

Katarzyna WASIAK 

University of Łódź, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Poland

Between Trauma and Nostalgia: Second Generation Memory of the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Pomiędzy traumą a nostalgicią. Pamięć drugiego pokolenia o wojnie w Bośni i Hercegowinie

• Abstract •

In this article, the author set out to analyze the war narratives of the Bosniak second generation – the generation that de facto did not experience the war, and base their stories on the experiences of their loved ones. The author shows how family narratives about the war affect the contemporary lives of those born after the war, and most importantly, how they affect contemporary ethnic relations in Bosnia.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina; war; collective memory; politics of memory

• Abstrakt •

W niniejszym artykule autorka postanowiła przeanalizować narracje wojenne bośniackiego drugiego pokolenia – pokolenia, które wojny *de facto* nie przeżyło, a swoje historie wywodzi z doświadczenia najbliższych. Autorka ukazuje, jak narracje rodzinne o wojnie wpływają na współczesne życie osób urodzonych już po zakończeniu konfliktu, a przede wszystkim, jak wpływają na współczesne stosunki etniczne w Bośni.

Słowa kluczowe: Bośnia i Hercegowina; wojna; pamięć zbiorowa; polityka pamięci

Introduction

Polish anthropologist Katarzyna Kaniowska stated that “[...] the lack of memory means the loss of identity. Without remembering we would be nobody” (Kaniowska, 2004, p. 15). Memory allows us to recreate past events, it brings to life the past, which allows us to construct our identity – our Self. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur mentioned the narrative nature of identity – he believed that a proper narrative ties together the individual’s experiences that build their identity (Ricoeur, 1992,

p. 11). Katarzyna Rosner, on the other hand, emphasizes that memory narratives will therefore be stories created on the basis of codes developed by culture, “[...] to which we reach to give shape and understand our experiences” (Rosner, 2003, p. 131). The intimate stories of our loved ones play a significant role in the construction of our narratives – our Self is based on the “emotional and intellectual identities” of individuals who are important to us (Kaniowska, 2008, p. 66).

As David Lowenthal notes – “memory of the past is crucial to our sense of identity” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 197). In the case we analyzed, it is worth noting that an extremely important aspect for identity will be the so-called postmemory,¹ also known as “inherited memory” or “received history”. It is worth to mention that postmemory is characterized by a strong emotional bond with the victims, and often leads to the mythologization of past events (Hirsch, 2008, p. 105). Societies, cultures are formed through the transmission from one generation to the next of values, myths, certain schemes – and very often trauma is transmitted along with them.

It is worth noting that the categories of postmemory and trauma make up a tangle of closely related issues. “The second generation [...] tainted by the echoes of the past” (Tuszyńska, 2005, p. 409), among other things, shapes its identity based on the relations of its parents. The issue of trauma in this context plays a significant role, the question is – what place nostalgia occupies here. The triad signaled in the title – postmemory, trauma, and nostalgia – prompts us to think about all these categories and analyze their mutual relations.

In this article, the author decided to analyze the war narratives of the Bosnian second generation – the generation that de facto did not experience the war, and

¹ The category of postmemory was introduced into scientific discourse by Marianne Hirsch. This Romanian researcher was born after World War II into a family of Jewish survivors – she created an innovative theory of research on the memory of the second generation, the so-called “after” generation. Starting from the autobiographical empirics presented in her 1997 book, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Hirsch analyzed her memories of the war, which she adapted through socialization from photographs around her, personal stories of loved ones, diaries, etc. Over the following years, the researcher had clarified the issue of postmemory in many essays and subsequent books, recognizing that “[...] postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance, and from history by a deep personal bond. Postmemory is a powerful and very special form of memory precisely because its relation to the object or source is mediated not through memories, but imagination and creativity. [...] Postmemory characterizes the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated histories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood or re-created” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 254). “Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 1).

base their stories on the experiences of those closest to them, as well as build them on the basis of the top-down created historical and political narrative.

