

Black Lives Matter goes to war with Napoleon and the French Revolution

Alex Lantier
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The *New York Times* championed the 1619 Project, a now-discredited attempt to rewrite all of US history as centered on racial conflict and the first arrival of slaves in America in 1619. The racist climate it helped stoke has seen petty-bourgeois supporters of Black Lives Matter topple statues of leaders of the 1776 American Revolution and of the anti-slavery forces in the US Civil War.

Now, the *Times* is taking aim at the French Revolution. In March, it published a column by Professor Marlene Daut titled “Napoleon Isn’t a Hero to Celebrate.” A supporter of Black Lives Matter, she is outraged by the marking of the bicentennial of Napoleon’s death on May 5, 1821. She denounces Napoleon, claiming he was driven by genocidal anti-black racism:

After a year in which statues of enslavers and colonizers were toppled, defaced or taken down across Europe and the United States, France has decided to move in the opposite direction. ... As a Black woman of Haitian descent and a scholar of French colonialism, I find it particularly galling to see that France plans to celebrate the man who restored slavery to the French Caribbean, an architect of modern genocide, whose troops created gas chambers to kill my ancestors.

Daut has chosen what is perhaps Napoleon’s most flagrant betrayal of the ideals of “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” proclaimed by the 1789 revolution. Napoleon had taken power in a 1799 coup, as Europe’s kings waged war on the young French republic for having abolished absolute monarchy and serfdom. Napoleon then spread across Europe, by force of arms, the struggle against feudal privileges that the struggles of 1789-94 had brought to a conclusion in France.

Consolidating conditions for the development of European capitalism inevitably entailed betraying the promises of the French Revolution, however. The infamous trade in slaves and sugar was at the heart of Atlantic Ocean commerce, and Napoleon rescinded the 1794 decree abolishing slavery while negotiating an 1802 peace treaty with Britain. He sent an army to Haiti that waged a bloody war in a failed attempt to re-impose slavery, which the 1791 Haitian revolution had overthrown. Later, in 1804, he crowned himself emperor, ending the First Republic.

At issue is not whether Napoleon’s decree on slavery and his war in Haiti were criminal, which they clearly were. Daut concocts a simplistic, racist narrative, thrusting aside the international and class issues raised by the great 18th century revolutions in America, France and Haiti. She attacks Napoleon as “France’s biggest tyrant” and “an unredeemable racist, sexist, and despot.”

Daut describes the First Republic as a regime that was not historically progressive, but driven by genocidal hatred of blacks. Her attack on Napoleon as “France’s biggest tyrant” has far-reaching implications. Had

the First Republic overseen a more tyrannical regime than the feudal absolute monarchs it overthrew, as Daut claims, then the French Revolution’s legitimacy would disappear.

The lie that the First Republic built “gas chambers” to carry out a genocide invites readers to crudely equate it with the Nazi regime. Daut takes this allegation from a 2005 book by right-wing black nationalist author Claude Ribbe, *Le crime de Napoléon*, which Daut promotes on Twitter. The cover of Ribbe’s book features two portraits, one of Napoleon and one of Hitler, blended together so they appear to stand next to each other.

Over the centuries, historical lies or oversimplifications about the 1789 revolution have always been closely linked to political positions. Daut uses them to posture as an opponent of French President Emmanuel Macron. His policies—a bloody war in the former French African colony of Mali, bans on burqas or Islamic veils, and murderous police brutality against working class youth, often targeting those of Arabic or African origin—are intensifying ethnic and religious tensions in France.

Daut points to Macron’s fascistic “anti-separatist” laws that ban criticism of anti-Muslim policies and institute loyalty oaths to France’s current Fifth Republic, writing:

The “Year of Napoleon” has arrived during a dangerous time. French academics who study race, gender, ethnicity and class are under attack. President Emmanuel Macron has derided the field of post-colonial studies by suggesting that it “has encouraged the ethnicization of the social question” to the point that the Republic is in danger of “splitting” apart.

Again, what is at issue is not whether Macron’s police-state laws are reactionary. They clearly pose a mortal threat to democratic rights and aim to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines. They come amid mounting threats of a coup from French retired and active-duty officers.

