

**Smithsonian Institution Archives. RU 290, Box 46, Photographs by Robert
Capa, Exhibition Catalog.**

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Robert CAPA

WAR

Photographs

What I have to say about Capa's work is strictly from the point of view of a layman, and the specialists must bear with me. It does seem to me that Capa has proved beyond all doubt that the camera need not be a cold mechanical device. Like the pen, it is as good as the man who uses it. It can be the extension of mind and heart.

Capa's pictures were made in his brain — the camera only completed them. You can no more mistake his work than you can the canvas of a fine painter. Capa knew what to look for and what to do with it when he found it. He knew, for example, that you cannot photograph war because it is largely an emotion. But he did photograph that emotion by shooting beside it. He could show the horror of a whole people in the face of a child. His camera caught and held emotion.

Capa's work is itself the picture of a great heart and an overwhelming compassion. No one can take his place. No one can take the place of any fine artist, but we are fortunate to have in his pictures the quality of the man.

We have his pictures, a true and vital record of our time — ugly and beautiful, set down by the mind of an artist.

John Steinbeck

Entire exhibition copyright © Estate of Robert Capa deceased, 1960



This is the first retrospective showing of the late Robert Capa's war photographs. There are approximately 150 pictures by Capa in this exhibit, many of them never seen before in magazines or in Capa's own books. Capa photographed five wars in 18 years and earned the recognition of his colleagues as the best combat photographer in the world.

Capa hated war. He had lived under the tyranny of Horthy in Hungary, and had known intimately the oppression that breeds war. He went to war for the first time in Spain in 1936. His pictures show the deadly image of war — the destruction of men — their bereaved families — the humiliation of surrender — the joys of liberation.

Robert Capa lived 41 years. A gay, witty, lighthearted man on the surface, he was intensely serious within, searching always for the truth. He found his own truth in war — understanding and loathing it, but staying close to the front lines. "If your pictures aren't good," he said, "you aren't close enough."

Capa died at war, killed by a land mine in 1954 at Thai Binh, North Vietnam, while taking pictures of French combat troops. The French awarded him a posthumous Croix de Guerre with the palm, order of the Army, one of France's highest honors. "He fell as a soldier among soldiers," said the French commanding general. "He deserves a soldier's honors."



Capa left a legacy of human valor — his own, as well as that of others — preserved forever in these pictures.

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Seeds of War

In the early thirties, when Robert Capa first took up his camera to record the world around him, the tragic shadows cast by the first war were merging with the foreboding shadows of the next. Although Capa himself may not have been aware of it, the conflicts and tensions of Europe in the thirties formed the pattern of his future as a photographer and journalist. Capa's love of people, his quick understanding and sympathy for the suffering of the individual, in sum, his humanity, made it impossible for him to turn his back on the contemporary political events which were affecting the lives of men and women everywhere. Capa's camera recorded the surges of political emotions, the emergence of unalterably opposed political faiths, the hysteria of appeal and counter-appeal. In a Copenhagen cellar, the deposed Trotsky's dogma of the left, in Belgium the hysteria of Fascism, in France the doomed hopes of the Popular Front, none escaped Capa's camera. In the center of the conflict stood Capa's real protagonist: the little man whose future was at stake in a world he could not change.



Spain

In 1936, Capa went to report on the war in Spain. From then on, Capa's own special gifts as a photographer and the course of world events forced him irrevocably into the role of a photographer of wars. In Spain he took his classic picture of man and war: the Spanish soldier at the instant of death. Here he recorded for the first time the scenes of horror and grimness that he was later to see repeated again and again; the wounded and the dying, helpless victims of air-raids, the despair of bereaved families, the desolation of children in war, the compassion of man to man and the few moments of personal happiness that men and women grasp at in the midst of tragedy.

The defeated Loyalist Army of Spain crosses the border into France led by a French policeman.



