

High culture for the underprivileged: The Educational Missions in the Spanish Second Republic 1931 - 1936

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Introduction

These days the 70 km journey by car from the centre of Madrid to the village of Valdepeñas de la Sierra takes about one hour. A part of the trip passes over the recently enlarged three lane motorway A1 to the Northern part of the province of Madrid, where the rich and beautiful live in their mansions, enjoying the cooler climate in summer and the proximity of the ski resorts in winter. The situation was quite different in the month of February 1932, when a group of six young primary teachers and students made this trip with heavily loaded lorries. The library with several hundred books, the movie projector and the films, just as the copies of famous paintings of the Prado Museum in Madrid on the lorries were financed by the Patronage of the Educational Missions, but the young, carefully selected cultural missionaries were volunteers who did not earn a single peseta with their work. Their most important motive was not an economical one, but their desire to bring some high culture to the underprivileged and isolated population of several rural areas in the Castilian province of Guadalajara in order to compensate the social injustice under which this population suffered.

Therefore, they did not only have to go through the long journey on uncomfortable lorries over the country road full of potholes and support the chilliness of a cold winter day, but, once arrived in Valdepeñas – “(a village) corrupted by the domination of a few landlords”¹ – they had to unload the lorries and prepare the material to be taken on horseback to several villages in the vicinity which could not be reached by car. But the physical labour and the cold climate were not the worst hardships for our young urban missionaries. What shocked them most was the situation of extreme poverty and negligence in many villages, sometimes paired with tremendous ignorance, which made some villagers, who were influenced by the local priests and landowners, openly reject the efforts of the missionaries.



Old and new houses in Alpedrete de la Sierra, a village visited by an educational mission in 1932.

“It is quite natural that you want to know, before we start, who we are and what our intentions are” stated the message of the Patronage’s president which was read to the villagers on the first evening of the mission in Valdepeñas, just as on the beginning of every other mission. “Do not be afraid. We have not come to require anything from you. On the contrary; we will give you some things for free. We are an itinerant school which wants to travel from village to village ... We would like to bring you joy (and) to entertain you ...”²

The missionaries had to present themselves and their intentions to the sometimes more than sceptical villagers,

¹ Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas: *Misiones Pedagógicas. Septiembre de 1931 – Diciembre de 1933. Informes I.*, Madrid, S. Aguirre Impresor, 1934, 30.

² Idem, 13.

who had not received anything but deep contempt from the urban dwellers for centuries. Still in 1931, the year of the proclamation of the Republic, there was a “chasm³” between urban and rural life. Whereas the cities enjoyed the inventions of modern technology, life on the country had not changed considerably since the Middle Ages. Even the idealistic and well-intentioned missionaries from Madrid could not avoid to become aware of the incredible difference between their own privileged living situation and the backwardness of the life in the villages that they visited: “We were so far removed from their world,” declared the former educational missionary Carmen Caamaño in an interview in 2007, “that it was as if we came from another galaxy, from places that they could not even imagine existed, not to mention how we dressed or what we ate, or how we talked. We were different.”⁴

This paper will explore the historical conditions that made several hundred young and privileged urban intellectuals perceive the social differences between the urban and the rural population in Spain at the beginning of the nineteen thirties as an intolerable social injustice which they wanted to remediate. With the help of available sources, such as academic studies, reports, diaries, photos and movies, I will try to deliver a narrative reconstruction of the unique and unfortunately very short-lived enterprise of popular education that took place in Spain from 1931 to 1936. The narrative and descriptive elements of the paper will be complemented by a critical review of the ideological foundations and the practical realization of the Educational Missions.

Previous conditions of the Educational Missions

The idea to send educational missions to Spanish villages was not a new one in 1931, but could look back on a quite long history. As other plans for initiatives which aimed to enhance the living conditions of the neglected rural population, the development of the project of the missions has to be considered in the context of the political situation in 19th and early 20th century Spain. Since the first decades of the 19th century, the country was politically biased. A basic conflict existed between the progressive, enlightened and educated bourgeoisie, which tended – together with some aristocrats – to liberal positions, preferring a republic or, at least, a constitutional monarchy, and, on the other hand, the conservative aristocracy, the upper-class and the big landowners, whose interests were defended by the Catholic Church, also a big landowner itself, who preferred a traditional absolutist monarchy. Three succession wars, the so-called Carlist wars, were the result of the tensions between liberals and conservatives in the 19th century, and numerous episodes of political unrest. Remnants of this conflict were even present in the worst confrontation that shattered contemporary Spain, the civil war from 1936 to 1939.

Nevertheless, the players in this long-term confrontation did not only act on the military field, but extended their battle on secondary war theatres, especially in the area of culture and education policy. In the last decades of the 19th century, professors and students at the Central University of Madrid were often directly affected by rapidly following changes in the power structure of the Spanish state. Liberal professors, who defended democratic ideas, were expelled from their university chairs under the conservative monarchy in the 1860s, restored at university by the quite short-lived first Spanish republic, and expelled,

³ Ortero Urtaza, Eugenio: «Los marineros del entusiasmo en las Misiones Pedagógicas» in: Sociedad de Conmemoraciones Estatales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 67.

⁴ See the interview with Carmen Caamaño at the beginning of the excellent documentary on the educational missions *Las Misiones Pedagógicas*, Acacia Films in collaboration with Spanish Television (TVE), 2007, available on the internet at <http://video.google.es/videoplay?docid=-3950977187437649927&hl=es> [Enquiry of May 31, 2009]

imprisoned and exiled again, after the conservative forces had won the upper hand in 1874⁵. Therefore, a group of liberal intellectuals, who desired to work academically without being exposed to the contingencies of political life, founded in 1876 an independent educational institution, the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*. The new conservative constitution of 1875 recognized religious tolerance and the freedom of teaching, thus making possible the foundation of this educational centre. The society was financed through subscriptions to nominal shares, the fees of the future students and donations. The most important aim of the institution was to “cultivate and propagate science ... through the means of teaching”⁶ as its intellectual leader, Francisco Giner de los Ríos, stated.

