

The Political Abuse of Military History in Albania during Communism

Etleva Smaçi

Albanian Armed Forces Academy

Abstract

The main focus of this paper is to analyse the abuse of military history for political purposes during the communist era in Albania. As a sub-discipline of general history, military history has always been one of the most essential subjects in military education.

To support this hypothesis, there were used documents from the Central Archive of the Armed Forces^{**} of Albania and Military History Department which testify to the most important developments regarding the national and international military history.

The method applied in this paper is the comparative approach highlighting the ideological context. Deliberate distortion was an effective strategy to indoctrinate young officers with Marxist ideology and national communism.

In addition, by analysing some of the military art texts used in the Military Academy of Albania before the 90s, it turns out that a large number of them were presented in a one-sided manner. The phenomenon was common to the military events that took place in Albania, especially during the Second World War, including the occurrences in the Western camp.

Hence, the analysis focuses on facts that enable any military historian to comprehend this delicate subject matter, concerning its impact on the army and society, as a whole.

To summarize, a partial military history can serve an authoritarian regime to propagate their version of history rather than the truth. One such example is the military history written in Albania during the communist period, which is the case study of this paper.

Keywords: myth-making, military education, indoctrination, political instrument

^{**} Hereinafter referred to as CAAF and CAS for Central Archive of State.

1. Introduction

As an academic discipline, Albanian military history has its roots in the early 1960s. It is a relatively new and underdeveloped field of study compared to other branches of history within the country and to the tradition of this academic area in world history. During the communist regime, military history remained under the shadow of general history and history of the communist party. As a consequence, the analysis of tactical and operational problems was conducted by mimicking the ideologies that characterized the science of history, in general. As shown in the documentation of the Defence Academy during this period, military history was included in the group of auxiliary subjects of this military education institution, the only one of its kind in the country since its establishment in 1958 until now.

The article by Michael Howard, titled: "The Use and Abuse of Military History (Howard, 1962) served as the major motivation to conduct a comprehensive national study of military history, particularly into a period dominated by an orthodox Stalinist regime, such as Albanian communism, with the discipline itself, as stated previously, being a holistic ideological approach to history.

However, after the fall of communism in Albania, a series of works by foreign and Albanian authors have specifically focused on the Second World War, which was proved to be the most distorted part of history, including the history of wars taught at the Albanian Defence Academy (Fischer, 1999; Hibbert, 1991; Kera, 2017). In this light, since the military history at the Albanian Military Academy during the communist leadership was based on a national history manipulated by the regime, the present study attempts to highlight through examples the deliberate distortions of certain events and the creation of nationalist myths in the field of Defence. As a model, "myth making" is used, which Howard refers to as the creation of an image of the past through careful selection and interpretation, in order to evoke or support certain emotions or beliefs (Howard, 1962, p.9).

1.1 Aim

The aim of this paper is related to historian Jeremy Black's suggestion that "it is important to try to reconstruct military history along lines that are now well in modern world history and in most national histories" (Black, 2004). Therefore, it is the obligation of experts involved in historical studies, in general, and military history, in particular, to expose those myths, as they do not serve the historical truth but ideology.

1.2 Research questions

This paper is based on the analysis of a case study. In essence, it probes the Military History curriculum offered at the Albanian Defence Academy during the dictatorship. The main thesis of this paper is to support the assertion that military history was not simply an academic subject in the Albanian military school during the communist regime, but it was a

powerful technique for shaping military decision-making and creating certain myths in the eyes of the public, regarding the war or particular participating forces.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology applied in this paper entails a qualitative research into textbooks on Military History published in Albania during the communist regime and after its fall. The novelty of the study lies in examining documents from the Central Archive of the Armed Forces and the then Military History Department. Additionally, the findings of this analysis are compared with similar Western studies, whereupon an objective reexamination of military history as an important scientific discipline in military schools is effectuated.

1.4 Definition of Military History according to the Marxist-Leninist perspective

This theoretical introduction begins with some definitions given by the most prominent authors of military history. Michael Howard defines it as "the history of armed forces and the conduct of war" (Howard et al., 1984, pp.5–13). Similarly, John Lynn defines this discipline as "the study of military institutions and of the conduct of past wars" (Lynn, 1997, pp.777–789). Another definition is that of authors Morillo and Pavkovic, according to whom military history is regarded as "any historical study in which military personnel of all sorts, warfare..., military institutions, and their various intersections with politics, economics, society, nature, and culture form the focus or topic of the work" (Morillo & Pavkovic, 2006, p.4).