One of the hypotheses that the author has raised in the course of her research speaks about the influence of family narratives on contemporary interpretations of war crimes. This is because the researcher suspected that it is the parents' memories that underlie second-generation nationalism. Based on this hypothesis, she posed a research question: did the second generation inherit a post-war trauma that could influence nationalist attitudes? In addition, the researcher, starting from the simple observation that memory creates a unified image of ourselves, and based on her own experiences while building her identity, by inquiring who her parents were, how they remember their youth, asked further research questions: does the second generation remember the war period with nostalgia?

In her analyses, the author relied on qualitative research she conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017–2021 using ethnographic methods. The study group is the Bosniaks community – that is, Bosnian Muslims, aged 19–25, considered by the author to be the primary medium of post-memory, or inherited memory. In selecting the respondents, the researcher paid special attention to the fact that they were people born at the end of or just after the war (only in this way could she be sure that they did not have personal memories of that period). The essential tool for obtaining information was unrestricted interviews. During all field trips, the author conducted 67 interviews, 39 of which were with women, while 28 were with men. The interviews were usually done during meetings in cafes, but also in private homes or during walks. The interviews were mostly recorded (if consent was given by the respondents) and then transcribed; a few interviews were only typed up. The material prepared in this way was subject to interpretation.

Theoretical reflections on the categories of trauma and nostalgia

As already mentioned in the introduction – the subject of this article will be the analysis of contemporary war narratives – stories of the second generation. It is worth noting that the very category of war memories is usually associated with such concepts as suffering, pain, trauma. Judith Herman noted that “traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman, 2020, p. 51). As Cathy Caruth noted, trauma causes immense suffering in the individual, but also strongly affects the environment, so it transfers from the individual level to the group one (Caruth, 1995, pp. 3–4). Social changes resulting from the experience of World War II, the

processes of decolonization and the violence of the 1990s have made the category of trauma a permanent part of the conceptual apparatus of the humanities and social sciences. Nowadays, reflection on trauma is the subject of research in many disciplines, from philosophy to cultural studies (Kaplan & Wang, 2004; Kibly, 2007; Rothe, 2011). The traumatogenic changes that are the aftermath of wars or revolutions have a considerable impact on society. Thus, trauma takes on a symbolic dimension – a cultural and social one, which often turns into political manipulation. The experience of trauma can become a reconstructing element of collective identity, not infrequently lying at the basis of its construction or consolidation. The so called “wound culture” is closely linked to victimization, and as Tomasz Łysak mentioned, has become a phenomenon in the contemporary definition of identity (Łysak, 2015, p. 7).

Trauma, which is often the aftermath of war, affects a community consisting of individuals, who then transmit their experience to subsequent generations, often leading to the traumatization of the next generations.² Mikołaj Grynberg, in his documentary *Oskarżam Auschwitz*, which is a collection of interviews with the survivors’ descendants, showed their growing up in the shadow of the trauma, as well as its often destabilizing effect on everyday life. In addition, the author, who took inspiration for the story from his own experience, presented the significance of trauma for the shape of the identity of the “after” generation. In addition, Grynberg exposed its severity, because many of the descendants of the survivors also suffered mental problems (Grynberg, 2017).

The “after” generation is raised among traumatic memories, often infused with a strong emotional charge. And very often they take the memories over to reinterpret them, and then they claim them as their own. As Hirsch points out, postmemory is an extremely permanent form of memory, because it contains a strong emotional charge. Moreover, it often requires a person to do intensive imaginative work and reproduce images of the suffering of loved ones (Hirsch, 1997, p. 23). Extremely important, therefore, seems to be the concept of inherited trauma which has entered the discourse thanks to psychiatrist Mark Wolynn. The researcher emphasizes that memory never dies, and family history is also our heritage, especially when it is

² It is worth mentioning here the category of transgenerational transmission of trauma (TTT) – research on Holocaust survivors allowed to see the “survivor syndrome”, involving the transmission of trauma to the next generation – then the term ‘transgenerational transmission of trauma’ was established (Kellermann, 2013). Transgenerational trauma is also referred to as “intergenerational trauma” or simply “generational trauma”. This is a relatively new field of research, as it only began in the 2000s. The idea is that trauma is transmitted both behaviorally and potentially biologically, affecting the way our DNA acts (for more see: Wolynn, 2017).

