluation of this strand of 'consumer' war literature and to focus on its importance as a culturological tool to have a better understanding of the cultural environment of that time.

Keywords: Russian literature; war literature; WWI; dime literature; dime stories

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1. Introduction

In the critical literature that focuses on early twentieth-century Russian literature, there is no such concept as 'dime' literature. There are, however, other labels (e.g., *Bul'varnaja literatura*, *Massovaja literatura*), which, in more or less detail, aim at defining the variegated situation of the trends in mass literature at the beginning of the century (see Blagoj 1925; Bjalik 1972; Lotman 1997). Previous research has established that WWI was a major topic of the cultural discourse of that time, even after the establishment of the Soviet government (see Gatrell 2005; Ivanov 2005; Cohen 2008, pp. 3–5; Petrone 2011; Petelin 2012, pp. 10–21). However, how literature contributed to the way in which war was represented and propagated to the population in the war period and what were the features of this kind of literature are topics that deserve closer scrutiny. On the grounds of the analysis of the style, content, and even of the 'mere' appearance of some 'mass' publications aimed at the broader public, the goal of this article is to stimulate a consistent re-evaluation for this type of 'consumer' war literature.

Russian World War I literature published during the war period is rich and diverse. It includes novels, anthologies of various kinds, reprints of newspaper articles, and alleged accounts of soldiers' real lives and experiences at the front. The present paper is focused on brief short stories of the period 1914–1916. The methodological approach on which this study is grounded takes as its point of reference the broader outlines of the American dime novel (see Denning 1987; Ramsey and Derounian-Stodola 2004; Randolph Cox 2000), since the modes of publication and narrative devices of Russian WWI short stories show interesting similarities to the typical features of the American dime tradition.[1] Given the very specific scope of this investigation, however, I have considered it more suitable for my analysis to focus almost exclusively on Russian texts and to refer to the phenomenon of American dime literature in its more neutral and structural aspects. I have chosen to label these kinds of literary works as 'dime stories', both to emphasize the overall importance of re-evaluating 'minor', 'consumer' literature of this period as a format of fiction and to

lay the foundation for future investigations of a broader, diversified phenomenon of early twentieth-century Russian 'dime literature'.

In analogy to what previous research has established in relation to the literary values of the American dime novel (see Denning 1987, pp. 9–17; Randolph Cox 2000), the significance of Russian WWI dime literature should be interpreted in the light of social history and in the broader context of the cultural history of the time. Contrary to what one might expect, a literary analysis of these writings, whose literary value has always been considered mostly negligible by critics and scholars (see Cechnovicer 1938, pp. 291–314; Vil'činskij 1972; Heller 1989; Simonova 2013, p. 758), can contribute to a more comprehensive reading of the historical and social context of Russia in the 1910s. It is no coincidence that, in line with the general features of propaganda-style literature, the heroes of this particular type of mass literature make themselves the bearers of very specific values, of a moral orientation that proves to be in absolute consonance with the needs of domestic politics. The major difference between typical propaganda literature of the First World War[2] and this genre of consumer publications is that in the latter, there are no elements that undergo significant changes during the three years of Russian participation in the war. For obvious historical reasons, beginning in 1916, explicit indications of censorship clearance make their appearance on publications,[3] but nothing more happens. Somehow, it is as if WWI dime literature remained out of time, unchanged, and even untouched by the change in Russian society's attitude toward the war.

2. 'Mass', 'Consumer', 'Dime' Literature?

The Russian landscape of the early twentieth century witnessed the presence of a significant number of 'consumer' publications, namely low-cost literature aimed at the unscholarly reader. So far, nothing different from the publishing landscape of the previous decade. Of course, the novelty lies in the topic around which all these publications revolved: the war. This is the element that allows us to draw a dividing line between dime stories and French-influenced popular literature of late nineteenth-century flavor. It is, in fact, to these elements that the most widespread trend in consumer literature publications, in terms of style and subject matter, must be traced. Graf Amori's numerous novels published between 1912 and 1915 provide a clear example of the so-called *bul'varnaja literatura*.[4] Thematically, *bul'varnye* publications made full use of newspaper incidents, rehashed and combined in every possible way. As stated in (Blagoj 1925, pp. 108–9), their plots were centered on the most sinister elements of city life: famous detectives, ingenious thieves, sensational misadventures, and endless love stories. A recurrent tinge of obscenity, often outright pornography, hovered over most of this consumer literature and gave it a charm of its own. The year 1914 was, obviously, a turning point in literary trends. As the themes change, the tone and style change as well; the rhetoric becomes patriotic, warlike, and heroic, and the recounted stories often sound blatantly fictional and improbable in their telling of events that would have allegedly been reproduced from the front. Many of the authors of these texts, however, did not begin their literary careers in the wake of the war: they were not soldiers, but rather professional writers, more or less known to the general public. They often had literary portfolios ranging from nineteenth-century social realism to more recent decadent literary trends. Many of them, swept up in the patriotic momentum, would enlist as volunteers, gain some firsthand experience in the war—but never on the front lines—and write about it on returning home.

But what is it that makes this kind of consumer war literature closer to the American *dime* genre? To answer this question, I shall point out two main factors: *a.* publishing matters and *b.* the elements constituting their narrative.

The publishing point of view deserves attention. Although it is impossible to draw a direct parallel with the American dime novel context due to several factors related to the way in which American dime literature writers approached the topic of war, there are some outward elements of these mass-market publications in which interesting similarities can be found. In the United States, the very term 'dime novel' made its appearance in the late

nineteenth century as a brand name, denoting at first a series of paper-covered booklets published regularly and in numbered sequences. These books were given standardized format and content; each was sold for ten cents (hence the name 'dime').[5] Attractive for their low price and illustrated covers, this format was immediately popular and had such great sales success that many publishers began to create their own versions and imitations, granting the 'dime novel' widespread dissemination throughout the country (see Randolph Cox 2000).

The Russian publishing landscape of the 1910s was varied and significantly differed from the American context. Although, at the time, there were no such proven direct contacts between the two countries allowing us to suggest concrete contamination between literary genres,[6] a closer, contrastive scrutiny allows us to highlight some points of contact between these two manifestations of consumer literature, that turn out to be closer than what may appear at first glance. Therefore, we can highlight some continuities, allowing us to discuss the existence of a Russian 'dime' literary phenomenon.

