HISTORY ALWAYS A SCIENCE OR
SOMETIMES A SCIENCE OF PROPAGANDA?
AN AUSTRIAN CASE STUDY

by R. John Rath

The recent struggle between liberals and conservatives over the adoption of Franklin, Caughey, and May's *Land of the Free* as the eighth-grade American history textbook in California schools reminds us once again that even in a relatively free society history is often regarded as a potent instrument for molding the young into the types of citizens which those who wield political authority would like them to be. In a pluralistic, democratic society, the battle over the minds of the young is usually joined in hearings before administrative or legislative bodies in the various component states or provinces of the union. In countries with centralistic governments, the decision is generally made by an appropriate bureau or committee of the national ministry of education. No matter what the actual procedures for choosing textbooks may be, the selection of elementary and secondary school texts by political bodies exerts at least some influence on textbook writers to depart occasionally from Leopold von Ranke's dictum "Es zu schreiben wie es eigentlich gewesen war." In other words, pressures are at hand, whether covert and unconscious or overt and deliberate, in pluralistic and democratic as well as authoritarian or totalitarian states, to turn history into a science of propaganda rather than a science or discipline concerned with an objective, methodological search for truth.

What I am saying is certainly not new; in fact, it is so commonplace that it almost borders on sheer verbosity. I do hope, however, that some of the examples I will give might possibly make some of you more aware than you might now be of how seriously our historical knowledge has been distorted by writers who have turned the historian's craft into a science of propaganda for citizenship training purposes. On the more positive side, I wish to indicate how elementary and secondary school history textbooks might profitably be studied to gain insight into the attitudes of power elites of particular countries or particular eras. I also hope to show how a study of elementary and secondary school

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textbooks might possibly be of at least some assistance in ascertaining the common stock of political, economic, and national beliefs of the great majority of inhabitants who never read the books of the great thinkers or other intellectual leaders, or even the watered-down commentaries about their ideas.

The history textbooks used in the Austrian elementary and secondary schools after 1918 serve as an excellent case study illustrating how changes in political, national, economic, and social ideology tend to influence the teaching of history in the public schools. Within the past half century, four radical political changes have been made in Austria. In 1918 the conservative Habsburg monarchy was supplanted by a federal democratic republic. In 1933 parliamentary government was replaced by an authoritarian regime, which, in turn, succumbed to a totalitarian National Socialist dictatorship in 1938. In 1945 Austria again became a democratic state. After each change in government the educational curriculum was modified to fit the changed spirit of the times.

During the thirteen and a half years of democratic rule which followed the collapse of the monarchy in 1918, it was fashionable to praise everything that savored of liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty. Convinced of the superiority of democracy to monarchy, a large number of Austrians vented their wrath upon everything that reminded them of the former multinational empire and hurled calumnies against the Catholic Church, which was associated in the popular mind with Habsburg domination. Since the supranational traditions of the monarchy had run counter to the strong nationalist notions that had swept the empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the German population of Austria—the only group left after the collapse of the empire—was strongly Pan-German and clamored for union with a democratic German republic. The dire economic straits of a great many Austrians and the financial problems confronting their government turned their attention to economic problems. Some were attracted by the tenets of economic liberalism; others found ready-made solutions for their economic problems in the gospel of Marxian Socialism.

The prevailing attitudes of the new era were reflected in the history textbooks studied in the Austrian elementary and secondary schools. The sections devoted to ancient history dealt mainly with the economic and social life of the common people and with cultural history. In the chapters on medieval and early modern history, considerable emphasis was again placed on economic and social matters. Pains were taken to show how closely German and Austrian cultures were related to each other from earliest times. The role of the common man was accentuated, while the contributions to European civilization of kings, princes, and clergymen were minimized. A mild anti-Catholic bias also permeated the narratives. The pupils were taught
that the main causes of the Protestant Reformation were the wealth, luxury, and immorality of the popes and clergy and the miserable living conditions of the peasants and working classes. Martin Luther was treated in a sympathetic manner; nonetheless, the hero of the piece was not Luther but the German peasants. More space was actually allotted to a heart-rending account of the peasant revolt of 1524-1525 than to the whole Lutheran movement. And the whole Catholic Reformation was disposed of in one page!