associated with suffering (Wolynn, 2017, p. 23). Dominick LaCapra, analyzing trauma in the context of the Shoah experience, also found that there is a transmission of suffering to subsequent generations. He stated that: "I have intimated that the experience of trauma may be vicarious or virtual, that is, undergone in a secondary fashion by one who was not there or did not go through the traumatizing events themselves. In the vicarious experience of trauma, one perhaps unconsciously identifies with the victim, becomes a surrogate victim, and lives the event in an imaginary way that, in extreme cases, may lead to confusion" (LaCapra, 2004, p. 125).

It is worth noting that nowadays, the relationship of postmemory and trauma is analyzed not only in the context of the Holocaust, as it has expanded its contextual scope. It is mentioned, for example, in the context of the experience of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, or the conflicts taking place in the 1990s. Moreover, postmemory is expanding to the community level. It emerges as a significant category in both social and cultural analyses. Postmemory is part of the space of "post-traumatic culture", which, as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir stated, "[...] focuses around a central injury, an ancient and repressed one, which suddenly returns and brings the entire current reality under revision" (Tokarska-Bakir, 2004, p. 98).

There is no doubt that the children of parents who were directly affected by the collective trauma have inherited a terrible past. The memories and testimonies of the second generation are an attempt to reconstruct the experiences their parents went through. The question of second-generation memory was also asked by the French writer of Jewish origin, Henri Raczymow, who, referring to his own experience, drew attention to the memory of the "after" generation, creating an alternative concept to postmemory – a 'memory shot through with holes' (*mémoire trouée*). Raczymow recognized that the memory of the second generation is falsified, because there is a constant reconstruction, moreover, it is extremely vulnerable to external stimuli (Syska, 2015, p. 7). As Ewa Domańska notes, the personal perspective causes history to give way to (dis)memory, i.e., selective perception of the past (Domańska, 1999, p. 113). Already Maurice Halbwachs claimed that a constant feature of the construction of narratives about the past by societies is the deformation and selection of events (Halbwachs, 2022, p. 34). As Piotr T. Kwiatkowski notes – amnesia is "a socially significant gap in collective memory concerning figures and facts of significant importance to the collective, which distinguishes it from the natural process of forgetting, which does not cause damage to the present or future culture or identity" (Kwiatkowski, 2009 p. 104). Interestingly, as Ewa Domańska notes, selective treatment of the past is also rooted in nostalgia (Domańska, 1999, p. 113).

Nostalgia itself, as Domańska also states, is one of the strongest forms of reminiscence combining physical reality with emotions and feelings – thus giving the most

intense experience of the past (Domańska, 1999, p. 113). In her research, Svetlana Boym points to the etymology of the concept of nostalgia. *Nostos* from Greek means ‘homecoming’, while *algos* means ‘pain’ (Boym, 2001, p. 41). Nowadays, the category of “nostalgia” is explored, especially in studies of the communist past. Boym also notes that today we can speak about a “global epidemic of nostalgia” (Boym, 2014, p. 331). Extremely popular nowadays are the phenomena of *jugonostalgia*, or nostalgia for the Soviet Union, or for Polish People’s Republic. A huge number of people after the political transformations were unable to find their way in the new capitalist reality, felt anxiety, even trauma. As Boym notes, “[...] nostalgia became a defense mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and the economic shock therapy” (Boym, 2002, p. 288). Hence, nostalgia for past times emerged. Interestingly, in the case of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, *jugonostalgia* is equally alive in the second generation. Importantly, the phenomenon of nostalgia is considered a longing for better times, for the normality of everyday life. Thus, one may be surprised by the nostalgic approach to war memories, which are associated with trauma rather than longing.