Overall, the publication of World War I literature in Russia was not strictly tied to specific publishing houses. However, if we narrow the field of our investigation to those publications in which there emerged many of the typical features of the dime novel, such as 1. a particular type of cover illustration, which graphically summarizes the central episode of the narrative; 2. a 'universal', standardized book format; 3. the length of the booklets (which in our case stretches between 20 and 30 pages), and 4. the low cost, which makes the book attractive precisely because it is affordable, we may conclude that many of the publications that could fall under the umbrella of Russian WWI dime stories gravitate towards the Moscow-based publisher A.S. Balašov, or the book series *Deševaja narodnaja biblioteka* (The People's Economical Library), published by the Petrograd-based charity organization *Skobelevskij Komitet*.[7] The booklets of the Moscow publisher A.S. Balašov are the ones that appear most akin to the features of the American dime novel. The layout of the covers is always the same, and the image there depicted condenses the central episode of the narrative, sometimes making use of shocking and gory details (see Figure 1);[8] the format of the booklets does not vary, while the length of the publications differs only by a few pages (see Petrov 1914; Šuchmin 1914, 1915).



Figure 1. Samples of Russian WWI dime booklet covers. From left to right: Petrov (1914); Šuchmin (1914); Šuchmin (1915).

On the other hand, the *Deševaja narodnaja biblioteka* series represents an attempt to create an actual book series. All the booklets share the common feature of having a cover with the same graphic layout, depicting a soldier and a peasant reading a booklet. Such a depiction of the target audience is a likely allusion to the 'dime' nature of these editions (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Samples of Russian WWI dime booklet covers from the series *Deševaja narodnaja biblioteka*. From left to right: Mužel' (1916); Skitalec (1916).

The price of these books does not always appear on the book itself, making it difficult to draw an accurate conclusion in this regard. The *Deševaja narodnaja biblioteka* booklets lack a precise indication of their price. From a comparison with other publications belonging to the same series (see the last pages of Mužel' 1916 and Oliger 1916), it is reasonable to assume that the *Skovelevskij Komitet* booklets were affordable even to the lower classes. Other publications from the same publisher, however, are marked by a higher price and are accompanied by a statement from the committee itself, explaining that the increased price is due to the allocation of the proceeds from the sale to the construction of war hospitals and to supporting the families of the fallen (see Vtoraja Otečestvennaja Vojna 1915–1916, p. ii). Overall, considering the range of prices of various publications as indicated in the advertisements on the back cover of some books of the years 1914–1915[9] and comparing these prices with the average annual income of the lower class in Russia at the end of 1913,[10] we can assume that the conditions for speaking of *dime* literature do indeed exist in the Russian context of this period.

Moreover, investigating the close connection between these booklets and newspaper publishing provides this study with further grounds to delve into World War I short stories from a 'dime' perspective since *a.* some of the authors who published short stories in book form also published their own works in newspapers,[11] and *b.* some books, or more properly, collections or anthologies of short stories, are precisely book reprints of stories that originally appeared in newspapers.[12] This is indeed another factor justifying the possibility of drawing a more consistent analogy with the case of the American dime novel, in which the same dynamics occurred.[13]

3. First World War Russian 'Dime Stories'[14]

Most Russian WWI dime stories take place in a purely military context. In this regard, Russian scholars distinguish between 'front' (*frontovye*) and 'rear-guard' (*tilovye*) war stories (See Simonova 2013, p. 758). Recent research has shown that the main heroes of these narratives are usually members of the military. It has also been observed that WWI war stories mostly follow the anti-epic sentiment inspired by L.N. Tolstoj and V.M. Garšin (See Simonova 2013, p. 758). This perspective of 'legacy' from late nineteenth-century literary tradition grounds Svijasov's statements on the main feature of Russian war prose: as a rule, battle scenes are put in the background since the writers are mainly concerned with portraying the humanity of soldiers and officers, of their inner world (See Svijasov 1989, p. 4).

Do these same features occur in Russian WWI dime stories? The answer is *sometimes*. Indeed, in many of the stories on which this study is grounded, war and its explicit representation is a ubiquitous element that frequently intertwines with the main hero's point of view, sometimes influencing it, sometimes overwhelming it. Many of these short stories simply would not work had battle scenes lacked a relevant role in the structure of the narrative. Yet, the debt to the most important authors of the late nineteenth century is undeniable. Accordingly, it is no surprise that in this often sketchy consumer literature, despite the (almost systematic) poor attention to the narrative and the seemingly 'hasty' connections between the passages, frequently there appear more or less concealed references to Tolstoj's *Sevastopol Sketches*.[15] However, it would be short-sighted to dismiss WWI dime stories as a simpler, less refined rehash of Russian nineteenth-century prose. With the aim of problematizing this sociocultural and editorial phenomenon, we should instead investigate the nature of its content and modes of narration.[16]

On the one hand, a deeper analysis of the narrative elements of Russian WWI dime stories proves that a direct comparison with American dime literature centered on the theme of war is not fruitful. In fact, although the war setting has been an undoubtedly prolific trend in the American context,[17] these are mostly texts in which war plays a background, secondary function to the narrated events. Many of the plots of American dime literature take place against the backdrop of wartime events of particular significance in a context of national history and identity: a case in point can be found in American revolutionary war stories or Civil War stories.[18] However, as is the case of Civil War-themed literature, not only "the principal Civil War series did not appear until nearly two decades after the end of the war" (Randolph Cox 2000), but the very centrality of the depiction of war has been questioned: Noel (1954, p. 177) states that "the Civil War produced stories of all types [. . .] the only kind missing was a battlefield story". Randolph Cox (2000) argues that "only a handful of texts appeared during the war years and those were mostly fictional accounts of skirmishes on the frontier and guerrilla raids. [. . .] Other publishers [. . .] issued series with titles that suggest they were about the Civil War [. . .] but in reality they were stories designed to be read by the soldiers to relieve the boredom of camp life". American dime literature also includes stories that drew from World War I. However, we are dealing with sporadic mentions of German or French settings and names, with no significant depiction of the war.[19] On the other hand, the central theme that Russian WWI dime stories explore is, of course, war. War is a depiction of bloody combat scenes, as a constant background of the narrative, as a simple context on which the narrated events unfold, or as an overwhelming agent conditioning the actions of the main characters. Overall, the main characters of these short stories are the embodiment of ideals of patriotism, comradeship, self-sacrifice, and a sense of community: they stand out above the group to which they belong (be it a troop, a squad of Cossacks, a family) without, however, ever failing to achieve the sense of belonging that qualifies the militaristic and patriotic rhetoric proper to the wartime context.