However, if one considers the definition of military history provided in the textbook of the Defence Academy in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in 1987, in addition to the explanation that: "Military history is the subject that deals with the study of wars and armed forces of past times...", it entails the addition "and the military activity experienced by the popular masses, classes, and parties" (*World Military Art History*, 1987, p.5). An ideological formulation, the definition is a quotation taken from the book "On the People's Army" by the communist leader Enver Hoxha (Hoxha, 1983, p.501).

The authors of the military text, who have extensive experience in the field, state in the preface that the primary focus of the textbook is the development of Stalinist military art and refer to Stalin as a "military strategist." The history of military art, both as a course and scientific discipline, a component of national history, was born and developed within a completely ideological military school, so it is natural that its basic elements were not based on military models inherited from the past (which, to be fair, were almost nonexistent), but on the directives of the Party and particularly on what the then communist leader, Enver Hoxha, dictated as truths about military aesthetics. This definition was altered following the overthrow of the communist regime. Today, the Academy of Armed Forces defines military history as "a special discipline of the science of general history that examines the emergence and evolution of military issues from antiquity to the present day" (*Strategy and Military History Textbook*, 2015).

From this perspective, questions naturally arise: to what extent was the historical truth of wars, especially World War II, exposed? And what impact did this kind of exposure have on

the development of Albanian military personnel? Similarly, how did it influence the creation of an idealized perception of communist leaders as military strategists under the Stalinist model? And, above all, were the facts of military battles misused to denigrate political opponents of the regime and promote a spirit of hatred towards the West?

1.5 Treatment of Military Events during World War II in Albania like a Communist Movement (National Liberation Movement)

In the analysis of military events in Albania during World War II, Jomini's classification of military history into three categories will be taken into consideration. The first category is a pedantic description of every aspect of a battle, down to the smallest detail. The second category includes an analysis of battles based on the principles of war, examining the characteristics of military art. The third category deals with the political-military history that analyzes the war in a much broader context through the links between war and politics (Jessup & Coakley, 1979), which later inspired Clausewitz's thesis that "war was an extension of politics" (Clausewitz, 1950). The third category serves to understand the context in which the post-war military history was created in the Albanian military education institution, herein referred to as the Defence Academy, a designation attributed to the historical period under analysis.

As stated earlier, the Department of Military History established Marxist-Leninist philosophy as the foundation for its methodology and theory of the history of warfare, war and the military, drawing on the teachings of Marx, Engels, Stalin, and Enver Hoxha. In the early years of the syllabus in the 1960s, which coincided with the severing of ties with the Soviet Union, 20 lessons were devoted to world military history and 76 lessons addressed the problems of the National Liberation Anti-Fascist War with the sole focus on the partisan forces organized by the Albanian Communist Party (*Report on Changes in the Syllabus of Military History to be Taught in Military Academy*, 1966, p.1). Military history was highly valued for its educational importance and possibility of moulding the character of future military personnel from a professional and ideological point of view. The particular significance attached to World War II was not only because it was closest in time but because it was the war during which the regime established the foundations of its political power. And the most important attribute required of young officers was loyalty to the Party and its leadership, which in military history was regarded as the leader of the anti-fascist war both politically and militarily.

An analysis of a report sent to the Political Directorate of the People's Army and the General Staff on 13 June 1966 (*Letter to Political Directorate of General Staff*, 1966) in a classified document, reveals the topics that would be covered in the Military Art History program at the Defence Academy, which at the time was named after the country's second most influential political leader, Mehmet Shehu. As was the case with numerous historical events, the name of the academy changed several times during the communist regime in response to political changes in the country.

As previously stated, a thorough examination of the Defence Academy's military history syllabus shows that the program was dominated by lessons devoted to the political-military history of the National Liberation Anti-Fascist War. In comparison to the years 1958-1962, when this military institution began its journey, the amount of international information taught in military art history significantly diminished, as opposed to the national data. Thus, the lessons dedicated to the history of popular art in the partisan war were doubled, while the lessons devoted to the history of Stalinist military art were considerably reduced from 44 lessons to 6 hours, whereas those allotted to military art in World War I and World War II were almost eliminated (reduced to 2 lessons), (*Defence Academy Military Command Report*, 1966, p.6).