It is worth emphasizing at this point the utopian nature of the nostalgia experience. These are memories that are deeply filtered, selected, often omitting past suffering – nostalgia is highly falsified. In addition, although the memory of the war should be associated with suffering, it is worth noting that the memories of this period, although formed in the face of hatred, despair and pain, were formed in the face of social contact, community, being together. This silent knowledge within the family of trauma-related events also tells the story of the past, which is not easy to put into words, or no longer wants to be remembered. As Marek Zaleski notes: “The past is something that no longer directly affects us, does not make demands on us, does not threaten us. [...] Even that what is painful does not return as painful. Nostalgia feeds on a memory from which pain has been removed” (2004, p. 162).

(Post)memory of war: a case study

As has been mentioned many times, it would seem that the memory of the war is associated only with suffering, but the extremely complex human psyche allows memories of a shocking event to take on different dimensions. In addition, looking from the perspective of the author’s research, it should be noted that the memory of the second generation is influenced by various aspects, not just the surrounding family narrative. Listening to stories, reading diaries, visiting museums or learning history at school, we become curators of archival materials of various kinds – from

intimate stories to historical events. However, we are interested in the memory that consists of personal memories of loved ones, that is, it is closely related to the already discussed category of postmemory – inherited memory. Experiences of war trauma are seen as dark, full of pain and suffering. They refer to a fragment of history that is deeply rooted in the community's perception as painful events.

Family narratives are part of personal biography, people are immersed in family stories from the very beginning, and it is these stories that provide them with knowledge about the world. Subsequently, it is through their prism that they interpret the world, order their experiences, which they then put together into a coherent whole – a self that is intimately connected with the family stories that are part of their biography. The stories are the roots of which they are an extension. As the repeatedly mentioned Marianne Hirsch noted, these are memories “permanently connected by an ‘umbilical cord’ to life, they are the medium that connects the memory of the first and second generations” (Hirsch, 2010, p. 255).

Biographical narratives show the continuity of us because they are based on the knowledge that the individual has both about himself and about his ancestors. Significant stories are often retold, allowing them to become fixed in the individual's consciousness. Identity is created within a specific cultural and social context, which provides a certain framework to which the individual refers when creating his identity. Tragic events related to the war, although often impossible to express in words, are deeply rooted in the perception of the community, being subject to generational transmission. In addition, and importantly, biographical narratives allow the appropriation of memories by subsequent generations, moreover, they are often conceived as their own. Memories of unpleasant experiences, memories of trauma do not manifest themselves directly, but cannot be completely concealed, and therefore have a huge impact on the identity of family members. These are the memories to which successive generations refer in the processes of self-identification. They lead this generation to glorify their parents' memories more than their own experiences – this was not uncommon in the case of the second generation of Holocaust survivors. Perceiving the world through memories, the parents' experiences are authentic, but are only a slice of the next generation's memory.

The personal narratives of the respondents were filled with stories about loved ones, places that mattered to them, and social events. In many interviews (exactly in forty seven out of sixty nine), the “positive face” of the war was shown. At the same time, it is worth noting that the majority of these were statements by women, which shows a different approach to interpreting the events of the war, since male memory repeatedly took on a propaganda dimension. It would seem that women tended to base their “memory” of the war on family anecdotes and stories, and

less often on political rhetoric. This is indicated, for example, by the statements of Nermina, Lejla, and Nejra:

“My mother talks about those underground discos all the time. When everyone was partying, celebrating every day, dancing.”³

“In Sarajevo, it was a completely different life. My parents met during the war at a party held in the basement at their mutual friend’s house.”⁴

“Mom’s biggest regret is that she had to interrupt her studies, but overall after the war she completed them peacefully.”⁵

The statements also show the nostalgic nature of parents’ memories, while it is worth noting that most of the nostalgic stories were passed on by mothers than by fathers. Thus, it can be concluded that the perception of the war of the first generation is also subject to gender differentiation. The author does not want to make far-reaching theses in this aspect, as she only studied the second generation. However, from the statements of her respondents, she noted differences between the stories of mothers and fathers.

Nostalgia refers to a longing for past times or a set of relationships and experiences related to the past. Too often it is associated with the mythologization of history. As Jennifer Delisle notes, in her analysis of the war, nostalgia “is based on individual, lived experience, but it can still be influenced by elements of fantasy, distortions of memory” (Delisle, 2015, p. 17). Hence, this does not mean that the parents of the respondents did not experience pain, because they certainly did, but they do not necessarily want to tell their children about it.