Given this fundamental thematic discrepancy, the points of contact between the expressions of the consumer literature of the two countries should therefore be sought among more generic aspects, such as neutral elements related to the structuring of the narrative or the very way in which writers found inspiration for their plots. Since the focus of this study

is related to war narratives, it is worth mentioning that in the American tradition, some writers' names "include a military title, a legacy of the recent Civil War, and appear on stories about that historic event", and even if "few seem to have been actually earned in the military", such titles "lend authority to the storyteller" (Randolph Cox 2000). The Russian context seemingly shows an opposite trend, as in some cases, the material that served as the starting point for the narrative is likely drawn from experiences the authors witnessed in real life. Consider, for example, the cases of Viktor Vasil'evič Mujžel' and Stepan Gavrilovič Petrov (who signed his works under the pseudonym Skitalec): both relatively well-known authors in the literary milieu of the 1910s Russian *belletristika*, they participated in the first years of the war as volunteers, the former as a corpsman, the latter as a war correspondent for the newspaper '*Birževye vedomosti*'.[20] Nikolaj Oliger, a very prolific author who dealt with almost every literary trend of the beginning of the twentieth century: in his work he ranged from realism and erotic literature to the patriotic wave that, following the outbreak of the war, led him to enlist voluntarily as a corpsman.[21] Once back home, the impressions gathered by these authors regarding the war in general and the situation at the front would form a credible backbone for the setting and the rough characterization of the protagonists of their short stories. The sketchy and stereotypical characterization of the main heroes is an element justifying an analogy with the American dime novel, a genre in which, as Randolph Cox states, "there was little place for nuances of style" since "what happened next counted more than character development' (Randolph Cox 2000).

Recent studies on Russian mass literature have shown that antithesis is a key narrative device in the descriptions of the main characters of those writings, which were published in newspapers in the years 1914–1916 (see Simonova 2013, pp. 758–59). The antithesis is very frequently unfolded in a contraposition of the 'young' and 'old' individual attributes, which often are implicit. In analogy to the meaning that the same juxtaposition takes on in the American dime novel genre[22], in the Russian dime literature of the First World War it emerges that the main characters of a large number of the stories set at the front or in a properly warlike context are mostly soldiers or officers from lower ranks. In this case, 'young age' is an entirely symbolic characterization that overlaps with the low rank of the heroes since the purpose of this literature seems to be to want to celebrate the prowess of the characters: the younger ones compensate with valor and heroic deeds for the lack of experience, which they inevitably lack because of their young age.

The story *Vojna i velikij gerojskij podvig Maksima Kaševarova* (The War and Maksim Kashevarov's Great Heroic Deed) serves as a clear example of such characterization. The main character of the narrated war episode is the *navodčik* ('gunner') Maksim Kaševarov, who remains maimed on the battlefield after the explosion of a grenade. Heedless of the dismemberment, he stoically continues his duty, succeeding in shooting down a German troop almost entirely and in saving his squadron, which did not know how to react to what was happening (see Šuchmin 1914, p. 16).

Another case in point is *Djužina nemcev na odnom kazackom štyke* (A Dozen Germans on a Single Cossack Pike) (Šuchmin 1915). Published in 1915, this is a short story in which a surprisingly consistent number of narrative elements and devices makes it similar to certain branches of the American dime novel.[23] Like its overseas analog, this work impresses right from the illustrated cover, depicting a galloping Cossack as he wields a pike on which half a dozen German soldiers are skewered.[24] This story stands out also because its narrative is arranged in a slightly different way from the structure presented here below (see Figure 3). The main character, Semen Semenovič Jachontov, is not only introduced from the very first lines of the story but his presentation is laid out in a way that foreshadows the actual beginning of a heroic story. From the very beginning, we are about to witness the making of a national hero, whose qualities as a well above-average individual are evident even before the war outbreak, in the civilian dimension of the Cossack village (*stanica*) in which he lives:

> Если война делает героев, то война творить и чудеса. Вот об одном из таких чудес я и хочу рассказать. Опишу героя своего рассказа. По паспорту он был:

> казак Донской области, [. . .] Семен Семенович Яхонтов. [. . .] Яхонтов не только в своем хуторе, но и в ближайших станицах отличался своею удалью молодецкою (Šuchmin 1915, p. 3).[25]

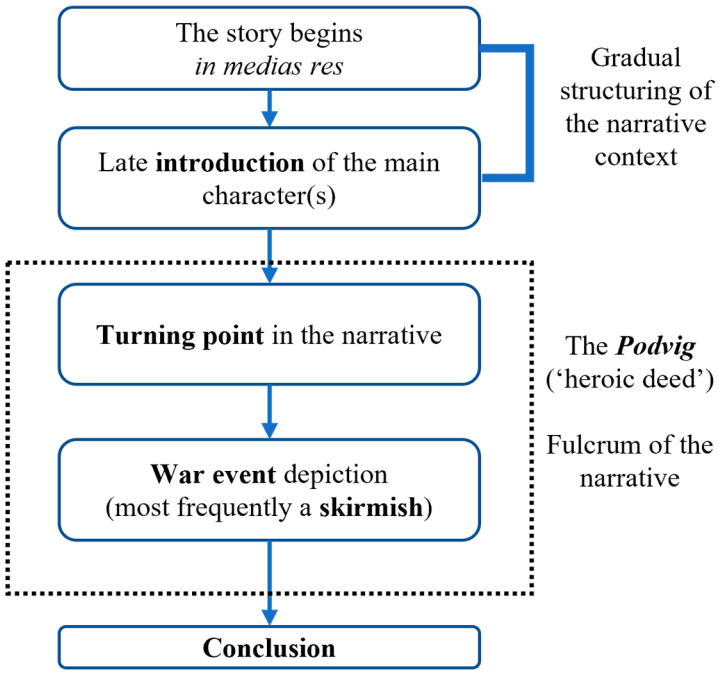


Figure 3. Schematic view of the most common structure in Russian WWI dime stories.

