



Péter Nádas

A headless revolution

1956 was the victory of republicanism over tyranny, but also the mortal defeat of democracy, the memory of which has been repressed as much in Hungary as anywhere else. Now the tradition of revolution is dead, writes Péter Nádas, only conformity and opportunism are left: the leading role belongs to opportunists and the court poets of conformism.

So, on that Tuesday afternoon, a single flow of humanity was moving down the avenues; they were coming on Váci Avenue, on Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Avenue, but on Marx Square many stopped in hesitation: which way now? The piled-up trams stood motionless where they had got stuck in their tracks, with the lights burning in the empty compartments. There were about eighty thousand people stranded around the edges of the square, on the banks of this vast intersection. They were singing, shouting demands, having visions and speechifying. A crowd, half a million strong, was already in front of the Parliament building. They demanded that the Russians go home, and clamoured for Imre Nagy to make a speech. It was slowly getting dark. They kept coming from Buda on Margit Bridge, along Balassi Bálint Street, coming on Falk Miksa Street and pouring out to the square. They stopped coming on Alkotmány Street, here the crowd solidified into a motionless mass, but they were still coming from the other side of the square, from Nádor Street and all along the embankment. By this time, traffic in the city had come to a virtual standstill. They demanded in unison the star to be turned off on top of the Parliament cupola, the entire square adopted the demand: "Turn off the star!" Returning from school, I too spent the afternoon on the street, I was now part of the crowd standing on the square. Not every demand was adopted by the square but this one was. The star had been installed on the top of the cupola only a few weeks before; they had done a really good job. The square was echoing the thundering rhythm of this cheerful demand but, it seemed, there was no one around to hear it: the Parliament building with its turrets and traceries loomed darkly, sombrely and silently in the background. Perhaps there was some light up in the cupola hall. Perhaps they did hear it up there and thought it better to yield to the people's will. Yet they turned off the public lighting of the square instead. A roar of indignation rose from the crowd and there was a fear that people would fall upon the building to tear it apart by their bare hands. Fires were started immediately; people set newspapers and pamphlets ablaze and held them up high. Like wildfire, the quickly dying lights spread in waves above the heads. The silence had a solemnity about it; the sheer beauty of the waves of fire enchanted everyone for a moment. It was probably at this point that I lost my sketching board and my T-square. Then, high above, the ruby light of the star went off; it was the downsized replica of the Kremlin's famous star in Moscow. The square was completely dark now. In the soft and warm evening, autumn had a certain pungent, foggy edge to it; one

could sense the river's metallic smell. The silence of a crowd always has a massive weight. It took some time before the square would dare believe that its demand had been heard, and then amongst triumphant, thunderous cheers the public lighting was turned on again.

Someone appeared on the left balcony. This, of course, couldn't be noticed from below but the news came that someone had come out to the balcony. He appeared to be talking but it was no use, he couldn't be heard. The crowd was screaming that nothing could be heard. Then the word came and spread that Imre Nagy was on his way. For that someone on the balcony said that Imre Nagy was on his way. And they proceeded to install a microphone on the balustrade of the balcony and they hung a few huge, funnel-shaped loudspeakers on the façade of the building. They kept rapping on the microphone, testing it by saying, one-two-three, this is a test, and the sound was echoed by the facades of the surrounding buildings. All this made things even more cheerful, and the square burst into a joyous laughter. But then it started to look like they would fuck around with this for an eternity, with this technical preparation; they were just playing for time. The crowd roared and clattered, losing patience, it gave voice to its discontent and restlessness, its body became lumpy as small groups started to form here and there while impatient orators rose to express their opinion. The city was taking in this new experience, this unknown quality of simultaneously blasting multiplicity. No one could predict what would emerge, which of the demands would take hold on the square, and what would come of it. Everything was happening at once.