The institution should become an unavoidable point of reference for all progressive intellectuals during the six decades of its existence and acquired an importance, which went far beyond of its relatively small number of students. Ideas conceived by the institution influenced strongly on the education policy in Spain, especially in the first decades of the 20th century.

As many other progressive intellectuals, Giner de los Ríos understood that the enduring disregard for the rural population was one of the main reasons for Spain’s backwardness as compared to other nations. As early as 1881, Giner proposed to the then responsible minister of the Spanish government to organize a kind of ambulant missions to the villages, especially in order to motivate the teachers, who worked there⁷. Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, a young professor of history of arts and a former student of Giner, took up the fundamental idea of his teacher and passionately defended the right of children in the villages to the same high quality education than the children who lived in cities at the National Education Congress held in Madrid in 1882. He demanded that only the best qualified teachers should be sent to the villages:

Instead of sending incomplete teachers to the rural schools, ..., let us send there only the best teachers, not only those with the best knowledge, but those, whose vocation is teaching, because this is even more important for the issue.⁸

Both ideas, i.e. organizing ambulant missions and sending highly qualified teachers to the villages, were considered positively by other progressive Spanish intellectuals, but inspired only very few of them to act in consequence. One follower of the *institucionistas*, Ángel Llorca, demanded at an educational congress in Barcelona in 1909 the organization of a body of educational missionaries, who should orientate the teachers inspired by the Education Museum⁹ and help to promote love for the school in the villages. Another follower, Luis Santullano, had organized a small travelling library in the province of Zamora and visited small villages, where he founded reader circles with tiny groups of rural teachers.

After 1911 the programme of the Institution, which aimed to fight illiteracy by promoting rural schools and schooling with the training of new teaching staff and educational missions, infiltrated the official education policy. A high ranking official in the Ministry of Public Instruction closely linked to the Institution, Rafael Altamira, started some test missions and there was an entry for educational missions in the budget of the Ministry in 1912. Gregorio Marañón, a physician and intellectual, travelled to Las Hurdes, a poor region of Extremadura, in 1922 and drew public attention to the unsustainable situation of the rural population. Nevertheless, all these initiatives were individual efforts

⁵ For a detailed description of the events see: Jiménez-Landi, Antonio: *Breve historia de la Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Educación y Ciencia, 1998.

⁶ quoted according to Jiménez-Landi, 1998, *op. cit.*, 83.

⁷ See Otero Urtaza, Eugenio, *op. cit.*, 73.

⁸ Cossío, Manuel Bartolomé in *Congreso Nacional Pedagógico. Actas de las sesiones celebradas*, Madrid, Sociedad El Fomento de las Artes iniciadora del Congreso, Madrid, Imprenta de don Gregorio Hernando, 1882, 85.

⁹ Whose director was Cossío.

and were not systematic in solving the problems of the rural schools and enhancing the cultural knowledge of the rural population in these years. Even these sporadic attempts to introduce literacy and culture in underprivileged regions came to an end with the coup d'état of General Primo de Rivera in 1923.

The idea that the rural environment did not only need a reform of the property laws and more efficient methods to cultivate the soil, but also to promote its schools and the citizenship education, was generally accepted among progressive Spanish intellectuals during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, but could not be put into practice.

The establishment of the *Patronage of the Educational Missions*

The foundation of the *Patronage of the Educational Missions* was the immediate consequence of the proclamation of the Spanish Republic on April 14, 1931. Cossío, who was in Switzerland on that day, returned quickly to Madrid, where he accepted his appointment as president of the Patronage. According to an article published by Santullano¹⁰, Cossío was convinced that the missions were an authentic work of social justice, because they were not designed to satisfy immediate needs of the rural population or to be directly useful, but because the people in the villages had a right to enjoy high culture and more spiritual goods by contemplating works of art. The decree, which established the missions with a



Ángel Lorca, Luis Santullano and Manuel B. Cossío (from left to right) in Bustarviejo (Madrid) in May 15, 1935.

text written largely by Santullano, described the main objectives of the missions as follows: "The objective is to take the breath of progress and the means to participate in this progress to the people, especially to those who live in rural communities ... so that all villages in Spain, even the remote ones, can participate in the noble advantages and pleasures which are reserved for the cities nowadays."¹¹ The missions did not start immediately as Cossío took his time to find missionaries, who could fulfil his high expectations. The young people who took part in the missions should be able to create a positive relationship with the farmers and never give them the impression to enjoy their free time or be lazy, but to manifest an attitude of unselfish interest during their visits and beware of showing urban behaviour which could be considered scandalous by the villagers.

The third article of the decree which created the Educational Missions established three main objectives: They were to establish popular libraries in the country in order to *promote general culture*, organize courses and lectures, inform the rural population through movies about the life and the customs of other peoples, scientific progress, etc. Furthermore, concerts with choirs or small orchestras would be organized and music broadcast over the radio or played on the gramophone. They would visit the largest possible number of village schools and organize courses for the teachers in order to realize the objective of *educational orientation*. The democratic principles of modern states would be presented in public meetings, and lectures about the structure of the state and the possibilities of the citizens to participate in public life should be held in order to promote *citizenship education*.

¹⁰ See Santullano, Luis: «Cossío y las Misiones Pedagógicas», *Revista de Pedagogía*, no. 165, Madrid, 1935.

¹¹ Ortero Urtaza, Eugenio, *op. cit.*, 80.

The Patronage created several services in order to comply with these obligations. The most important was the library service, which counted on the collaboration of the famous philologist María Moliner. The missionaries organized public lectures of ballads and poems during their visits and left in every village school a collection of about 100 books, which should satisfy the interests of adults and children who nearly did not read any books before. More than 5000 libraries were distributed during the five years of the Patronage's activity.

