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SEARCHING FOR ALLIES: BALTIC REPUBLICS IN “KURIER BIAŁOSTOCKI”

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present Poland’s attitude towards the Baltic republics in the local newspaper between March and September 1939. The article shows how a Polish local newspaper has been reporting on the Baltic republics during the last few months of peace.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The article is based on qualitative research, using mainly articles from “Kurier Białostocki” – a daily newspaper published from March 1 to August 31, 1939, in Białystok, the capital of the Białystok Province in the Second Polish Republic. A total of 181 issues of the newspaper (incorrectly numbered up to 239) were reviewed, searching for articles and references to the Baltic states. The analysis of individual articles and references will be presented in chronological and thematic order.
- ▶ *Score/results* – The basic questions contained in the text concern whether the local newspaper wrote a lot about the Baltic states. What topics did the articles cover? Were allies sought in these countries in the face of the threat of war? The form and content of these references, as well as when and how they were written, will also be important.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The study’s originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from border press studies and history of international relations. Nearly half of the “Kurier’s” content was devoted to the current international events. In addition, it covered local, sports, and educational issues. During the period in question, a total of 54 pieces of information about the Baltic states were published. Most of them concerned Lithuania. Far fewer texts concerned Estonia, and especially Latvia. These smaller countries are presented from the perspective of the official policy of the Polish authorities.

| **Keywords:** international relations, Baltic republics, Białystok, press, “Kurier Białostocki”

1. Introduction

Kurier Białostocki was a daily newspaper published in Białystok from March to September 1939. At that time, Białystok was the capital of the Białystok Province in the pre-war Second Polish Republic. The publication of Kurier was suspended with the outbreak of World War II. The main criterion for choosing this particular newspaper (among the four published during the period in question) was its completeness [Bezzubik, 2011; Brzezińska-Stec, 2006; Dobroński, 1988]. The other newspapers are only available in fragments today¹. The aim of this paper is to present the attitude of the local newspaper towards the young independent states, in particular in Lithuania, which was not recognised by Poland until 1938. The basic questions contained in the text concern whether the local newspaper wrote a lot about the Baltic states? What topics did the articles cover? Were allies sought in these countries in the face of the threat of war? The form and content of these references, as well as when and how they were written, will also be important. The analysis of individual articles and references will be presented in a chronological and thematic manner.

Kurier Białostocki was published daily (including Sundays) without interruption from March 1, 1939, to August 31 of that year. A total of 181 issues were published (incorrectly numbered up to 239)². The newspaper was edited by Mikołaj Zdanowicz, who was associated with the ruling camp in Poland at the time. The exact circulation remains unknown, but it fluctuated around 1 000 copies. It consisted of 8 pages (Sunday editions consisted of 12 pages). Nearly half of the Kurier's columns were devoted to the current international events. In addition, it included sections on local events, sports, education, as well as columns, excerpts from novels, and picture stories.

2. The Baltic republics in Kurier Białostocki from March 1 to August 31, 1939

The first mention of the Baltic states in Kurier Białostocki appeared on March 22. In a short article accompanied by a photograph, the newspaper informed the

¹ It was one of four newspapers published in Białystok until the end of August 1939. The others were Dziennik Białostocki, published for nearly 20 years, Gazeta Białostocka, Dzień Dobry, and the Jewish newspaper Unser Leb'n. Bialystoker Tegleche Cajtung.

² All issues of Kurier Białostocki [later: KB] are available, among others, in the Podlasie Digital Library.

readers about the visit to Warsaw by the Estonian Foreign Minister Karl Selter [*Min. Selter opuścił Warszawę*, 1939, KB, 22: 2].