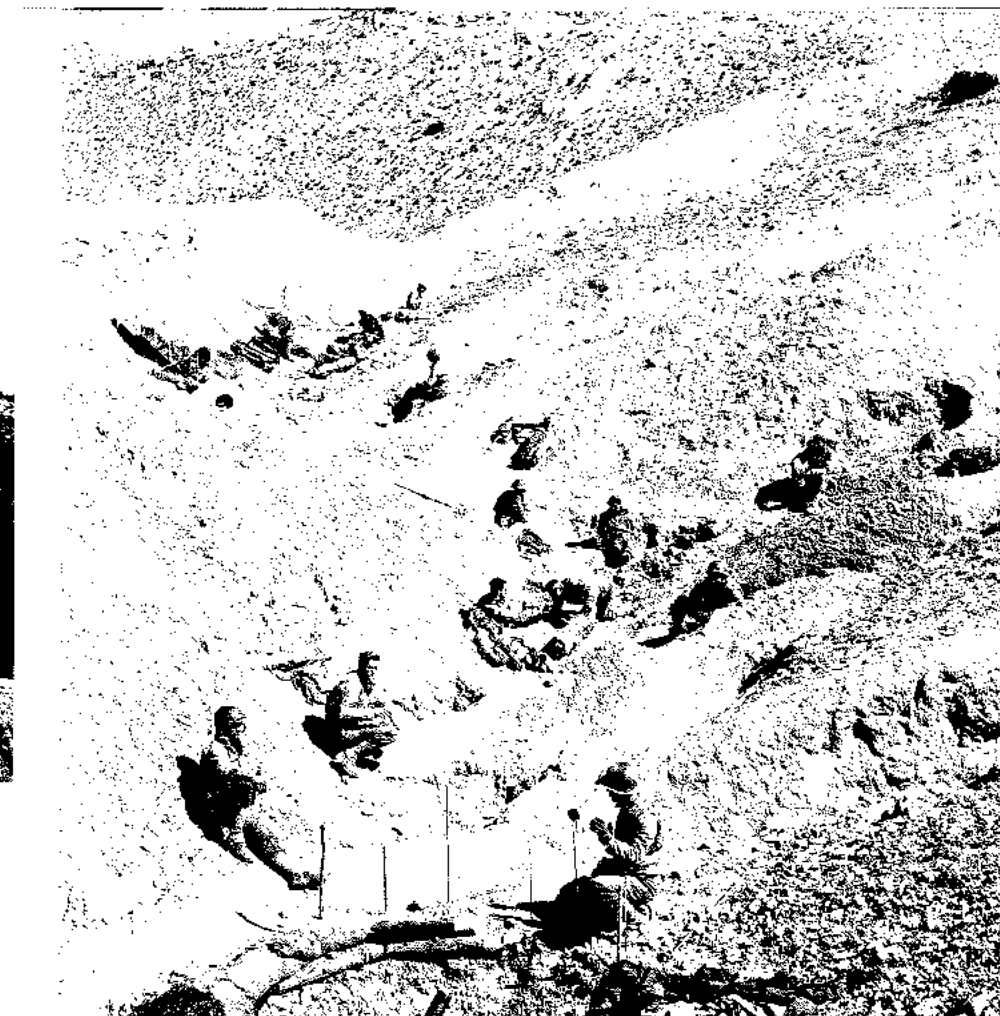
China

In January 1938, Capa left Europe for the first time. He went on assignment to record a war on the other side of the world. In the fighting between the Chinese and the Japanese invaders of their country, he found mirrored the scenes he had left behind him in Spain. The air-raids in Shanghai, the burning remnants of Hankow, the grieving woman beside the ruins, brought home to Capa the theme that his camera expressed at all times: the universal face of war.



North Africa

In North Africa, Capa's camera accompanied the American troops on the opening assault of the European theater. Here he photographed the G.I. under battle conditions for the first time. He flew on missions with the 301st Bombardiers during the day and played poker with the pilots at night. The 1st Division fought for three weeks on the jebels of El Guetar and "every day" Capa wrote later, "I took the same pictures of dust, smoke, and death. This war was like an aging actress; more and more dangerous, and less and less photogenic."