One of the surprising aspects of the educational missions is that they were not limited to the distribution of cultural contents by classical media – such as books – but that they tried to take new communication technologies to the peasants, which were largely ignored. The missionaries used to travel with a gramophone, which was used to organize public performances of popular music coming from different Spanish regions or classical music. Some records were even edited by the Patronage and two of them contained records of the Mission's Chorus. Nevertheless, the most interesting device, which attracted the peasants' curiosity, was the cinematograph. Some people had to travel quite long distances walking in order to discover this new wonder, which they did not know at all. The missionaries showed silent movies to the public, accompanied by music from the gramophone, basically documentaries about other Spanish regions and comical movies. There is a testimony of a mission to Alpedrete de la Sierra, which describes the impression caused by the cinematograph:

The cinema and the gramophone were totally unknown to them, so unknown that they even did not feel the curiosity to know them. It was a revelation for them; they accepted it with the dazzling of a miracle without being interested to find out, how the mechanism worked; they laughed about everything with a cheerful surprise about the movement of the actors and the singing of the gramophone; they talked and applauded continuously. Basically, they all felt the same emotion, an immense happiness.¹²

The Theatre and the Chorus of the People had the intention to bring an elementary theatre to the villages. About 50 boys and girls, nearly all of them university students or future primary teachers, organized the installation of the stages in the villages and showed simple plays and sung popular songs in the whole of Spain. As the theatre could not reach some remote villages, Cossío and his collaborator Rafael Dieste started to organize the presentation of plays for a puppet theatre in the villages.

Another quite interesting tool of the educational missions was the Museum of the People, which was composed of a collection of famous paintings that were copies of originals exposed in the *Museo del Prado* in Madrid. Cossío dedicated a lot of energy to organizing these exhibitions, as he wanted to succeed in introducing the aesthetical contemplation of art works in the villages. There were two collections of paintings, which used to be exhibited for a week in each village and explained by the organizers of the museum. The missionaries left framed photos or engravings for the schools in the villages.

The Patronage also organized teacher training courses. The courses lasted one week and had a quite reduced number of participants. Usually, the themes of the courses were requested by the primary teachers of a certain region, who had received the enquiries by the Patronage on time. One of the main objectives was to strengthen the confidence of the primary teachers in themselves and their inspiration.

Missionaries and missions

Different studies on the social structure, the ideological background and the motivations of the missionaries come to similar conclusions. Even though they had some points in common, i.e. most of the missionaries were quite young and a majority studied for or had

¹² Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas, *op. cit.*, 32.

an educational profession, as much as they shared the idealistic wish to enhance the situation of the rural population in Spain, a closer look at the political ideas that they confessed can only find out an astonishing diversity. To a certain extent, the Educational Missions seem to have been one of the very few ventures in the Second Spanish Republic, in which rightists and leftists worked together, even if the latter clearly prevailed.¹³ Maybe this multifaceted composition of the missionaries was the result of some leading organizers' intent to maintain equidistance to leftist and rightist ideas. Américo Castro, for instance, wrote in 1935:

A hundred times has been repeated that the terms left and right lack justification and that the public positions, to which these different words are referred to, and, above all, the antagonism that separates them, are frivolous and archaic,

just in order to state later in the text that the attempt to destroy the Educational Missions was criminal and unreasonable.¹⁴ Cossío's message, which was read aloud to the villagers at the beginning of an Educational Mission, tried more indirectly to describe the missions' purpose as guided by the noblest and most unselfish motives and insofar not related to any political aims. According to Cossío, the missions should correct the injustice of the isolation of the peasants and bring them joy and fun with the culture that expressed itself through images and words. Even though he did not expect that the peasants would learn very much, he hoped to awaken their love for reading, because if all Spaniards would feel a longing for reading, a New Spain would emerge. At the same time, he invited young people who were privileged by their knowledge and fortune, to pay back to society the debt of justice that they had acquired by participating in the missions. The missions did not try to indoctrinate the peasants, but to show a sign of fraternity with them and to achieve that they considered the paintings of the museum as their own property, and at the same time to make them proud on their own traditions, when they heard young students present popular songs or ballads.¹⁵

Otero Urtaza's review of the approximately 700 missionaries¹⁶ identifies nearly every imaginable ideological affiliation among them. According to this author, there were conservative Catholics, enlightened Catholics, young orthodox and Trotskyite communists, socialists and followers of the Bolshevik revolution, libertarian members of the Iberian Anarchistic Federation (FAI), militants of the United Socialist Youth (JSU), but a huge majority were just enthusiastic republican educators.¹⁷ Some writers and poets as Miguel Hernández or artists as Ramón Gaya took actively part in the missions, but the largest professional group which brought the missions forward consisted of teachers, especially primary school teachers. Ruiz Berrio counts more than 150 primary school teachers who participated in the missions, among them about 80 who attended different courses that were offered in several Spanish villages, about 12 who worked as missionaries after having been students in a mission, and another 80 teachers who collaborated only as missionaries.¹⁸

Anyhow, it is not easy to sketch an objective picture of the missionaries and their motives. Recent Spanish studies use – referring to contemporary sources – positive adjectives to describe the missionaries' characteristics in such an excessive number that

¹³ See Ruiz Berrio, Julio: «Maestros, inspectores y profesores, protagonistas de las Misiones Pedagógicas» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 241.

¹⁴ Castro, Américo: «Los dinamiteros de la cultura» in *El Sol*, Madrid, June 4th, 1935.

¹⁵ See Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas, *op. cit.*, 13 ff.

¹⁶ See the list of missionaries in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 521 – 524.

¹⁷ Ortero Urtaza, Eugenio, *op. cit.*, 90.

¹⁸ Ruiz Berrio, *op. cit.*, 243.

makes it impossible to believe them without any reservation. Naturally, current Spanish educationists are inclined to perceive the missionaries' efforts as brilliant examples for the promotion of a democratic culture and the missionaries themselves as the precursors of educators, who would take up their ideals after the end of the fascist dictatorship and the reestablishment of a democratic state in Spain, but it seems that they sometimes forget to preserve the necessary critical point of view.