In the parts devoted to Austrian history, the schoolchildren were made to feel that, in Austria at least, beneficent social reforms could be expected only from democratically-elected representatives of the people. Nowhere were there phrases which could in any way arouse in the youth an admiration for their past rulers or for the traditions of their country. In the section on the French Revolution, however, serious efforts were made to convert the students to the antimonarchical and democratic tenets of the French revolutionists.

In dealing with the nineteenth century, the authors of the school texts did not hesitate to denounce the antiliberal, antidemocratic, and antinational proclivities of the Habsburgs or to excoriate Metternich’s repressive policies. The early nineteenth-century German liberal and nationalist movements and the patriotic fervor of the German students at Wartburg in 1817 were eulogized at length. The story of the revolutionary movement of 1848-1849 was seized upon to exalt the democratic and Pan-German doctrines prevailing in the postwar Austrian Republic. Much ado was made of the freeing of the serfs by the democratically-elected Austrian revolutionary national assembly, while the discussion of the Frankfurt Assembly gave occasion for an encomium of German nationalism.

Paeans of praise were sung about the unification of Germany and Italy, but not even a single small section of the texts was devoted to the long reign of Francis Joseph, significant as it was in Austrian history. To reflect the intense pacifism of the Austrians during the 1920's, heart-rending descriptions of the privations of the Austrian people covered much of the space allocated to the World War. The treaty of St. Germain was bitterly denounced, particularly for prohibiting the union of Austria with Germany.

Between 1933 and 1938—the period of authoritarian rule—an entirely new version of history was taught in the Austrian schools. After 1933 the schools no longer functioned as institutions to fashion good citizens for a democratic society. Their main aim now was to train young people “to feel, think, and conduct themselves in a religious-moral, national, social, and patriotic manner.” The authoritarian leaders of the 1930's rejected the Pan-German and democratic concepts of the previous decade. Instead of emphasizing the necessity for union with Germany, they strove to awaken in the populace a strong feeling of Austrian patriotism. The builders of the “new Austria”
created a Christian, German, corporative, and authoritarian government based on principles consonant with what they believed to be the historic mission of their fatherland. The state was to be governed in a Christian spirit and was to put into practice the fundamental reforms of society advocated in the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*.

Instead of stressing the economic and social aspects of ancient, medieval, and early modern history, as did the texts studied before 1933, the histories now taught in the schools gave relatively little space to economic and social concerns. The dominant emphasis after 1933 was on such themes as the expansion of Christianity, the founding of monasteries, and the piety of princes and rulers. It was explained to the pupils that the Catholic Church made use of its large property holdings to take care of the poor, educate the young, and perform similar worthy tasks. In decided contrast to the great stress put on the peasant revolt in the texts of the 1920's, the books studied after 1933 gave only a short paragraph to the peasant revolt and quadrupled the amount of space allotted to the Counter-Reformation.

Instead of paying disrespect to kings and princes, as the authors did in the earlier texts, the authors of the texts of the authoritarian era took advantage of every opportunity to shower them with praises. They waxed eloquent over Emperor Maximilian's piety and courage and extolled the undaunted loyalty and intrepidity of Prince Eugene. Maria Theresa was painted as a beloved mother looking after the religious, moral, and social welfare of her people. Joseph II was represented as a kind reformer, admired by all his subjects, while Francis Joseph was depicted as an amiable father who constantly busied himself with promoting the well-being of his subjects and seeking to preserve European peace.

