
The Evolution of Folk Beliefs and Rites Actualization in Crisis Situations: The Case of the Belarusian Peasant-Migrants

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ABSTRACT

The Belarusian migrant peasants of the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries introduced to the territory of Siberia and the Far East of Russia some features of their folk beliefs and magical rites aimed at overcoming different crisis situations. Based on the field data, a number of general trends in their evolution are considered for the period from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Initially the magical folk rites which fulfilled traditional apotropaic and producing functions were actively used to withstand natural disasters, crop failures, epidemics and epizootics. During the period of social upheavals in the USSR caused by the politics of atheism, collectivization of the agricultural sector, and World War II, some of these folk rites acquired new peculiar contexts of actualization. They include the emergence of new patron functions of the saints and change in the range of situations when vows, collective prayers and religious processions were to be conducted. The author concludes that at present the descendants of Belarusian migrant peasants have maintained mostly those folk beliefs and rites which have preserved their value in everyday life.

Keywords: *folk beliefs, folk rites, folk Orthodoxy, social upheavals, disasters, Belarusians, peasant migrations.*

The folk beliefs and magical rites should be considered as a link between the spiritual and practical activities of the human beings and the world that surrounds them. Many of the relict manifestations

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which are preserved until present times root back to the most ancient ideas about the nature and magical practices, which were intended to manage the power of nature by humans. In the present study, we define the magical folk rites as a set of ritualized actions which are not directly related to the natural calendar cycle or a personal life cycle. As a rule, they are performed in crisis situations associated with natural disasters, social upheavals, epidemics or epizootics. They often have apotropaic functions to protect a person and dwelling, livestock and agricultural plants from evil forces. Due to their connections with certain occasions that occur irregularly, in the Russian ethnology they are often defined as *occasional rites* (Tokarev 2011). During the formation of the Eastern Slavic ethnography in the second half of the nineteenth century most researchers did not define a boundary between folk beliefs and folk rites which often co-existed in syncretistic unity. Thus, the Russian ethnologist Sergey Tokarev rightly noticed that, ‘when studying the beliefs and rites we often meet phenomena that are heterogeneous in origin, but have fused to become inseparable’ (Tokarev 2011: 18).

Despite the modernization of the rural dwellers life style in many countries during the twentieth century, we can also indicate different cases of returning to archaic practices for overcoming different crisis situations. A well-known Russian researcher in the field of cultural studies Alexander Akhiezer characterized this situation by the term *archaization* which he employed to denote the use of the people outdated adaptation programs that have historically developed among ethnic communities that formed in more primitive social conditions compared to the complexity of challenges of the modern world (Akhiezer 1991). We can observe many such cases in the everyday life of the East Slavic peasants that lived in Russia from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. At the same time, today there remain many knowledge gaps concerning the folk beliefs and rites actualization in crisis situations among different ethnocultural and local groups of peasants. This situation is especially typical for the Asian part of Russia.

The extensive peasant relocations from the European part of the Russian Empire to agricultural regions in Russian Siberia and Far East took place in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many peasants were involved in these migrations due to several reasons. The first one was the transition of the Russian political and economic system from feudalism to capitalism after the abolition of

serfdom in 1861. The second important factor was land shortage in a number of regions of the European part of the Russian Empire, which forced rural dwellers to look for new places for living. Therefore, these peasant relocations, which were usually voluntary, had much in common with the colonization of the New World by Europeans.

As a result, the ethnocultural structure of the population of Siberia and Far East of Russia became much more diverse and included most of the ethnic groups that lived in the European part of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus at that time. By the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries, the Belarusian migrant peasants occupied a prominent place in the ethnic structure of population of Siberia and the Far East. According to the results of the 1926 Soviet Census which gives an approximate idea of the ethno-demographic changes that occurred as a result of peasant relocations to the Asian part of Russia, the Belarusians were the third largest ethnic group (after Russians and Ukrainians) who lived in Siberia. Their total number was 320,320 people, of which 311,329 people (97.2 per cent) lived in rural areas. This fact indirectly indicates that they were peasant migrants or their descendants (Soviet Census 1926a). In the territory of the Far East of Russia, the Belarusians took fourth place after Russians, Ukrainians and Koreans. Their number was 41,124 people, of which 36,186 people (87.9 per cent) lived in rural areas (Soviet Census 1926b).