Otero Urtaza reminds his readers that Cossío used to qualify the missionaries as the "elite" of the institution, stating that it would be difficult to find a similar generation of teachers in any other part of Europe during these years. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied, even with the necessary precaution, that the academic record of at least some participants in the missions is quite outstanding. Among the missionaries there were authors of text books for primary schools, books for citizenship education, literary books and the writer of a widely recognized history book who was to be killed by fascist troops after the outbreak of the civil war¹⁹. Additionally, a large number of scientists, artists and photographers could also be found under the missionaries²⁰.

Were the missionaries a crowd of naïve young people? If we suppose that most missionaries were followers of Cossío's basic assumptions, independently from their ideological orientation, then Tuñón de Lara's opinion "that there was a certain aftertaste of archaeology" in the missions which corresponded to "an educational utopian concept so much enrooted in our cultural traditions" so that the realization of the missions without transforming the agrarian structure of the country was like "planting trees with the crown first"²¹ does not seem totally unjustified. There are some elements in Cossío's thinking which raise the question, if really all villagers who were the object of his educational efforts would have agreed with them. According to the director of the Patronage, it was more important to "enjoy life" than to eat. Even if it is comprehensible that a professor of the history of art comes to such a conclusion, it is at least reasonable to doubt that all villagers visited by the missions preferred to watch a Charlie Chaplin movie to a good dish of lentils. Intelligent and well educated as they were some of the missionaries became aware of the difference between their own pretensions to bring high culture to the isolated population in the country and the predominant needs of these people. Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, one of the missionaries who participated in the third educational mission to Valdepeñas de la Sierra, stated that "we saw the poverty, the backwardness, the injustice, and we were affected by that, but there was not much that we could do about it. We were convinced of the need of radical reforms. We knew that raising the economical level was the necessary condition for raising the cultural level. ... But we never thought that our work was useless. It was enough for us to watch the reaction of the people ... We did what we could, but we were aware that it was necessary to do much more, above all in the economic field"²².

Nevertheless, the Patronage changed the character of an educational mission only once after the negative experiences of a group of students in the village San Martín de Castañeda near the Lake Sanabria. According to the report of the group, the living conditions in the village were so miserable that the people resorted to a kind of hidden beggary by offering their craftwork more and more aggressively for sale. The villagers were hardly interested in the program presented by the missionaries, but in making money with them. Given the failure of the mission, some missionaries conceived the idea to return to the village in order to realize some projects which should enhance directly the bad quality of life in the village;

¹⁹ Daniel González Linacero, the director of a teacher training institute (Escuela Normal) and author of *Mi primer libro de historia*, was killed on August 8, 1936, by fascist troops in his house in Palencia.

²⁰ See Ortero Urtaza, Eugenio: *Las misiones pedagógicas: una experiencia de educación popular*, Ediciós do Castro, A Coruña, 1982, 96.

²¹ See Ortero Urtaza, Eugenio, 1982, *op. cit.*, 94.

²² See Ortero Urtaza, Eugenio, 1982, *op. cit.*, 95.

this enterprise should become the first and unfortunately only educational-social mission. The missionaries repaired the school building, organized a decent housing for the primary school teacher, offered the regular feeding of the school children, courses of hygiene to the female population of the village and introduced even a new crop, special maize for cold climates, to the peasants. In addition to these measures, the missionaries also presented their usual cultural program. In the aftermath, it seems that this educational-social mission remained more a unique experiment than a model for following missions, because the Patronage understood that it could not use its budget for feeding the rural population, but that it should concentrate on cultural education; according to this point of view, it was the task of other institutions of the new republican state to enhance the material living conditions of the villagers.

The missions were present in the whole Spanish territory, but with a different intensity depending on the region. Some communities as Navarre and the Canary Island were served only by the library service, being other typical activities of the Patronage quite scarce in these areas. There were some initiatives in remote areas of Spain²³, which organized educational missions independently from Madrid. The rector of the University in Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, held some lectures in 1932 and inspired Rafael Dieste²⁴ to participate in the missions and to organize them in Galicia. Similar activities were realized in other northern regions of Spain. Nevertheless, the destination of the largest number of educational missions was the centre of Spain, maybe due to the vicinity to Madrid and also the existence of a great number of neglected villages. The missions started from different local capitals and offered their services to many peasants. There were also quite frequent missions to the villages in the low mountain range *Sierra de Guadarrama* which were just about 100 km from Madrid²⁵, but where life had not changed very much since the Middle Ages. Missionaries reported that most villagers had never left their environment and did not even know what a motor car was²⁶. Some of these reports on the incredible backwardness of the villages were so impressive that they were quoted in debates among members of the Spanish Parliament, who commented them according to their political affiliation. Taking into account the relative short life of the educational missions and evaluating them from an organizational point of view, the large number of missions and villages visited seems to show that the strong intention of many Spanish intellectuals to remediate the social injustice that they had diagnosed was accompanied by outstanding organization skills. During the realization of the mission, the cultural education of the villagers was just as important as the learning process of the missionaries. The missions gave to a whole generation of young intellectuals the opportunity to acquire a first hand knowledge about the situation of their countrymen who lived outside the big cities and to develop a strong sense of social justice. Unfortunately, some decades of dictatorship had to pass until these experiences of popular education could find their just recognition and inspire the education policy of the new Spanish democracy.

²³ See, for instance, García Lorenzo, Luciano: *Las "misiones pedagógicas" en Zamora (1933 – 1934)*, Instituto de Estudios Zamoranos "Florián de Ocampo", 1991.

²⁴ Dieste, born in 1899, belonged to the so-called "Generation 27" in the Spanish literature and became well known as author of a quite extensive literary work in Galician and Spanish, especially plays for the theatre and the puppet theatre. During the civil war, he was a member of the *Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals* and defended the Republic. After the war he went into exile to South America and the UK; in 1961 he returned to Spain, working actively for the Galician culture and political independence until he died in 1981.

²⁵ "The educational missions deployed a considerable activity in the city of Madrid and its province" Huertas Vázquez, Eduardo: *Las misiones pedagógicas en la Comunidad de Madrid*, Artes Gráficas Municipales, Área de Régimen Interior y Patrimonio, Madrid, 2000.

²⁶ See Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas, *op. cit.*, 38 – 39.