Going back again to trauma theory, it is worth noting that, all too often, silence is a key response to traumatic experiences (see: Danieli, 1998; Hoffman, 2004). In the context of research interest, where there is not only a generational, but also a social consensus with regard to trauma, it seems normal for most of the younger generation to know the details of past events – they may not know exactly the family vicissitudes, but on the principle that “they were all there together”, they can interpret the silence in the family home. Tales of the violent past, war, and violence are passed on within the community and are readily available – these are elements of the modern historical narrative, the events of the 1990s having become the national myths of the Bosniak community.

³ Nermina, age 25, interviewed on December 10, 2019, in Sarajevo.

⁴ Lejla, age 24, interviewed on December 10, 2019, in Sarajevo.

⁵ Nejra, age 24, interviewed on December 9, 2019, in Sarajevo.

In addition, perhaps nostalgia can indicate how difficult it is to articulate a painful experience. There seems to be a lack of space for such a conversation about pain and trauma in family homes.

It is also worth analyzing how questions about the past were constructed. Certainly parents were asked questions about what it was like during the war, but more from the perspective of everyday life. Furthermore, every person wants to know their roots, hence it was more important to know how their parents met than how many times they witnessed a bombing or how many times they experienced rape. In addition, it is worth noting that the war happened during the period of their parents' youth – as Fatos Lubonja notes, the years of beauty and youth are remembered with nostalgia, no matter whether they happened during a period of peace or conflict (Lubonja, 2002, p. 12). As has already been mentioned, both memory and nostalgia are selective processes, longing for certain periods of one's life. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the stories of all respondents talking about their parents' youth in the times of conflict have a nostalgic tone.⁶ This is evidenced by the statements of the following respondents:

“My mother once told me how she used to go to underground discos and danced with her friends. I can't imagine how you can have so much fun during the bombing. But it is known, there were quiet days when they went for walks. My mother told me how she started dating my dad, moments before the war. Then he went off to fight, but used every free moment to come to her. Then he always brought her favorite chocolate.”⁷

“My grandmother had such a bittersweet story. Because during the war, my grandfather died of a heart attack, probably from stress. And at the beginning of the war she buried him, and at the end she was already getting married.”⁸

Conclusions

As Marek Zaleski notes, “[...] we are a creation of our memories, and our consciousness is a feature of our memory” (2004, p. 5). It should be noted that the childhood

⁶ Interestingly, nostalgic statements were more frequent from the respondents whose parents spent the war in besieged Sarajevo. Perhaps this is due to the fact that an “alternative” life developed in Sarajevo. The siege, which lasted more than four years, led to the fact that the people living there had to adapt to the conditions in the city. In addition, it was the cultural center of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which did not want to break with its artistic tradition even under the conditions of war.

⁷ Selma, age 22, interviewed on December 12, 2019, in Tuzla.

⁸ Sofija, age 21, interviewed on October 20, 2019, in Zenica.

of the second generation of Bosniaks falls on the post-war period, which was filled with various images of violence. Certainly, the second generation cannot speak of an experience of conflict *sensu stricto*, but the time in which they grew up marked them with trauma, for the war was still vividly visible – it was not uncommon for their playground to be ruins. In addition, the young grew up in an atmosphere of high-profile settlement processes, hence from an early age they were fed both the slogans of historical politics and Western discourse on the war.

Inspired by Marianne Hirsch's concept and research on the postmemory of second-generation Holocaust survivors, the researcher suspected that second-generation Bosniaks were equally affected by the trauma of war as their parents, and moreover she suspected that tense ethnic relations are influenced by the experiences of those closest to them. Undoubtedly, family histories influence contemporary interpretations of the war, but it should be emphasized that the tensions mentioned are not a direct result of upbringing in the family home, although it certainly has an impact. As has been pointed out many times, the author started from the concept of postmemory with the assumption that memory inherited from loved ones can have the greatest impact on the consciousness of the second generation. However, as research has shown, it would be a huge abuse to say that it is the basis of second-generation nationalism. Of course, the memories of parents have an impact on the perception of the Other – in this case, Serbs and Croats, but this is not the result of being raised in a nationalist spirit, but of being raised in a certain anxiety of another war.

