

Article for the Symposium at Misan University (Iraq) on 4-4-2019

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Representations of Iraq in Russian memoir and biographical-documentary prose

Abstract

The article analyzes the Russian publicistic prose on Iraq, including Maxim Ershov's memoirs and a biographical-documentary book by Valery Gulyaev. Proceeding from Yu. M. Lotman – V. A. Maltzev structural-poetic methodology, we analyze the aforementioned books along four lines: the mode of narration, characterizations and descriptions, chronotopes and the quotation plane.

Keywords: memoirs, biographic prose, documentary prose, publicistic prose, journalistic prose, Iraq, Russia.

The East has always been of great interest to Russian researchers, public figures, historians, literary critics and cultural scientists. Russian and Soviet memoir and documentary prose on the subject of Iraq, Middle East and Asia as a whole, has a long-standing tradition in the literary life of Russia. There are documentary and historical series *Path to the East*, *Following the footsteps of the disappeared cultures of the East*, *Russian travelers in the countries of the East*, *Russian travelers and Orientalists*, *Written monuments of the East* and many others. There are lots of valuable individual historical and scientific books on Asia, too. We wish there would be more such prose works, so that their amount would equal or prevail over works about the West. Currently this is not the case. However, it is pleasing that quality in the case of Oriental literature prevails over quantity, that those works on the East that exist can rightly be called conscientious and scrupulous, celebrating the beauty and wisdom of the East, relishing its works of art, architecture, literature, poetry. Many academic works describe sociopolitical events, facts of history, as well as peculiarities of everyday life. However, the phenomena related to the cradle of human civilizations – Middle East, despite a sufficiently deep study, need further research. In fact, modern man is connected with thousands of invisible but durable threads with the cultural traditions of ancient Mesopotamia. And to study these traditions is not only his right, but also his duty. We draw long-forgotten truths from Eastern ancient customs, symbols, artifacts, beliefs, from history and philosophies of Asia.

In this article we analyze two works, from more modern to more recent: firstly, Maxim Ershov's book *Across ancient Mesopotamia or Iraq through the eyes of a tourist* published in 2012, largely reflecting the recent occupation of Iraq by the USA and NATO, secondly, Valery Gulyaev's *In the country of first civilizations* published in 1999, which tells about the experience of Soviet archaeological excavations in Iraq in the late 1960s – 1980s. The works on which we would like to dwell belong to the past 30 post-Soviet years of Russian memoir and biographical-documentary prose on Iraq, although undoubtedly, the thoroughness with which the authors approach the interpretation of the events connected with Iraq echo the Soviet tradition of profound and careful attitude to Oriental history and modern social life. Essentially, both works are permeated by benevolence towards and respect for the East, the unchanging perception of it as something unusual and wonderful. They draw attention to the details of life, culture, history, literature, science, the philosophical views of Iraqis.

An important difference is observed between the books, though. While in the early post-Soviet-time book by Valery Gulyaev the reference point is largely the West, its historians and archeologists, their authoritative opinions about the East, their estimation of the Soviet archeology's achievements, in the later book by Maxim Ershov there is no unwelcome third-party agency. Now the reference point is entirely the Russian-Eastern relations and their long-standing history, mutual interests and aspirations. We welcome this change of heart in the Russian prose concerning the East. Particularly in Ershov's book there is an open and honest denunciation of the NATO

aggression in Iraq, of supremacism and double standards of the West.

Now we get down to our practical analysis. Proceeding from Yu. M. Lotman – V. A. Maltzev structural-poetic methodology, we analyze the aforementioned books along four lines: *the mode of narration, characterizations and descriptions, chronotopes and the quotation plane*.

Special focus is made on the rendering of the authentic text, therefore long illustrations are provided in our analysis.

Firstly, we consider *the mode of narration* in the above-mentioned books about the East, indicating close or distant narrator. We observe the interaction of narration planes in both the novels. The narrators shift from the first person, the individual experiencer, to the third person omniscient narrator or to the role of storyteller. With the help of this, constant mental transitions from the general to the particular and from the particular to the general are observed.

Let us illustrate the first-person narration, representation of the individual experiencer's vision of Iraq. As becomes clear from Valery Gulyayev's book, from 1969 till the 1980s Soviet archeologists worked in the North of Iraq. Unlike Europeans, they gave most of their finds to Iraqi museums. They dug up antiquities gratuitously, groping for historical-ethnographic knowledge, but most young archeologists also for the joy of adventure, sightseeing in Iraq and the process of archaeological digging. On the first day the heroes arrived at the place of the digs too late at night, and the guide told them they should sleep that night in Nineveh. The archeologists felt eerie, because the terrain was lifeless – all mounds and wilderness. But the new arrivals were relieved to find a lodge, even a whole house, for archeologists there. The anticipation of the future events is expressed in the lines: "Falling asleep to the melodious singing of a muezzin (apparently, there was a mosque somewhere near the base), I mumbled under my breath: Well, here I am in Iraq, in ancient Mesopotamia, among the hills of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital damned in the Bible!" Since then, every spring, over the next ten years (1971-1980), I came to Iraq as part of a Soviet archaeological expedition to excavate the ancient settlements of the Sinjar valley. In addition, we, naturally, used every favorable opportunity to travel around the country and get acquainted with the world-famous monuments of the past, which the Iraqi land is so rich in." The readers' interest is galvanized by the artistic intermingling of the personal and social-historical planes of narration here.