More extensive articles about Lithuania appeared in the newspaper on March 23, in connection with the Germany's annexation of Klaipėda. This time, the issue began with a clearly distinguished headline: "Lithuania has surrendered the Klaipėda region to the Reich." Under this collective title, numerous notes were published concerning the events of March 21 and 22: German demands on Lithuania to hand over the Klaipėda region to Berlin, the actions of the Lithuanian government and its acceptance of the ultimatum, and the planned visit of the Lithuanian side to Germany to determine the details of the transfer of the disputed area [*Litwa oddała kraj kłajpedzki Rzeszy*, 1939, KB, 23: 1]. It is worth noting that *Kurier* did not report, for example, the visit of Lithuanian MP and envoy E. Tarauskas to Warsaw on March 21 in connection with the German ultimatum on Klaipėda, nor did it report on other diplomatic and military contacts that took place during the period in question [Łossowski, 2007: 175–178].

The first and only article concerning the occupation of Klaipėda was published on March 26. It was essentially a report on the Polish Senate's deliberations, during which the friendship between Poland and Lithuania, which was "going through difficult times," was emphasised. Such statements were accompanied by a "prolonged applause" [*Prace prawodawcze Senatu*, 1939, KB, 26: 1]. As can be seen, Lithuania, which lost the Klaipėda region to Germany, was shown friendship and support in the pages of *Kurier*. This is evidenced by the title given to the description of the proceedings – "Demonstration of friendly neighbourly feelings towards Lithuania." It should be noted, however, that in this case no mention was made of Germany's responsibility for the situation.

It is worth elaborating on the positive perception of Lithuania by Poland. When discussing relations with Lithuania, it should be noted that for a long time, they did not exist at all. The main bone of contention was the issue of the Vilnius region, which was occupied by the Polish Army in 1920. The situation did not change until 1938. As the Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck wrote, "establishing relations with a neighbouring country in the international situation at that time was necessary in order to protect Polish interests." The pretext was the death of a Polish KOP soldier shot by Lithuanian border guards. The ultimatum issued by Warsaw ultimately led to the establishment of diplomatic relations, and relations with Poland's neighbour "entered a new creative path." [Beck, 1987: 139–141; Kornat, Wołos, 2020: 541–553].

According to a Lithuanian scientist, the Polish ultimatum was intended to humiliate the national pride of Lithuanians and deepened their distrust of Poland and Poles, but it did not result in the severance of diplomatic relations, only their establishment [Žulys, 2015: 169, 175].

The subject of Klaipėda was raised several times in the pages of Kurier Białostocki in March and April 1939. Short notes were devoted, among other things, to the heroic resistance of the unit led by Lieutenants Zemaitis and Bendorius (Bernot) [*"Zemajtis i Bernot wracajcie do Kowna!"*, 1939, KB, 27: 1; Łossowski, 1997: 355–356], the German plans to fortify the naval port, Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler's visit to the city, the resignation of Prime Minister Vladas Mironas' government, and the formation of a new cabinet led by General Jonas Černius [*Pierwszy dzień rządów swastyki w Kłajpedzie*, 1939, KB, 24: 1; *Kanclerz Hitler w Kłajpedzie*, 1939, KB, 25: 1; *Sejm litewski nie ratyfikował aneksji Kłajpedy*, 1939, KB, 26: 1; *Kłajpeda portem wojennym*, 1939, KB, 27: 1; *Rząd litewski podał się do dymisji*, 1939, KB, 28: 1; *Nowy rząd litewski gen. Czerniusa*, 1939, KB, 29: 1; *Sejm litewski ratyfikował układ z Niemcami*, 1939, KB, 32: 1; *Roboty fortyfikacyjne w Kłajpedzie*, 1939, KB, 32: 1]. These were mostly short, few-sentence mentions, but they were always placed on the front page of the newspaper, which testified to their importance.

The newspaper also reported on a radio address by General Stasys Raštikis, Commander-in-Chief of the Lithuanian army, concerning a collection for the armament fund. In his speech, the general emphasised that the positions of states depend on foreign policy, the internal situation, the moral state of the country, and the army. Kurier Białostocki also published several quotes from Raštikis' speech. For example: "Therefore, if we want to be free, we must defend ourselves," or "The fundraising campaign for the armament fund is not a demonstration against any of Lithuania's neighbors. The fundraising campaign is a decision that Lithuanians will not surrender without a fight..." [*Litwini nie poddadzą się bez walki*, 1939, KB, 29: 1]. After a few days, the Białystok daily newspaper highlighted the massive response of Lithuanian society to Raštikis' speech and noted an increase in membership of the riflemen's associations – szaulis [*I Litwa zbiera fundusze na uzbrojenie*, 1939, KB, 34: 1].

