

BOOK REVIEW—ANNE APPLEBAUM'S *RED FAMINE* (2017)

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Anne Elizabeth Applebaum. *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*.
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Written by Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine* is a detailed historical account of the famine of 1932–1933 which engulfed ‘Soviet Ukraine’ (Ukrainian *Socialist Soviet Republic*, 1919 [1922]–1936; Ukrainian *Soviet Socialist Republic* [UkrSSR], 1936–1991)—an event known as the ‘Holodomor’.² The Holodomor is considered to be the second great famine since the inception of the ‘Soviet Union’ (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR], 1922–1991) and it cost millions of lives, with numbers ranging from 3 to 10 million.³ In comparison, the first great famine in ‘Soviet Russia’ (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic [SFSR], 1917 [1922]–1991) claimed approximately 5 million lives in 1921–1922. That famine struck Russian parts of the Soviet Union the worst, but Ukraine suffered as well. The first famine became known to the world while it was unfolding and was then intercepted by international aid, while the Holodomor of 1932–1933 was covered up and virtually erased from the Soviet public memory. While the Holodomor narrative is relatively unknown to the Western public, it is not a new one. The British–US-American historian Robert Conquest⁴ published the first scholarly treatment of the Holodomor back in 1986 in a book entitled *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. In 2004, the two British researchers Robert William Davies and Stephen G. Wheatcroft challenged Conquest on ‘intentionality’ and the death-toll with their study *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (2009 [2004]).⁵

Applebaum’s recent book picks up on this contested memory of the Holodomor. She is mostly known for historical narratives such as *Gulag: A History* (2003), while also working as an outspoken columnist in *The Washington Post* and other US news outlets, where she frequently voices her opinions on world affairs, often on the situation in

¹ Allen Lane (London) belongs to Penguin Random House—such as Anchor Books (New York) and Doubleday (New York). In addition to the Allen Lane 2017 hardcover edition, both a Doubleday 2017 hardcover edition and an Anchor Books 2018 paperback edition are available; among other reprint editions. Further, Applebaum’s *Red Famine* is also available in Norwegian: *Rød sult: Stalins krig mot Ukraina*, translated by Rune R. Moen, 2018 published by Cappelen Damm (Oslo).

² The term ‘Holodomor’ roughly translates to ‘death by starvation’. According to Applebaum (2017: xxvi), it is derived from the Ukrainian words *holod* (hunger) and *mor* (extermination).

³ These numbers have been heavily debated, but the historical consensus seems to stabilize at 3.9 million (Applebaum 2017: 279–280). The politicalized versions of these numbers are often set at 7–10 million, probably to ‘outdo’ the 1941–1945 Holocaust.

⁴ [George] Robert [Acworth] Conquest (1917–2015) was known for his polemical and condemning historical books on the Soviet Union and was an adviser of both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan on questions concerning the Soviet Union.

⁵ Read more about this in the *Deñ* [*The Day*] article ‘How the West Interprets the Ukrainian Holodomor: Robert Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft vs. Robert Conquest’ (Kulchytsky 2015).

Ukraine—while typically characterizing Ukraine as the ‘victim’ and Russia as the ‘aggressor’. This view is reflected in the preface of her new book:

The *Maidan revolution* [sic] of 2014, *Yanukovich's decision to shoot at protesters* [sic] and then flee the country, *the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea* [sic], *the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine* [sic] and *the accompanying Russian propaganda campaign* [sic] all unexpectedly put Ukraine at the centre of international politics while I was working on this book (Applebaum 2017: xxx; emphasis added).

It was truly a timely publication in the year 2017, with a divided Ukraine still locked in something akin to civil war, Ukrainian acts of aggression towards Soviet monuments and the release of *Bitter Harvest* (2017), a Canadian–US-American film directed by George Mendeluk, which tells the tale of the Holodomor to a global audience.