But while Daut criticizes Macron, her racist arguments unmistakably echo those of the French president. She shares his view that the French population and, presumably, humanity at large are riven by deep-rooted, essentially insoluble racial and ethnic hatreds. While Macron proposes to address this by demanding submission to a capitalist police state, Daut advances a narrative suiting privileged layers of blacks and allied academics, on both sides of the Atlantic, who demand access to positions and influence in the name of fighting anti-black racism.

Daut argues that French attitudes on Napoleon prove the irreconcilable hostility of the French—presumably, that is, of white people in France—toward blacks. She complains that “it is still common for the French to lionize [Napoleon] as a hero, even if an unlikable one, who not only stomped all over Europe at the Battle of Austerlitz, but also created

the Bank of France, the modern legal code and the education system still in use today.” She then attacks in particular

the role that the French people played in their country’s violent return to slavery. This did not result solely from the capricious whim of one terrible dictator. French legislators and the French Army, with broad support from the public, upheld Napoleon’s actions, demonstrating the enduring incoherence of French republicanism.

Reading Daut’s outpouring of hatred at Napoleon, one feels compelled to ask: would Daut prefer it if Napoleon had been defeated at Austerlitz and other key battles he fought?

Indeed, he first came to prominence at a critical time in 1793, for retaking from Britain the strategic Toulon port on France’s southern Mediterranean coast. At that time, the British, Austrian, Prussian, Spanish and Portuguese monarchies, together with Holland, were waging war on France. Moreover, the execution of Louis XVI for treason in January and the final abolition of feudal rights without compensation in July had led to counterrevolutionary revolts inside France—first of the Chouans in the western Vendée region, then of the federalists across the south.

Would slaves have had a better fate if Europe’s kings, who controlled most of the Atlantic slave trade, had instead consolidated control of southern and western France; marched on and taken Paris; imposed on Parisians the “total military execution” that the duke of Brunswick had threatened in his infamous 1792 manifesto; and, in an orgy of mass murder and terror, crushed the revolution and reestablished the principle of feudal oppression unchallenged across Europe?

One is tempted to say that to ask such a question is to answer it. This would be to underestimate, however, the ferocious opposition to revolution encouraged by academic postmodernism, and the growing far-right and monarchist influence in Europe, going well beyond neo-fascist parties. This ultimately includes Macron, who, before hailing France’s Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as a “great soldier,” declared that what France is missing is a king. One cannot escape the question: does Daut’s tirade against the First Republic have any factual foundation?

Did the French First Republic perpetrate anti-black genocide in Haiti?

Daut’s argument that Napoleon is the “architect of modern genocide” is a historical lie, and the comparison she invites between Napoleon and Hitler is politically obscene. The Nazis denounced “Judeo-Bolshevism” and tried to exterminate the Jewish people, due notably to the role they played in the communist movement, and the leading role of individual Jews, such as Leon Trotsky, in the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. They murdered 6 million Jews and over 20 million Soviet citizens after launching a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

Napoleon did not set out to exterminate black people, or to reverse the overthrow of feudal property carried out by the 1789 revolution. Daut, however, concocts a narrative in which Napoleon willfully decided to restore slavery via genocidal violence, of which French people were willing tools. She writes:

In 1794, in the wake of the revolution that transformed France

from a monarchy into a republic—and after an enormous slave rebellion ended slavery on the French island of Saint-Domingue (today, Haiti)—France declared slavery’s abolition throughout its territory. But in 1802, Napoleon was in charge and reversed that decision, making France the only country to ever have brought back chattel slavery after abolishing it.

Daut writes that French schools “leave out or gloss over how and why slavery was re-established eight years later by Napoleon, who used the justification that if he did not reinstate it, sooner or later, the ‘scepter of the New World’ would ‘fall into the hands of the Blacks.’” She notes in passing that Napoleon took this decision while negotiating the 1802 Amiens treaty with Britain, as he debated what to do with colonies Britain was returning to France. In these colonies, Britain had blocked the 1794 abolition decree and maintained slavery.

She then recounts the French army’s bloody campaigns that crushed an uprising in Guadeloupe and failed to crush the former black slaves who had risen up in Saint-Domingue:

Black people on the island of Guadeloupe fought the French troops Napoleon sent there to shackle them once more, but they eventually lost their struggle and saw slavery officially reinstated that July.