In this writing, the author gives no explicit indication of the role the protagonist plays within the army: he moves and acts as a member of a squad of Cossack horsemen. We come to know that he is a *razvedčik* (scout) only incidentally, in specific passages where the narrator portrays him as a role model for his companions and, consequently, as an inspiration for the readers:

> Семен на боевых позициях отличался не только с каждым днем, но и с каждым часом. [. . .] Все дивились его храбрости и ловкости. Где летали миллионы пуль, где ежесекундно рвались шрапнели, там везде был Семен и отовсюду ускальзывал совершенно невредимым. Все товарищи любили ходить с Семеном на разные разведки, веря в его молодецкие дела и удалецкую силу. Едет Семен как-то со своими товарищами топкою степью германской земли, да рассказывает о том, как лучше немцев в плен брать. [. . .] Слушают его казаки со вниманием [. . .] (Šuchmin 1915, p. 11).[26]

The choice to narrate the adventures of a young Cossack is not accidental, from a purely prosaic point of view related to the editorial appeal. Within the historical context and multi-ethnical identity consciousness of the Russian Empire, the mention of the Don Cossacks is, in a certain sense, a representative element of the frontier, one that could even be called 'exotic' to some extent. It should also not be forgotten that the Cossacks served in the Russian Empire's army as cavalrymen; given the year of publication and the motivational, patriotic aims that such a work carried, it is worth emphasizing that it must surely have seemed more appealing to the public of the time—especially to the younger readers—to read and be inspired by the bold endeavors of a swift and reckless horseman, who escapes the dangers of war thanks to an exquisite balance of his own abilities and fortune coming in his aid, rather than by stagnant trench warfare, which concerned the common foot soldiers.

Djužina nemcev is entirely focused on the superhuman features of its main character, who emerges victorious from any war scene. In recounting the events, the author makes

clear that Semen maintains his heroic qualities even when he finds himself separated from his squad. He has no fear in taking the initiative to face the enemy, which is portrayed as an evil force: "Давайте-ка рассыпимся, да разузнаем, где эта нечистая сила попряталась" (Šuchmin 1915, p. 12).[27] In this story, the protagonist being alone is the mandatory condition for the pivotal narrative device—the *podvig*—to take place. The term *podvig*, 'heroic deed', can be referred not only to the case of this specific work but to the general narrative fulcrum of Russian WWI dime stories (see Figure 3).

> Вихрем подскакал Семен к пригоркам смотрит, а там человек двенадцать немцев в окопах сидят. Схватил Семен пику, да и ударился на немцев. [. . .] Стреляют они в Семена, только пули его не берут. [. . .] Уж видели германцы, что дело плохо: сдавались бы, а то бежать! Не прошло и двадцати минуть всей борьбы, а уж она и кончилась. . . [. . .] Слез храбрый казак с коня, перетащил все трупы в одно место, сложил их в одну груду и воткнул около них свое победное копье (Šuchmin 1915, p. 13).[28]

Aside from the rough portrayal of the character and the adventurous descriptions of the war scenes that seem to distance this tale from the anti-epic tradition of late nineteenth-century war literature, the author does not conceal the hero's humanity, thus making for a more believable character for readers to empathize with:

> И смотря на лежащие трупы врагов, он в каждом почувствовал близкого себе человека. И много он тогда для души своей получил откровений, и сумрачные, тяжкие мысли закопошились в его мозгах и даже слезы вызвали на глазах у героя (Šuchmin 1915, p. 14).[29]

However, it is my understanding that Semen's capability to see a fellow human being beyond the enemy should not be misunderstood as a renewed sense of humanism but instead as a way of stressing the moral superiority of the Russian fighters, who were forced to face an 'evil force' attacking their homeland.[30]

The story ends quite predictably: the protagonist reunites with his comrades, who are astonished at his valor and efforts. In an obvious metaphor of social recognition, the companions celebrate Semen just as society would ideally celebrate soldiers' valor and self-sacrifice toward the homeland: "А один из товарищей привязал к Семенову копью, воткнутому близ мертвых немцевъ, бумагу, на которой написал: 'Это славное дело донского казака Семена Семеновича Яхонтова'" (Šuchmin 1915, p. 15).[31]

Let us now move to another text, *Achmetka* (Šipulinskij 1914). Besides proving to be more adherent to the general narrative structure, as exposed in Figure 3, this story deserves a closer look for several reasons. First, its subtitle: *Rasskaz ranennogo praporščika* (The Tale of a Wounded Non-commissioned Officer), which provides us with hints about the narrative structure of the story. The narrator is not explicitly external, but it is a character in the story itself, precisely the non-commissioned officer, who fulfills the function of the external narrator's voice. The narrative device at work in this text proves to be a unique case, slightly departing from the external narrator's mode of narration, which is the most common in Russian dime stories. However, in essence, it does not make any kind of significant change to the unfolding of the narrative structure, which turns out to be the same as in other dime stories. The beginning occurs in media res, in compliance with the general rules of Russian dime stories, although the reader is first presented with a sort of "narrative within a narrative", which the author uses as a pretext. The fact that the actual story is introduced by a wounded officer reveals the intention to confer authenticity and authority to the narrated events. From the very first lines of the story, it is already clear that the narrator is omniscient, as the officer will only report to the reader the events that caused his stay in the military hospital:

> Лежа здесь, на этой чистенькой больничной койке,—начал привезенный недавно в Москву раненый прапорщик,—я не перестаю думать о них, о своих солдатах, и стыдно признаться, но я уверен, что встреча с родными, [. . .] не заставить меня забыть о своем взводе. Я готов самым строгим образом

> исполнять все предписания врача только для того, чтобы поскорее опять быть вместе с ними. Когда я впервые увидел их, я с любопытством начал рассматривать этих людей, с которыми мне суждено будет жить и, быть может, вместе умереть, судьба которых в значительной степени будет в моих руках. (Šipulinskij 1914, p. 3).[32]