Another example of close narration, this time looking at the scene from above, but still fairly personal, is the reproduction of the peculiarities of Iraqi cuisine. It is from Maxim's Ershov's book: "Arabs know how to cook. The main food is kebabs, in front of which a large number of salads is served. But the most interesting dish in Iraq is roasted carps. True, they are not cooked everywhere, but only in special establishments. Stupid fish frolic in the pool with water, not understanding their purpose. The person in charge of the carps, with a net, catches the necessary number of fish and throws them on the asphalt. The fish do not have to flutter for a long time, the cook is already flying to them. With precise, sharp movements of the knife, he removes scales, rips the belly and removes guts. Next, the carcass is cut along the spine into two halves, clamped in a special vice and sent to the oven. The whole cooking process takes 10-12 minutes. Juicy, cooked on an open fire, the fish is then served on the table in foil, exuding a divine flavor. Caviar, if any, is roasted separately. You can pour the dish with lemon juice. The main thing, eating the Iraqi carp, is not to swallow your tongue with pleasure."

Omniscient narrator is quite naturally frequent in biographical-documentary and memoir biographic novels, too. Third person narration lends the narratives sense of objectivity, factuality. The purpose of such narratives is to inform the readers about dry facts, even though sometimes contrary to popular beliefs. Let us take a passage from Valery Gulyayev's book concerning Iraqi weather: "Indeed, in most parts of the country during a long and hot summer, the thermometer often reaches the 50-degree mark Celsius. Desert plains south and west from Baghdad, practically devoid of any

precipitation, are bursting with heat. Sad caravans of camels wander over them, driven by Bedouins in yellow-dust-strewn clothes. Occasionally, you can see date palms on the banks of rivers. And yet, the north of Iraq, from Sinjar to the mountains of Kurdistan, is far from natural tropics in its natural characteristics. And we had to know this difference on our skin. We were lucky to have been actively helped in the search and acquisition of the necessary expedition equipment by our veterans, who had worked in Middle East, Central Asia and Nubia, Petr Darovskikh and Musa Yunisov. Going to the tropics of the Sinjar valley, they decided to rely on their own experience and did not believe the suppliers from the Academy of Sciences of the USSR about the heat waiting for us in Iraq. So the expedition's baggage turned out to include the usual equipment of any domestic expedition hardly applicable in solar Mesopotamia: wadded sleeping bags, durable, army-style tents, heavy canvas cloaks, canvas boots, warm jackets. It was the foresight of these experienced men that helped us out at the first, not at all warm, meeting with the tropics of Sinjar, when the local capricious spring brought continuous rains, winds and cold on our heads. Later, wrought by sad experience, we brought the powerful GAZ-66 all-terrain vehicle, and quilted jackets, and even two sheepskin coats to Yarim Tepe. And I must say that all this, almost arctic equipment was in our use most of the field (three-month) season or at least half of it. The heat came in our camp somewhere by the end of April, and even then, not every year. We usually finished the excavations and went to the Iraqi capital, and then to our homeland in May. So, we could only feel the warm embrace of the Iraqi summer in the final month of our stay in the country. The main period of field work fell on March-April, cool and slushy time, reminiscent of our European autumn."

The personal or omniscient narrator sometimes interchanges with the story-teller, recounting legends and fairy-tales, as in Maxim Ershov's *Across ancient Mesopotamia*: "Once upon a time there was an old man with an old woman, and they lived on a river near the sea bay. The old people did housekeeping, fished, smoked fish and sold it. But once in their country, which was called Neiraq, a mustached uncle named Adam became the caliph. The new caliph flew north in the plane, kissed there with a Grandfather named Leonid, then sent a vizier overseas to distant Uncle Sam. Caliph Adam was trying to please both. The Grandfather and Uncle saw a punishing sword in the hands of the Caliph that would fall against the neighboring kingdom called Neiran.

And in the neighboring state, religious fundamentalists came to power, who had thrown off the Padishah from the throne. A lot of people fled from Neiran. Change came upon the blessed country. The fundamentalists wrapped their beautiful women in hijabs and made them walk in black clothes. A good half of the viziers and courtiers, who faithfully served the Padishah, were executed or just removed. The fundamentalists believed that the Almighty helped them, and they should force all Muslims to live by their rules. They looked at neighboring Neiraq, with which they constantly argued about borders. Then there was an attempt at Caliph Adam's life, and the suspicion fell on Neiranian fundamentalists. The mustached Caliph got angry and said to his subjects: "Let's take the oil-rich lands from our neighbors. We agreed with the former Padishah that the border passes along the eastern bank of the river, and now their spiritual leader, Pomeini, asserts that it is only in the middle. Uncle Sam will help us! Grandpa Leonid is for us!" "Of course, let us take these lands," agreed the viziers, "our army is fourth in the world in strength." No sooner said than done. The Caliph's army is sent across the river and attacks the army of the spiritual leader. The tanks are roaring, the planes are buzzing, the desert is crying from the trampling of soldiers. The end justifies the means - the oil lands are captured. The sky blackened by fire seven times said goodbye to the sun, and Caliph Adam pitied the Neiranian people. He offered to his neighbors to give him a piece of land near the river, something promised by the padishah, and to sign the peace.

But it was not to be. Neiran refused peace and stood up in defense. It had fewer arms, but the desire to fight was higher. The spiritual leader Pomeini proclaimed that if his subjects died in the war, they would become martyrs and go to heaven. Neiranian women, old people and children walked as a human shield in front of their knights, and fell, struck down by a bullet from a shot, or a mine in a minefield. The spiritual leader decided that he needed to take two sacred cities from Neiraq. People

believed him and inspired by this idea threw themselves on the Neiraqi machine guns. Eight years spring replaced winter, and eight times Caliph Adam offered to the spiritual leader Pomeini peace. The war went on with varying success. At first, luck smiled on the Caliph, then she turned away from him. Both countries burned each other's neighborhoods with missiles, bombed enterprises, sank ships with oil, sent spies. In the swamps where the old man and the old woman lived, it became hot with constant fighting. Partisans and saboteurs hid in the reeds during the day, and at night they fought bloody battles with each other.