Furthermore, as exemplified by the above quotation, it seems that Applebaum's narrative of the Ukraine–Russia conflict is synchronized with the Western mainstream media version of the event.⁶ While Applebaum presents *Red Famine* as an objective historical work, one should keep in mind her other role in the news media and think tanks where she often warns about ‘total war’ with Russia. While it is important to contextualize *Red Famine* within her political work, my goal is to focus on how the content of her newest book is presented.

A look at the bibliography in *Red Famine* reveals that Applebaum consulted a vast amount of literature in English, Russian and Ukrainian. Applebaum notes that the wealth of available documentation ‘finally’ makes it ‘possible’ to tell ‘the complete story’ of the Holodomor. Well, in this case, perhaps it is better to name it the ‘almost complete US-conservative's version’ of the event. Applebaum's work is, after all, aligned with Canadian and Ukrainian research, to which the author acknowledges a great debt for supporting her work. She tells us that: “[...] Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow* (like this one) was written in collaboration with the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute” (Applebaum 2017: 336). This information should caution the reader of what strain of the Holodomor narrative we have before us.

Applebaum explains that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine a lot of work has been done collecting oral history and memoirs in Ukraine. Quotations from such witness testimonies are used to great effect throughout the book and make a gruesome reading, but one should perhaps be slightly wary of relying too much on such sources as they are not always trustworthy and may be politically motivated or otherwise manipulated, as pointed out by the US-American–Canadian historian John-Paul Himka.⁷ However, Applebaum relies heavily on witness testimonies to ‘prove’ that the famine was deliberate. Perhaps the best examples of this

⁶ Oliver Boyd-Barrett did an extensive study of such narratives and balanced them with narratives from ‘Western’ ‘alternative media’ in his book *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis: A Study in Conflict Propaganda* (2017), which should be consulted if you are interested in a critique of the hegemonic ‘Western’ mass-media narrative of the conflict.

⁷ See John-Paul Himka's review article ‘Encumbered Memory: The Ukrainian Famine of 1932–[19]33’ (2013). Himka is known for challenging the ‘mythologizing’ of Ukrainian history. About this, read his article ‘Interventions: Challenging the Myths of Twentieth-Century Ukrainian History’ (2012). It is worth noting that none of his works are considered in Applebaum's here-reviewed book.

can be found in chapters eight–ten that deal with the alleged decisions made by the Soviet government to ‘initialize’ the famine.

Applebaum’s book is divided into fifteen chapters, not including the preface, introduction and epilogue. It includes historical maps of Ukraine and includes a large number of documentary photographs.

The introduction briefly tells of the various obstacles that hindered the formation of an independent Ukrainian state before 1917. In the first chapter, the narrative begins in 1917, the first year of the ‘Ukrainian Revolution’. In 1918, Ukraine became an independent state for a short period—interrupted by German, Polish and three Soviet invasions. The third Soviet invasion came in 1920, which temporarily ended any hopes for independence, but Ukraine would still enjoy some freedom for the next ten years, although part of the Soviet empire.⁸ In chapters one and two we learn about Ukraine’s struggle for independence and identity in the period leading up to the Holodomor and we are offered important background material for understanding the famine(s). This chapter introduces the important label ‘kulak’, one of the three peasant class categories devised by the Bolsheviks. Referring to a rich peasant who exploited others to work for them, it became increasingly political: “Very quickly, the kulaks became one of the most important Bolshevik scapegoats, the group blamed most often for the failure of Bolshevik agriculture and food distribution” (Applebaum 2017: 35).