Regarding the formulation of topics on military art during the two world wars, this art was studied as: "Conclusion of the development of military art in the main capitalist countries between the First and Second World Wars." Imperialist warfare dominates the theoretical analysis of both world wars. The concept of the Second World War shifted from imperialist war to anti-fascist war when the Soviet Union entered the the armed conflict in June 1941, according to military history accounts (*World Military Art History*, 1987, p.498). Foreign authors have also reached this conclusion on the political history of Albania during this period. The Soviet Union's entry into the fighting transformed it from an imperialist conflict to an anti-fascist conflict, with Albanian communists identifying themselves with patriotism (Fischer, 1999; Hibbert, 1991, p.32). For the next 45 years, this would be the most effective weapon for indoctrinating the armed forces and the general population. The war waged by the Albanian people was also considered an anti-fascist conflict and an anti-imperialist revolution. This manipulation aided the communists to isolate Albania from Western influence and interaction. In the military history courses, the Western military were identified as the enemy of the future.

With a strong emphasis on the study of past wars, particularly World War II, the scene was set to regard the partisan warfare, organized by the Communists, as the only military art model. Any other experience in warfare was either denied or distorted. This provided sufficient premises in military schools to mythologize the idea that the anti-fascist resistance and military actions were carried out solely by the communists. In other words, while the military actions and operations conducted by communist guerrilla forces were treated like heroic acts, those carried out by other formations were labeled as adventurous. The other two political-military groups formed in Albania during World War II, Balli Kombëtar (National Front) and Legaliteti (Legality), were viewed as collaborationist formations, both in military schools and national history (*National Liberation Military Art History*, 1989; *History of the Antifascist National Liberation War of the Albanian People*, 1984). This was a black and white position.

Considering them as enemies was a sufficient justification for not mentioning their military heritage from 1920 to 1939.

This allowed communist leaders to claim, after the conflict, that the National Liberation Army inherited nothing from its predecessor. This falsification was carried out in contradiction with the very documents issued by the Communist Party during the war years (*Circular of July, 16th, 1944*). Even Enver Hoxha himself admits in his memoirs that part of the commands of the staffs and the General Staff itself were "supplied" with military personnel from King Zog's army. In his book, he mentions the names of soldiers, such as: Asim Zeneli, Dali Ndreu, Mehmet Shehu, Shefqet Peçi, Spiro Moisiu, and so on (Hoxha, 1984, p. 258).

The treatment of military phenomena of World War II through the biased party documents [archives of the Albanian Communist Party] is unfortunately evident even in the preparation of scientific dissertations in the Department of Military History at the Defence Academy. This is understandable in that period because military matters then were closely linked to the issue of power after the end of the war, and the Albanian Communist Party refused to share the military victory with anyone else.

The authors of military art history were aware that the models of partisan warfare of the Albanian communist movement during World War II had little or nothing to do with the principles of warfare. Therefore, the axiom of these texts became the thesis that popular warfare had its own principles and could not adhere to the principles of modern military science, which were applied in a standardized manner (CAAF, 1966, Fond 2002 File, p. 12). The then typical historian had an academic profile that left much to be desired, with their writings based mostly on memories, rather than documents. (Hasani, 2006, pp. 32–33).

The only voice opposing to this method for writing military art history was the founder of the Military History Department, Major Dilaver Radeshi, who had studied in the Soviet Union. He stated that: "the existing lessons on the National Liberation Anti-Fascist War were designed without using archival sources, and their content corresponded more to the history of war according to the communist model than to military art history" (*Major Dilaver Radëshi Discussion*, 1966). This lone voice was soon expelled from the ranks of the armed forces and academic circles. He was imprisoned in 1967, which marked the end of the efforts to treat military history as a scientific discipline, not as an ideological extension to the history of the Albanian Party of Labour.

The metamorphosis and the process of falsification of the military history on partisan war reached its climax after the 1970s. This was linked to the setback that the army and its main figures suffered in 1974. The execution and internment of many major participants in the partisan war, following the Stalinist model, conditioned the alienation of their role and attitude towards the war. The only key remaining personage as a political author and military strategist was Enver Hoxha. To elevate his character even in military art, he was lauded as the leader of partisan war. Any military theorist who tried to give the idea that partisan war was an insufficient model of fighting, was labeled an enemy.