In April 1939, Kurier published three more articles on the Baltic states. The first, entitled "Lithuania is prepared to defend its independence," provided Polish readers with extensive information about the Lithuanian government's plans to strengthen the army and the country's defense system, the direction of foreign policy, and budget cuts following the loss of Klaipėda. The same issue also included

a separate reprint from the Lithuanian press (*Lietuvos Zinies*), which emphasised the positive reception of Lithuania by the Polish society: “A year ago, it was possible to hope that, after establishing relations with Poland, Lithuania would find a loyal partner in the Polish society for the preservation of its independence. These expectations were not disappointed. At a critical moment (the occupation of Klaipėda), the Polish society showed a great deal of understanding for Lithuania.” [*Litwa przygotowana jest do obrony niepodległości*, 1939, KB, 38: 1–2; *Polska nie zawiodła Litwy*, 1939, KB, 38: 2].

The next two articles described the visit of the Estonian Commander-in-Chief General Johan Laidoner to Poland. The visit took place on April 17–24. The first article reported on the general’s ceremonial farewell at the train station in Tallinn. It mentioned, among other things, that he was seen off by the highest state authorities (led by the prime minister) and military officials, as well as the entire Polish legation in Tallinn with their spouses (!). The report also included a list of his companions, among whom were his wife, Estonian officers, and the Polish military attaché [*Generał Laidoner odjechał do Polski*, 1939, KB, 47: 1].

The next article, entitled “The Estonian People Will Respond with Arms to Hostile Advances,” quoted an interview with General Laidoner, given to representatives of the press shortly before his return to Estonia. It is worth mentioning the most important points of this statement. After praising the state of the Polish Army, General Laidoner emphasised the development of the Polish arms industry, the scale of which came as a surprise to him. Commenting on his visit to the arms factories in Stalowa Wola and Rzeszów (Central Industrial District), Johan Laidoner stated: “What I saw represents a great achievement, which was accomplished in an extremely short time and with careful planning.” Later in the interview, the general drew attention to “the unchanging will of the leadership to pursue an independent Polish policy and the readiness to defend against any armed aggression.” He also pointed to numerous common interests, despite the fact that “Poland is a great power and Estonia is a small country.” On the other hand, he noted the lack of a military alliance between the two countries and made it clear that it was unnecessary, as “possible dangers confront us with common issues.” At the end of the article, the importance of the Estonian Commander-in-Chief’s visit was once again emphasised, pointing to his ceremonial farewell, among others, by Marshal E. Rydz-Śmigły. It was a new opportunity “to show friendship towards Estonia”, highlighted by the playing of the Estonian national anthem and General Laidoner’s shout in Polish, “Long live Poland!” [*Naród estoński odpowie z bronią w rękę na wroga zakusy*, 1939, KB, 54: 1].

In May 1939, *Kurier Białostocki* published a series of articles covering the visit to Poland of the commander-in-chief of the Lithuanian army, the Brigadier General Stasys Raštikis. As in the case of General Laidoner's previous visit, the invitation came from the Polish Marshal Rydz-Śmigły. The newspaper provided a detailed profile of the distinguished guest and described his service. During his several-day visit (May 9–11), General Raštikis met with three of the most important representatives of the Polish authorities: the Foreign Minister Józef Beck, President Ignacy Mościcki, and the Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły. On the first day of the visit (May 9), the newspaper described Raštikis' stay in detail. The visit began with a ceremonial welcome at the Warsaw railway station by the Polish Marshal, surrounded by an honour guard of the Polish Army, with the national anthems of both countries being played. Before noon, the guest met with Minister Beck, and in the afternoon he laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. General Raštikis then held further meetings with representatives of the Second Polish Republic, watched Polish infantry combat exercises in Rembertów, visited the State Aviation Works in Okęcie and, importantly, the armament facilities of the Central Industrial District. The *Kurier* also published positive opinions from the Lithuanian press about this visit. It was noted that although General Raštikis was a military man, he also acted on behalf of the Lithuanian people [*Naczelný wódz armii litewskiej przyjeżdża dziś do Warszawy*, 1939, KB, 68: 2; *Naczelný wódz Litwy złożył wizytę ministrowi Beckowi*, 1939, KB, 69: 1; *Gen. Rasztikis przyjęty został przez P. Prezydenta*, 1939, KB, 70: 1; *Litwa prowadzi politykę niezależności*, 1939, KB, 70: 1; *Litwa przeżyła z Polską niejedną wiek wspólnej doli i niedoli*, 1939, KB, 71: 2]. The Białystok newspaper also published a report reprinted from the Italian press [*Giornale d'Italia*] about the visit of the Lithuanian general, which ended with an announcement of the possible signing of a non-aggression pact between Poland and Lithuania [*Stosunki Polski z ZSRR i Litwą na drodze do dalszej normalizacji*, 1939, KB, 72: 2].