Italy

When the 82nd Airborne Division was flown into Sicily to parachute down as a spearhead of the main seaborne landing, Capa flew with them. Flying low over the Mediterranean, in a rocky plane, eighteen men sat silently with eyes closed waiting the signal to jump. In the dark interior, Capa took flash pictures. After the jump, Capa flew back in an empty plane, developed his pictures in an emergency dark room and sent them out by radio. They were the first pictures the world saw of the first Americans to land in Sicily. Capa returned to Sicily and photographed the Sicilian campaign for three weeks; the German soldier in defeat, the Italians greeting the victorious American Army, the ruins of towns and villages. Capa described his pictures as "simple pictures, showing how dreary and unspectacular fighting actually is. Most don't mean anything the day after they are published. But the soldier who looks at the shots of Troina, ten years later in his home in Ohio, will be able to say 'that's how it was'".



Naples

The women of Naples are weeping for their sons. Outside a church, they watch and mourn as the bodies of their children are carried down the steps in crudely built coffins, too short even for the half-grown bodies of boys who died fighting like men. Few of Capa's pictures are more intensely personal and none express more eloquently the wasteful toll of war.



England

Throughout the war, England was Capa's home base. He had a special respect and understanding for the tough East End Londoners, caught in the slums, making the best of wartime dangers and discomforts. Capa enjoyed them; their humor, their touching kindnesses to each other and their firm faith in their country. Here, too, he took pictures of the men who flew over Germany almost daily and between raids returned to the monotony and loneliness of barrack life in a foreign country. Capa's photographs show the tensions of wartime flying, the desperate attempts at gaiety, the few moments of relaxation that came so seldom and ended so soon.



Londoners take refuge and a cup of tea in an air raid shelter during the Blitz.



The Invasion

"The flat bottom of our barge hit the earth of France. The boatswain lowered the steel-covered barge front and there, between the grotesque designs of steel obstacles sticking out of the water, was a thin line of land covered with smoke — our Europe, the "Easy Red" beach . . . The water was cold, and the beach still more than a hundred yards away. The bullets tore holes in the water around me, and I made for the nearest steel obstacle . . . It was still very early and very gray for good pictures but the gray water and the gray sky made the little men, dodging under the surrealistic designs of Hitler's anti-invasion brain-trust, very effective.

Laurent-sur-Mer must have been at one time a drab, cheap resort for vacationing French school teachers. Now, on June 6th, 1944, it was the ugliest beach in the whole world. Exhausted from the water and the fear, we lay flat on a small strip of wet sand between the sea and the barbed wire. (The slant of the beach gave us some protection, so long as we lay flat, from the machine-gun and rifle bullets, but the tide pushed us against the barbed wire, where the guns were enjoying open season.) I crawled on my stomach over to my friend Larry, the Irish padre of the regiment, who could swear better than any amateur. He growled at me: "You damn half-Frenchy! If you didn't like it here, why the hell did you come back?" Thus comforted by religion, I took out my second Contax camera and began to shoot without raising my head."

from *Slightly Out Of Focus* by Robert Capa



France

As the Allied armies fought their way across France from the Normandy beaches to Paris, Capa was with them. For him and many others, this campaign was at once tragic and gay. Death was still everywhere, in ditches beside dusty, summer roads, in blackened, burned-out tanks, behind corners in village ruins. The ugly image of war was the inescapable background to the joy of liberation that the Allies brought with them. The French people were tasting their first freedom and the troops their first French champagne in five years. As the armies neared Paris, excitement increased.

"The road to Paris was open," Capa wrote, "and every Parisian was out in the street to touch the first tank, to kiss the first man, to sing and cry. Never were there so many who were so happy so early in the morning . . . Girls in light printed dresses climbed on our tank and ersatz lipstick soon covered our faces. Around the Chamber of Deputies we had to fight, and some of the lipstick got washed off with blood, but late in the evening, Paris was free."