During the Soviet period, migrations from Belarus to Siberia and the Far East continued but their volume decreased. In the 1920–1950s, the causes of peasant resettlement changed. There dominated the planned labor migrations organized by the state and deportations during political repressions. In the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the urban population became the main subjects of migration. Most of these migrants were no longer carriers of traditional peasant culture, so in the present article we consider only the descendants of Belarusian peasants-migrants of the second half of the nineteenth – beginning of the twentieth centuries. In this period the traditional culture of Belarusians had a high degree of typological similarity with other Eastern Slavs – Russians and Ukrainians. At the same time it had a number of specific features. Due to the isolation of the large historical and cultural region of Belarus – Polesia, the peasant-migrants from its territory well preserved many archaic folk beliefs that were lost among many other Eastern Slavs. Most Belarusian peasants belonged to the Orthodox Christianity, but sometimes their religious traditions might include some elements introduced from Catholicism. At the time of relocations the ethnic identity of Belarusian

migrants had not been finally formed yet and many of them called Russia as their homeland. This was due to the fact that in those days the ethnonym Belarus was rarely used and the territory of the modern Republic of Belarus was officially called as Northwestern Krai of the Russian Empire. At the same time, most of migrants initially spoke Belarusian language or its dialectal mixture with Russian, which was called *trasianka*.

Among the cultural influences the Belarusian peasant migrants introduced to the territory of Siberia and the Far East of Russia there were features of their folk beliefs and rites aimed at overcoming certain crisis situations. In the present article, basing on the field data, we consider a number of general trends in their evolution from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

The examples of folk beliefs and rites of Belarusians were recorded in detail in the works of the ethnographers of the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries (Nikiforovsky 1895; Shein 1902; Romanov 1912; Bogdanovich 2009; Dobrovolsky 1903; Serbov 1915). Later their genesis as well as common and peculiar features were systematized in the context of the traditional culture of East Slavs by Dmitry Zelenin, Vladimir Propp, Sergey Tokarev, Nikita Tolstoy, Svetlana Tolstaya, Lyudmila Vinogradova, Anatoly Zhuravlev and some other Russian ethnographers, anthropologists and folklorists (Zelenin 1991; Propp 2009; Tokarev 2011; Tolstaya 1986a, 1986b, 2005; Tolstoy, Tolstaya 1981; Tolstoy 1995, 2003; Zhuravlev 1994; Vinogradova 1995). Due to the fact that all these ethnographic descriptions in their chronology coincide with the massive peasant relocations from Belarus we have a pretty complete idea of the original prototypes of the magical rites and folk beliefs which were brought by migrants to the territories of Siberia and the Far East of Russia. By comparing these descriptions with modern ethnographic data we can identify to what degree certain beliefs and rites are preserved as well as trace their transformations that occurred in a new place. For the few past decades, some Russian ethnologists used this methodological approach in their studies of transformations of the Russian traditional peasant culture, which resulted from the most dramatic social transformations in the USSR of the first half of the twentieth century. Based on ethnographic data collected in Siberia, Tatiana Shcheglova investigated the survival strategies in subsistence systems of Altai rural dwellers in the years of War World II (Shcheglova 2015). Works of Maria Vasekha are devoted to the gender aspects of modernization of the Siberian villagers' life style in the 1920s (Vasek-

ha 2016). Elena Fursova surveyed transformations of the Folk Orthodoxy traditions of different ethnocultural and local groups of East Slavic population of Siberia caused by social upheavals of the twentieth century (Fursova 2017).

The main goal of the present article is to survey the features of actualization of folk beliefs and magical rites in crisis situations among Belarusian peasant migrants in Siberia and the Far East of Russia.

This study is based on the ethnographic data obtained in the interviews with descendants of Belarusian peasant migrants conducted by the author in the period from 2009 to 2021 in the regions of Siberia and the Far East of Russia, namely: Tyumen Oblast, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Irkutsk Oblast and Khabarovsk Krai. Most of the informants were born between the 1910s and 1960s and belonged to the second or third generation of the Belarusian migrants.