Finally, Uncle Sam, missing out on oil, decided to help Neiraq, knocking a Neirianian plane over the sea, thus forcing the people who came to power in the beautiful country to sign peace with their neighbors. Adam Caliph rejoices, his thick mustache sticking up, and arranges a grand parade for his army. But he needs to pay for the help, and the treasury is empty. Caliph asks his viziers: "What are we going to do?" The viziers tell him: "Grandfather Leonid left for the other world, Mikhail the Marked is on the throne in the North, his deeds are incomprehensible. Let's find out from Uncle Sam, if he allows us to return one small kingdom. Previously it was ours. There is a lot of oil there, and we owe it to Uncle Sam." Secret messengers are rushing over the ocean, Uncle Sam listens to them and promises not to interfere. But Adam Caliph has forgotten the saying that there is no little brother in the card game. Uncle Sam cheated the Caliph. As soon as the Caliph's army occupied the alien kingdom, his former friends made a fool of him. Ships sailed from across the ocean, defeated the Caliph's army, testing Uncle Sam's new weapons on it. Having defended freedom and democracy in the small kingdom, Uncle Sam locked the large state of the Caliph, hung the padlock on it and forbade oil trade in order to delay the global crisis. But neither blockade nor the crisis meant anything for the old man and the old woman. They catch fish and smoke it, and they wash clothes in the river, because they don't even have a trough."

This eloquent fairy-tale recounts in a clear and simple form the history of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the subsequent events. The fairy-tale narrative also permits to place clear evaluative accents and even project some moral on the whole story.

Secondly, an important item to be considered is *characterization and descriptions*. Heroes are mainly Russian archeologists and tourists; they are not the focus of attention. More topical are background characters, the Iraqi social environment and individuals as viewed by the authors. The way of describing these characters is mainly indirect – through speech and behavior. Interpersonal communication, life and customs, relationships, social roles, education, social and financial situation, attitudes, personal and family life – all of these fragments of information are carefully collected by the authors. Through them we can fathom the nature of the Easterners.

A few national character features of Iraqis are outlined in first-hand observations in both books. For example, Maxim Ershov in his book accentuates asking advice of one's seniors as a typical feature of Iraqis: "One legend says that Umar-Askhab (reigned 634-644, immediately after Muhammad), while in Medina, heard from his commander Sariyat, who was fighting at that moment in Nahavand (locality in Iran), asking for help. Umar went up to the minaret of the Medina mosque, looked into the distance and shouted: "O Sariyat! Hold on to the foot of the mountain!" Sariyat in Nahavand heard this cry, acted as Umar commanded (may Allah be pleased with him), and defeated the enemy. Probably since then the Arabs have changed little. On occasion and without cause, any military and police officer will certainly consult with his superiors. We are thoroughly checked before getting to the territory of the National Museum. When we prove not terrorists, but ordinary tourists, and voice our wish to take pictures in the museum, endless calls and consultations begin. Walking around the territory, too much time on our hands and suffering from idleness, we disarm our guards for a photo session, then half-heartedly agree to go to the museum without cameras. But after about 40 minutes, someone has somehow managed to get through to someone high up, and we are allowed to enter the museum with cameras." The tension following the NATO aggression is expressed in characters' conduct, who, under the stern war rules, are subjected to numerous

checkups and inspections. “An hour later, we find ourselves near the mosque of Abu Hanif. Only the police are allowed to drive to the checkpoint guarding the mosque, the tourist bus is kept at a distance. Our police and Omar show the security chief some papers. Everyone is actively talking to each other, gesticulating; some mobile calls and long negotiations begin. About 20 soldiers guarding the mosque stare at us and take pictures of the exotic freaks on their phones. Then Omar returns victoriously. The tourist bus is driven to the inspection area. Recalling their duty, the soldiers study the bottom with a mirror attached to the pole. Next, we pass through the metal detector frame, then everyone else is also inspected, the women taken to a special room”.

In Part 41 of the same book the Iraqi guards, stern and unsmiling, still recoil before Americans: “We get up on a wide two-lane road to Baghdad. Around the desert torches of oil refineries are burning from all sides like the lamp of Aladdin. Rain tries to drip, then a dust storm begins, causing the sun to turn white. In one place, a heap of equipment appears casting a large black shadow on the sand, from which only rusty frames were left. These are the traces of the war of twenty years ago. In 1991, Saddam Hussein ordered the troops to leave Kuwait. And it was here that American plane violated the Iraqi airspace and bombed an Iraqi military convoy heading for Baghdad... And again, two alien helicopters hold sway in the sky, where a column of American military equipment is moving along the oncoming lane to Basra.

The column is led by an armored car stuck with headlights, which has a powerful bullbar with a rectangular briefcase-seeming object fastened to the front, making the whole structure resemble an evil rhino. The briefcase is a device for searching for explosives, it sees land mines for a good hundred meters... Next in the convoy are cargo trucks carrying either two armored cars, or two tractors, or two containers. Then go 7-10 more armored cars, followed by others. All in all, I counted 53 cars. Probably in this way valuable items were taken from the National Museum...