The narrator tells the story in detail, taking due time to build a truthful narrative context and only later introducing the real protagonist of the story, Achmetka, a Tatar soldier of whom he sketches a picturesque portrait. Achmetka is described as illiterate, but despite this attribute (which should be interpreted according to the paradigm of the analogy between 'young' and 'inexperienced'), he is nevertheless endowed with so much resourcefulness that often, the officer-narrator himself unwillingly follows the suggestions of the private soldier.[33]

The narrator reconstructs in detail the soldiers' sense of camaraderie and focuses especially on Achmetka's positive role within the troop while also mentioning his non-Russian origins, which are pointedly remarked on by the narrator himself. Here emerges a point in common with the American dime novel, that is the sublimation of the frontier in the 'exotic' element, which in this case is rendered through the lines of Achmetka, the main hero: he is described as an illiterate Tatar soldier, and his social background, as well as ethnicity, are made manifest in the wilfully ungrammatical rendering of Russian sentences and in the insertion of expressions or words probably taken from the Tatar language and placed here and there, as interjections.[34] Through a rather vague narration of a few episodes of military life, we come to the turning point that allows the enactment of the *podvig*:

> Скоро и мне с моим взводом приходилось перейти на линию боя. В это время где-то вблизи меня раздался треск, что-то с силою ударило меня в ногу, и я лишился сознания. [. . .] Когда очнулся, я увидел, что лежу далеко позади наших войск, и вижу только их тыл в расстояние верст двух впереди, напирающих на противника под непрекращающимся огнем австрийской артиллерий. (Šipulinskij 1914, p. 10).[35]

At this point in the narrative, the *podvig* is finally at work. The officer-narrator recalls finding himself in mortal danger when, suddenly, there appears Achmetka out of nowhere, pulling him to safety:

> Я оглянулся и увидел почти рядом с собой вырисовывающуюся из лощинки голову Ахметки. В руках у него была винтовка. Я окликнул его, и он подполз ко мне. Оказалось, что у него осколком снаряда вырван кусок мяса на ноге, и он также был в безпамятстве. [. . .] Больше раненых вокруг нас не было. Были только убитые. Устроив маленький военный совет, мы признали, что ни он, ни я, не можем идти за своими. Но оставаться на поле было нелепо. И мы решили собрать все силы, чтобы пробраться в деревушку, из которой только что выбежали подстреленные Ахметкой австрийцы. (Šipulinskij 1914, p. 12).[36]

From this point onwards, the two soldiers' pilgrimage to rejoin their army begins. They struggle on foot but are animated by patriotic stoicism. They arrive at a deserted Polish village, where they meet an old woman who has miraculously escaped the savagery of the Austrian throng. The two soldiers do not know the language, but thanks to the "common roots of Slavic languages,"[37] they manage to communicate and, amid laughter and ironic and sometimes light-hearted comments on the situation described, they finally reach a Cossack detachment. The wounded are immediately attended to, and the story ends with a doctor reporting to the narrator that Achmetka's leg will have to be amputated. Achmetka's *podvig* consists not simply of the rescuing of a fellow soldier but also of the lack of consideration for one's own health condition: the greater good lies in the fulfillment of the sense of community, or in other words, of one's duty towards the homeland.

Užasnyj boj za znamja (A Terrifying Clash for the Banner) (Petrov 1914) is another short story that does not differ from the already examined texts. After a lengthy preamble consisting of a series of remarks on the state of the war, the main character of the story is

finally introduced. He is a young, low-rank cavalry officer, the Cornet Nikolaj Petrovič Orlovskij. A common element with the American dime novel in this case, is provided by the surname of the protagonist,[38] who, in the performance of his heroic deeds, swoops down on his enemies like an eagle on its prey (Orlovskij derives from *orel*, 'eagle'). Once again, we are dealing with the story of a virtuous soldier, an exemplary husband with extraordinary physical and mental prowess (see Petrov 1914, p. 7). He does not avoid his duty to his homeland and is able to counter the enemy's shenanigans and cunning maneuvers by entering combat first, thus setting an example for his fellow soldiers. The turning point in the narrative is represented by the description in which the cavalry troop of which the hero is a member finds itself in a tactically unfavorable position within a thicket; the narrator seems to be describing the situation almost as a mockery of fate as if the hero found himself in that war scene by chance (see Petrov 1914, p. 12). In any case, unexpected and seemingly random circumstances do not prevent the *podvig* from being enacted. In this text, the *podvig* feat is to take the insignia away from the German troops, in a strange call-back to the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest,[39] to inflict a crushing defeat on the enemy even from a moral perspective:

> Орлом врубился в толпу врагов корнет Орловский и начал наносить смертельные удары направо и налево. Ну, и рубил же он немцев! Прежде всего им был зарублен на смерт офицер, у которого находилось знамя. Но знамя тотчас же перешло в руки другого немца-солдата, которого сплошной стеной окружили немцы. И в этот-то трагический момент в лес внеслись на горячих конях русские драгуны и врубились в толпу немцев... И началась отчаянная рубка! (Petrov 1914, pp. 13–14).[40]

The short story ends quite predictably with the victory of our hero, who, upon returning to the base camp, is cheered and celebrated. However, what needs to be emphasized in the conclusion of this tale is the way in which it is described: it is condensed into a few short episodes stressing the theme of unity among the soldiers, emphasizing that the real strength lies in the multitude, in the number, in the army as a complex whole system made of multiple, isolated units. Of course, the main character of the story is a single individual who stands out from the nameless mass of other participants in the *podvig*, but the recognition of the hero coincides with a celebration of the collective heroic act, not of the individual (see Petrov 1914, pp. 14–15).

To gain a broader understanding of the motifs of the dime stories of World War I, it is worthwhile to also consider those stories that are characterized by a civilian or 'rear-guard' setting. Here, the war is a secondary but nevertheless omnipresent element of the narrative background. The main events of the narrative revolve around a character that is typically a 'young' representative of society. 'Young' here can be understood either in a literal sense, relating to the protagonist's age (a young boy, as in *Sucharik*, see Oliger 1916; or a young girl, as in *Arinuška*, see Skitalec 1916), or in a metaphorical sense, relating to the moral and social implications produced by the character's social position and role (as in the case of the corpsman in *Na peredovych pozicijach* (At the Front Line), see Skitalec 1916).