No longer was the French Revolution described in a manner intended to convince the schoolchildren of the wickedness of monarchies and the virtues of democracy. Instead, the textbook authors now sought to impress upon the youngsters the fact that the Revolution, instead of freeing the people, really put them under a much more oppressive yoke of tyranny than the one to which they had previously been subjected. Metternich was no longer denounced as a tyrant and reactionary, as he had been before 1933, but was depicted as a preserver of peace and security. Rather than condemning the suppression of liberalism and nationalism, the authoritarian historians wrote that the immobility of the governments of Central Europe at that time gave the German people an opportunity to develop their very best characteristics. In place of the long tribute to democracy and German nationalism in the democratic books, the writers of the texts for the authoritarian schools gave a mere factual description, limited to three or four pages, of the events of 1848 and 1849. "Father" Radetzky was now the hero rather than glorious revolutionists, courageous workers, and long-suffering peasants.
The heroism and self-sacrifice of Austrian soldiers during the World War was recalled to the young readers. The November 1918 revolution in Austria was attributed to unpatriotic communist and socialist propaganda. The peace treaties of 1919-1920 were still denounced, but the bitter condemnation of the prohibition of the union of Austria with Germany in the earlier texts was omitted. The Soviet Union was strongly attacked and the spread of communist and socialist ideas over postwar Europe deplored, while the resistance of conservative and Catholic groups to Marxian Socialism was eulogized. The postwar period in Austria was pictured as one of misery and despair before Engelbert Dollfuss rescued the homeland from the hands of incompetent parliamentary politicians.

In March, 1938, still another government and political ideology were superimposed upon the Austrian people, and the prevailing Austrian educational setup was again knocked topsy-turvy. For seven years Austrian students were subjected to the citizenship training program of Hitler's totalitarian Third Reich. They were to forget that there ever had been a concept of Austrian patriotism. Even the word "Austria" was stricken from the record. Like their democratic and authoritarian predecessors in Austria, the new National Socialist masters made full use of history to mold young Austrians into good citizens of a National Socialist empire.

In the history texts used in the Austrian elementary and secondary schools during the democratic era, social and economic history had received the dominant stress. Between 1933 and 1938 the main emphasis had been put on Austrian tradition and on religious history. From 1938 to 1945 racial and political history were the themes most frequently harped upon.

The Austrian schoolchildren were informed about the great virtues of their Nordic forebears and told how, in their quest for living space, their Nordic ancestors had conquered all Europe and the whole Mediterranean basin. It was the Nordics who, concerned as they were with preserving the genetic health, racial purity, and folk-community spirit of their race, built up and raised Greek and Roman civilizations to their pinnacle of glory. Unfortunately, the Greeks and Romans fell under the evil spell of Semitic capitalism and let down the barriers which had kept the Nordic ruling classes from marrying servile persons of oriental stock. In a short while the Nordic blood flowing in the veins of the Greek and Roman ruling elites was practically extinct. As a consequence, the Hellenic and Latin states fell ready prey to young, virile conquerors.

Medieval peasant life was touched upon mainly to disclose to the students the values of the National Socialist concepts of blood and soil. A discussion of medieval trade was included primarily to demonstrate how the usuriousness and un-German demeanor of the Jews made them abhorrent to all persons with whom they came in contact. Tears were shed because the
conversion of heathen Germans to Catholic Christianity had resulted in the destruction of the old German heroic ethics and the wise old German laws which had prevented German freemen from marrying non-German slaves. Moreover, so the Austrian Jungvolk was told, the rise of the Catholic church to the position of a European power brought in its train a Titanic struggle for world supremacy which ended in the catastrophic destruction of the medieval German empire.

The National Socialist texts portrayed the Reformation, in a decidedly anticlerical tone, mainly as a Los von Rom movement. The hero of the piece was not Martin Luther but Franz von Sickingen, a gallant fighter for folk and fatherland; the villains were Charles V, John Calvin, and the Jesuits.

In place of the panegyrics about Austria's past, so prolific in the texts studied between 1933 and 1938, were eulogies of the wondrous accomplishments of Germans over the whole face of the globe. Austrian schoolchildren were now informed that it was Diderik Pining, from Hildesheim, and not Christopher Columbus, who first discovered America by discovering Newfoundland in 1472. Columbus made his voyages only because Pining's discovery had given him the idea of reaching India by sailing west. The new world was named after the German, Americus Vespucius, and it was primarily German traders who conducted the trade in the new lands discovered in Africa, India, and the Americas. Forty-eight of the seventy-two signers of the American Declaration of Independence had German names. "All the officers and almost all the soldiers" in Washington's personal bodyguard were Germans. And it was a German girl, Betsy Ross, who designed the American flag!