The Yankees have to leave Iraq before the end of this year, so they are preparing. After some time, the second column passes, no less powerful, then the third, fourth, tenth, fifteenth... Ali claims that such a movement of technology occurs every day. After the twentieth column, my spirit fades completely. I stop counting and lie curled up on two bus seats. Photographing Americans is forbidden. For this they are entitled to open fire. Near ancient Ur, when we drove past their base, I saw a sentry on the tower. In his equipment he looked a real alien. It is very difficult to fight such a soldier...

It's already dark. Because of the repair the highway narrows into one lane. Suddenly, lying in the cabin, I see powerful light approaching. Perhaps it's a UFO wishing to contact us? I look up. The light and barking sound rush right at us. The American armored car leads its next column.

Jumping into the oncoming lane, an American orders us to stop. Our police jeep stops. According to the occupation rules, the Iraqi driver is obliged to turn on the lights in the cabin so that the American can see who is driving. It's good that you don't need to raise your hands... The driver turns on the lighting in the cabin...

When a weak dog meets a stronger one, it playfully lies down, showing that it is dominated by the winner. Somehow our guards look the same. Their jeep seems to have become lower and buried in the ground. The police turn on the flasher. Our bodyguards, Ali and Omar, look down, they are clearly ashamed. Americans could easily smudge the police jeep and the bus. Most importantly, such a thing would remain unpunished for them in Iraq...”

Many descriptions and digressions are devoted to the character of Saddam Hussein and his rule, e.g.: “Saddam had 48 palaces across the country. The people were starving during the blockade, and the President built palaces for himself and strengthened the guards. Ordinary Iraqis were not allowed to go to such places at a distance of a shot... We go in one of the buildings. During the war it suffered greatly. On the facade and inside holes from the shells and bullet are visible. Regal dust

is everywhere, the windows have no glass. As a memory of the dictator, the ceiling and walls are decorated with patterned Arabic words: Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein... There are inscriptions in the form of birds and all kinds of fish..."

The characterization of believers – above all the Shiites and the Sunnis – is indirect. They are represented as a generic image through facts without assessments: "Now we are on the territory of the mosque. But why we were brought here, remains unclear. We are not allowed to go inside. I only remember that this is a Sunni mosque. Shiites can come and pray with the Sunnis, but they usually do not. In general, in Shiite mosques in Iraq it is easier to get permission to go around and photograph... Next to the Souk is the Golden Mosque with the mausoleum of the tomb of the seventh imam Moussa al-Kadim. Gentiles are not allowed there. The Golden Mosque is a place of pilgrimage, and most of the pilgrims are from Iran. Shiites, both men and women, in front of the entrance put a clenched hand to their heart, symbolizing the willingness to suffer for the faith."

There are subtle descriptions of some characteristic features of Iraqi's everyday life, which, despite the transience of observations, can be graphically visualized and permit to grasp the Iraqi's nature, their mores and morals.

In Maxim Ershov's book there is a mention of a sheikh living in a reed house among ordinary Arabs living in brick houses, nevertheless the latter respectfully gather in the reed house of the former for wise conversation and advice: "We inspect an ordinary Arab village, the main attraction of which is a sheikh's reed house, the size and shape of which is similar to a semicircular storage hangar. The house is woven entirely of reeds and has two entrances. Here lives the local sheikh. After the negotiations, he allows us to visit. Inside there is an interior: a beautiful chandelier, a ceiling fan, portraits of Imam Hussein and a kitchen corner, where they cook over an open fire. The old sheikh sits on blankets and allows us to photograph him. Local Arabs gather every evening at the sheikh's. Men drink coffee, discuss important matters, receiving valuable advice from the old man. Most importantly, everyone in the village lives in ordinary brick houses, and only the sheikh remains the keeper of traditions. Surprisingly, Allah keeps such buildings from fires". This passage suggests the respect for tradition, austere and holy life, unhurried wise conversation.

Or compare a vivid description of the so-called Marsh People in Iraq: "...To the left there are swamps with canals and islets, each marsh family occupying a hamlet-islet and living its simple marsh life. Marsh Arabs build Mosques on higher pieces of land. While in Russia they say "marsh melancholy", in Iraq the expression "marsh poverty" is appropriate. It would seem if they just moved across the road they would live like ordinary Arabs, but no. The strangest thing in these parts is that from generation to generation, the marsh people maintain age-old traditions of poor austere life... The police can't imagine what interest one might have in the swamps, so we no longer make stops, which is a pity. But miscellaneous scenes of the marsh life come to mind like snapshots. Somewhere in the distance, black spots crawling among the endless reeds waving in the wind... Women in burqas sail in a boat, skillfully rowing with oars... Women knee-deep in water picking in muddy slush... Women on islands sorting out reeds and loading them into the boat. The men here are not engaged in farming, but only fish. They say ten years ago it was easy to poke a fork in the ducts and catch fish. This would be a paradise for many Russian fishermen..."

Here is a passage from Valery Gulyaev's book: "As for food, according to the tradition in Iraq, we always hired a local chef: the first two seasons we had a gray-haired Persian Abbas wearing a gray astrakhan hat, and then for several years a nice, short, chubby aysor, seid Sliou from Mosul, head of a large family clan. He was a great cook, an accommodating and very friendly person. As a rule, he was assisted by one of the local Turkmen boys. Our meals in the cabin were very solemn, according to some special Eastern ritual. Shurpu (a local type of soup) was usually brought in and personally poured into dishes by the cook himself. The second course – meat with boiled rice, beans and vegetables on oval-flat porcelain dishes was held by the boy and the chef served it with a majestic

look, as if bestowing each of us with gold. Strict hierarchy was observed: first the head of the expedition, Rauf Munchayev (mudir, that is, the head), then dokhtur Nikolay (deputy head of the expedition, professor Nikolay Merpert), etc., were served, etc. until those who sat on the other end of the table got their helpings. The sonic names of local Arabic delicacies still sound in my ears today: thymen (rice), lablabiya (peas), fasolia (beans), hass (cress), laham (meat), dolma (grape leaves stuffed with rice and ground meat with spices), hubuz (bread), shakar (sugar), etc.”.