The short story *Sucharik* (Oliger 1916) proves to be straightforward in its plot and structuring, as it follows the usual norms of dime stories. Again, the story begins in media res. We are introduced to Sucharik, a young boy from a wealthy family, who is forced to take lessons in Russian orthography with a private tutor. However, in his mind, he is always thinking about the war, about when he will participate in it, and especially about his uncle, his sister's husband, who is an officer deployed to the front. The boy every day consults the newspapers to seek information about the state of the war. One day, by chance, he comes across an article that contains a long list of names of missing soldiers. Among them is that of his beloved uncle, who years before had given him the nickname *Sucharik*, 'little cookie'. Unintentionally, he reports the fact to his sister, who begins to grieve, despairing over the uncertainty of her husband's fate. According to the usual narrative structure, from this turning point, we move to the *podvig*, even in a 'civilian' tale such as

this: the boy, moved by his sister's grief, decides to set out himself, in secret, in search of his uncle missing in action. He leaves her a brief note explaining his intentions:

> Страшно торопился и потому чуть не забыл очень важного. Вернулся уже с порога и положил на свой столик, на видное место, заранее приготовленную записку: "Милая сестричка, я уезжаю искать дядю Колю. Это лучше, чем просто разведчик, потому что тоже подвиг, а тебе будет приятно, если я найду. Извини, что не посмотрел на елку. Ты не сердись и не беспокойся, я найду. (Oliger 1916, p. 13).[41]

What makes a tale such as this particularly interesting is not only the presence of the *podvig* in a not strictly military narrative context but also the way in which the narrative is presented: the short story is, in fact, almost entirely articulated in the form of dialogue or interior monologue.

Russian dime stories also contemplate the existence of negative characters, a likely warning to readers. A very clear example of this strand is the short story *Arinuška* (Skitalec 1916). As in the previous case, we are dealing with a rather linear narrative structure. The story begins in media res, but the protagonist is introduced from the very first lines of the story. Arinuška is a young lady from Moscow who is traveling by train and is headed to the front to assist the wounded as a sister of mercy. She sidles up to a duchess, traveling to the battle line for the same reason. The author describes the girl's fears aboard the train, as she is frightened by rumors that it is a common practice of the Austrians to bomb hospital trains. At the same time, the author adopts an extraordinarily strict moral stance towards her: it is clear from the description that the young lady is nothing more than a no-good, accustomed to coquetry and other activities, ill-suited to the war setting. The author seemingly even despises her when he describes her dreams of a romance with an officer:

> Аринушка не переставала мечтать о романической встрече с офицером, с настоящим героем войны, совершающим подвиги, непременно с офицером, и только с офицером, всех остальных мужчин ниже офицера или прапорщика она давно уже перестала считать мужчинами и совершенно не интересовалась ими. (Skitalec 1916, p. 14).[42]

Once she arrives at her destination, she is met by a young officer, who takes her and the duchess in a carriage to the front area. The carriage is spotted by an Austrian observation tower, and a sustained bombardment begins. Despite the young officer's exhortations to flee, the girl inappropriately sets out to collect shell fragments to keep 'as a souvenir', and only later realizes that she is in the midst of a real war scene. Paralyzed by fear, she pitilessly dies in the chaos caused by the shelling:

> [. . .] вдруг опять над ее головой весь воздух наполнился прежним отвратительным железным визгом, земля поплыла из-под ног, небо сразу померкло и какая-то страшная, непонятная сила мягко повлекла Аринушку в тихую, черную и безбрежную тьму. (Skitalec 1916, p. 18).[43]

Apart from the cruelty of the events narrated in this story, what immediately stands out is the lack of the *podvig*. This, of course, is to be understood as in line with the description of a shallow character, inappropriate to the context, who is collocated in a situation of total opposition to the values of patriotism and self-sacrifice. The message here is not that the protagonist, as a girl, has no chance to perform a heroic act, but rather a condemnation for her attitude: she seems not to be interested in putting herself on the line to accomplish a feat, so much as in settling down with an already decorated war hero and thus living off a sort of 'second-hand glory'. And for this reason, she suffers the harsh moral condemnation of her own narrator, who dooms her to a cruel death.

4. Conclusions

As is evident from many of the stories here analyzed, the main themes and motifs of these tales are absolutely the same as those found in literature with a patriotic slant (see Cortesi 2021). As shown in the textual analysis, most Russian WWI dime stories share a

rather simple and linear narrative structure, with some sporadic variations on the theme (see Figure 3). As a rule, the story begins in media res. Sometimes, the very beginning is preceded by the author's view on war. The main characters are usually introduced to the reader only at a later time in the narrative. In most cases, the author presents the protagonist by name; sometimes, the reader is provided with more or less detailed information on the social background or ethnicity. Given the multi-ethnic nature of the Russian Empire, this latter element is not incidental: on the contrary, it serves as a specific narrative and cultural function. The structuring of the actual narrative context comes as the result of a combination of a number of narrative scenes, which may either relate directly to the main event of the story or be a series of characters-related random episodes, arranged to create a more believable effect. The author, as a rule, makes use of this construction as if it were a foundation on which the two decisive narrative moments are then grafted. The first one is the turning point, which is a new, often unexpected situation in which the protagonist sometimes ends up in a dangerous situation. In any case, the feeling is that a real change is about to take place. In the short stories that are characterized by a war setting, the turning point is followed by the description of a war scene, which assumes a central role within the narrative. Usually, the war scene described by the authors is a quick fight, a skirmish, or a lightning strike, which by its nature is the most suitable moment for the heroic deeds of the main characters to find their ideal stage. It is precisely between these two central moments of the narrative structure that the development of the *podvig* is usually situated. The *podvig* can be defined as the heroic action for which the character is celebrated, and from a structural point of view, it can be considered as an element 'overlaying' the structure. It fits into the narrated context in an organic and flowing manner without giving the impression of a structurally forced or exaggerated construction. The conclusion usually bears little or no influence in the straightforward unfolding of such a structure.

Putting aside the considerations regarding the general structure of the short stories that I have proposed here, which should be considered as a first attempt to provide a categorization of a broader Russian WWI dime literature phenomenon, it is important to highlight the value of these war stories, primarily as a culturological tool. As is evident in the textual analyses, these works do not stand out in terms of literary value: on the contrary, in many cases, they seem to fit into the traditional strands of late nineteenth-century realism or to reiterate the patriotic vulgate which burst out immediately after the outbreak of war. However, the importance of these stories in providing new perspectives on the broader understanding of the often-overlooked literary landscape of this era cannot be denied.