THE INITIAL FEATURES OF THE FOLK BELIEFS AND RITES OF BELARUSSIAN PEASANTS

Initially the Belarusian peasant migrants actively used magical folk rites to withstand natural disasters, crop failures, epidemics and epizootics. In the folk beliefs and rites of the peasants from Belarus the pagan and Christian components were closely intertwined. These syncretistic beliefs originated in the dual faith which was typical for most East Slavic peasants since the Christianization of Kievan Rus' which began in the tenth century BC. As Linda J. Ivanits noticed, 'Popular Christianity, however, was often a far cry from official Orthodoxy, for, as we shall see, many of its personages seem to be thinly disguised re-workings of pagan deities' (Ivanits 1989: 4). At the same time, she rightly added that

even though the traditions and spirit world of the Russian peasant contained reflections of ancient beliefs, one cannot make direct connections between particular notions of the nineteenth-century peasant and the pagan of, say, tenth-century Rus'. Over the centuries ancient beliefs and rituals acquired many additional layers, and it is often difficult to determine what is a later accretion and what is truly ancient (Ivanits 1989: 5).

For Belarusian peasants, one of the most dangerous natural disasters was drought, which led to crop failure. The examples of pluvial magic have a very important place in oral stories of the descendants of Belarusian migrants which lived in Siberia and the Far East of Russia.

Ethnographers noted a wide variety of rites for rain invoking on the territory of Polesia which gave many Belarusian migrants (Tolstoy 2003: 90). Pluvial magic of the Belarusian peasant migrants have saved a high degree of variability. During the field studies we recorded that most part of rainmaking rites had been earlier identified on the territory of Polesia by Nikita Tolstoy (Tolstoy 1995: 79).

Among Belarusians a custom was widespread according to which in case of any disaster during one day or one night local women had to weave long flax linen which was called *obydennik*. The length of such a textile was usually at least a few meters. As a rule all adult women of the village took part in manufacturing of an *obydennik*.

In the village of Osinovka (Vikulovsky district of Tyumen oblast) which was founded in 1900 by peasant migrants from Mogilev Governorate, in case of drought women would gather in someone's house and for one day weave an *obydennik* which was usually at least three meters long. After this people started a procession with the *obydennik* and an icon of any venerated saint across the village with prayers. The prayers were generally addressed to Saint Mary or Saint Nicholas. At the end of this ritual its participants drown the *obydennik* in the river as a kind of sacrifice (Kramor 2003). A similar rite was described in the late nineteenth century by Pavel Shein on the territory of the Borisov Uyezd of Minsk Governorate. Unlike the Siberian version, in this case an *obydennik* was donated to the local church as a votive offering (Shein 1902: 294). Thus, we can trace in different variations of this rite the predominance of pagan or Christian components. It is notable that in Osinovka village this rite could be combined with a pagan custom of killing a frog which was widespread among migrants from Polesia in Siberia to cause the rain in drought (Tolstaya 1986a). In addition to the rite of rainmaking described above, Belarusian migrants could weave an *obydennik* as a kind of vow in case of epidemics or other disasters that threatened the village dwellers (Lyubimova 1997; Lobachevskaya and Fedorov 2012). The inhabitants of the same village described another pluvial rite, when local women made a big doll of straw which was called *Mokritsa*. After procession through the village *Mokritsa* was also drowned in the river (Author's field data 2009).

Another group of rainmaking rites was associated with ritual actions that were carried out in the cemetery. In the village of Marininsk (Zalarinsky district, Irkutsk Oblast) in order to invoke the rain three widows had to read prayers at the cemetery (Author's field data 2018). Belarusian migrants living in the Taishet district of Irkutsk Oblast went to the cemetery and watered the graves of their ancestors, asking

them for rain 'to feed their family' (Author's field data 2018). Another version of this rite was recorded by the author in the village of Tigino (Bolshemurtinsky district, Krasnoyarsk Krai). According to it, in order to invoke the rain it was necessary to water the graves of the people committed suicide by hanging (Author's field data 2019). In the village of Lakino, located in the same district, for rainmaking, three widows need to go to the cemetery, take land from the graves of three drowned people and throw them in a well (Author's field data 2019). The above-described traditions can be attributed as echoes of archaic rites belonging to the cults of veneration of ancestors which were characteristic for all Eastern Slavs (Zelenin 1991: 350).