Thirdly, it is essential to examine *chronotopes* in the works of Russian memoir and biographical-documentary prose about Iraq. The reasons for choosing times, places, realia and personalia described can be different and combined: a personal visit, familiarization with this or that phenomenon, cultural, socio-political significance of a thing described. The authors depict modernity of the East, transcend the spirit of its history, draw lessons from historical events. It is also interesting to discern the auctorial attitudes to what is described, which may vary.

Baghdad, Babylon, Basra, Karbala in *Across ancient Mesopotamia or Iraq through the eyes of a tourist*, the Sinjar valley, Ashur, Nineveh, Nimrud, Hatra in *In the country of first civilizations* – all these places reveal different spirit and, through vivid depictions, can be readily, if fragmentarily, visualized.

As was said, much space in Maxim Ershov’s book is devoted to recent history – the NATO’s aggression in Iraq. Signs of the lost war were still very much visible. Let us cite the paragraphs containing observations of contemporary Baghdad and reflections on its recent history. “The National Museum of Iraq. This is one of the saddest pages of the Iraqi history. The entire 19th and early 20th century Englishmen, Germans, Americans dug up ancient cities in Iraq and took everything that they found to themselves. But the Iraqis managed to dig up something, too, and place those finds in the capital’s museum, creating a world-famous exposition. When the Americans entered Baghdad in 2004, terrible looting began. Armed people burst into the museum like a genie from a lamp. The marauders had a clear plan for the museum, they knew where everything was, they even opened the underground vault. They looted the most precious things. The director of the museum, trying to stop the mess, several times appealed to the US military with a request for help. It was enough to put one tank and 5-6 submachine gunners at the entrance, and the looting would have stopped. But the Yankees walked off. As a result, the museum was thoroughly looted. Later, when the amnesty was announced, so that the citizens would return the exhibits, someone would bring something, but those were all trifles. A lot of unique things were lost forever. Apparently, there was a clear order for the most valuable exhibits, and now all of them are in private collections – of course, not in Iraq. Lucky was the Nimrud gold collection. Saddam Hussein had hidden it before the war in a cell in one of the banks. Later, because of the absence of the tenant, the cell was opened, and the famous collection was found and returned to the museum, but it has not yet been presented for view... It is said many American soldiers do not even know what ancient land they came to - the civilizations of Sumer, Assyria and Babylon, which rightly open the book of the greatest achievements of mankind... I have not had such a desire to visit a museum for a long time. And even in its present condition, I liked the National Museum of Iraq.”

“We again circle round Baghdad, which, like a shy Muslim girl, shows her pretty face bit by bit. The old quarters are entangled in the wires, as if tied into a Gordian knot. Like beetles, cars are slowly squeezing around on business, like fighting bees, soldiers stand on their posts, and like ants along a path, pedestrians move along houses. Baghdad makes various noises, it beeps, gasses, groans, screams, and the cunning trader invariably invites to his shop... Iraq lost the war, this is history. Hussein was betrayed and surrendered to the Americans by his own generals. Saddam’s sons fought to the end and became shahids, the people respect them for this, but the former dictator was made a mockery of... I remember very well the television report, where Saddam Hussein last appeared as president. He came to the outskirts of Baghdad in the Tauin district, and some people chanted around him, claiming that they would fight for the surrounded capital to the end. After the

capture of Baghdad, very strong battles were fought in the area of Haifa Street. Here lived the officials and relatives of Hussein, even now traces of bullets and shells are visible... Was it necessary to fight for Baghdad to the end, because the Yankees would then have completely razed the city to the ground? This is a difficult question...”.

Next place described is Babylon, in particular, Saddam Hussein’s palace there: “...we go up the spiral road on another hill. UNESCO financially helped Babylon. Archaeologists dug ancient Babylon and carried off the earth to the side. Then Saddam Hussein built himself a palace above, thus violating the integrity of the historical object, and because of this UNESCO stopped financially helping Babylon. Omar shows us a palm grove. One of the trees, enclosed by a fence, had been planted by Hussein himself. He then personally picked dates from it... Forgetting about November and that it is time to succumb to winter, the sun looks out from behind the clouds and begins to burn. What is the weather like in July here?.. We reach the top of the hill. According to the idea of modern architects, near the main entrance to the palace, where the observation deck offers a gorgeous view of partially restored Babylon, Saddam was supposed to meditate. Surely Saddam compared himself to the great rulers of Mesopotamia, surveying his possessions from the hill. In his gorgeous palace, the wind is now walking, daily carrying layers of yellow sand. On the walls there are still emblems with portraits of the leader. During the war, American soldiers settled here. In the main hall, the Yankees played basketball, as evidenced by a basketball backboard tied to the wall...”