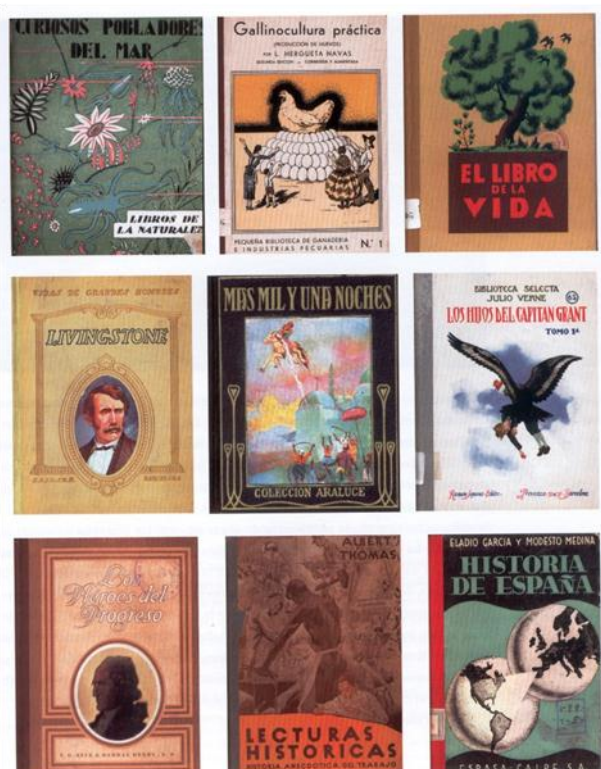
The services of the Educational Missions

The libraries

When the Republic came to life, the number of public libraries in Spain was rather low. There was a certain network of libraries in Catalonia and parts of Asturias, but not in the rest of the country²⁷. The first governments of the Republic tried to satisfy the growing demand of cultural knowledge by creating two kinds of libraries, the municipal libraries and the libraries of the Educational Missions. The library service was the most important activity of the Educational Missions by far, as they spent about 60% of the budget in acquiring books and transporting them to the villages. Whereas the other activities of the Missions – movie projections, exhibitions of artworks, theatre plays, etc. – were single events, the libraries stayed in the villages. Until 1936, the libraries of the Missions had reached 5.552 locations, most of them quite small villages. One of the most significant intentions of the Missions was to contribute to the reduction of the extraordinary high number of illiterate citizens, 43% of the population according to the census of 1930, but much higher in rural areas and among women.

A typical library of a Mission was composed of about hundred books which included classical and contemporary literature by Spanish and non-Spanish authors, books about history, geography, education, agricultural techniques or biographies. The consignment of a

book included paper to wrap them, instructions how to conserve them and file cards for loaning the books. When the primary school teacher received the library, she or he could choose additional ten books which complemented the collection; if these books were in the catalogue of the Missions, they were also sent, sometimes even together with a gramophone and a collection of music records. 2.135 libraries were sent to villages in 1933 and 1934²⁸. Nearly half a million readers were registered in 1932 and 1933, more than fifty percent of them children, and more than two millions loans of books, over 60 % of books for children. These and a lot of other data are contained in a survey produced directly by the Patronage, as it considered the concession of a library to a village as a starting point. Librarians, i.e. mostly primary school teachers, were regularly contacted and asked to report about the use of the



Book titles of a library of the Educational Missions.

²⁷ See Salaberria Lizarazu, Ramón: «Las bibliotecas de Misiones Pedagógicas: medio millón de libros a las aldeas más olvidadas.» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 303 – 304.

²⁸ See Salaberria Lizarazu, Ramón, *op. cit.*, 306.

library to the Patronage, so that it could organize future consignment of books according to the demand in the village. There were also some library inspectors who visited regularly the libraries in the villages which had been established by the new republican state. According to the reports of José Vicente Quadrado, a library inspector who had travelled to hundreds of villages, different situations could be observed: books were not ordinary objects at that time, but instruments of social transformation, so that the establishment of libraries sometimes caused scepticism in a village, especially among the ruling class. In other villages, the libraries introduced by the Educational Missions were used as an important tool for school education and even cultural education²⁹.

María Moliner, the later famous philologist who would publish one of the best dictionaries of the Spanish language³⁰, was then a member of the Patronage of the Educational Missions in Valencia and had visited all libraries which had been established by this institution. She started to reorganize the Patronage's libraries in this region, trying to solve the problems that she had observed. According to Moliner, collaborators of the libraries should be appointed in the villages and the libraries themselves grouped in three types: school libraries, rural libraries with an infantile section and mixed libraries with a larger number of books. And, finally, she proposed to label every library with a large sign and to create reading groups in order to make the existence of the libraries better known. Unfortunately, her efforts did not come to a good end, as the civil war broke out.

The library service was politically one of the most controversial activities of the Educational Missions. The conservative press accused the missions to realize quite useless, but costly initiatives which only served to satisfy the vanity of some gentlemen³¹. More malicious conservative politicians argued that the distribution of libraries among the rural population could cause a violent revolution, mentioning that the revolution in Asturias³² had broken out in an area where a large number of libraries had been established³³. So it could not be very surprising that the military junta in the fascist zone passed a decree only a couple of months after the beginning of the civil war which called upon all authorities to "recollect and destroy all books with a socialist or communist character which could be found in school libraries."³⁴ The result was that it was difficult for Spaniards to lend a book in a public library for decades, and if they did so, they just found books which "responded to the healthy principles of religion and Christian morality."³⁵

The Museum of the People

The Educational Missions had been conceived to a large extent by Cossío's ideas on social education. Being a professor of the history of art, the aesthetical education of the rural population was one of his deepest concerns. In 1882 he had formulated the quite rhetorical question, where a poor child in a village could ever contemplate a statue or learn that Shakespeare or Velázquez had existed. The impossibility of a large part of the rural

²⁹ Idem, 310.

³⁰ Moliner, María: *Diccionario de uso del español*, Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 1966.

³¹ See the review *Atenas*, no. 52, 1935, 236.