Instead of taking advantage of the French Revolution to proselytize democratic ideas, as the democratic authors had done, or merely to point out the dangerousness of revolutionary thinking, as the authoritarian writers did, the National Socialist textbook writers turned the French Revolution into an object-lesson of the perils of Judaism, liberalism, humanitarianism, and internationalism. They denounced early nineteenth-century liberalism, which had been so enthusiastically praised in the 1920's and passed by in complete silence between 1933 and 1938, as a philosophy paving the way for Jewish world domination, and they waxed enthusiastic over the nationalist expressions of German Romantic writings and the strong Teutonic and alleged anti-Semitic voicings of German students. Metternich was no longer an oppressor of liberalism and nationalism or a preserver of peace and stability but a venal tool of the Jew Rothschild and an obsequious agent of the pope, and the revolutionists of 1848-1849 were nothing more than victims of radical Jewish liberalism.

The last of the nineteenth century was described largely in terms of the "good guy" and the "bad guys." The "good guy" was Otto von Bismarck,
an audacious realist, who waged a courageous battle against a nefarious conspiracy of the “bad guys”—the Jews—to take control of the fatherland and to ruin the German race. Assisted by the Freemasons, the Jews took advantage of the rapid growth of big business to obtain control of most of the large industrial concerns, the landed property, the press and theater, and the most important political posts in the German empire.

Aiding the German Jews in their intrigues to get the whole German empire in the palms of their hands, the Austrian school tots were told, were Jewish and Masonic conspirators outside Germany. Most of the leading political figures in England, France, and Russia were Freemasons. They entered into a triple entente with one another to isolate Germany, to initiate a campaign of slander against Germany, and to induce a Serb plotter belonging to an organization similar to the Masonic order to create a cause for war by assassinating the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand. After the war was over, the young Austrian scholars were informed, the Freemasons pronounced the death sentence upon Germany. Three of the “Big Four” who drafted the “Versailles dictate”—Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, and David Lloyd George—were high-ranking Freemasons, and each of them had a Jewish adviser constantly at his side. The Dawes and Young reparations plans, drawn up by agents of J. P. Morgan, the king of Jewish international financiers, crowned the work of the conspirators by making Germany nothing but “an exploitation colony of international high finance.”

In the meanwhile, within Germany itself—so goes the tale related to Hitler’s Jungvolk in the Eastern Mark—the Jews and their allies, the Marxian Socialists, the Freemasons, and the Catholics, frustrated all the efforts of the Austrians to effectuate a union with Germany. They also shoved through the German national assembly a typical Masonic constitution which had been drawn up by a Jewish political scientist and which opened the door for the Jews to gain complete control of German political, economic, and intellectual life. They were on the verge of taking over complete control of Germany and destroying everything that smacked of Germanism when Adolph Hitler, in the nick of time, rescued Germany from their clutches and reestablished strong authoritarian leadership, enacted measures to restore the hereditary health of the German people, and created anew the sacred ties between German blood and German soil.

In 1945 there was a fourth change of government. Austria again became a democratic republic. In many significant ways the spirit of the Second Republic, however, differs considerably from that of the first. After 1945 the Austrian people were no longer dominated by that intoxicating spirit of liberty and popular sovereignty which had possessed many of their forebears in the early 1920’s. The mutual deprivation and suffering during the war and numerous friendships developed in concentration camps and in resis-
tance movement between various leaders of the warring political parties of the 1920's and '30's helped to dampen the political extremism of the interwar period. Also absent since 1945 have been the violent attacks on Austrian traditions and the intense anti-Catholicism which so deeply colored the thinking of the 1918 revolution. Moreover, the seven years of annexation by Germany once and for all put an end to the ardent Pan-Germanism and the spirited pro-Anschluss agitation of so many Austrians before 1933. Most important of all, since 1945 a specific feeling of Austrian nationalism has developed for the first time in history. In short, although the second Austrian Republic is democratic in spirit, it is by no means a mere copy of the first one.