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Notes

1 Brooks (1985, p. 168) states that: "there existed in a sense a common popular culture that was shared by Western Europe and America in the half century before World War I, but Russia, as a poor cousin of more literate neighbors, could borrow little until the end of the period. Whether borrowing from foreign sources, however, or drawing on their own imaginations, Russian popular writers addressed their market, and even in translating foreign novels publishers had to be very choosy in order to satisfy the demands of the new readers." See also Rebecchini and Vassena (2014).

2 Further insights on this topic can be found in Cortesi (2021).

3 Such indications are usually found at the bottom of the last page before the inside back cover. As a reference, see Oliger (1916); Skitalec (1916).

4 Graf Amori is best known for the large number of publications he authored in the first half of the 1910s. These are mostly adventure novels with an imprint on the picaresque genre. For further reference on this author, see Nikolaev and Egorov (1989, vol. II, pp. 12–13).

5 Randolph Cox mentions Beadle's dime novels (1860–1874) as the first proper 'dime' book series. See Randolph Cox (2000). See also Denning (1987, pp. 18–26) and Ramsey and Derounian-Stodola (2004, pp. 264–65).

6 It is worthwhile mentioning that, as Randolph Cox states, since 1907 "over 300 stories from Buffalo Bill and Nick Carter series were translated into most of the European languages, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Russian, [. . .] and distributed in those countries. [. . .] The venture came to an end with the beginning of the first World War, but not before other publishers began similar series in imitation of the American heroes" (Randolph Cox 2000). On the other hand, Brooks argues that a specific trace of foreign influence can be seen in the Detective stories trend, that began to spread in Russia immediately after the 1905 Revolution. As an example, consider the Russian version of Nick Carter or Pinkerton detective stories. See Brooks (1985, pp. 208–9). See also the entries 'Nick Carter' and 'Pinkerton Detective Series' in Randolph Cox (2000).

7 Скобелевский Комитет для выдачи пособий потерявшим на войне способность к труду воинам, namely 'The Skobelevskij Committee for Granting Allowances to Soldiers Who Lost their Ability to Work in the War', a charity organization founded at the end of 1904, in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War.

8 See the cover of Šuchmin (1914), portraying a dismembered soldier.

9 As a general example, I should mention the back cover of *Strašnaja povest'. Razskazy russkich soldat, bežavšich iz nedr germanskogo plena* [A Frightening Story: Tales of Russian Soldiers Who Escaped the Depths of German Captivity] (Kurmojarov 1915). Here, the advertising prices for works by the same author, indicated on the back cover, vary between 1 rouble and 1 rouble 20 kopecks. Overall, it seems the price of the books varied depending on the publisher, and not on the length of the book: the prices of bigger tomes in some cases are the same of those of smaller booklets: for a comparison, see Mužel' (1915), costing 1 rouble and 25 kopecks. Other publications indicate a far lower price: *Achmetka*, for example costed 5 kopecks, see Šipulinskij (1914). The general price increase from 1914 to 1915 is likely due to inflation. In the absence of more precise data, it seems reasonable to assume that the average price of other publications (of the same type, and with the same marketing target) is roughly the same. See the back cover of Kurmojarov 1915. In this regard, see also (Petrov 1914; Šuchmin 1914; Šuchmin 1915).

10 For further reference, see Forzoni (1991, pp. 204–5).

11 As is the case of V.V. Mužel', mentioned in Simonova (2013, p. 759).

12 This is the case of Kurmojarov (1915).

13 "Some of the titles were original works, written directly for the series, others were book versions of serials or collections of short stories that had appeared elsewhere. Some were collections of three or four novelettes from a nickel library or weekly designed to look like a brand-new novel" (Randolph Cox 2000). See also Denning (1987, pp. 10–13).

14 If not otherwise stated, I am responsible for the adaptation of pre-1917 Russian orthography to current norms, as well as for the translations from Russian to English.

15 As in the following passage: "Это отношение напоминало предания Севастополя, когда солдаты называли своего начальника отцом, а генералы солдат своими 'благодетелями'" [This relationship recalled the tales of Sevastopol, when the soldiers called their superior their father, and the generals called their soldiers their 'benefactors'], (Šipulinskij 1914, p. 4).

16 Useful insights can be found in Brooks (1985, pp. 166–80).

17 See the entry 'War Stories' in Randolph Cox (2000).

18 For a detailed list of this trend of dime collections, see the entries 'American Revolutionary War Stories' and 'Civil War Stories' in Randolph Cox (2000).

19 A significant example can be found in Wild West Weekly *Wild West's Show; Or Caught in the European War* (dated 4th December 1914). Despite the title of Chapter X, "Caught in the European War", there is no depiction of war in the narrative.

20 Mužel's (1915) anthology *S železom v rukach, s krestom v serdce* (Iron in Our Hands and A Cross in Our Hearts) collects many depictions of different war episodes, sometimes even accompanied by date and pictures. It is worth mentioning that this collection of short accounts, intended for the newspaper, is presented in a style that is heavily contaminated by narrative devices. See Mužel' (1915). See also Nikolaev and Egorov (1989, vol. IV, p. 148). Skitalec's thoughts on the war are collected in a brief preamble preceding the short stories. See *Vojna!* [War!] in Skitalec (1916, pp. 1–9). For further references on these authors, see Nikolaev and Egorov (1989, vol. IV, p. 148) and Nikolaev and Egorov (1989, vol. V, pp. 634–35).

21 For further references on this author, see Nikolaev and Egorov (1989, vol. IV, pp. 426–7).

22 In relation to the heroes' names of the American dime novels, Randolph Cox states that many of them "contained the adjectives 'Old' or 'Young'; Old suggested veneration, respect, even familiarity; Young indicated someone already heroic at the start of his career", Randolph Cox (2000).