Things unfolded differently, but no less tragically, in Saint-Domingue. Under two generals who were sent to the island by Napoleon to, in his words, “annihilate the government of the Blacks,” the French Army was ordered to kill all the people of color in the colony who had ever “worn an epaulet.” French soldiers gassed, drowned and used dogs to maul the revolutionaries; the French colonists openly bragged that after the “extermination” the island could simply be repopulated with more Africans from the continent.

The expedition to Haiti was a political crime that left 80,000 Haitians and 20,000 French soldiers dead. It prefigures the colonialist violence French capitalism and other imperialist powers would deploy—on a far larger scale—in later decades and centuries.

It is impossible, however, to maintain the claim that the French First Republic tried to exterminate blacks without running roughshod over history. This is what occurs when Daut cites the apparently damning piece of evidence, written in Napoleon’s own hand, that he feared that “the ‘scepter of the New World’ would ‘fall into the hands of the Blacks.’”

This is a distortion of Napoleon’s 1801 letter to Foreign Minister Charles Talleyrand on French negotiations with London, which Daut cites without identifying it. Reading the letter gives an entirely different picture of the calculations driving Napoleon’s decision to invade Haiti.

Napoleon was France’s first major bourgeois politician, in the modern sense of that term. He aimed to use the overthrow of feudal property carried out in 1789-94 to entrench bourgeois property and to secure as strong as possible a position for France in world trade. Acutely aware of the threat from below, he downplayed and mocked his left-wing opponents as “Ideologues.”

Far from being driven by genocidal anti-black hatred, Napoleon based himself on pragmatic, national military and commercial considerations. He initially planned to leave slavery abolished in the area of Saint-Domingue controlled by the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L’Ouverture. In an August 16, 1800 State Council meeting, Napoleon said:

The issue is not whether abolishing slavery is good. ... I am convinced this island would belong to the English, if the blacks were not attached to us. They may perhaps produce less sugar; but they will produce it for us and will provide us, at need, with soldiers. We will have one less sugar refinery, one more citadel occupied by friendly troops. ... So I will speak of liberty in the free part of Saint Domingue ... reserving for myself the right to limit slavery where I maintain it, and re-establish law and order where I maintain freedom.

Napoleon changed positions, however, when L'Ouverture invaded the Spanish-controlled area of Saint-Domingue to liberate slaves there. L'Ouverture was nominally a representative of the French Republic, but his initiative did not have French support. This risked encouraging new revolutionary aspirations in Europe and also angered the Spanish king, whom Napoleon was courting as an ally in his negotiations of the 1802 peace treaty with Britain.

Napoleon responded by sending an army in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to retake Saint-Domingue and exploit it as a profitable sugar-making slave colony. This decision is recorded in the November 13, 1801 letter from Napoleon to Talleyrand. While Daut cites a few phrases of the letter as proof that Napoleon planned genocide to prevent the "scepter of the New World" from falling "into the hands of the Blacks," an actual reading of the letter refutes Daut's misleading claims.

In this letter, Napoleon told Talleyrand to stress that attacking Saint-Domingue was against French interests: "The liberty of blacks recognized in Saint-Domingue and legitimized by the government would in every way make it a stronghold of the Republic in the New World." Propping up a weak, counterrevolutionary regime, he added, would burden France militarily: "Saint-Domingue retaken by the Whites would be for many years a weak point, requiring assistance from France."

On the other hand, Napoleon added, crushing the slaves in the Caribbean was of great interest to the French Republic's enemies—notably the British monarchy, which feared a revolt in its own sugar cane plantations, in Jamaica and elsewhere. He wrote:

One advantage of peace at the present time, for England, is that it comes when the French government has not yet recognized the organization of Saint-Domingue and so the power of the Blacks. If this had been done, the scepter of the New World would, sooner or later, have fallen into the hands of the Blacks. The shock that would result for England would be incalculable, while the shock of a Black empire, in France, was indistinguishable from that of the Revolution.