A local event gained significance in the crowd. Or it didn't. Some ideas were picked up, others remained solitary cries. A truck, filled with people, careened out of Szalay Street to the square but it got stuck in front of the Kúria. Standing on the flatbed they demanded the crown prince, they wanted Otto to return to the throne, to restore the monarchy, the Habsburgs. Strangely, the crowd, stuck at the mouth of Alkotmány Street, gave way — let them go. They carried posters and a huge picture of Otto. Strangers appeared everywhere. For almost all of us here were strangers to each other, although this changed after a few minutes. First of all you got to know where people had come from; for some reason this was what everyone wanted to know, where you had come from. And you knew what people next to you had on their minds. They let you know. Nearly everyone talked, as a result of which even those who kept their silence stood revealed. The strangers reminded one of folk educators; they said nothing about themselves, but wanted to convince their new acquaintances that the Jews were to blame for this, that there were too many of them. A younger man and farther off another, and a third were all trying to convince me of this. Out with the Jews from power, this is what they would have proposed. Around me no one responded to this. Another came up not knowing that others had tried me before. I made no reply. Those around me looked through him and didn't answer either, pretending not to hear him.

Then, from the cheers arriving in waves from the main staircase, we could tell that Imre Nagy had arrived. The square roared, then fell silent wanting to hear how well it could hear itself, then roared again. Someone announced that he had arrived. From this point on, my recollections diverge from those of others. As he stepped out to the balcony (others remember him to have appeared in a window), clumsily they were trying to put some light on him, but he stumbled over something. It might have been due to a high doorstep or to his nervousness, for he had never addressed a crowd of this size, or he was unsuitable for this role by nature, but perhaps the balcony floor was simply too steep. Since then I always wanted to take a closer look at that balcony. As I

remember, during his speech two people, one on either side, were holding him in the doorway of the balcony. This is why he was so far away from the microphone, and this explains why it was so hard to understand him. According to other recollections, those two people were holding him in a window. But I stick to my own memories. All you could see in this awkward beam of light was that someone stepped forward, stumbled, his hat flew off, while he himself disappeared for a moment. Laughter arose above the square, for it was a ridiculous sight, but it wasn't the entire square that laughed, there were patches of laughter stifled immediately by a general sense of shame. In a revolution there are no great entrances. It doesn't matter that your arrival is awaited by a whole city, it doesn't matter that you are Imre Nagy, you are just like anybody else. Every emotion was a mass emotion on this gentle autumn evening, or rather, only the crowd could legitimate or suppress individual emotions. To this day I cannot understand how I was able to hold out from three in the afternoon till midnight without feeling hungry or thirsty or without having the urge to pee.

His first word was "comrades". This form of address didn't have a chance to echo; the crowd responded with an immediate outcry and whistling: "We are no comrades." People were not only thinking in unison and using the same words, but they were ready to blurt out their response immediately, at the same moment. Imre Nagy's Bolshevik upbringing was not to his advantage here, it was in vain for him to insist on this stupid comrade business, it just wouldn't do. There was a language of revolution inherited from the nineteenth century and this is what he should have used. "My young friends", or something similar was his next feeble attempt, but the square wanted nothing of this patronizing tone either. "My fellow citizens". This was rewarded by a triumphant cheer, even though the word got stuck halfway in his throat. There it was: he came out, we taught him, he learned and now this turn of events too could belong with the great victories. We just confirmed the traditional usage of bourgeois revolutions. The speech itself was barely audible through all the echoing and crackling, the approvals and protests, and through the joyous or hostile whistling. Standing on the square, one didn't have the feeling that the revolution had found its leader.

The first, you could say, benign and jovial phase of the revolution included massive desertion in the police and military corps, the opening up of weapon factory warehouses, the ritual pulling down and sawing up of Sándor Mikus's Stalin statue, the siege of the radio building in Bródy Sándor Street (I was still standing on the square when the news was approaching from the direction of Nádor Street, "they are shooting at the radio, they are shooting at the radio"), and also the first serious armed street fights. This phase ended with a bloodbath. It happened on Thursday. A good friend of mine was there, in front of the Hotel Astoria when the crowd occupying the pavement simply wouldn't budge. It held up a Russian tank column, forcing the commanding officer to stick his head out of his tank. "What do you want, why did you come here? Why don't you go home?" they shouted at him in Hungarian and in Russian. The officer shouted back that he had come to free the city of fascist bandits. It wasn't hard for them to convince him that there were no fascists and no bandits there. There were students, there were workers, there were bureaucrats, and there were scientists here. "Can't you hear that we are talking to you in Russian?" The officer defended himself desperately by saying that he had been duped then. Hearing this, the crowd started to celebrate the Russians, fastening Hungarian flags on the tanks, which the confused Russian soldiers, to show their peaceful intent, allowed them to do. At this moment, another Soviet tank column approached on Rákóczi street, and when the crowd noticed that these