In May 1939, the capital city's daily newspaper devoted little space to the Baltic states. Latvia was mentioned for the first time in issue 74 of May 13. It reported on a joint meeting of the economic and cultural council and the country's highest authorities. Particular attention was paid to the most important points contained in the speech by the Latvia Foreign Minister Wilhelm Munters. These included: the decline of cooperation between nations, the lack of hope for outside help, reliance on own resources, and the need to sign a non-aggression pact with Germany [*Łotwa przygotowana do obrony*, 1939, KB, 74: 1].

Other May mentions of the Baltic states include: the development of Polish-Lithuanian relations, a football match between the LGSF team from Kaunas and the Białystok team, which ended with a score of 5:0 for the visitors, and a brief note on the Lithuanian reception of General Raštikis' visit to Warsaw [*Pomyślny rozwój stosunków polsko-litewskich*, 1939, KB, 76: 1; *Witamy miłych gości litewskich*, 1939, KB, 83: 5; *Zwycięstwo drużyny litewskiej*, 1939, KB, 84: 5; *Podróż gen. Rasztikisa do Warszawy faktem o historycznym znaczeniu*, 1939, KB, 86: 2].

In June 1939, eight issues of *Kurier Białostocki* published information about the Baltic states. It concerned: a visit by Lithuanian cooperative members; problems with the financial settlement of the May visit of Lithuanian footballers to Białystok; the awarding of an honorary doctorate to a Polish professor by the University of Kaunas; reprints of Lithuanian announcements related to a possible future war; celebrations related to the 20th anniversary of the Latvian Riflemen, including the presence of delegations from Poland, Estonia, Finland, and Lithuania; German propaganda postcards about Poland and Lithuania; and visits by Estonian journalists to Warsaw [*Goście z Litwy i Szwecji*, 1939, KB, 95: 2; *Echa meczu piłkarskiego z Litwinami*, 1939, KB, 102: 4; *Doktorat h. c.*, 1939, KB, 103: 2; *Litwa nie podda się*, 1939, KB, 108: 1; *20-lecie strzelców łotewskich*, 1939, KB, 109: 1; *Jak Zagłoba Szwedom Niderlandy*, 1939, KB, 116: 4; *Dziennikarze estońscy w Polsce*, 1939, KB, 117: 2].

On June 24, *Kurier Białostocki* published a lengthy interview with the Estonian Major General Ants Kurvits, commander of the Estonian Border Guard. Kurvits was in Poland on an official visit at the invitation of the Brigadier General Jan Kruszewski, the commander of the Polish Border Protection Corps (KOP). Before his departure, General Kurvits shared his reflections with Polish readers. He noted that his main goals were to familiarise himself with the organisation and working methods of the Polish border guard and to deepen the "traditionally good" relations between the two countries. In the rest of the interview, General Kurvits mainly praised the preparation and training of the Border Protection Corps, which he was able to observe personally [*Pochlebna opinia estońskiego generała o K.O.P.*, 1939, KB, 113: 2].