Here is the description of Basra: “We throw coins in all three rivers and hurry to the bus. I look forward to getting to Basra. After Gerna we drive on a wide two-lane road, connecting Basra with Baghdad. To the left of the road, like a cruiser in the sandy sea, a power station emerges. From it in all directions, like horny bulls, stand supports holding the wires of the power lines. The Americans had bombed the power station, and Russia helped Iraq recover it. Burning torches are visible from a distance, indicating the oil plant. Nearby anti-aircraft guns guard the peaceful Iraqi sky. We are approaching Basra. Initially, a canonic suburb of one-story houses with palm trees and garbage heaps, among which cows are grazing. We drive through a powerful bridge over a very wide Shat El Arab, passing under the arch. Well, here we are in Basra City. Three million people live in Basra, this is the industrial heart of Iraq. Wide avenues, large two-story houses and relatively clean streets. In contrast to Baghdad, the consequences of the war are eliminated here. One feels wealth, there are no checkpoints, pillboxes, bunkers and concrete fences. The center is old and colorful, there are many monuments with garden squares laid out near them. Somewhere in the distance, like a clock that counts a peaceful life, the Ferris wheel is spinning. On the Basra embankment there are many different monuments to national heroes... Under the escort we walk further through the night Basra, where a soldier stands every 100 meters. One of the streets is lit with an ice-cream parlor. Like in Moscow, a person disguised as Mickey Mouse invites passersby to the parlor. But, seeing a strange crowd of foreigners, accompanied by machine gunners, Mickey Mouse is hiding in his hide-out...”

Much space is dedicated to historic events, the creation of the Arab states, inextricably linked with the struggle between religious groups. Compare the following passage from Maxim Ershov’s book: “Once the Prophet Mohammed was visited by ambassadors from Shamy (the territory of the modern states of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine), Yemen and Nejd. They asked to make dua, blessing their land. In response, the Prophet said three times: “O Allah! Bless the countries of Sham and Yommen. ” He was asked: "But what about our Nejd, O Messenger of Allah?" He replied: "No, a shaitan's horn will appear from this area." So, where is the land rejected by the Prophet? According to one version of Nejd, this is the northeast of the Arabian Peninsula, the terrain between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. A part of Islamic scholars explains that the expression “horn of Shaitan” means the extremist current in Islam, later called Wahhabism, which was founded by Muhammad ibn Abdu'l-Wahhab, who lived in the area of Nejd in 1681-1778...” “In 1817, the ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, declared war on Wahhabism and soon took Mecca, Medina, Taif and Jiddah. In 1818, the capital of Wahhabis, the city of Al-Dariya, fell. The Wahhabis retreated to Iraq, but

after three years all their leaders were caught and after a public announcement executed... But ideas often live their lives. In the time of trouble, in 1926-1927, new Wahhabis attacked Iraq, seizing Mecca before that. Then they moved to Medina, where they destroyed the grave of the uncle of the Prophet (after his father) Hamza and the uncle of the prophet (after his mother) Abbas. In Jiddah, the grave of the ancestor of the human race Hava (Eve) was attacked. The Wahhabis destroyed gravestones, putting small pebbles instead... The entire territory captured in 1927 with the support of England was called the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, after Muhammad ibn Saud, the governor of Al-Dariya province.”

In the historical narrative dialogues are sometimes inserted, cf. two bodyguards’ opinion on the interaction of religious groups in Iraq:

“ – In modern Iraq, about 60% are Shiites, 35% are Sunnis, the rest are mostly Christians. But the Sunnis traditionally hold power here. If there are fair elections, then after the departure of the Americans the situation should change, - says Ali.

– We (the Shiites) did not allow al Qaeda into our ranks. This is a purely Sunni organization. All these explosions are the work of Americans. They pay Wahhabis who blow up, - Omar is convinced.”

A more scientific view, based on field work, is provided by Valery Gulyaev’s *In the country of first civilizations*. The roll of historical events in the territory of Iraq, changing ancient civilizations are described with historical-archeological verity: “Only gradually, with great difficulty, by the 1950s, was it possible to create an approximate scheme for the development of pre-abbreviated Mesopotamian cultures, consisting of three periods or stages. It was achieved thanks to the rather modest-scale excavations of several ancient Syrian and Iraqi tells. According to the tradition accepted among archaeologists, each such period was named after the area or point where the first excavations were carried out. Thus, successively alternating stages and cultures came into being: Hassuna (6th millennium BC), Khalaf (5th millennium BC), and Ubeid (end of 5th – 4th millennium BC)... The ancient Greeks called this country Mesopotamia. The name Mesopotamia comes from the Greek words mesos (middle) and potamos (river) and can be translated as interfluvium. Its modern name Iraq means in Arabic “land located on the coast. At the dawn of history, at the end of the 4th millennium BC, one of the most prominent ancient civilizations of antiquity was born in Mesopotamia — Sumerian, in no way inferior to Pharaohs in greatness and glory to Egypt...”

In Gulyaev’s book we find the inspired history of old Assyria – the area where the archeological digs took place in which the author participated: “Around 3000 BC, the Semitic nomadic tribes from the western desert invaded the Northern Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates. They called themselves the sons of Ashur, by name of their patron god. Hence the name of the people – the Assyrians (from Assur, Ashur). Turning soon to a settled way of life, they founded a small state with the center in Ashur, where the king’s residence and the temple of the main tribal god were located. The latter was not directly connected with any of the natural elements or phenomena. Initially, he was considered the patron saint of the Assyrians’ favorite occupation and was depicted most often with a bow and arrow. Later, with the strengthening of the role of wars and conquests, Ashur became the god of war. Sometimes, at a later time, it is called the deity of the Sun in hymns, but this is only an external imitation of the cult of the Babylonian god Marduk. However, as was the case in ancient times, the Assyrian rulers attributed all their victories to the head of the local pantheon – to militant Ashur... The position of yesterday’s nomads who settled on the hilly shores of the Tigris, up to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC remained very shaky. They were alternately forced to submit to more powerful rivals in the south to Sargon of Akkad, Naramsin, Hammurabi and the Hittites who had invaded from the west. But these endless blows of fate, invasions and wars that did not stop for centuries only hardened the character of the harsh and unpretentious shepherds, hunters and farmers of Assyria, making them the best soldiers of the