Belarusians often performed rainmaking rituals at wells or springs (Tolstoy and Tolstaya 1981: 87). In the village of Cherchet (Taishet district, Irkutsk Oblast) there was a custom to walk around six wells and throw poppy grains into them to invoke the rain (Author's field data 2018). A similar custom was recorded by Pavel Shein in the territory of the Grodno Uezd, but in his description the number of wells used for the ceremony was not specified (Shein 1902: 295). The inhabitants of the village of Karay (Bratsk District, Irkutsk oblast) read prayers for rainmaking near a spring (Author's field data 2017). In the village of Poletnoy of the Municipal District named after Lazo of Khabarovsk Krai, the descendants of Belarusian migrants from the Mogilev Uezd would drown *Trinity birch* decorated with ribbons in the river during a drought (Author's field data 2015).

On the territory of Polesia, the rituals of plowing a river or a road were widespread (Tolstaya 1986: 18). In the village of Prudki (Municipal District named after Lazo of Khabarovsk Krai), founded by peasants from Mogilev Governorate, during drought, local women would arrange a symbolic plowing of the river with a plough. This story correlates with a number of other descriptions of such ritual actions among Belarusian migrants. In particular, it reproduces the situation when real plowing was performed by men, while the ritual – exclusively by women (Fursova 2013: 533). In the village of Cherchet in order to invoke rain the widows plowed land in the courtyard near the gate in the shape of a cross and sprinkled wheat on it. In the village of Vakorino (Kazansky district, Tyumen oblast), and also in some other villages of Belarusian migrants, the oldest people went around the village three times with icons taken from home, reading different prayers (Author's field data 2019). Such later traditions when archaic manifestations of pluvial magic give the way to Christian ritualism

were widespread not only among Belarusians, but also among the Russian old-settlers of Siberia (Lyubimova 1997).

The rites, protecting house from fire and thunderstorms, are well preserved in memory of the descendants of Belarusian migrants. In the village of Ermaki (Vikulovsky district, Tyumen oblast) in case of fire in the street, it was necessary to throw an Easter egg in the opposite direction to approaching fire (Author's field data 2009). People believed that the Easter willow also protects the house from a fire. Many Belarusians believed that church candles consecrated during *Sretenie* (Candlemass) protect the house from fire and lightning. In the second half of the nineteenth century similar customs were widespread in Belarus (Zelenin 1991: 402; Romanov 1912: 302).

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW CONTEXTS FOR THE FOLK BELIEFS AND MAGICAL RITES DURING SOCIAL UPHEAVALS IN THE SOVIET TIME

The introduction of the atheism policy in the USSR in the late 1920s was a serious worldview shock for most rural people since religious traditions played an important role in their lives. The descendants of Belarusian peasant migrants preserved a lot of stories about the curse of people who participated in destruction of churches. For example, in the village of Ermaki people hand down the following story. In 1938, by order of the local authorities it was decided to close the church. One of the villagers – Pyatrok actively took part in this affair and committed a blasphemy stomping with his feet of the Holy Shroud. A few days later his hands and toes became numb and soon he was completely paralyzed. The relatives took him to different doctors, but they could not give an explanation for this disease. After committing blasphemy he remained bedridden for three years, three months and three days. After that he began to recover and was able to walk again but remained hunchbacked. Soon the war began, he got drafted to the front and was killed a month later (Author's field data 2011). Similar stories become widespread among all East Slavic population of Russia. Such stories typically involved symbolic images and metaphors of such oral epic genres as *bylina* and Folk Orthodoxy apocryphal stories.

At the same time, the closing of church parishes in rural areas in the 1930s increased the role of the Folk Orthodoxy traditions in life cycle rituals. In case of absence of churches and priests, children could be baptized by senior family members or the most reputable villagers. During this period, a ceremony in church (in Russian – *venchanie*) was often excluded from the wedding. In accordance with the

conclusion made by Lidia Fetisova, in case of absence of an opportunity for a wedding in the church, in the eyes of the rural community collective feasting, coupled with the other folk ritual actions had legal force for the marriage (Fetisova 2002: 63). For the same reasons, during funerals and commemorative rites brought from the motherland of the Belarusian migrants, in most cases, prayer for the dead by priests was missed.