It should be noted that although in July and August there are as many as 17 references to the Baltic states in the newspaper, none of them concerns military issues. Instead, topics such as the issue of small border traffic between Poland and Lithuania, the visit of Polish writers to Kaunas, the stay of Lithuanian and Estonian writers and journalists in Poland, fraud committed by Germans against Lithuanian workers in the Third Reich, the visit of the Polish sailing ship "Dar

Pomorza" in Tallinn, the location of the Lithuanian population of Klaipėda and Lithuanian border issues, a train crash near Riga, and references to attempts by German propaganda to disrupt good relations between Poland and Lithuania [*Pisarze litewscy przyjadą do Polski*, 1939, KB, 127: 2; *Wycieczka dziennikarzy litewskich w Polsce*, 1939, KB, 128: 1; *Gra o Bałtyk*, 1939, KB, 129: 2; *Litwini przysięgają walczyć o dostęp do morza*, 1939, KB, 131: 1; *"Dar Pomorza" w Tallinie spotkał się z serdecznym przyjęciem*, 1939, KB, 198: 1; *Po Tyrolu – Kłajpeda*, 1939, KB, 199: 1; *Układ niemiecko-litewski*, 1939, KB, 200: 2; *Oszukani robotnicy litewscy wracają masowo do domu*, 1939 KB, 203: 1; *Ostre zarządzenie litewskie przeciw nielegalnemu przekraczaniu granicy*, 1939, KB, 204: 1; *Tendencyjne kłamstwa prasy niemieckiej*, 1939, KB, 205: 2; *Przymusowe gromadzenie zapasów żywności w Estonii*, 1939, KB, 207: 2; *Ostatni dzień pobytu wycieczki literatów polskich na Litwie*, 1939, KB, 211: 2; *Mały ruch graniczny w Grodzieńszczyźnie i Suwalczyźnie*, 1939, KB, 212: 5; *Rokowania niemiecko-litewskie o rozrachunki kłajpedzkie*, 1939, KB, 231: 2; *Prowokatorzy usiłują podważyć dobre stosunki Polski z Litwą*, 1939, KB, 234: 2].

Some space in *Kurier Białostocki* was also devoted to the Polish-Lithuanian sporting contacts. For example, there were detailed descriptions of the Lithuanian boxers' tour of Poland, and announcements of athletics competitions between Vilnius and Białystok, which ultimately did not take place [*Turnee bokserów litewskich*, 1939, KB, 216: 5; *Mecz lekkoatletyczny Wilno–Białystok odłożony*, 1939, KB, 216: 5]. It is worth mentioning here that in May 1939, matches played by the Lithuanian champions – the LGSF football team from Kaunas – were described in a similar way, including games against the Białystok team (5:0) and the Grodno team (2:4).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the goals of the Polish foreign policy towards the Baltic states. Józef Beck specified them in instructions given to MP Jerzy Kłopotowski in Riga: "we will help these countries as long as they are able to maintain the independence of their policies and do not become the subject of their neighbours' policies." [Kornat, Wołos, 2020: 553].

3. Conclusions

In summary, during the period in question, from March to the end of August 1939, a total of 54 reports on the Baltic states were published in 181 issues of *Kurier Białostocki*, mostly short, often based on sources provided by the Polish Telegraphic Agency (PAT). Most of them concerned Lithuania and focused on four main issues: the annexation of Klaipėda by the Third Reich, the formation of

a new government in Lithuania, the visit of the Lithuanian commander-in-chief to Warsaw, and mutual visits by representatives of Polish and Lithuanian culture and science. Among the texts concerning Latvia and Estonia, a short mention of the 20th anniversary of the Latvian Riflemen and longer interviews with high-ranking Estonian military officers during their visits to Poland are worth noting. In these interviews, particular attention was paid to praise emphasising the strength of the Polish army and arms industry. In total, only 6 of the 54 mentions or articles directly referred to Polish-Baltic military relations, but these were the longest texts concerning the Baltic states.

It is worth noting that *Kurier Białostocki* made virtually no mention of the Baltic states signing non-aggression pacts with the Third Reich³. It should also be noted that the Latvian generals did not visit Poland.