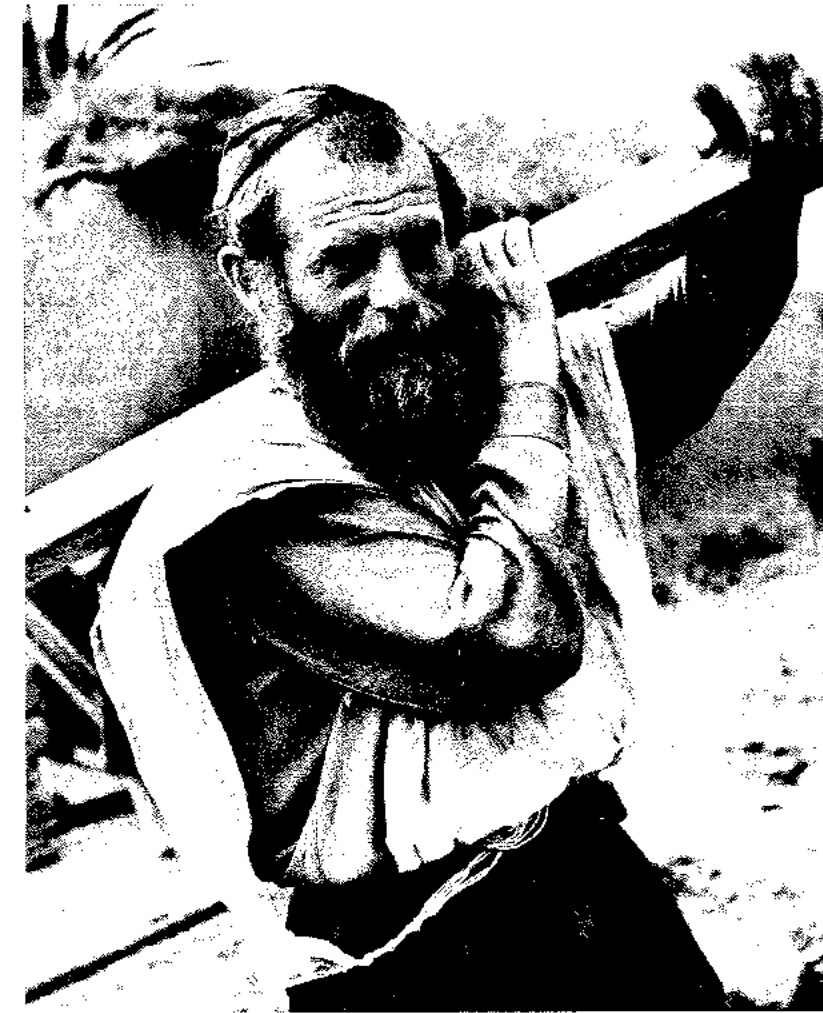
Germany

The last, unreal days of the war inspired Capa to produce some of his most moving pictures. The soldier killed in a parachute jump, the last rites administered on a battlefield, the compassionate medic with the wounded, Capa's camera has left us a record of them all. He was with the troops when they broke through the Bastogne encirclement. He participated in the last invasion of the war, the jump over the Rhine of the 17th Airborne Division. When the fighting was over Capa found photographs in Berlin that spoke of another aspect of war; defeat with its grim poverty, hopelessness of returning soldiers and occupation. For four years, from the blitz of London to the victory over Germany, Capa had recorded the image of war. Now he could pack up his cameras and go home, hoping to become and remain, as he said, "an unemployed war photographer."