³² The revolutionary movement in Asturias was largely dominated by anarchist groups of miners and realized a violent strike against the centrist – conservative government of the Second Spanish Republic during two weeks in October 1934. The revolution was violently repressed by government troops under the command of General Francisco Franco, who would later lead the fascist rebellion against the republic. The revolution left some 1.500 dead (among them about 300 soldiers and policemen) and raised considerably the tensions between the left and the right.

³³ So the deputy Lamamié de Clairac in a parliamentary debate on June 27, 1935, see *Diario de las Sesiones de las Cortes*, 27 de junio de 1935, 57.

³⁴ See Salaberria Lizarazu, Ramón, *op. cit.*, 315. Eyewitnesses in the mentioned documentary movie about the educational missions report on the burning of books in their villages after the arrival of the fascist troops.

³⁵ Idem.

population to have access to works of art and literature was for Cossío the consequence of the most horrible social injustice. When the Educational Missions started, Cossío immediately began to organize an itinerant exhibition of Spain's most famous artworks, which should be taken to the villages, considering them a cultural heritage for all. The "Museum of the People" addressed according to Cossío "all those humble people who live in the remotest villages and who have never left them ... and where there are not any museums ... they do not know any painting of the great artists."³⁶ The creation of the Museum involved the practical problem of the acquisition of copies of important artworks selected according to Cossío's criteria. "Cossío wanted copies made by painters, not copyists, to be taken to the villages"³⁷, so he organized together with Pedro Salinas, a member of the Patronage since its foundation, a contest in 1932 in order to get the copies that he was looking for. Three young painters, among them Ramón Gaya, took part in the contest invited by Salinas, and the quality of their paintings did not only convince Salinas himself but also the aged president of the Patronage Cossío³⁸. Ordered by Cossío, the painters produced numerous copies of famous Spanish paintings, usually in the original format. The *Executions at La Moncloa* by Goya, the *Resurrection* by Velázquez, his *Infant Margarita*, the *Auto de fe* by Berruguete, just as the *Portrait of a Chevalier* by El Greco were some of the famous paintings reproduced by Ramón Gaya, Juan Bonafé and Eduardo Vicente. At the end of this process, the Patronage disposed of two collections with 14 paintings, complemented by some smaller works, mostly copies of drawings by Goya. The selection of the personnel who should take the Museum to the villages and explain the paintings followed the typical personalist scheme of Cossío: The academic achievements of a person were not so much important for him, but his personal impression acquired in an interview. There are many testimonies which describe the quite unconventional and at the same time somehow paternalistic procedure of the Patronage's director³⁹. After the selection of the missionaries, Cossío left the practical organization largely to his collaborators, indicating only that he did not want them to act scholarly or arrogantly before the villagers.

The Missions tried to take the Museum to the villages on local holidays or celebrations, when people from the surroundings used to gather there. Even though the programme of activities varied according to the circumstances, the organization of the Museum had some points in common. The paintings were transported by lorries to the village and exposed there in the best available rooms, usually in the town-hall or the school building. The missionaries tried to expose



Peasants contemplating Gaya's copy of Goya's painting *The executions at La Moncloa*.

³⁶ Presentation of the Museum written by Manuel B. Cossío, reproduced in the catalogue of the exhibition *Ramón Gaya y el Museo Circulante de las Misiones Pedagógicas* held in the museum Ramón Gaya in Murcia in April and May 1991.

³⁷ Gaya, Ramón: «Mi experiencia en las misiones pedagógicas (1931 – 1936). Con el museo del Prado de viaje por España.» in Val del Omar, José: *Val del Omar y las misiones pedagógicas*, Publicaciones de la Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid, 2003, 19.

³⁸ See Dennis, Nigel: «El Museo del Pueblo» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 330.

³⁹ Antonio Sánchez Barbudo and Rafael Dieste report on quite similar experiences. Both were hired for the Missions after an interview with Cossío, see Dennis, Nigel, *op. cit.*, 333.

the paintings in a decent way, they hang blankets on the walls, so that the paintings could be better contemplated, they adorned the rooms with plants and played classical music from a gramophone. The exhibitions opened two hours in the morning and in the afternoon after four o'clock. The missionaries used to give lectures in the afternoon about the historical period of the creation of the painting or directly on its characteristics. Afterwards, the typical activities of the Missions started, i.e. performances of music and movie projections. The Missions stayed for about a week in a village, and when it left, it used to leave not only the library, the gramophone and several records, but also photos of the most important paintings in the village.

It is quite difficult to judge, if these quite ephemeral exhibitions had a long-lasting effect on their visitors. The missionaries had to deliver a written report on their experiences to the Patronage and often reported personally to Cossío. Most reports mention visitors who followed the session with interest and tried to understand every word and who sometimes made quite interesting comments on the artworks they had contemplated⁴⁰. The photos made of visitors of the Museum, which the *Residencia de Estudiantes* conserves, show many peasants contemplating with interest and respect the paintings that the Missions had brought into their villages. On the other hand, some missionaries mention that they felt unable to answer the visitors' questions about the utility of the exhibition, because the lack of a concrete purpose was a central element of Cossío's design of the Museum. He just wanted the Museum to exist and to present it as a gift to the villagers.

Was the Museum of the People just an enterprise in order to satisfy the personal vanity of Mr. Cossío, as some conservative critics argued? There is no doubt that Cossío felt personal satisfaction, when the missionaries reported to him, as it is also clear that the design of the Missions followed largely his personal ideas about popular education and especially aesthetical education. With one exception, the Missions did not care directly about the material situation of the villagers that they visited. Insofar, this criticism cannot be totally dismissed. On the other hand, it is quite probable that the exhibitions had an effect on the villagers which went beyond the satisfaction of Cossío's personal ambitions. It is likely that most peasants did not immediately understand the usefulness of paintings for their personal lives, but they may have understood something else: There were educated people from the cities who came to visit them, sent by the new government of the Republic, and who apparently cared about them and their education. This must have been a new experience for a rural population who had been neglected and even despised by the urban ruling classes for centuries. The Missions were also a new experience for those young people who organized the exhibitions. Most of them visited the Spanish countryside for the first time in their life and became acquainted with the situation of the rural population. The painter Ramón Gaya stated:

It was very enriching for me, I understood the people a lot, that is to say humble people.⁴¹

Other missionaries summarized their experiences in a similar way⁴². Insofar, the Missions created a group of intellectuals with a strong sense of social justice who possibly could have changed the country, had it not been for the civil war which killed and exiled so many of them.