Napoleon also explained why he intended to pursue a policy that, by his own admission, harmed his government's political and strategic interests. He told Talleyrand to convey to London his fears that the liberation of slaves could provoke renewed, left-wing political ferment internationally: "In my decision to annihilate in Saint-Domingue the government of the blacks, I have been guided less by commercial or financial considerations, than by the necessity of smothering in every part of the world all types of seeds of disquiet and disorder."

France was ultimately allowed to dispatch two flotillas, undisturbed by the more powerful British Royal Navy: one to Guadeloupe, another to Saint-Domingue.

In his article "The Colonial Failure of the Consular Regime," referring to Napoleon's title of First Consul at that time, historian Thierry Lentz writes on these expeditions' bloody outcome. In Guadeloupe, General

Antoine Richepanse relied on the aid of Magloire Pélage, a black officer who had fought in French armies in Europe since 1794, and of black troops to crush uprisings against the reestablishment of slavery led by Louis Delgrès and Joseph Ignace. Lentz writes:

Richepanse's military operation was carried out with a brutality that even his own lieutenants denounced in their reports. From May 10-28, the battle raged. Overall, Richepanse lost around 40 percent of his troops, either to combat or illness, and owed victory to support from Pélage and 600 colored troops of the colony's army. ... For many months, large-scale massacres were carried out, killing several thousand among the black population. Slavery was reestablished by a simple decree of the captain-general, and around 5,000 Blacks were expelled to other colonies.

In Saint-Domingue, French troops under General Charles Leclerc forced L'Ouverture's troops to withdraw to the western mountains to wage guerrilla warfare. "The insurgents counted now on several factors to overcome Leclerc: guerrilla warfare, a scorched-earth strategy, and the ravages of yellow fever," Lentz writes. Before dying of yellow fever, Leclerc made a deal with L'Ouverture's treacherous subordinates to hand over L'Ouverture, who died in prison in France in 1803.

As more and more French troops died of yellow fever, General Donatien de Rochambeau then continued a doomed war effort for a year, with even more savagery than Leclerc. This barbaric war, predictably, ended in disaster. Lentz writes of Rochambeau:

Torture, the training of dogs specialized in hunting blacks, collective drownings and summary executions marked his command, without improving the military situation. On the contrary, black generals had successes whose impact was all the more disastrous in that the number of European troops kept falling. ... Renewed war with England [in 1803] put an end to the dreadful adventure in Saint-Domingue, "a great mistake on my part," the Emperor [Napoleon] later said.

After Napoleon's 1815 defeat and the restoration of the French monarchy by the European powers, Juste Chanlatte, a Haitian journalist trained at the elite Louis-le-Grand high school in Paris, wrote a history of the Saint-Domingue war. In the book, published in Paris in 1824, Chanlatte reported that French troops burned sulfur dioxide in the holds of prison ships. He wrote that "victims of both sexes, crowded together the one on the other, died, suffocated by the sulfur vapors."

Daut's claim that the French Republic created "gas chambers to kill my ancestors" is a reference to this report, taken up later by other 19th-century historians of Haiti. French historian Pierre Branda has contested that such poison-gassing occurred, arguing that there is no documentary record that French troops ever had orders to burn sulfur in prison ships.

Whatever took place, it is evident both that the French war in Saint-Domingue was a bloody crime, and that if there was poison gassing, it was on nothing like the scale of the industrial murder of millions in Nazi gas chambers during World War II. Nonetheless, Claude Ribbe, whose 2005 book Daut promotes on Twitter, baldly asserted that Napoleon's policies "prefigure in an evident way the policy of extermination carried out against Jews and Gypsies during World War II."

It is not to defend the foreign policy of the French bourgeoisie—covered, as it is, in the blood of millions spilled later, during imperialist rule and counterinsurgency wars in Algeria, Indochina, Syria and West Africa—to

state that this is a historical lie. Napoleon waged bloody wars, but he neither planned nor carried out a genocide of black people, in the Caribbean or elsewhere. The attempt of Daut, Ribbe and others to falsely equate the French First Republic with Nazism, and thus to discredit social revolution, is based on a concocted historical narrative.

Were the French people complicit in the restoration of slavery?