Ancient East in the end. The uniqueness of the local nature played a significant role in this... Above the city of Tikrit, notes S. Lloyd, in the valleys of the Tigris and its eastern tributaries, the Great and Small Zab, during the winter enough rains fall to get a good harvest of wheat without artificial irrigation. In the spring, grass and flowers rise above the knees. The vine and many types of fruit trees grow without watering. Oak, poplar and even pine give the building forest. At the same time, a good building stone is always available and easily mined in quarries. In this part of the country, the economy is more natural than in the south, because agriculture needs only a small amount of technical assistance, and herds of sheep and goats that roam the grassy hills, are very rarely in need of good pastures... In ancient times, the hills of Assyria were unusually rich in game. Wild boars, deer and chamois were abundant here, even with devastating lions' raids, – the true masters of the animal world of this part of Mesopotamia. Sometimes lions attacked livestock, therefore the Assyrian shepherd, who spent most of his time away from home with herds of sheep and goats, had to be a good hunter, a strong and hardened person who despised danger. To join the deadly fight with a lion, defending his own goods, to kill a wild boar, a wild bull, to knock down an eagle with a deadly arrow, to catch large fish in the river was usual, commonplace for almost every adult Assyrian. Is this not the much-needed quality for the people, as well as unpretentiousness, the ability to overcome difficulties, dexterity, courage, strength and good possession of weapons? The biblical prophet Isaiah did not exaggerate saying when he looked with horror and secret admiration at the formidable ranks of the tireless Assyrian army: Yahweh called the people from the ends of the earth, hastily and quickly they move, no one is tired or stumbling, no one among them sleeps, the belts are not untied on their thighs, and the straps are not torn on their sandals: their arrows are ground, and all their bows are taut, the hooves of their horses are like flint, the wheels of their chariots are like a whirlwind. Like young lions, they grab prey and carry it off, and no one will be saved from them... The first elevation of Assyria occurred in the 14th century BC during the reign of the kings Adadnerari I and Tukulti Ninurta. The main center and starting point of the Assyrian expansion at that time was the city of Ashur, which stood on the right, west bank of the Tigris, near the northern borders of the Mesopotamian plain.”

Gulyayev also meticulously recounts the source of the early Muslim states and the Muslim faith. “All relatives and comrades met on June 8, 632 in the house where the Prophet died. Mohammed, who had many daughters from 11 wives, did not have a direct heir, all his sons died in infancy. The direct descendants of Mohammed could be considered the grandchildren of Khosan and Hussein. Their mother, Fatima, the Prophet's daughter from her first marriage, was married to Muhammad's cousin Ali ibn Abu Talib. During his lifetime, the Prophet publicly embraced Khosan and Hussein, covering the grandchildren with his cloak, which is why they were called “grandsons of the cloak”, distinguishing them from other descendants... The Prophet received revelation from above, marking Ali as his successor and spiritual leader (Imam) of the Muslims after his own death. “For whom I am the patron, so Ali is the patron,” said the Prophet. But Ali at the time of the death of the Prophet was only 33 years old, and was not allowed to come to power, Ali submitted and did not insist. Twenty-four years were ruled by other associates of Mohammed Abu Bakr (632-634), Umar (634-644) and Usman (644-656). His death died only Abu Bakr. After the assassination of Uthman, in the confusion of civil war, the old guard of Muhammad forced Ali to take power. Ali becomes caliph. But in 24 years, the mighty rival for power, Muawiya, the governor of Syria, who rejects Ali's claims, has had time to grow... Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, the son of the old enemy of Muhammad, who accepted Islam only under the pressure of circumstances, refuses to recognize Ali as caliph and opposes him with a large army. When the two armies came together under Siffin in the Upper Euphrates, Ali was lucky. Just before the start of the battle, not wanting to shed the blood of Muslim Muslim co-religionists, a part of the soldiers left his army. From the Arabic word harij (leaving), they began to be called harijites, later turning into one of the most irreconcilable sects of Islam... The Kharijites, trying to overcome the schism in Islam, decided to kill Ali and Mu'awiya. On a certain day they made their shares. Mu'awiya was wounded in Damascus, but he survived. Ali the killer hid in the city of Kufa in the mosque, severely injuring the Caliph with a poisoned knife.

Two days later, on January 23, 661, Ali passed away... When Muhammad wanted to kill the conspirators, young Ali replaced the Prophet, and lay down on the bed in his house, giving his cousin the opportunity to escape to Medina. Ali waged more than 90 battles and won all of them. He ruled for 4 years and 9 months. According to the recollections of people, Imam Ali had no flaws, and was a model of humanity and Islamic wisdom. All the years after the death of the Prophet and before entering into power, Ali was engaged in science, writing even a textbook on Arabic grammar.

The concept of Shiism comes from the Arab "Shiat Ali" - the party of Ali. All the following 11 Shiite Imams are his descendants. After Ali's death, Khosan became the Imam, but he failed to advance to the caliphs. Khosan went to a truce with Mu'awiya, publicly in the mosque of Kufa, giving up power with the condition that he would become caliph after the death of Mu'awiya. His imamat lasted 10 years. Khosan was married many times. Among his descendants are many kings and imams who ruled in different parts of the Arab world. By order from Damascus, Josan was poisoned by one of his wives... When Muavia died in 680, he managed to transfer power to his son Yazid. The tradition of the Arabs was to choose their own Caliph. The Arab world was again in excitement. The Kufi supporters of Ali's house began to assure Imam Hussein to oppose Yazid, promising that all of Kufa and all of Iraq would rise to battle with the usurper."