The cinema

Whereas the library service and the Museum of the People were activities of popular education which would have equally worked in the 18th and 19th century, if anyone then

⁴⁰ See Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas, *op. cit.*, 55.

⁴¹ Gaya, Ramón, *op. cit.*, 32.

⁴² See Dennis, Nigel, *op. cit.*, 343.

would have been seriously interested in enhancing the cultural level of the rural population, the Missions also employed relatively new techniques of mass communication in the nineteen thirties as the cinematograph and the gramophone. The optimistic hopes of some young intellectuals, who considered the cinema as an anti-intellectual communication medium which would substitute books and teachers, being liberating insofar⁴³, were reflected in some of the Missions' organizers considerations about the usefulness of the *Cinematographic Service* for the purpose of popular education. Without the knowledge of the future development of the cinema into a mainly commercial enterprise, statements as

The Republic knows the potential of the cinema as a means of teaching. A movie with its moving pictures appeals faster to the uncultivated or less cultivated intelligence than a book with its definitions and theorems.⁴⁴

were possible. According to the concept of the service conceived by the Patronage, there were two main tasks: The movie projections should be used as an educational resource, informing and entertaining the rural population with documentaries on “national views, costumes and traditions and those of faraway countries, industries, big cities and savage villages, arts, landscapes and curiosities of Spain and other peoples, ...”⁴⁵, cartoons and motion pictures. At the same time, the missionaries were to film the activities of the villagers and their own activities in order to create a visual memory which could be used to edit new documentaries that could be presented in future Missions.

A typical movie projection started with a documentary, continued with a cartoon (Fritz the Cat) and finished with a motion picture, very often a comical one (usually by Charlie Chaplin)⁴⁶. Different reactions of the rural public are reported. Some villagers felt totally surprised before the new technical wonder that they had ignored completely, even though there existed a movie industry in Barcelona since approximately 1914 and a large movie theatre had been inaugurated in Madrid in 1920. Most villagers followed the movie



Village children watching a movie projected by the cinematographic service of the Educational Missions.

projection with great interest and joy after overcoming their first surprise, and some even searched for people behind the bed sheet that served as screen. Nevertheless, the public left the projections on some occasions, especially, if the documentary shown contradicted the life experience of the peasants. García Maroto reports on his experiences during a mission, when peasants started to laugh about a US-American documentary on the production of bread, which mentioned ingredients – as lard – that they would never use, causing them to leave the projections. As it seems, only the young boys and girls

⁴³ According to the opinion of the photographer and filmmaker Val del Omar, see Saénz de Buruaga: «Val del Omar multimístico en Misiones» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 382.

⁴⁴ Santos, Mateo: «Misiones Pedagógicas: la cruzada de la cultura», *Popular Film*, nº 287, Barcelona, Feb. 11, 1932, 1.

⁴⁵ Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas, *op. cit.*, 10.

⁴⁶ See Puyal, Alfonso: «Gonzalo Menéndez-Pidal o el cine como documento» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 391.

of the village kept on watching the movies, because they liked the darkness⁴⁷.

The photos which were taken during movie projections show overwhelmingly happy villagers with a large percentage of women and children who watch the movie with an expression of amazement and joy. On the other hand, photos of less successful sessions were not made or, at least, not published, so that it is difficult to make statements on the effect of the movies on their public. The movies probably were a welcome interruption of the daily routine for most peasants, but if they planted in many of them a “seed” which made them search for more cultural knowledge, one may venture to doubt.

The cinema service shows in a special way that the educational missions were a typical initiative of its time. A decade ago, the necessary technique to project movies in remote villages would not have been available, and a decade later only a few peasants would have ignored the existence of movies. At the very moment of the educational missions, the movies may have opened the eyes of at least some villagers for the world that surrounded their limited existence.

The theatre and the chorus of the people, the puppet theatre and the music service

The Educational Missions employed classical and modern means in order to introduce plays and music in the neglected villages of the Spanish countryside. The classical method spread this cultural knowledge with the help of a theatre and chorus group which offered performances to the peasants, the modern method consisted in the distribution of gramophones and records with classical and ethnic music. According to the memories of José Marzoa⁴⁸, a member of the group, it was Luis Santullano who converted an existing chorus of former students at the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* into an instrument of the Patronage. About 50 young students of both sexes, whose majority prepared themselves for a career as primary school teachers, rehearsed a repertoire of approximately 25 Spanish popular songs which they presented on a mobile stage in many village. They always included some songs known by the villagers in order to sing together with them and to transmit them a feeling of pride for their own traditional cultural creations, which were returned to them by a quite large chorus. During the semester they held their performances only on Sundays in the surroundings of Madrid, but during the semester break they travelled through the whole of Spain.

Alejandro Casona, a school inspector, author of plays and theatre director, directed the plays that the theatre and the chorus of the people would perform in the villages. He adapted plays written by classical authors, especially Spanish classics as Lope de Vega and Cervantes, for the rural public. Casona remembers that the theatre audiences followed more often than not the performances “with



Female students belonging to an Educational Mission prepared to perform a play in a village.

⁴⁷ García Maroto, Eduardo: *Aventuras y desaventuras del cine español*, Plaza y Janes, Barcelona, 1988, 70 – 72.