The directive was clear, and the authors of military art history lessons had to change their attitude, which was widely reflected in the materials prepared (*[Report on Changes in the Syllabus of Military History to be Taught in Military Academy]* Central Archive of Armed Forces, 1966, p. 23).

1.6 Military History Textbook Myths that Inspired Loyalty to the Regime

By analyzing the process of "myth making," Michael Howard argues that historians have such expectations because the creation of certain myths encourages patriotic feelings and supports certain political regimes. For this, he cites examples of nationalist historians, such as: Sibel and the British J.R. Seeley, who write with clear didactic purposes to awaken feelings of loyalty and patriotism (Howard, 1962). This study comes to the same conclusion and adopts the same approach, as this phenomenon is reflected in military history writings during the communist regime in Albania.

The glorification of Enver Hoxha's leadership in the national liberation anti-fascist war from a military perspective is one of the deliberate myths to influence loyalty to the regime and create a cult of personality (great leader) during the period examined in this analysis. As Fischer points out, exaggerating the importance of the war was in his interest, as it created a national myth of the popular anti-imperialist uprising, comparable to the myth of the war of Vlora against the Italians in 1920 (Fischer, 1999, p.331; Schwandner & Fischer, 2002, pp.143–156). In communist historiography and consequently, in the texts of military history, the most elaborated thesis was the victory of partisan forces led by the Albanian Communist Party against Nazi-fascists (Kera, 2017).

Enver Hoxha was recognized for his merits as a military strategist in a manner similar to his idol Stalin. According to military history, all the problems of the uprising and all the issues of the armed forces' internal life, strategy, operational and military tactics were resolved based on the directives prepared by Hoxha himself. Even according to the text "History of the National Liberation Anti-Fascist War," the instructions of the General Staff on partisan tactics were approved by Hoxha himself (*History of the Antifascist National Liberation War of the Albanian People*, 1984; Kera, 2017, p. 369).

The paradoxical fact is that for the textbook's authors, with the required military knowledge, Enver Hoxha, who had no military education, is considered an expert in military operations. The myth of the popular strategist justified at the Congress of Përmet - the congress that laid the foundations for the communist political power in Albania - the dismissal of General Commander, Major General Spiro Moisiu [who had served as a major in the army of King Zog E.S], a career military member who had studied in the West, and appointed to this position by Enver Hoxha himself (Duka, 2007, p.226).

This imposed fame also kept another important militarily educated figure of the war, Mehmet Shehu, away from the Ministry of People's Defence. In addition to being a General Commander, Enver Hoxha held the post of Minister of Defence for a period of 15 years, until he was forced to resign from this position and several other functions under the pressure of the new Soviet leaders, following Stalin's death (Smaçi, 2017, pp.22–28).

Enver Hoxha was elected as the political commissar of the General Staff of the National Liberation Army, created in July 1943. Spiro Moisiu, a major with military training, was elected as the head of the General Staff (Duka, 2007, p.220). All the operational plans of the war were based on his professional experience, but in the official version of Albanian military history, the military art of the national liberation war was not only led but also directed at the operational level by Enver Hoxha, as mentioned above (*National Liberation Military Art History*, 1989). This stance can be viewed acceptable because in totalitarian regimes it is sometimes impossible to write a different history (Howard, 1962, p.10).

The fragmentation of military history into the periods that suited the regime, was another source of myth-making. Thus, the timeframe from the declaration of independence in 1912 until the occupation of the country by the Italians was never included in the texts of military history during the communist regime. The study of the army created by King Zog was prohibited, and even his commendable achievements as a military leader were deliberately hidden and distorted. Albanian filmmaking and dramatic art played a very negative role, portraying the Albanian military during the monarchy with derision.