Red Famine rears its head in chapter three, where the first famine of 1921–1922 eventually forced a truce between the Red, the White and anarchist armies. Applebaum attributes this famine to ruthless policies of grain confiscations exacerbated by civil war, propaganda, hate speech—and bad weather. Unlike the Holodomor of 1932–1933, “[...] in 1921[–1922,] mass hunger was not kept a secret. More importantly, the regime tried to help the starving” (Applebaum 2017: 61). Fridtjof Nansen and Herbert Hoover were key actors in the international relief effort. Applebaum posits that the famine was used to quell Ukrainian rebels and subdue the church, but the extent of the famine frightened Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks, forcing them to temporarily halt the grain confiscations. The famine’s consequences were peasant uprisings and fear for loss of power and resulted in two new policies, Lenin’s ‘New Economic Policy’ (NEP) and ‘Ukrainization’. The latter meant that the Ukrainian language was finally legalized and standardized, after having been very restricted in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Chapter four, covering 1927–1929, tells how the NEP resulted again in a food crisis and unrest. Under Joseph Stalin, a new phase of collectivization was about to begin in 1930; the subject of chapter five. The goal was to gather all small farms into large state farms and ‘proletarianize’ the peasantry, with the aim of boosting grain production and export, the income to be used to further industrialize Stalin’s empire. A ‘Five-Year Plan’ was introduced spawning competition to fulfill or exceed the set quotas. These policies were yet again met with discontent in rural Ukraine as the peasantry was restored to pre-1917 conditions—a ‘second serfdom’, so to speak. The freedoms

⁸ At the time of ‘the Russian Revolution’ (1917), Ukraine was part of Tsarist Russia (Russian Empire, 1721–1917; Tsardom of Russia, 1547–1721; note: Russo–Polish War, 1654–1667). The pair of revolutions in Russia ignited Ukrainian hopes for independence. As it turned out, Ukraine was too important to be granted absolute independence under the Soviet yoke. Soviet control did not come easily, and the Ukrainian peasantry violently resisted the collectivization policy. It took two famines to finally quell Ukrainian resistance. For a more detailed account of this, read chapter two of Robert Conquest’s *Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), next to *Red Famine* (2017).

Ukraine experienced since the truce in 1920 were gradually taken away as Applebaum illustrates with quotes from Miron Dolot's memoir of the Holodomor, *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust* (1985). Conditions became worse than ever for the Ukrainian peasantry. This was heralded in Dolot's peaceful Ukrainian village by the appearance of state activists who were dispatched to the countryside to implement collectivization. Applebaum describes many of them as truly patriotic and motivated by the propaganda and the hate speech used in the 'de-kulakization' campaign. To be named a 'kulak', which originally meant a wealthy farmer, but which came to be applied to anyone who opposed collectivization, owned a cow or seemed better off than others, entailed grave consequences:

As de-kulakization began in earnest, the vicious language had practical consequences: once a peasant was named a 'kulak' he was automatically a traitor, an enemy and a non-citizen. He lost his property rights, his legal standing, his home and his place of work. His possessions no longer belonged to him; expropriation often followed [...]. In practice, de-kulakization quickly evolved into plunder. Some kulak property was confiscated and then sold to the public at improvised auctions (Applebaum 2017: 126–127).

Male heads of households, and many families were deported to remote corners of the Soviet empire: "In time, the large numbers of deported kulaks would fuel the rapid expansion of the Soviet forced labour system, the chain of camps that eventually became known as the Gulag" (Applebaum 2017: 132).⁹ All of these elements are skillfully implemented by Applebaum to convince the reader of how 'brainwashed' these evil state agents were that invaded and despoiled the Ukrainian countryside. It also shows Applebaum's somewhat uncritical use of memoirs published by the Ukrainian diaspora.

Chapter six deals with the second wave of peasant rebellions and uprisings, which occurred in 1930, and documents widespread resistance towards the second collectivization drive, and chapter seven relates how this failing project was ruthlessly forced through by resorting to violent methods and a fearful propaganda campaign. Mass arrests and deportations of 'counter-revolutionary elements' and the implementation of draconian laws were among the methods used. Especially harsh for the starving rural population of Ukraine was the law of August 7, 1932, which allowed for the theft of even small amounts of food to be "[...] punished by ten years in a labour camp—or death. Such punishments had hitherto been reserved for acts of high treason" (Applebaum 2017: 181). Such examples of Stalin's policies and their consequences are abundant throughout the book and much like Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), many of the chapters read like horror-fiction at times. Compared to the way that Conquest compares the mass starvation in Ukraine to the killing of Jews in the 1941–1945 Holocaust—"Ukraine [...] was like one vast Belsen" (1986: 3)—Applebaum is perhaps more neutral in her descriptions of the horrors of the famine and comparisons

⁹ For more details on the 'Gulag', see Applebaum's *Gulag: A History* (2003).

with ‘Nazi’¹⁰ crimes. Nonetheless, in chapter eight, she seeks to prove, with documents, that Ukraine became something like ‘a vast extermination camp’.