In the Folk Orthodoxy traditions of Belarusians the vows have been widespread. The vows were generally taken in cases of crop failures, diseases or natural disasters. Echoes of these traditions have preserved among the descendants of Belarusian migrants living in Siberia and the Far East of Russia. In Polesia, peasants made fraternal votive candles for different vows (Shein 1902: 176). In accordance with this custom, the villagers donated wax for a large candle, which was stored in the house of one of the locals for a year. Currently, in Siberia and the Far East of Russia, stories about fraternal candles have almost disappeared from the memory of the descendants of Belarusian migrants. Despite this, as a relic of such traditions, among inhabitants of the village of Osinovka (Vikulovsky district, Tyumen oblast) there still exists a custom of veneration of the icon named 'Candle'. In this custom one can distinguish elements of traditions of creating by peasants a sacral complex with a fraternal candle and a patron saint icon which was widespread in Polesia (Lobachevskaya and Fedorov 2012). In the village of Osinovka, there has been saved only the venerated icon 'Resurrection of Christ' which is called 'Candle', but a wax candle for unknown reasons has been excluded from this custom over time. On Christmas, the icon is transferred from one villager's house to another where it stays for one year. During this period, the house where the icon is stored turns into a kind of temporary sacred center of the village, serving as a church for the locals. This custom was typical only for migrants from Polesia and was not observed among other ethnic groups of East Slavs in Siberia and the Far East of Russia.

The tragic events of World War II deeply resonated in the folk worldview. According to the memories of the peasants, before the war many people periodically saw ominous signs that foreshadowed it. As a rule, people saw such symbolic images in the sky, as soldiers, horses, women in sorrow, *etc.* (Fursova 2017). In their dreams people often saw saints or deceased relatives, who told about the upcoming war. When investigating wonderful visions and signs which were told about by rural residents of Siberia and Belarus before the war started, Elena Fursova noted that 'on the eve of various kinds of dangers and during difficult trials, in particular on the eve of World War II, mech-

anisms for self-preservation were included, the warnings of the ancestors were recalled, their not only combat, but also spiritual experience' (Fursova 2017: 128).

In the war years, the patronal functions of some sacred objects and shrines venerated by the village communities acquired new contexts. In Belarus, during World War II the above-described votive candles often dedicated to the return of men from the war (Listova 2008: 45). This situation was similar in the village of Osinovka. During the war years, the icon was stored in the house of Marina Danilovna Prokoptsova, whose husband went to the front. Other villagers came to this house, prayed for the return of their men from the war. In the post-war time, when many men did not return from the front, the importance of the icon obtained a new meaning: 'Then women prayed to give strength to survive in their grief and to raise children. For them, it was a holy protection icon' (Author's field data 2021).

Similar to other Eastern Slavs, the erection of votive crosses (in Russian – *obetnyj krest*) was widespread among Belarusians. The cross could be placed on initiative of a rural community and on a vow of one person. In the village of Cherchet we recorded the following story:

At the intersection of roads, a married couple who did not have children erected a votive cross. After that, they would have children. Gradually, this cross became venerated among the locals. When the war began the recruits passed by this cross. One of them ran up to the cross, downed on his knees next to it and prayed. The others walked by, laughing at him. This man was the only one who returned from the war (Author's field data 2018).

CONCLUSION. THE MAIN TRENDS IN THE FEATURES OF ACTUALIZATION OF THE FOLK BELIEFS AND RITES

Summing up the analysis of ethnographic data collected during the study, we can highlight the following main trends in the actualization of the folk beliefs and rites in crisis situations among Belarusian peasant migrants in Siberia and the Far East of Russia. For the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1920s, among Belarusian migrants dominated the customs and rites which had been brought from their homeland. Most of them had a common typological basis with other Eastern Slavs, but some rites and beliefs had their unique features.