The creation of the paradigm of popular leaders who were 'followed' by the people was also studied in military schools, especially in Albanian military art, with the same approach as in national history. Except for Gjergj Kastriot Skënderbeu, who belonged to the elite corps of Janissaries, in the Ottoman Empire, and had a military education (*The History of Albanian People*, 2002, p.393), other characters who had been praised as leaders of popular uprisings, such as Selam Musai or controversial Haxhi Qamili, who overthrew Prince Vidi, were deliberately ignored, as was the fate suffered by all former career military personnel [who had studied mostly in Turkey and a smaller part in Austria E.S] who were important personalities in Albanian society during the years 1912-1939, and who contributed either to the Defence of the country or to the efforts to create a regular army of the new Albanian state.

Thus, in military history texts, the period of operational actions of the winter of 1943-1944 and the spring/summer of 1944 was depicted according to the regime's perspective. Both in textbooks and in the book *History of Albania*, they are known as: "Winter Operation" and "June Operation". Even these names are subject to debate. In the Wehrmacht documents, the military phrase "cleansing campaign" was used to especially refer to the military actions of the period November 1943-February 1944, which aimed to clear out partisans from the operational zones.

According to this documentation, these engagements were not systematically planned military initiatives that extended over the entire period of occupation, but were continuous and highly intense military fighting aimed at eliminating the communist guerrilla (Kasmi, 2013, pp.99–100).

The mythologisation of partisan heroism was often demythologised by political orders and preferences. The treatment of Mehmet Shehu as a war hero is the most striking example. All officers who studied at the Defence Academy until 1981, were familiar with the official version that the breaking the General Staff out of the enemy encirclement in the winter operation was to Mehmet Shehu's credit. After the 1980s, when Shehu was declared a "police agent," the version was replaced by Enver Hoxha's narrative that the National Liberation Army's headquarters had broken the encirclement themselves (Smirnova, 2004, p.273).

Another important military development studied at the Defence Academy during the communist regime as a model of partisan warfare against the Germans is the Battle for the Liberation of Tirana. Here, too, the version adopted complied with the official history. The liberation of Tirana is considered a heroic victory against the Germans in Albanian military history and has created the myth about the "battle of Tirana". A myth reinforced by numbers exaggerated and manipulated by the communist regime, officially reporting 2,000 German soldiers killed in this military engagement and around 500 wounded (*National Liberation Military Art History*, 1989; *History of the National Liberation Antifascist War of the Albanian People*, 1984). Foreign and Albanian authors writing after the 1990s on the above conflict, based on German and British documents, mention 1,600 men killed and missing, with nearly half belonging to the Steyrer group (Kasmi, 2013, p.152). The demythologising of the assertion that the Germans were completely destroyed by the partisans in the battle for the capital was refuted by the testimony of British officers who entered Tirana with partisan forces. They speak of intact military installations and a city that had not suffered major damage (Fischer, 1999).

In the official version of the "History of People's Military Art", the fights for the liberation of Tirana are depicted as fierce and prolonged, taking more than two weeks from the last order in October to November 17, when Tirana was liberated. The explanation for the duration of the combat was never provided by the communist historiography due to ideological ends. However, this was brought to light by researcher Marenglen Kasmi, in his publication "German Occupation in Albania". Based on German documents, he explains that the attack launched against the Steyrer group during the Struga-Elbasan march, and later Elbasan-Tirana, delayed the German troops' withdrawal towards Yugoslavia. If these troops had not been struck by guerrilla warfare, the liberation of Tirana would have happened within three days, as the German plan had predicted (Kasmi, 2013, p.171). This situation later became a source of hundreds of historical writings that compared the Battle of Tirana to a Stalingrad in miniature.

1.7 The War of the Allies through the Lens of Communist Military History

The textbook "Military History of World Art", published in 1987, not only showed the differentiated stance taken by the Albanian Communist movement on the Allies during World War II, but also emphasised that: "the Soviet Union was the only faithful ally of the people that both helped them to be liberated from fascist occupation and to establish and strengthen a popular democratic order" (*History of the Antifascist National Liberation War of the Albanian People*, 1984). In fact, this affirmation has barely any truth to it. Based on documentation from Albanian archives, the Soviet Union did not provide any real assistance. The first Soviet mission arrived in Albania in August 1944 when the partisan war had reached its climax (Bailey, 2011; Hibbert, 1991; Smirnova, 2004). The first part of this statement entailed the manipulation of history serving the communist propaganda to justify their seizure of power and forge an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Another aspect that is noticeable in military history texts is related to the analysis of the external factor that naturally also influenced the victory of the anti-fascist forces in Albania. In all materials prepared for officers during the communist period, the successful invasion by the Allies in Sicily, in July 1943, resulting not only in the overthrow of Mussolini but also in the surrender of Italy, was deliberately ignored. The same is true for the Battle of Normandy. The biggest distortions are found in the analysis of the fall of Berlin, a victory that is one-sidedly attributed to the Red Army (*National Liberation Military Art History*, 1989).