The differences between the First and Second Austrian Republics, as well as those between the Second Republic and the authoritarian and National Socialist eras, are reflected in the history textbooks studied in the Austrian schools since 1945. Since the Second World War the citizenship training objectives of the Austrian schools have been to train the youth to think independently and logically, to instruct them in basic Christian religious and moral values, to impregnate them with democratic, pacifist, and internationalist ideas, and to imbue them with a strong feeling of Austrian nationalism. To accomplish these objectives, the schoolchildren are made acquainted with a much broader spectrum of history than ever before. Gone are the one-sided account of social and economic history of the 1920's, the exclusive stress on the accomplishments of monarchs and clergymen of the authoritarian era, and the emphasis on alleged Jewish conspiracies to destroy Nordic and German peoples of the period of National Socialist occupation. Now the Austrian schoolchildren are studying well-balanced and relatively objective accounts of all fields of history—political, cultural, social, economic, diplomatic, and military—from ancient times to the contemporary era.

That is not to say that the Austrians have abandoned all efforts to bend historical facts to suit citizenship training purposes. Since 1945 they have merely been bending them in a different direction. In line with the social democratic element in current Austrian political thought, the struggles between the plebeians and patricians of ancient Rome are now described in terms of a modern class struggle and the Gracchus brothers are depicted as heroic champions of the common man. The ruthless exploitation of the impoverished peasantry by the wealthy classes of Greece and Rome, it is intimated to the Austrian pupils, was the main cause for the rise of tyranny in both ancient Greece and Rome. In deference to the Catholic and nationalist current in present-day Austria, however, an appreciable amount of emphasis is devoted to the accomplishments of the medieval church and clergy, the deeds of various Habs-
burg rulers, and the rise of Austria as a Great Power. Maximilian I, Prince Eugene, Maria Theresa, Andreas Hofer, and Francis Joseph especially are turned into objects for admiration by Austrian youngsters.

Indicative of the lack of bitter partisanship and violent anticlericalism in the Second Austrian Republic is the well-balanced, factual account of the Protestant Reformation in the history texts. Neither the peasant revolt nor the Catholic Counter-Reformation is overemphasized, as was the case in the 1920's and '30's, respectively. Even more characteristic of the new spirit in Austria is the use made of the British Bill of Rights, the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, the American Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen to imbue the student with the democratic principles advocated by the political leaders of the Second Austrian Republic.

The discussions of medieval and early modern history are thus a hybrid variety, procreated from both democratic and authoritarian chromosomes. The authoritarian traits become more recessive, however, when the authors of the texts discuss the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Metternich is now reproached, though in milder terms than in the 1920's, for his repression of liberalism and nationalism. The liberal and nationalistic students and the victims of the "Metternich system" have again become heroes. The 1848-1849 revolutionary movement is once more described in a sympathetic vein, but the encomium to German nationalism in the texts of the First Republic has been omitted and General Radetzky for a second time becomes a beloved father of his army.

Replacing the enthusiastic praise of the unification of Germany and Italy in the texts of the pro-Anschluss 1920's are factual accounts in which the horrors of warfare are pointed out, and Francis Joseph is cast in the role of a peace-loving emperor seeking to make peace at the first opportunity. In the long section devoted to the Austrian monarchy between 1849 and 1914 the democratic aspects of the government are emphasized, and it is pointed out that all nationalities in Austria had equal political rights, their own educational and cultural institutions, and unlimited freedom of movement in the whole monarchy.

The socialistic trends and Catholic social welfare doctrines prevailing in Austria since World War II have prompted the pointed analyses of the weaknesses of economic liberalism and the relatively long discussions in the texts of the rise of socialism and Catholic social movements. In line with the prevailing spirit of pacifism, there is a graphic description of the horrors of warfare in the chapter on World War I. In deference to the new spirit of Austrian patriotism and nationalism, it is pointed out to Austrian youngsters that the nationalist claims of the Balkan peoples against Austria-Hungary were in the final analysis responsible for the outbreak of the war. Also, the
strong support given to the German war effort by the Austrian campaigns on the Eastern Front is emphasized. Nothing critical is now said about the prohibition of *Anschluss* with Germany in the treaty of St. Germain.

In their discussions of the First and Second Republics and the authoritarian regime the writers of the post-1945 history texts appear to be bending over backwards to be as fair as possible to the political leaders and political parties of all three eras. However, they do not hesitate to denounce the Italians for oppressing Germans in the South Tyrol and make no secret of Mussolini's interferences in Austrian internal affairs in the 1930's. They also spare no efforts to inform the schoolchildren about the machinations of the National Socialists against Austria in the 1930's, the horrible mistreatment of Jews and political opponents by the Nazis, and the efforts of the Communists to destroy Austrian democracy in the 1940's and early 1950's.