too were decked out with Hungarian flags, a great cheer went up, "The revolution is won! Let's go to the Parliament!" On that Thursday the news that the Russians were with us, that they crossed over, did in fact spread like wildfire. To this day, I can recite the chronology of those thirteen days. Even today I cannot quite contain my romantic frenzy felt over the sensation that everybody is with us, the whole world is with us. You couldn't be everywhere at the same time, but all the news, the stories, and the legends of glory reached you. Upon hearing them, you experienced them vicariously, relying on your reserves of empathy, and you embellished them; hence the great number of variations. The revolution recognizes a first person plural that, instead of excluding the first person singular, accommodates and even absorbs the latter with all of its characteristics. My friend went over to the Parliament where he was greeted by the sight of more Russian tanks; people climbed on top of them to celebrate themselves and the soldiers. It was at this point that the volleys thundered. They were shooting into the crowd with machine guns from the top of the surrounding buildings. In those days the city believed that members of the hated State Security did this, but historians think that the shooting from above was ordered by General Szerov. People below were running to take cover under the arcades, only the wounded and the dead remained on the immense square.

Next day, on Friday in the early afternoon hours, secretary of state Dulles [John Foster Dulles, US secretary of state — ed.], along with the President's disarmament advisor, assessed the situation in Hungary. At a session of the State Security Council, Stassen [Harold Stassen, Republican senator — ed.] had already proposed that, following the Austrian example, the satellite countries too should be made neutral. We hasten to add here that in these days the Hungarians fervently hoped to be treated by the great powers in the way the Austrians had been treated. Stassen advised the secretary of state to approach the matter through President Tito or to use some other diplomatic channels; in one way or another, the Russians had to be told that the neutrality of the satellite countries was not unacceptable to the United States. Dulles doubted that they had to go that far. He rejected Stassen's suggestion by saying he didn't want to create the impression in the Hungarian insurgents that the State Department was negotiating with the Russians behind their backs. Judging by the testimony of contemporary documents, however, it seems as if the secretary of state wished to do even less than the diplomatic minimum. And then, when President Eisenhower called him on the phone an hour later, he appears to have wrapped his intention in rhetoric, saying to the President that it was very difficult to know how to handle the situation. But he did know, because in his Dallas speech on the following Saturday he laid out very clearly what to do.

Despite the collective emotions that were running extremely high at the time, and the revolutionary enthusiasm bubbling up in the great cities of Europe and America in the wake of these emotions, secretary Dulles's sense of reality worked like that of a sleepwalker. I know a few men of my age, one Danish, one Dutch, one Swiss, and one French who, along with their friends, started to mobilize by getting or attempting to get weapons to join the fight. They were held back by a few parental slaps in the face, although the Dutchman and his three friends got as far as Vienna. To this day, Dulles's cautious, hesitant rhetoric and pragmatism causes Hungarians much grief, but during that critical time his thinking was more in line with the existing balance of power and international treaties than any emotionally fuelled and justified action. The following Thursday [1st November — ed.], Imre Nagy, yielding to the dynamic forces of the revolution, made a solemn and desperate speech in

which he announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and declared the country's neutrality, thereby making his compatriots happy — though only for a few hours, since neither the happiness nor the declaration had any basis in the reality of international politics. After all, the American secretary of state had spoken clearly and acutely in Dallas the previous Saturday. He was able to afford the acuity: he was talking to an audience of political experts. Dulles wanted, first of all, to clarify his position according to which all the signatory parties are bound by the Atlantic Charter and the Declaration of the United Nations to recognize the right of sovereignty and self-determination of every nation that had been forcefully deprived of these rights. He made it clear that in eastern Europe one form of occupation had simply given way to another form, and he called the Soviet oppression imperialist. He left no doubt about the sympathy felt by the United States toward those patriotic revolutionaries to whom freedom was dearer than their own lives. However, he also left no doubt about the limits of the United States' responsibility regarding this matter. The United States didn't consider these nations, namely the Hungarians and the Poles, to be its military ally and, at the same time, didn't require any particular social system on their part as a condition of economic relations. Naturally, he wouldn't even mention the possibility of neutrality, although he did announce that the United States, along with other nations, had taken the Hungarian question to the Security Council of the UN.