Daut fashions another apparently devastating argument based on Napoleon's restoration of slavery in the French colonies in 1802. The French people, according to Daut, overwhelmingly supported slavery: "French legislators and the French Army, with broad support from the public, upheld Napoleon's actions, demonstrating the enduring incoherence of French republicanism." She concludes that France should dedicate itself to a century of introspection to do penance:

The truth is that exposing the brutally inhumane consequences of France's fight to bring back slavery lays bare the uncomfortable fact that racism and colonialism existing alongside proclamations of universal human rights are not aberrations. This apparent contradiction is in fact fundamental to French republicanism. France probably needs to dedicate at least a century to pondering that.

In fact, it has been not 100 years but 232 years since the French Revolution, and workers not only in France but internationally have had the time to "ponder"—and, also, to fight—the betrayal of the promises of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity by the capitalist system.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, opposition to successive French republics' crimes, including colonial oppression, came primarily from a socialist critique of capitalism. Workers concluded that these crimes did not invalidate the perspective of genuinely establishing Liberty, Equality and Fraternity via mass revolutionary action. The experience of capitalist rule, and the bloody suppression by successive capitalist French republics of workers uprisings in 1848 and in the Paris Commune of 1871, showed that equality was incompatible with capitalist property.

Amid the growing popularity of works of Karl Marx after his great defense of the Paris Commune, workers of all nationalities in France and internationally joined mass socialist and, after the October 1917 revolution in Russia, mass communist parties.

Daut's denunciations of Napoleon come from a different, diametrically opposed class standpoint. She speaks for the racist identity politics that have come to dominate in middle-class postmodernist academia since Stalinism completed its betrayal of the October revolution, dissolved the Soviet Union, and restored capitalism in 1991. In this view, humanity is so deeply infected by racism as to make collective revolutionary action at best impossible, and at worst dangerous.

She writes that "dedicating an entire year to the memory of Napoleon demonstrates that repressing history in the name of France's favorite ideology, universalism, is already a crucial part of the Republic."

Daut's own potted account, blaming the French people for slavery, is itself based on ignoring history, however. She condemns the lack of revolutionary opposition in France to Napoleon's restoration of slavery in 1802. However, she is silent on the bloody suppression of the left after the Thermidor, that is, the fall of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor (July 27, 1794 in the standard calendar).

The fate of the February 4, 1794 decree abolishing slavery is, however,

inseparable from the shift to the right that followed the Thermidor. Voted by acclaim in the Convention, reflecting broad popular hatred of slavery, the decree largely remained a dead letter outside Saint-Domingue, where the slaves had already taken power, and French Guyana and Guadeloupe, where it was inconsistently applied. The British navy had seized many other French colonies, and French slaveholders in the Mascareignes, in the Indian Ocean, chased away officers who arrived to enforce the decree in 1796.

Indeed, the decree was voted as conflicts mounted among the revolutionaries who had abolished the monarchy, expropriated feudal property, and defeated the Vendée revolt. A fratricidal struggle over whether to maintain emergency measures—like maximum limits on high incomes and executions during the Terror—tore apart the Mountain led by Maximilien Robespierre, the Enragés led by Jacques-René Hébert, and the Indulgents led by Georges Danton. In five months, from March to July 1794, first Hébert, then Danton and finally Robespierre went to the guillotine.

After Robespierre was executed, in front of a crowd shouting "F*** the maximum [income limit]," the bourgeoisie worked to consolidate its rule against the threat on the left. The Jacobin club, the leading club in the French Revolution, where figures like Robespierre, Danton and Hébert had spoken, was closed. The army crushed two uprisings in Paris against hunger and poverty wages, on April 1 and May 20, 1795. At least 2,000 people, mostly Jacobins, were killed in a White Terror by counterrevolutionary militias like the Friends of Jesus and Friends of the Sun.

Egalitarian, left-wing tendencies that emerged in opposition to the Thermidorian regime were suppressed. These included political ancestors of the socialist movement, like the Conspiracy of Equals led by Gracchus Babeuf—a writer who had attacked slavery before the revolution—which advanced the call for holding property in common. Arrested in 1796 on charges of preparing an insurrection, Babeuf was executed in May 1797.