As German writer Thomas Brussig, author of the novel *On the Shorter End of Sun Avenue* [Polish: *Aleja Stoneczna*], notes: “Recollection is not remembering, it is not holding in memory – memories make it possible ‘to make peace with the past, in which every resentment turns out to be passing, wrapping up with a soft veil of nostalgia everything we once felt as harsh and hurtful’” (Brussig, 2002, p. 37).

Accordingly, these nostalgic memories are the result of the individual nature of memory, deprived of a collective context. These memories do not feature the executioner and the victim, but ordinary everyday life, which then becomes part of the biography of the next generation. The respondents' parents or grandparents gave them intimate, personal stories about home and life under wartime conditions. Hence, the respondents are able to describe the exact way to fetch water, as if they were the ones who went to fetch it every day during the war, bypassing the political context. Arjun Appadurai, in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, wrote in this context about “armchair nostalgia” or “imagined nostalgia” – that was formed without “lived experience” or collective historical memory, and it is therefore neither the result of individual empiricism nor collective

memory (Appadurai, 2005, p. 118). The above phenomenon is perfectly illustrated, for example, by Farah's statement:

“My mother and grandmother used to walk to the *pivara*⁹ for water, let's walk this route, I'll show you everything. It was the closest point with water from their house. However, these daily trips were not as easy as our walk today. As you can see for yourself, there are a lot of stairs to climb, now we have a downhill walk. Imagine that grandma and my mother had to walk down those stairs every day, and then walk up with canisters of water, it's very slippery here during winter. It was not an easy task. In addition, under constant fire, the water points were a good target. [...] Mom still repeats that their biggest luck was that they didn't go for water on January 15. Do you know what happened on January 15, 1993?”¹⁰

While these intimate stories are extremely nostalgic, that does not mean they do not contain pain and trauma. However, these are not the kind of stories that a researcher expects to hear in a field painfully affected by war in the first place. What needs to be emphasized is that the content of the testimonies collected was far from dominated by the constant evocation of tragedy and reliving of pain. The transmission of psychological shock between generations certainly occurred, but it is worth noting that it was not through direct testimony. As in the case of Holocaust survivors, war tragedies were not spoken of in the respondents' homes, but these unspoken words were equally capable of transmitting trauma to the next generation. The author would like to point out that she is far from a conclusive view of the category of inherited trauma, because psychological suffering is an extremely complex phenomenon. The psychological damage, caused in this case by the atrocities of war, cannot be buried, cannot be denied. Although it can be assumed from the interviews that the transmission of trauma occurred in a “gentle” way, this does not mean that there were no family tragedies as a result of psychological shock or post-traumatic stress.¹¹

It is certain that in Bosniaks' homes, there was, and still is, a lack of space for honest conversations about the war.¹² Perhaps parents do not feel the need to talk

⁹ *Pivara* is the name of a water point that was located on Isevića Sokak street.

¹⁰ On that day, the mentioned water point was fired upon, eight people were killed at the time and 19 were wounded; Farah, age 21, interviewed on November 4, 2019, in Sarajevo.

¹¹ After the war, there were many incidents – murders, physical aggression, abandonment of children, etc. – that resulted from post-traumatic stress. According to studies conducted on the impact of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina on mental health, the devastating effects of trauma are clearly visible. Mood disorder prevalence rates at 22% and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at 35% have been observed among Bosnian citizens on average 11 years after the war (Ajdukovic et al., 2010).

¹² It is worth noting, for example, that when asked about crimes or violence perpetrated against

with their children about the issue – the conversation is certainly not used for therapeutic purposes, as a conversation about incidents and memories in order to share the emotional burden. Silence has a protective function – both for parents and to “protect” children from painful memories of the war.

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family members of the respondents, the most common answer was: “dad died during the war”, “[...] died during the war” – no specification of how he/she died, at whose hands, etc.

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