⁴⁸ See «El Teatro y el Coro del Pueblo en el recuerdo de José Marzoa y Leopoldo Fabra» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 449.

curiosity at the beginning and then with interest, with arduous interest.”⁴⁹ His memoirs also refer to the differences between the educated public in the cities and his audience in the countryside:

I detected that the universal great comical authors can nobly delight a rural audience and probably even more profoundly than a sophisticated public. ... Quite contrary to what happens in urban auditoriums, the play lives with total independence from the author ... many of our peasants have not ever heard the name of Cervantes, but no one ignores the name, the gesture and the significance of Sancho.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, the theatre could give its performances only in larger villages which were connected to the road network. As the Patronage’s intention was to take high culture even to the remotest villages, it organized a puppet theatre called *El Retablo de Fantoche*s which was easier to transport on horseback than the large mobile stage. Rafael Dieste, a writer and theatre director from Galicia, became its director. He had applied for a scholarship at the *Junta para la Ampliación de Estudios* in Madrid, an official organism closely linked to the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, in order to study the customs and traditions in Spanish villages. The *Junta* rejected his application, because it only financed studies in foreign countries, but put him in contact with the Patronage which engaged him immediately as director for the puppet theatre. Dieste adapted a play that he had written for the small stage of the puppet theatre and gave performances in many Spanish villages that could not easily be accessed, starting in Galicia. According to his memoirs⁵¹, the performances attracted the villagers who usually started to discuss the play after the show.

The composer Eduardo Martínez Torner and the primary school teacher Pablo de Andrés Cobos were the most active organizers of the music service. Apart from arranging songs for the Theatre and Chorus of the People, they organized courses for primary school teachers which prepared them to teach folksongs to their classes and managed the delivery of gramophones and selected records to the villages. De Andrés wrote many short biographies of classical composers which were presented to the villagers during the music sessions of a Mission. He reports in his memoirs that most villagers needed the explanations of a missionary in order to find an approach to classical music⁵². The educational intention of the music service was in the first place to appeal to the musical knowledge of the rural population by presenting them life performances or records of popular songs and then to widen the cultural horizon of the audience by introducing classical music. Insofar, the musical service can be considered an essential part of the educational efforts of the Missions which tried to introduce as many aspects of high culture as possible in the neglected Spanish villages of the nineteen thirties.

Conclusions

The Educational Missions were a unique and original initiative of popular education in the nineteen thirties. They were planned according to a clear and coherent concept conceived by Manuel B. Cossío and realized during five years with an astonishing efficiency. For the first time in Spain’s history, an official state-run institution worked in order to enhance the cultural level of the rural population with a totally new didactical model. The missionaries tried to avoid as much as possible academic procedures and

⁴⁹ Casona, Alejandro: *Juego biográfico dividido en una raíz y tres árboles*, Gráficas Summa, Oviedo, 1965, 80.

⁵⁰ Idem, 81.

⁵¹ Aznar Soler, Manuel: «Rafael Dieste y el Retablo de Fantoche de Misiones Pedagógicas» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 468.

⁵² Pliego de Andrés, Víctor: «El Servicio de Música: Eduardo Martínez Torner y Pablo de Andrés Cobos» in Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/Residencia de Estudiantes: *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931 – 1936*, Madrid, 2006, 431.

partially employed methods of jugglers and showmen to entertain their rural public and introduce at the same time contents belonging to a classical high culture, as defined by bourgeois and progressive intellectuals. Therefore, they did not only use traditional methods as exhibitions, theatre and music performances, but also employed modern communication technology like gramophones and movie projections.

A lot of participants in the missions, missionaries just as much as peasants, agree on the following positive aspects of the missions: many peasants experienced for the first time that an official organism cared about them. A group of young intellectuals from the cities came into their villages, tried to communicate with them and introduced a cultural knowledge beforehand unknown to the villagers. Due to the brutal ending of the missions at the outbreak of the civil war, it is impossible to make statements on the long-term effect of its educational efforts, but their most important significance does not seem to lie in the distribution of high culture among the rural population, but in approaching different social classes which had ignored each other before. The peasants learned that they could expect something better than the traditional contempt from at least a small part of the urban bourgeoisie, whereas many missionaries began to understand the real needs of their countrymen who lived in remote villages. The creation of a quite large group of young Spanish intellectuals, who worried about social injustice and acted to remediate it, independently from their ideological orientation, can be considered as one of the most positive aspects of the missions, even though it took nearly four decades until these experiences could inspire the education policy of the renewed Spanish democracy.

Nevertheless, the educational missions had to meet with criticism from the left and the right, as much during the period of their realization as afterwards in academic studies. The conservatives argued that the missions were useless at best and only served to satisfy the personal vanity of their organizers or inspired, at worst, the peasants to a violent revolution against the ruling classes. Conservatives at that time were not prepared to define the elimination of the backwardness of many Spanish villages as a question of national pride.



A poster announcing a performance of the Chorus and the Theatre of the People

The historical and contemporary criticism that came from the left deserves more serious considerations. Socialists, communists and anarchists criticised that the intellectuals of the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* had never cared very much about the most important problem of Spain in the nineteen thirties, i.e. the reform of the economy and the industrial and agricultural revolution of the country⁵³. According to this point of view, it would have been much more useful to send sons of peasants to other European countries in order to study modern agricultural techniques instead of spending money for raising the cultural level of the rural population. “We enriched the head of the nation and forgot about its stomach.”⁵⁴

This critique clearly touches a sore spot. The Patronage understood as its principal task to promote the cultural education of the villagers, not to enhance their material conditions, because that would be the assignment of other institutions of the Republic. One may venture to doubt that

⁵³ See Araquistáin, Luis: *Pensamiento español contemporáneo*, Losada, Buenos Aires, 1962, 38 – 39.

⁵⁴ Idem, 39.

organizing a quite efficient service of popular education as the educational missions and neglecting at the same time the establishment of equally or even more important social services was really the most intelligent policy to achieve the necessary reform of the country. The intention of the missions was without a doubt very good and noble, but it is difficult to avoid the question, if the educational efforts of the missions would not have shown more positive results with a more social focus like the educational-social mission to Sanabria, for instance. But even as they were, they still constitute a quite brilliant example of popular education whose principles may even today inspire similar activities, even though their methods would have to be adapted to modern times.

Notes:

A short movie on the villages visited by the third educational mission in 1932 is available at http://www2.uah.es/tice_eec/Invest/Valde.wmv

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