23 Here, I consider *Djužina nemcev* close to American Frontier and War dime novels. See Randolph Cox (2000).

24 The very title, *Djužina nemcev na odnom kozackom štyke* (A Dozen Germans on a Single Cossack Pike), bombastic as it sounds, is in line with the titles one can read on many American dime novels: "easy to read on a book cover, easy to remember afterwards" (Randolph Cox 2000). The illustration on the cover was probably arranged with a similar purpose: the vivid illustration of the main episode of the story must have impressed in the readers' minds. Consider the cover of another dime stories collection published in the same year, *Zarnicy vojny* (Thunderbolts of War) by Evgenija Russat, in which the typeface of the title meshes with

an illustration depicting a lightning bolt. See Russat (1915). See also the cover of *Vojna i velikij gerojskij podvig Maksima Kaševarova*, portraying a maimed soldier laying in front of an operating machine gun (see Šuchmin 1914).

[25] "If war makes heroes, it also creates miracles. And I want to talk about one such miracles. I will describe the hero of my story. His passport said he was a Cossack from the Don region, [. . .] Semen Semenovič Jachontov. [. . .] Jachontov's prowess distinguished him not only in his farmstead, but also in the nearest stanitsas".

[26] "Semen in combat positions distinguished not only day by day, but hour after hour. [. . .] Everyone was amazed at his courage and agility. Where millions of bullets flew, where shrapnel exploded every second, Semen was there, slipping away completely unharmed. All Semen's comrades loved to go with him on various reconnaissance missions, believing in his skilful deeds and reckless strength. One day, Semen and his comrades rides across the German steppe, and tells them the best way to take German prisoners. [. . .] The Cossacks listen to him carefully [. . .]".

[27] "Let's spread out and see where this evil force is hiding out".

[28] "Semen rushed to the hills, and there were twelve Germans sitting in the trenches. Semen grabbed his pike and struck the Germans. [. . .] They shoot at Semen, but the bullets missed him. [. . .] The Germans did not see that coming: they would surrender, or flee! Not twenty minutes into the fight, and it is already over. . . [. . .] The brave Cossack got off his horse, dragged all the corpses to one place, piled them up and stuck his victorious spear near them".

[29] "And looking at the corpses of the enemies, he felt in each of them a person close to himself. And then many things were revelated to his soul, and gloomy, heavy thoughts rushed into his mind and even brought tears to his eyes".

[30] This is evident from one of the main character's remarks: "Не место рассуждать воину о вашей горькой участи. Сами вы затеяли войну, сами и кушайте ее яблочки" (Šuchmin 1915, p. 14) ("It is inappropriate for a warrior to argue about your bitter fate. You were the ones who started the war, and now you reap what you sowed").

[31] "And one of his comrades tied a piece of paper to Semen's spear, stuck near the dead Germans. There he wrote: 'This is the glorious deed of the Don Cossack Semen Semenovič Jachontov'".

[32] "Lying here in this clean hospital bed—began the wounded non-commissioned officer who had recently been brought to Moscow—I can't stop thinking about them, about my soldiers, and I am ashamed to confess, but I am sure that meeting my family, [. . .] will not make me forget about my platoon. I am ready to comply in the strictest way with all the doctor's orders just to be with them again as soon as possible. When I first saw them, I was curious about these people, with whom I would live and perhaps die together, and whose fate would be largely in my hands".

[33] "Даже мне он часто подавал советы, которыми мне невольно приходилось следовать, признавая их справедливыми, и за которые я ему был очень благодарен" (He often gave advice even to me, which I involuntarily had to follow, recognizing it to be fair, and for which I was very grateful), (Šipulinskij 1914, p. 5)

[34] The characterization of the characters' ethnic backgrounds rendered through the reproduction of their nonstandard accent, inflection, or pronunciation is also found in American dime literature. See the way the mispronounced English of some characters of Chinese or French origin is reproduced in Wild West Weekly *Wild West's Show; Or Caught in the European War* (dated 4th December 1914).

[35] "Soon my platoon and I had to move to the battle line. At that time there was a cracking sound somewhere near me, something hit my leg with force, and I lost consciousness. [. . .] When I came back to my senses, I saw that I was lying far behind our troops, and I could only see their rear two versts ahead, as they were pressing on the enemy under incessant fire of Austrian artillery.".

[36] "I looked back and saw Achmetka's head looming almost beside me out of the ravine. He had a rifle in his hands. I called out to him, and he crawled toward me. He appeared to have a piece of meat torn out of his leg by a shell fragment and was also unconscious. [. . .] There were no more wounded around us. There were only the dead. Having had a little war council, we admitted that neither he nor I could go any further. But it was ridiculous to stay on the field. So, we decided to gather all our strength to sneak into the village from which the Austrians shot by Achmetka had just escaped.".

[37] See Šipulinskij (1914, p. 13). The emphasis on the Pan Slavic koine is in line with the overall cultural discourse of the time. See Cortesi (2021).

[38] See Randolph Cox (2000) for further reference on the typical names of American dime novel heroes.

[39] Given the myth of Moscow—Third Rome, this reference could be interpreted as a sort of symbolic retribution against the Germans.

[40] "Cornet Orlovsky plunged into the crowd of enemies like an eagle and began to strike lethal blows to the right and to the left. What a way to cut down the Germans! First, he hacked to death the officer who had the banner. But the banner immediately passed into the hands of another German soldier, who was surrounded by a solid wall of Germans. And at that fatal moment Russian dragoons on their impetuous horses rushed into the forest and rammed into the crowd of Germans. . . And a furious slaughter began!".

[41] "He was in a terrible hurry, that he almost forgot something very important. He came back from the doorstep and put a note on his table, which he had prepared in advance: "My dear sister, I am going away to look for Uncle Kolja. This is better than a simple reconnoitre mission, because it's a feat, too, and you'll be pleased if I find him. I'm sorry I didn't look at the Christmas tree. Don't be angry and don't worry, I'll find him".

[42] "Arinuška never stopped dreaming of a romantic encounter with an officer, a real war hero performing feats, he must have been an officer, and only an officer; she had long ago ceased to consider as men all the other men below the officer or non-commissioned officer grades and was completely uninterested in them".

[43] "[. . .] suddenly the air above her head was filled again with the same disgusting yellow screeching, the earth sank from under her feet, the sky immediately darkened, and some terrible, incomprehensible force gently pulled Arinuška into the silent, black, and boundless darkness".

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