A related point that needs to be addressed in this case is the use of documentary photography in *Red Famine*. The book is illustrated by a fine collection of photographs taken during the famine. A few of these images show dead famine victims; none shows dead or skeletal children, which otherwise tend to provoke the most pronounced emotional reactions in viewers. Such pictures are, however, displayed in Conquest’s book and they are mostly of victims of the earlier famine 1921–1922, and were in fact taken in *Russian* areas of the Soviet Union, although this is not stated in Conquest’s book.¹¹ To her credit, Applebaum has not re-used these iconic images of starving or dead Russians, even though she writes about that famine as well. Instead of resorting to the shock value of photographs like the ones Conquest used, Applebaum documents the extent of the later Ukrainian famine, and argues that it was to a large extent man-made, using material not available to Conquest.

Chapters eight, nine and ten focus on decisions made by the Soviet government that ‘led’ to the Holodomor of 1932–1933, making the case that the famine was ‘deliberate’. Numerous Russian scholars do not agree with many of these arguments, which we shall go into later in this review.

Chapters eleven and twelve recount in explicit detail the starvation and survival in the spring and summer of 1933, before chapter 13 tells of the aftermath of the famine, and chapter fourteen details the ‘cover-up’ of the famine. Much is made of the claims of *New York Times* journalist Walter Duranty, who reported that there was no famine, only widespread cases of malnutrition. This point is still debated today with several newly released documentaries and films to tell the tale of the journalists who witnessed firsthand the horrors of the Holodomor.

I would now like to focus on the two last parts of the book, chapter fifteen and the epilogue, as they are perhaps the most relevant for media and documentation studies, as well as memory studies, and because they aim to connect the famine with current debates and events in Russia and Ukraine.

The topic of chapter fifteen, ‘The Holodomor in History and Memory’ (Applebaum 2017: 320–345), is how the famine has been represented in memory and history. It shows that from 1933 to the late 1980s, the Soviet government(s) denied it and tried to ‘erase’ it from collective memory (Applebaum 2017: 321). The only exception to this silence was during Adolf Hitler’s occupation of Ukraine. Applebaum writes that when the Nazis entered Ukraine in June of 1941 they knew about the famine of 1932–1933 and used it for their own propaganda campaign, pinning the blame on ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’. German troops were at first greeted by many Ukrainians as liberators, but events would prove this terribly wrong. The Nazis’ main interest was grain to feed their country during the last phase of the war. Thus, the Nazis aspired to design their own famine based on Stalin’s methods. Incredible as it may sound, Applebaum (2017: 324) asserts that: “Contrary to stereotype, the German authorities were less efficient than

¹⁰ From here on, the rather colloquial, yet commonly accepted phrases ‘Nazi’ (National Socialist) and ‘Nazis’ (National Socialists) are being used by choice—analogue to ‘Nazism’ (National Socialism).

¹¹ Some of the most iconic photos were taken by Fridjof Nansen during the famine relief mission in Russia 1921–1922. See a narrative of that famine and the photos ‘in their proper context’ in *Nansens kamp mot hungersnöden i Russland 1921–[19]23* by Carl Emil Vogt (2007).

their Soviet counterparts: [P]easant traders did get through the make-shift cordons—they found it difficult to do so in 1933—and thousands of people took to the roads and railroads again in search of food”. Despite restrictions and difficulties imposed on them by the Nazi regime, Ukrainians again enjoyed religious freedom and could start to speak openly about the famine. But because of the collaboration by Ukrainians in the 1941–1945 Holocaust and the fact that the famine was used in Nazi propaganda, the collective memory of the famine remains tainted. So by relating this lesser-known part of history, Applebaum wants to show the origins of the current ‘Nazi–fascist narrative’ the Russian government uses to delegitimize the Ukrainian government and to justify Russia’s ‘annexation’ of Crimea. She then intertwines this history with contemporary politics:

Thanks to the politics that swirled around the word ‘genocide’, it became a kind of identity tag in Ukrainian politics, a term that could mark those who used it as partisans of one political party and those who did not as partisans of another. The problem worsened in the spring of 2014, when the Russian government produced a caricature ‘genocide’ argument to justify its own behavior. During the *Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine* [sic], Russian-backed separatists and Russian politicians both said that their *illegal interventions* [sic] were a ‘defence against genocide’—meaning the ‘cultural genocide’ that ‘Ukrainian Nazis’ were supposedly carrying out against Russian speakers in Ukraine (Applebaum 2017: 354–355; emphasis added).

Applebaum shares no source for the story above and fails to mention an ‘alternative narrative’ pointed out by Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2017: 21), among others, where right-wing groups and ultra-nationalists indeed played a vital role in instigating violence against the police forces during the ‘Euromaidan’ (2013–2014), causing the ensuing chaos—nor does she mention the fact that Russia legally had stationed military forces in Crimea prior to the ‘invasion’ (Boyd-Barrett 2017: 63). Such stories are seemingly ignored by ‘Western’ news outlets like the *New York Times*, according to Boyd-Barrett.

The same chapter discusses the Holodomor documentary *Harvest of Despair* (dirs. Slavko Nowytsky and Yuriy Luhovy, 1984) and the subsequent release of Robert Conquest’s book on the famine in 1986. Conquest’s book received widespread interest, but also critical reviews and some academic journals did not even care to consider it. A book published in response was *Fraud, Famine and Fascism: The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard* (1987), by a Canadian labor activist named Douglas Tottle. Applebaum tells of how at the time the book was promoted by the Soviet government and that it was nothing more than “Nazi propaganda” (Applebaum 2017: 338). What Applebaum writes about this book is very significant in light of current events:

In retrospect, Tottle’s book is significant mostly as a harbinger of what was to come, nearly three decades later. Its central argument was built around the supposed link between Ukrainian ‘nationalism’—defined as any discussion of Soviet repression in Ukraine, or any discussion of Ukrainian independence or sovereignty—and fascism, as well as American and British intelligence (Applebaum 2017: 338).

This is, according to Applebaum, the same type of discourse used today in the Russian information campaign and such historical knowledge disseminated here is very useful for understanding current events in Ukraine, though I would say that the reader should be critical of the tone and language of the text and understand that there are, obviously, always several sides to a story.

The epilogue, ‘The Ukrainian Question Reconsidered’ (Applebaum 2017: 346–362), sums up the main points and arguments of the book and addresses interlinked issues in present-day Ukraine, such as the genocide debate.¹² Where does Applebaum stand on the question of genocide? This is crucial because the debate on genocide and intentionality is very much connected to recent developments concerning Ukraine and Russia, especially since 2014.¹³ I see Applebaum as fairly balanced on the question whether the famine constituted genocide and if it was part of a pre-mediated plan by Stalin to exterminate the Ukrainian people. Yes, she documents that policies were put in place that facilitated conditions for the famine, but she brings up the point that Ukrainians did not suffer *exclusively* and that Ukrainian communists were complicit in the crimes. She recognizes that other parts of the Soviet Union were also badly affected, for example Kazakhstan and rural parts of Soviet Russia. Even so, her narrative (and, not least, the title and the publisher’s promotion of the book) may give the impression that it aims at demonizing ‘Stalin and his circle’ alone. Only if you read the whole book you will understand that her arguments are not purely one-sided.