On the level of rhetoric, the democratic world was not able then, and has not been able since, to decide what to think of the Hungarian revolution or what to do with it; at the pragmatic level, however, it made an expedient and timely choice. On Friday and Saturday, Dulles had hit the nail on the head. It wasn't the first time that the reality of power had clashed with the reality of emotions. And if this rhetoric of hesitation seemed to undermine the Enlightenment tradition of revolutionary logic (by which even the speech of the secretary of state was not entirely unaffected), then it was undermined by the harsh reality of power politics and the interests of free trade.

The proper conclusion of the repeatedly disrupted bourgeois revolution urgently and inevitably needed in the eastern regions of Europe was no longer a concern; in Europe's western and northern regions it was a closed case, and in America it was also no longer on the agenda. While in all these places, the moral and emotional tradition of the revolution were not rejected, the obligations deriving from this tradition could not have been fulfilled without going against the interests of free trade and the balance of superpowers — that is to say, against the very foundation of the bourgeois world order — and without waking the spectre of World War III. What at first, at the level of political praxis, appeared as a simple strengthening of status quo later led to the separation of western Europe and the isolation of Europe's eastern half. In the short term, democratic Europe benefited greatly from this separation, and in its own myopic way is profiting from it to this day. It managed to slough off its economically underdeveloped regions, and to finalize, this time at the level of culture and geography, the Yalta agreement on the division of power. This act of separation did not lessen the economic mobility of democratic Europe — on the contrary, it increased it.

On that Sunday morning [4th November —ed.], when the Soviet army returned with its hastily reassembled tank divisions to Budapest, by this time enveloped in wintry fog, to show the world how to smash into pieces a great city that had not even had time to recover from the devastation of World War II, on that morning the Cold War project of sundering Europe in two was completed. It is no accident that the moral and emotional reticence of the past

fifty years has left the debate over the definition of the Hungarian revolution hanging. Was it a revolution, a popular uprising, a war of independence, an insurrection a counter–revolution after all, or perhaps just a food riot? These questions are not unfounded. Although my career and fate were set on their course largely by those two momentous weeks, I can still understand the incomprehension, confusion, and reticence surrounding them. This is not a work of indifference or a painful lapse of historical memory, but rather a kind of circumspection with which we are wont to respond to emotionally inappropriate or morally dubious phenomena.

The Hungarian revolution is surrounded by confusion and uncertainty in the popular mind as much in Hungary as anywhere else.

Revolutions are usually not known for the intelligence they unleash or manifest; rather they resemble natural phenomena, and one doesn't hold earthquakes or lightning accountable for their actions. This was particularly true of the Hungarian revolution, which can hardly be characterized as a reflective, articulate, or intelligent mass movement. This characteristic was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage, but simply a genealogical given. One has to accept it as it is and analyze it together with its constitutional obtuseness and taciturnity. It didn't know, nor did it clarify later, what it was doing or why it was doing it. Nor can the years of retribution provide sufficient explanation for its wordlessness, obtuseness, and occasional autism. The free world was not interested in hearing such an explanation, which in turn explains the dearth of objective analyses. It is not as if the Hungarian revolution lacked the sort of criteria that theoreticians consider to be the necessary attributes of an intelligently operating revolution. Or at least I'd like to perceive it as one possessing such attributes. It had a relatively long preparatory phase, remarkable in its theoretical and political aspects, which for a year–and–a–half was the work of highly qualified intellectuals. Mostly young intellectuals, we should add, and almost exclusively communist intellectuals. According to subsequently conducted sociological surveys, the average age of the active participants was thirty–six. Of these, eighty per cent were members of the communist party. About a third of them had previously taken part in the anti–fascist resistance, and had gained first–hand experience of the dictatorship's prisons and internment camps. These people were organized spontaneously around a discussion group, first named after Bessenyei and then after Petöfi. They were intellectuals with a more or less common political and professional background, natural heirs to the great reform–generation that had played a decisive role in preparing the Hungarian revolution of 1848. Not all of them were fully conscious of this heritage but the spiritual analogy and the emotional and historical tradition were clear to all. They weren't so much preparing a revolution as simply responding to a deeply and generally felt need for a reform of Hungarian society, a reform that they envisioned strictly within the limits of a socialist political model. They analyzed, criticized, explored and proposed, and became increasingly convinced that they had to come up with a blueprint for a fundamental change in the existing order.