The anti-egalitarian political climate of the White Terror that accompanied the consolidation of bourgeois property in France militated against enforcing the decree abolishing slavery. This does not, however, vindicate Daut's accusation that the French people supported slavery. Rather, it underscores the point made, two-thirds of a century later, by Karl Marx in *Capital*: "If money, according to Augier, 'comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,' capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."

Indeed, Daut's racist condemnation of the French people, while remaining silent on the Thermidor, is inseparable from her opposition to social revolution.

Napoleon was a bourgeois figure, who came to power in a coup as the culmination of the Thermidor and ruled based on a compromise between Republican and monarchist forces. He is not a hero of the Marxist movement. However, Daut's hysterical condemnation of him as "France's biggest tyrant" overlooks one central question.

The resounding defeats of Europe's monarchies by Napoleonic France, before Napoleon's ultimate defeat in 1815 at Waterloo, played a critical role in spreading the abolition of feudal property from France across much of Europe. In a 2009 article "Napoleon and Abolition of Feudalism," Professor Rafe Blaufarb writes:

Napoleon extended French legislation dismantling feudal property relations to annexed territories. Similar policies were pursued in satellite kingdoms like Naples and Westphalia. And even after Napoleon's Empire fell, restored monarchs made no attempt to undo these changes. Instead, they confirmed the transformation Napoleon had wrought. ... While Napoleonic domination of European lands was bitterly contested and soon

proved ephemeral, his program of feudal abolition was neither. Indeed, it was one of the most significant long-term legacies of the Napoleonic episode. From this perspective, Napoleon can still be seen as the faithful heir of 1789, as the vector by which the abolition of feudalism was spread to Europe.

It is hardly surprising, to be blunt, that Daut is uninterested in the abolition of feudalism in Europe. Her racist politics emerges in the broader context of the ruling elite's cultivation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Flush with tens of millions of dollars in cash from the Ford Foundation, a leading corporate foundation with close links to Wall Street, it has a large presence in US academia and media, and is increasingly active on social media in France, intervening notably in mass protests against police brutality after the murder of George Floyd last year in Minneapolis.

These forces advance calls for racial equity, seeking greater access to influence and privilege for layers of the black middle class in academia, corporate boards and elsewhere. Lavishly funded to divide the working class with racist rhetoric, they are hostile to any revolutionary overthrow of existing property forms—in the 18th century or today.

One final point must be made about the racist outlook championed by Daut. By writing with evident contempt and hostility for the revolutionary struggles in 18th century France, Daut helps reactionary French nationalists to falsely pose as defenders of the accomplishments of the French Revolution. Macron's "anti-separatist" law, inciting anti-Muslim racism while claiming to defend secularism and "Republican principles," is but one example.

Far-right politician Philippe de Villiers recently wrote an article, titled "A call to insurrection," attacking "race war, cancel culture, remigration ... in order to avoid the annihilation of France." De Villiers' article has elicited a wave of coup threats from far-right forces in the French officer corps in the neo-fascist magazine *Current Values*. Denouncing "racialism, indigenous nationalism and decolonial theories," one letter warned of "race war" and declared that the French army might intervene militarily inside France, leading to "thousands of deaths."

The arguments of Macron and de Villiers are entirely fraudulent. Terrified of mounting opposition among workers to imperialist war, policy brutality and their pandemic policy of "living with the virus," they are not defending a revolutionary heritage. Their stoking of anti-Muslim sentiment is an unmistakable sign of their opposition to the left-wing traditions that are the great heritage of the 1789 revolution.

The French Revolution, part of an international revolutionary upsurge that included the American and Haitian revolutions, was based on a promise of equality and opposition to class privilege that was international in content. By eradicating bonded labor in France and much of Europe, it dealt a powerful blow against slavery, helping trigger the Haitian revolution in 1791. In that same year, it granted full legal equality to France's religious minorities at the time—Jews, Protestants and Muslims—a policy Napoleon never rescinded.

With her false, racist denunciation of the French First Republic as a genocidal state, however, Daut denigrates the egalitarianism and internationalism that emerged from the 1789 revolution, and thus works to undermine socialist opposition to threats of far-right rule and military dictatorship. The historical falsifications and oversimplifications on which racist identity politics is based, and which divide the working class along racial and ethnic lines, must be decisively rejected.



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