During the second period of such social upheavals in the USSR as the politics of atheism, collectivization of the agricultural sector and World War II, occurred between the late of 1920s up to the end of 1940s, some of these folk rites and beliefs acquired new specific contexts of actualization while preserving their authentic structural forms.

Since the 1930s, after the introduction of the atheism ideology in the USSR, accompanied by the closure of churches, rural dwellers had a need to create alternative sacred centers that could rally people in the faith. In such situations, people could get together for prayers in the houses of villagers where any venerated icons were stored, performed prayers near different sacral natural or man-made objects (saint springs, votive crosses, *etc.*). In the absence of the church and clergy, some people (most often from the older generation) voluntarily conducted the most important church rituals, connected with the life cycle (baptism, funeral service, *etc.*). Social upheavals and crisis situations became a reason for the emergence of new patronal meaning of Christian saints. During this period, Jesus Christ, St. Mary, St. Nicholas, Seraphim of Sarov and some other saints became favourite heavenly intercessors of Belarusian migrants. For this time the oral stories about wonderful signs, intercession of saints or curses for deviations from church life became wide distribution in the folk life.

A comparison of data collected from descendants of Belarusian peasant migrants with ethnographic descriptions of those years related to other ethnic groups of the East Slavic population of Siberia and the Far East of Russia indicates that among them in most cases there developed similar innovations in magical folk rites and beliefs arisen as responses to the challenges of the social upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century.

For the second half of the twentieth century, there became common the situation of a gradual fading of the folk beliefs and rites in the everyday life of East Slavic rural dwellers in Siberia and the Far East of Russia. The main reason for this lied in few factors. The first of them was caused by modernization of the way of life of the Soviet village. Such social factors as increasing secularization along with people's growing faith in scientific and technological progress, the onset of relative economic stability and development of social infrastructure in rural areas, including primary and secondary education, amateur clubs, health care and veterinary reduced the role of archaic traditions aimed at overcoming crisis situations among young generations. In this context, elderly people remained the main carriers of folk traditions. The second reason was connected with a weakening intergenerational

transmission of ethnic tradition among the descendants of Belarusian peasant migrants. As recent studies show, as a rule, the representatives of the first two generations of migrants remain the carriers of the original ethnic traditions (Majnicheva 2006; Fedorov 2020). The third generation of East Slavic migrants often becomes almost completely assimilated in a new ethnic environment.

In the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, the models of social and economic life of the village formed in the Soviet era and based on a collective state farm quickly began to degrade. With the liquidation of such Soviet form of collective farms as *kolkhoz* and *sovkhhoz* many villages actually lost their agricultural economic functions. At the same time, the role of individual households for a personal subsistence began to increase. In some cases it looked like a return to the archaic and semi-natural forms of economic relations. This period brought major changes in the demographic structure of rural areas due to urban migrations of the working age people and increasing male mortality rate. This situation amplified and accelerated the fading of the inter-generational transmission of ethnic traditions. At the same time, due to the deep economic, ideological and worldview crisis for rural population of post-Soviet Russia a return of interest in some popular beliefs and rites became typical. This revival of the religious and ethnic traditions of the peoples of Russia was called by the ethnologists as Ethno Renaissance (Fursova and Aksenova 2013).

Observing the period from the 1990s up to the present time we can argue that the original features of folk beliefs and rites of the ancestors have been preserved fragmentary in collective memory of the descendants of Belarusian peasant migrants. The current performing of rituals has mostly apotropaic actions for protecting home, people and livestock from evil forces and also magical rites against natural disasters. During the Christian Orthodoxy revival, collective prayers and religious processions became widespread again. At the same time, while earlier the scope of folk beliefs covered not only their village, but also the surrounding natural environment (forests, fields, and rivers), today it has become compressed to the borders of such private spaces as a house or a homestead due to the disappearance of collective forms of agriculture in many villages. Therefore, we made a conclusion that at the present time among the descendants of Belarusian peasant migrants there have been preserved mostly those forms of magical folk rites which remain valuable for the everyday life. At the same time some folk rites became the objects of reconstruction by amateur folklore collectives but they usually present only external and

estheticized manifestations of traditions without their original sacral context.

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