These thoroughgoing reforms had to be prepared under the pressure exerted by the party elite and the secret service of the Stalinist dictatorship. In their arguments and terminology these intellectuals continued in the role of communist party–opposition, while struggling to rid themselves of their own Stalinism and communist dogmatism. With the gradual increase of their influence, their ties with the labour movement began to loosen while their own movement started to acquire an international character. They organized interdisciplinary debates for economists, historians, teachers, and philosophers;

there were more debates about literature, agrarian reform, and technical development. These emotionally charged discussions were mostly exercises in rhetoric with little intellectual yield. The reason for this might have been that the participants didn't have a clear perception of the place occupied by the methodologies and intentions of reform in Hungarian history. Their vision of reform was too narrow to grant them an understanding of possible connections with certain currents of thought or social movements in the outside world, or of the necessity of consciously rejecting others. Nevertheless, it was becoming increasingly evident to more and more people that the country had been led by political dilettantes and common criminals in the name of socialism and communism. It was also realized that without the freedom of press, no change could be brought about, and that the freedom of press, on the other hand, must mean freedom from party interests or party control. The bitter cup of their commitment to party politics or the labour movement had to be emptied — bottom up. When the Officers' Palace filled to capacity at the press debate organized there in June, the gates were closed, but the frustrated crowd left on the street outside broke them down in order to at least be present in the entrance hall and staircases. The need for change pushed them higher and higher, yet the great programme failed to materialize — probably not due to a lack of time. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that it was the best minds among them that proved to be unable to tell the difference between the history of the labour movement and world history and this, in turn, deprived them of the perception minimally required of leaders of a national liberation movement, making them unable to sense the dangerous bedrock reality of the moment.

The mass movement, which debuted on the streets of Budapest that Tuesday, absorbed the communist intellectual movement and obliterated it almost without trace. They did have a truck with loudspeakers on top but it was virtually swallowed up by the crowd, a circumstance of symbolic significance. It was not only that they lacked a programme; the popular movement that burst onto the streets was simply quite different from the one they had been preparing for, even if this popular movement still had very strong ties to the labor movement. While not without substantial personalities, the intellectual movement lacked any major figure who could have perceived the preludes and the consequences from the mass movement's point of view. The revolution did have a genius, but there was no one to give voice to it, and on account of the many-jointed nature of Hungarian society, there was a need for several major voices and figures. In the end, the intellectual movement and the popular revolutionary movement simply proved to be incompatible.

One reason why the place of the Hungarian revolution remains uncertain in the mind of the public is that it triumphed and failed at the same time, and the mind tends to resist ambiguities like this. It was the glorious victory of the republic's genius over the dictatorship, but also the mortal defeat of democracy, suffered in battle against the brutal administrative and military machinery of arbitrary rule. Even today, Hungarians cannot cherish their victory without taking stock of all its destructive and self-destructive consequences. This too is likely to be resisted by the mind. The great democracies, however, cannot even begin to contemplate, with a bad conscience, the sight of the defeat of Hungary's republicans and democrats without pondering the causes of the constitutional weakness of democracies and their defencelessness against arbitrary rule. And this task the mind is hesitant to perform.

A reckoning of this kind, requiring mutuality and community, is not on the agenda today and it is unlikely to be on the agenda in the future. Today, the democratic world believes that its achievements have nothing to do with the revolutions; in any case, the nature of its priorities is not intellectual or spiritual but economic and financial. It is now preoccupied with equality, as opposed to liberty, with the right to the pursuit of happiness and with the pleasure principle, as opposed to fraternity, although all this has made democracies even more vulnerable today.

The Hungarian revolution takes a place of honour in the history of European revolutions, in the series of increasingly refined riots, insurrections, and mass movements which marked the attempt of Europe's oppressed peoples to break out of the isolation created by the Yalta agreement and to return to constitutionality and self-determination. Its significance cannot be denied, yet in the past fifty years it has remained unclear in what exactly this significance lies.