For 45 years, at the Higher Military School, the Anglo-American contribution was taught in a distorted way, based on the version presented in the falsified memoirs of the communist leader, Enver Hoxha, in his book "The Anglo-American Threat to Albania." According to his perspective, also reflected in the military history text, the Anglo-American forces were not considered a true strategic equivalent to the German-Soviet front (*World Military Art History*, 1987). This argument was based on the ratio of forces, which were smaller compared to the Soviet forces. Thus, Enver Hoxha's ideological assertion that "the Anglo-American contribution to the war was much smaller than that of the Soviet Union" also became a myth (Hoxha, 1968).

The Anglo-American missions were never appreciated for achieving the strategic objective of liberating the country (Kera, 2017, p.372). Ideologically linked to the Soviet Union, such indirect importance was attributed to the victories and military actions of the Red Army on the Eastern Front. Concerning the abovementioned myth of the Battle of Tirana, the communist history exaggerated its role in this victory and "forgot" the role of the British forces in striking the German objectives. This oblivion was also accompanied by a distortion of the truth, according to which British air forces had been deployed after the Germans' retreat and had hit the civilian population and buildings (*National Liberation Military Art History*, 1989).

The acts undertaken by these missions to attack the German forces in Albania were not considered as military tactics. This is because recognizing these merits would have necessitated a political and military explanation for why Albania labeled the Anglo-American missions as enemies at the end of the war.

1.8 Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that many of the difficulties associated with war, with a focus on World War II, were treated by Albanian military art history art using Marxist philosophical theoretical viewpoints. What was characterized as military art and science concepts were, in reality, simply ideological notions. Xenophobia towards the West, ingrained in the communist-led partisan war, led to the instrumentalisation of the Albanian partisan army beyond its dimensions and aspirations for national liberation. The army, which was regarded as a byproduct of the Party's ideology, upheld this legacy even after the liberation, being viewed as a tool of the proletariat dictatorship.

To create the necessary foundation of blind obedience towards the regime, communist nationalism exploited all internal resources to fabricate its own version of a war history that had to be the first and only subject to be recognized and studied by military school candidates. The character of textbooks on world military art history and Albanian military art history was affected by this approach. The dominating knowledge in the history of international military art was that of the Red Army, constantly highlighting Stalin's genius as a military strategist. This aided in bringing forth similarities with Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha as a leader during World War II.

The distortion of military history with isolated episodes taken out of the whole context was part of the falsification of national history. Officers who graduated from Enver Hoxha United High School, and continued their studies at the Defence Academy, knew only one side of the wars, which, according to the Marxist-Leninist perspective, justified class struggle within society and fed hatred towards Western societies. As a result, even the model of the armed forces of these societies became an object of denigration in military classrooms, where the most common labels against them were enemy army, imperialist army, war-mongering army, and so on.

The regime had no difficulty constructing its own version of events because the group's mindset played a crucial role in this process of fabrication. The vast majority of the military personnel came from social classes closely tied to the regime or from poor strata who saw military career as a golden opportunity for their future [and they were not mistaken]. Propaganda responded to social changes by creating the image of victorious partisans. This portrayal contained some truth but not to the extent of the actual victory, as was illustrated through some examples in this paper. Military history was manipulated to support the decision on extermination of political opponents and discredit them as traitors and enemies of the country.

The greatest damage was done precisely to national history and especially to the military events that occurred in the Albanian territory during World War II. Even after 30 years of democracy, many of the myths and dogmas that originated in the Albanian military history during the communist dictatorship, continue to be debated, both politically and militarily. But it is crucial that now there are numerous and serious sources, and efforts are also being made to render the approach to military history as scientific as possible. To conclude, over these last three decades, as part of the debate in open democratic societies, the understanding of victories and losses and analyses of military events that occurred in Albania during World War II, at a tactical and operational level, have drastically changed.

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