Although the Baltic states did not want to enter into military alliances with Poland, their behaviour towards their larger neighbour after the outbreak of war was commendable. For example, Lithuania refused the proposal to take Vilnius made by the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. In turn, the Estonian military authorities, led by General Laidoner, allowed the Polish submarine *Orzeł*, which had been interned in Tallinn, to leave. In addition, all the Baltic states accepted a number of Polish refugees. Without prior good relations, such action would probably not have been possible.

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Sejm litewski nie ratyfikował aneksji Kłajpedy, 26.03.1939, KB, No. 26, p. 1.

Prace prawodawcze Senatu. Demonstracja przyjaznych sąsiedzkich uczuć dla Litwy, 26.03.1939, KB, No. 26, p. 2.

³ Latvia and Estonia signed non-aggression pacts with the Third Reich on the same day, June 7, 1939.

- „Zemajtis i Bernot wracajcie do Kowna!”, 27.03.1939, KB, No. 27, p. 1.
- Kłajpeda portem wojennym, 27.03.1939, KB, No. 27, p. 1.
- Rząd litewski podał się do dymisji, 28.03.1939, KB, No. 28, p. 1.
- Nowy rząd litewski gen. Czerniusa, 29.03.1939, No. 29, p. 1.
- Sejm litewski ratyfikował układ z Niemcami, 1.04.1939, No. 32, p. 1.
- Roboty fortyfikacyjne w Kłajpedzie, 1.04.1939, No. 32, p. 1.
- Litwini nie poddają się bez walki. Gen. Raszkitis wzywa społeczeństwo do rozbudowy zbrojeń, 29.03.1939, KB, No. 29, p. 1.
- I Litwa zbiera fundusze na uzbrojenie, 3.04.1939, KB, No. 34, p. 1.
- Litwa przygotowana jest do obrony niepodległości, 7.04.1939, KB, No. 38 pp. 1–2.
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- Naród estoński odpowie z bronią w rękę na wrogie zakusy, 25.04.1939, KB, No. 54, p. 1.
- Naczelnny wódz armii litewskiej przyjeżdża dziś do Warszawy, 9.05.1939, KB, No. 68, p. 2.
- Naczelnny wódz Litwy złożył wizytę ministrowi Beckowi, 10.05.1939, KB, No. 69, p. 1.
- Gen. Raszkitis przyjęty został przez P. Prezydenta i Marszałka Śmigłego-Rydza, 11.05.1939, KB, No. 70, p. 1.
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- Litwa przeżyła z Polską niejedną wiek wspólnej doli i niedoli. Konferencja prasowa u naczelnego wodza armii litewskiej gen. Raszkitisa, 12.05.1939, KB, No. 71, p. 2.
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- Pomyślny rozwój stosunków polsko-litewskich, 17.05.1939, KB, No. 76, p. 1.
- Witamy miłych gości litewskich, 24.05.1939, KB, No. 83, p. 5.
- Zwycięstwo drużyny litewskiej, 25.05.1939, KB, No. 84, p. 5.
- Podróż gen. Raszkitisa do Warszawy faktem o historycznym znaczeniu, 27.05.1939, KB, No. 86, p. 2.
- Goście z Litwy i Szwecji, 6.06.1939, KB, No. 95, p. 2.
- Echa meczu piłkarskiego z Litwinami, 13.06.1939, KB, No. 102, p. 4.
- Doktorat h. c. uniwersytetu kowieńskiego dla prof. Ludwika Krzywickiego, 14.06.1939, KB, No. 103, p. 2.
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- Gra o Bałtyk, 10.07.1939, KB, No. 129, p. 2.
- Litwini przysięgają walczyć o dostęp do morza, 12.07.1939, KB, No. 131, p. 1.

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- Po Tyrolu – Kłajpeda. Plan wysiedlenia Litwinów, 22.07.1939, KB, No. 199, p. 1.
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- Przymusowe gromadzenie zapasów żywności w Estonii, 30.07.1939, KB, No. 207, p. 2.
- Ostatni dzień pobytu wycieczki literatów polskich na Litwie, 3.08.1939, KB, No. 211, p. 2.
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