Israel

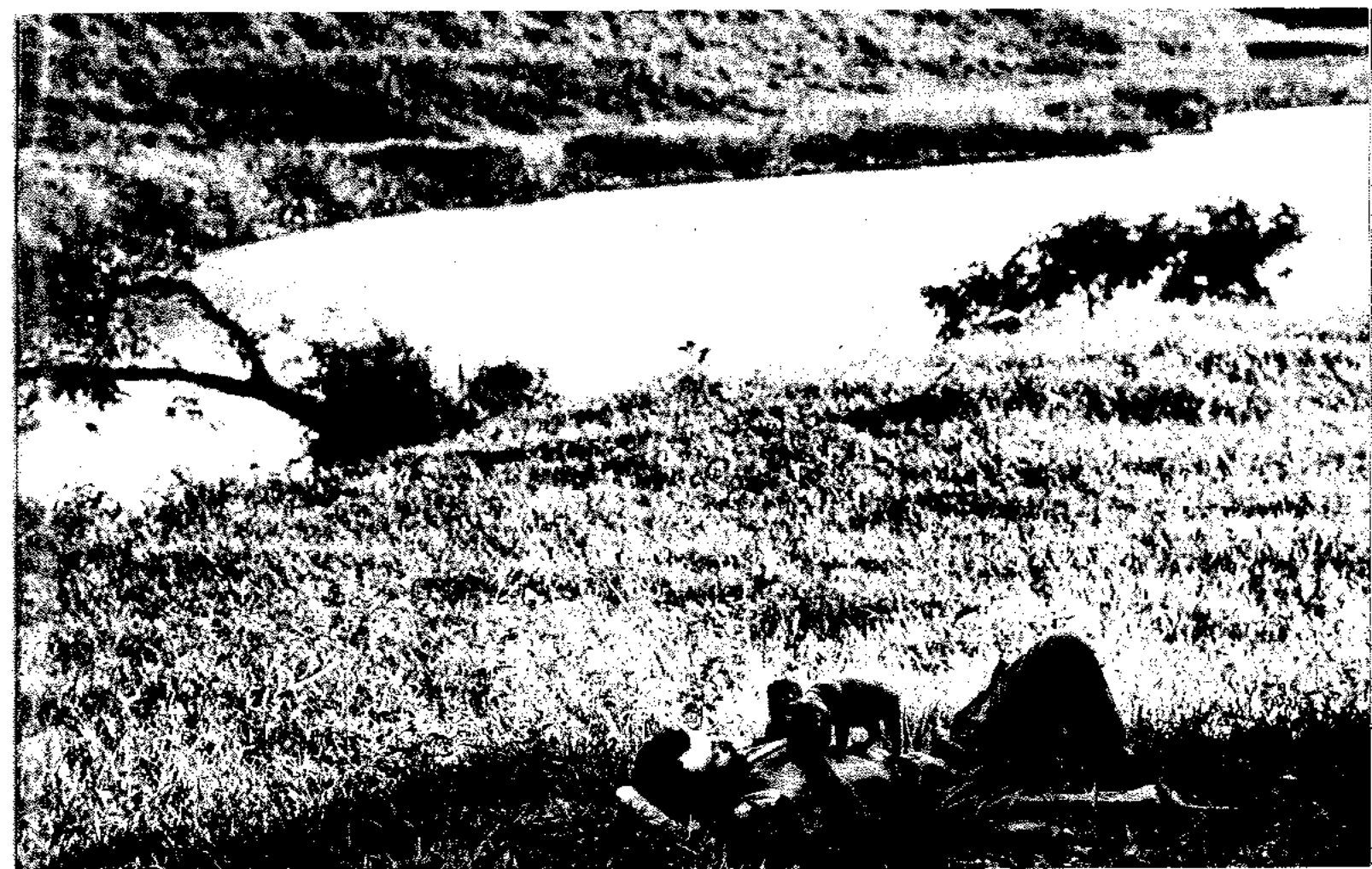
In the late 1940's and again in 1950, Robert Capa went to Israel. He did not go there to photograph war but to find peace. He found the promise of peace in the determination of the youth of Israel to make their ancient land a home and in the hope of the immigrants for a new life. But the peace was tenuous and precarious, the existence of Israel dependent on a hastily-trained fighting force, whose greatest strength lay in its dedication. Once again, Capa was an employed war photographer, taking pictures of dust and ruins, of soldiers marching to their death, of the weeping at the grave for those lost in battle. But despite fighting and death, destruction and bereavement, the Israel that Capa found and photographed speaks of hope and peace for a new democracy.