How would the current Russian government and influential Russian historians view this book? Applebaum answers this herself when laying out how the Ukrainian government, under President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), ‘pushed hard’ for the world to recognize the Holodomor as attempted genocide. The Russian government saw this as an attack on them, being the successor of the USSR (Applebaum 2017: 352). Russian academia then formed a counter-narrative that did not explicitly deny the famine but instead “emphatically downplayed” (Applebaum 2017: 352) it and Ukraine’s suffering. This counter-narrative is found in a 2008 publication by a Russian scholar named Viktor Kondrashin with the title *The Famine of 1932–1933: The Tragedy of the Russian Village* (2008a; title translated by the author). Kondrashin does not deny there was a famine and shows that Stalin knowingly let people starve, though he asserts that certain pre-dominant estimates of Ukrainian death tolls were too high. Applebaum argues that scholarly interpretations of the famine are not that different in Ukraine and Russia, but that politicized versions of the event create different public understandings. This statement seems slightly odd since her argument stands almost in dichotomous opposition to Kondrashin’s: She seeks to prove that the Holodomor was a ‘genocide’ of the *Ukrainian* people, while Kondrashin stresses the point that Stalin’s terror was primarily targeted at the *entire* Soviet peasantry and that many other regions were also affected by the famine. Applebaum refers to a 2008 ‘Holodomor genocide

¹² The Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael [Rafał] Lemkin (1900–1959) coined the word ‘genocide’ and called the ‘Soviet Genocide in Ukraine’ a ‘classic example’ of his concept (Lemkin 2009 [1953]; Applebaum 2017: xxvii). However, to classify the Holodomor as genocide by international law has proved difficult, partly because of the complex nature of the famine and partly because of the denial of the crime by Russia. Equally important is the absence of documents proving that Stalin planned the genocide.

¹³ Including the 2014 Ukrainian ‘revolution’ and the 2014 ‘annexation’ of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Obviously, the terms ‘revolution’ and ‘annexation’—as taken for granted by Applebaum 2017—remain highly politicized and disputed, and thus underline the power of language.

question' debate between Viktor Kondrashin and Ukrainian historian Stanislav V. Kulchytsky—as published in the Kyiv-based, outspokenly 'EU-and-NATO-supporting' and 'West-oriented' newspaper *Den* [*The Day*].¹⁴ By reading these articles, one may get closer to the crux of the matter.

After Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), the successor of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), took over the presidency, the Holodomor language had been toned down. Yanukovich has since refused to call it a genocide. Relating to dominant Russian Holodomor discourses in the late 2010s, Applebaum ascribes: “[...] [T]he arguments had come full circle. The post-Soviet Russian state was once again in full denial: the Holodomor did not happen, and only ‘Nazis’ would claim that it did” (Applebaum 2017: 355). In her concluding words she states that Ukraine did overcome Stalin's terror and that it remains a sovereign state to this day, and it does not matter whether we classify it as ‘genocide’ or as ‘crimes against humanity’. She goes on to state that the Russian state now continues with the ‘same methods’ to undermine and deconstruct it, both in a literal and physical sense. It remains to be seen what the future holds for Ukraine.

To conclude, it must be stressed that *Red Famine* is written from a particular angle. It is, in no way, ‘the complete story’ of the Holodomor. To some degree, it implies that certain Ukraine-related current-day practices and policies of ‘Russia and Putin’ are somehow comparable to the ‘monstrous’ ones of ‘USSR and Stalin’. The way the narrative of the book is constructed demonstrates that the line between history writing and geopolitics can be—as so often—considered blurry.

The theme setting and particular relevance of artificial or man-made famines seems to come up in intervals, when tensions re-arise between ‘Western’ powers and Russia and seems to be useful for the purposes of ‘demonizing’ ‘Putin’—the current President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin (2000–2008; 2012–)—, ‘the Kremlin’, the Russian government; or simply ‘Russia’ in the eyes of ‘the West’. In recent years, the famine of 1932–1933 has reached new heights as a politicized event to be instrumentalized in a ‘memory war’ on many discursive levels (history, mass media, memorialization, etc.) between key-representatives of the current countries Ukraine and Russia (Hordijk 2018). This should, symptomatically, remind us of the sheer power that media narratives have in shaping public imaginations.

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¹⁴ This enlightening debate stems from a history conference held in Moscow in 2008, where divergent historical perceptions of the Holodomor were under discussion (Kondrashin 2008b and Kulchytsky 2008; see also Kulchytsky 2015).

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