I think it can and has to be explained on the basis of its prehistory as part of a larger story: the senseless and largely miscalculated Cold War policy of the superpowers, attended by the disorganized isolation and the organized separation mentioned above. Or, it can be explained on the basis of what followed as an event that failed to create a new world but succeeded in creating a caesura. The Hungarian revolution forced a qualitative change in the relationship between the great powers. It put an end to the escalation of the Cold War, reduced the risk of nuclear war, and compelled the opposing powers to consider the idea of peaceful coexistence as an acceptable minimum. This pressure, however, was not brought by the victory of the republic or democracy, but by their defeat. The Hungarian revolution remained a memento, a negative experience that continues to be part of the European praxis, one driven from the surface of collective consciousness and made unavailable for dialogue by a sense of reality.

In my view, it's precisely for this reason that its significance can and must be explained as forming a part of the historical tradition of European and North American revolutions and social movements. And this should lead to an even more painful reckoning. It has to be stated that the Hungarian revolution was the last European revolution, a bloody end to the romantic and idealist history of the long age of revolution, one both painful and embarrassing for everyone. It is over, and this is why the Hungarian revolution is dead no matter how many monuments the Hungarians raise to celebrate its memory. And it remains dead. It survived the years of retributions but not the illusion of peaceful coexistence. In this sense, it is not just a substantial caesura but also a substantial loss for the political thinking of Europe. The counterpoint and eternal debating partner of pragmatic thinking has passed away with it. In the absence of the tradition of revolutionary change, we are left with the European tradition of conformity and opportunism, with court poetry and mannerism, and moving within this degrading tradition one cannot very well contemplate the vulnerability of the republic or democracy. Even in political philosophy, the leading role now belongs to various opportunistic ideologies and court poets of conformist ideas.

With some exaggeration, one could say that in October 1956 the peoples of Europe and North America, together with their legitimate governments, decided to put an end, once and for all, to the age of revolutionary change. And they were right to do so. To avoid another world war, the existing orders had to integrate, in some way or another, the social and political dissatisfaction of the

age; this became the supreme commandment of the day. Expressing deep regrets, with bleeding heart and being fully conscious of their responsibility, they opted not to support the headless and hundred-and-fifty-years overdue Hungarian revolution either by diplomatic means or by sending volunteers or weapons. This had nothing to do with the Suez crisis. Only the dimmer types in Hungary can console themselves by believing that it was due to some business about ships that the Americans and the European democracies couldn't pay attention to them. Besides the danger of another world war, they had other good reasons not to do anything. Had they decided to support the Hungarian revolution, it would have soon turned out that the capitalist — socialist dichotomy had remained, irrespective of the ideological hysterics of Russian imperialism (also seriously belated). The Hungarian revolution — contrary to popular opinion, and despite all of its anti-communist excesses — was not an anti-socialist revolution, and in its first phase not even an anti-communist one. It was clearly an anti-Stalinist revolution and clearly a plebeian one, it wanted independence and it wanted no part of the Russian empire; it was a democratic revolution that had no tolerance for foreign rule, for autocracy or for the arbitrary rule of collectives. It should not for a moment be forgotten that in that memorable year, the working class was still intact, along with the Christian democratic and social democratic traditions, and so was the agrarian proletariat, with its own, extremely vital social movements. So, at least in its first phase, the revolution would have based its envisioned order on public ownership and worker self-government. It would have returned to private hands smaller factories but not the manufacturing plants. It would have redistributed smallholdings, but not the large estates, and not the estates of the clergy. The order, at least initially, was envisioned as anti-capitalist and anti-feudalist. This was and has remained its most valuable intellectual yield, which it produced headless, without the participation of any major theoreticians, and within a few days. Despite the ongoing retributions, even in January, during the comprehensive countrywide strikes, it insisted on worker self-government. The idea of limiting property rights was especially repugnant to the great democracies. Their incomprehension, if nothing else, would have been enough to keep them on the sidelines; they had to let things happen, they had to let it exsanguinate. It is more likely, though, that the whole question never even occurred to them.

I say this without any pathetic overtones or sadness: my life has passed in the context of this double exsanguination. Since those days, I hate despotism, but I also find it difficult to turn my head silently at the sight of the weaknesses, cheap little farces, self-endangering prejudices and overall vulnerability of the republic and democracy.

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