Indo-China

On May 24th, 1954 Robert Capa was killed photographing the war in Indo-China. He was riding to the front with two other American correspondents and a Vietnamese driver, part of a French column that was pushing its way into Thai Binh. He had left his companions in the jeep with the casual words: "I'm going up the road, look for me when you drive up." A few minutes later, he was found, cruelly mangled by a land mine.

Capa's last pictures show an expanse of rice fields and the small, human figures moving through them. For eighteen years and throughout five wars, he had photographed the one person that always caught and held his interest and aroused his deepest emotions: the individual, so brave and so vulnerable.





Madrid 27/5/54

Capa:
He was a good friend and a
great and very brave photographer.
It is bad luck for everybody that
the percentages caught up with him.
It is especially bad for Capa.
He was so much alive that it is a ^{hard} ~~long~~
~~hard~~ day to think of him as dead.
Ernest Hemingway.

- DECORATIONS:** Citation for Medal of Freedom
Croix de Guerre with Palm
- AWARDS:** George Polk Memorial Award, 1954: *"For display of courage, integrity and enterprise above and beyond the call of duty."*
- Bob Capa Award —
LIFE Magazine and
Overseas Press Club: *"For superlative photography requiring exceptional courage and enterprise abroad."*
- Robert Capa Award —
American Society of
Magazine Photographers: *"Most famous war photographer of his generation."*
- "who died as a photographer in the tradition which he invented, for which there is no other word but his name."*
- Robert Capa and David Seymour Scholarship Award in Israel.
- BOOKS:** DEATH IN THE MAKING: Covici Friede, 1937
- THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO ROAD: Random House, 1943
- SLIGHTLY OUT OF FOCUS: Henry Holt, 1947
- THE RUSSIAN JOURNAL: with John Steinbeck,
Viking Press, 1948
- REPORT ON ISRAEL: with Irwin Shaw, 1950
- EXHIBITS:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Robert Capa was born in Budapest in 1913. At the age of eighteen he left Hungary for Berlin, where he began his photographic career as a dark-room assistant, while attending the university. When National Socialism came to power, he moved from Berlin to Paris. Poor and unknown, his early years in Paris were a struggle for recognition, as he took pictures of the ominous events of the thirties. In 1936, he went to Spain to photograph the Civil War. He remained in Spain for one year, his pictures of the war bringing him his first fame as a photo-journalist. The following year, he travelled to China, where he reported on the Japanese invasion. In 1939, he returned to Europe and later that year made his first visit to the United States. In 1941, he left for England. For the next four years, he photographed the war in the European theater, as a correspondent for LIFE and other magazines.

In 1947, together with Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour and George Rodger, old friends from the thirties, he founded Magnum Photos, an international co-operative photographic agency that has since grown to include twenty photographers of eight nationalities, working throughout the world. Magnum was founded to record and interpret the world of today through the medium of photo-journalism, under working conditions that would allow maximum freedom to the individual photographer. From 1947 to 1954, Capa's energies and talents were largely given over to fostering and strengthening Magnum. Still, he found time for his own photographic development. Although at the end of World War II, he had declared publicly that he wished to remain an "unemployed war photographer", he twice found himself breaking this resolve. The first time was in 1948, when he went to Israel to record the struggles of a new nation. And again in 1954, when he went on assignment to the Indo-China war, to fill in for someone else. There, he was killed by a land-mine on May 25th, 1954. He is survived by his mother and his brother.

A book and movie based on the life and work of Robert Capa are in preparation.

EXHIBITION LISTING

Seeds of War

3 panels — 11 photographs

Spain

8 panels — 18 photographs

China

6 panels — 12 photographs

North Africa

5 panels — 8 photographs

Italy

8 panels — 16 photographs

Naples

2 panels — 5 photographs

England

5 panels — 13 photographs

Invasion

3 panels — 11 photographs

France

6 panels — 11 photographs

Germany

10 panels — 20 photographs

Israel

10 panels — 21 photographs

Indo-China

6 panels — 13 photographs

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