Four different histories have thus been taught in the Austrian elementary and secondary schools within the last half century. After each of the four political overturns that have taken place within the past fifty years, the historical substance crammed into the heads of the youngsters was changed to suit the different citizenship training needs of those temporarily in control of the Austrian state. Has the question posed by the title of this paper—"History always a Science or sometimes a Science of Propaganda?"—been answered? Does the Austrian case study show that the history studied in the Austrian elementary and secondary schools during the past half century has been based on a scientific, objective search for truth, or rather that it has been modified by political leaders and educators to suit citizenship training propaganda purposes? I believe the answer is obvious.

A study of the history textbooks taught in other countries will no doubt give similar evidence of how history is changed at will to suit the citizenship training objectives of power elites. For instance, a comparative study of the history taught in Russian schools before and after 1917 should be quite revealing. And what about our own elementary and secondary school history textbooks? Compare the patriotic accounts of the Boston Massacre or the Boston Tea Party in the usual American junior high school text with the statement in a British secondary school text that the mob involved in the Boston Massacre was wholly made up of "sailors who were 'ex-smugglers'" or the British accounts of the "lawless defiance" of "agitators" who dumped tea into Boston harbor. Or balance the American text descriptions of the long series of American victories in the Mexican War with the stories in Mexican school books about the glorious victories of hopelessly outnumbered Mexican patriots against the imperialistic Yankee invaders!

School texts can thus be profitably examined for evidence of how the versions of history taught in elementary and secondary schools are consciously or unconsciously altered to suit the ideas of the wielders of political
authority—the political leaders and the pressure groups powerful enough to influence them—in regard to the kind of citizens they would like to have in a state. The texts can be studied with even greater profit for insight into the political, national, economic, social, and moral values cherished by the political leadership groups of any particular era. Although I examined the history texts for this particular study for the purpose of deciding whether or not their content was deliberately changed for citizenship training purposes, I could just as easily have investigated them with the aim of ascertaining the views of the ruling classes during the four different periods covered by this study.

Of much greater importance, I believe that the history and other textbooks used in the elementary and secondary schools can profitably be analyzed to find at least a partial answer to one of the most perplexing problems of intellectual history: that of determining the political, religious, economic, social, and nationalist beliefs of that large body of inhabitants of any country or any period of history who hardly ever read or understand anything more serious than the comic strips or local gossip sheets or their equivalents. Of course, during the past quarter century or longer, school texts have competed with many other opinion-forming instruments such as newspapers, radios, television, political parties, churches, social clubs, and economic interest groups in making an impact on the minds of the mass of citizens with only an elementary or secondary school education. Also, one must always take into account the likelihood that some teachers do not teach everything in the textbooks and that embittered and alienated schoolchildren at times stubbornly resist the values taught in school. Moreover, as Lawrence Wylie has pointed out in his Village in the Vaucluse, sometimes whole villages or areas hostile to a central government resist accepting the values represented by that government. Then, too, in instances where radical political changes have taken place as frequently as in Austria between 1918 and 1945, the molders of public opinion hardly had time to impregnate the youth with their own particular ideas before the whole school system was knocked topsy-turvy and an entirely new set of values was taught.

Nonetheless, especially when dealing with public opinion during more stable political periods, like the Habsburg monarchy of the early part of the nineteenth century, for instance, I believe that the hypothesis that the basic ideas of the great mass of poorly educated citizens can best be gleaned by studying what was taught them in the elementary schools might perhaps be valid. At least I have enough faith in the possibilities of this line of historical investigation to ask anyone who might ever make such a study in connection with any facet of the history of the Habsburg monarchy to submit it to me for consideration for publication in the
TEXTS EXAMINED

The First Austrian Republic


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The National Socialist Era

Gehl, Walther, Deutsche Geschichte in Stichworten. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (Breslau, 1940).

—, Geschichte für die zweite Klasse, Oberschulen und Gymnasien. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende der grossgermanischen Zeit (Breslau, 1939).


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