Fourthly, it is worth considering is *the quotation plane* of the novels. These includes poetic epigraphs and citations of literary and historical works, referenced by the authors.

In the first place, Maxim Ershov uses in his book numerous epigraphs, selecting for them stanzas from classic Persian poetry. Those epigraphs aptly predict the content of each chapter, simultaneously lending the inimitable aesthetic flavor to the whole book. They may be informative, moralizing, ironic or allegoric. For example, Omar Khayyam's rubai "I counted many sects in Islam wise. / Of all I chose the sect of lovejoys. So - / Be my God! Give me joy of paradise. / It's not a sin to merge with God aglow!", which precedes the chapter on Islamic sects, is used for an informative purpose, but with a slight jocose tinge, because of the metaphorization of the word "sect" ("sect of lovejoys"). Another epigraph is by Vazeh, it precedes the story of Saddam who conducted wars and built palaces and mosques to his glory when many Iraqis died in the war or starved because of the American blockade: "It surely makes no sense to tear down / One hundred huts to build a minaret alone." Yet another epigraph is a quote from Unsuri: "If you take from the mountain and do not give back, / Don't forget that the mountain will dwindle away." It precedes Part 37, describing the dilapidated palace of Saddam Hussein in Basra.

Jami's quatrain "When stepping on a serpent's hole unknowing with your foot, / Don't spare the asp, don't stop and stall, your pity's not for good. / Don't shrink from hissing, don't believe the serpent's mercy cries... / Contrive to crush the frightened asp, or you yourself shall die." may be regarded as moralizing. This stanza precedes Part 3 "History of Baghdad", describing of construction, glorious days, deadly intrigues and destruction of the capital. There are plenty of other stanzas of Islamic poets, used for the purposes of announcing the theme, moral conclusions etc.

Alongside pieces of poetry, there are references to historical and ethnographic studies. Thus, Valery Gulyaev's book, published by the Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation, is backed by many historical and archaeological data and references. Gulyaev quotes Arabian historians al-Kazvinini, Tabarisi, geographer Ibn Jordadbeh, foreign historians and archaeologists Mikhail Nikolsky, Vladimir Iordansky, Oleg Bolshakov, Robert Koldewey, Erich Zehren, Wilhelm Koenig, Walter Andrae, Hormuzd Rassam, Henry Layard, Seton Lloyd and others.

Here are some passages from Gulyaev's book, furnished with references: "The question of the existence of real traces of the past in modern Baghdad still raises hot debates among journalists and scientists. Some see the contours of the legendary capital of the caliphs in almost every street of the

modern city, others equally firmly dismiss any material connection between present-day Baghdad and the Harun al-Rashid era. Oddly enough, both are apparently right in their own way. Let us first hear the arguments of the optimists. Heroes of the famous Arabian tales, embodied in bronze and stone, come alive on Baghdad streets, writes journalist Y. Glukhov. The sonorous streams of the Fountain of Jugs remind of the story of Ali Baba and forty thieves. On the bank of the Tigris, under the fanshaped palm trees, you can see the beautiful Shherezadede and the king Shahriyar, created by a talented Iraqi sculptor. Together with the old parts of Baghdad, its mosques and bazaars, these scenes remind us that we are in the city of Thousand and One Nights...

He is echoed by an American journalist, William Ellis: Even now one can find traces of that Baghdad, which was once the richest city in the world. In the labyrinth of narrow streets, the old souk of the souk still rages. A corner of the bazaar rumbles where coppersmiths knock out patterns on the metal. It also sells incense, eye color, and saffron... The souk survived the modernization of Baghdad, as did the Mustansiriya school, built in the 13th century and widely known during the reign of the caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty.

The supporters of the opposite view of the Iraqi capital are just as resolute in their conclusions. And the very first nihilist was our compatriot — the Russian officer, traveler, and diplomat E.I. Chirikov, who visited Iraq in 1849. Baghdad, he writes, is surrounded by a high wall, which has collapsed from the east side since the 1831 flood. Not a single mosque remarkable in construction, not a single beautiful minaret; they are all low, heavy, tasteless buildings and covered with very ordinary tiles. The baths are bad, dirty... The bazaar is old, of good construction, all the passages are under the arches; but the shops are poorly stocked and all dust and dirt; the business is slow, kind of deadly... Thus, in the middle of the 19th century, the picky gaze of the Russian traveler could not see in the labyrinths of old Baghdad a single architectural gem, a single building worth mentioning. What can we say about the modern city, which has already been under the roller of modernization and reconstruction! Is it any wonder in this connection the rather pessimistic statements of some journalists who visited the Iraqi capital in the 1970s and 1980s when the construction boom began there?

In today's Baghdad little has survived from the time of Harun al-Rashid, echo K. Heivandov and O. Skalkin in 1976. But the Iraqi capital is striking in its scope of growth and renewal. This ancient city has an unusually high percentage of new buildings of houses, bridges, hotels, office buildings. Many of them look quite attractive, combining modern architecture and comfort requirements with national motifs in the design. About three million Iraqis almost a quarter of the country's population lives in the capital. Baghdad is growing, crushing the desert. Its changing guise reflects the changes occurring in the country.

Vladimir Iordansky, who visited Iraq in 1986, already at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, believes the same way. Caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur, he writes, founded Baghdad in 762. One hundred thousand workers built the city, enclosed it with a fortress wall. From that distant era, little has survived to this day. When I first visited the Iraqi capital 15 years ago, it was a dusty, widely stretched city, little reminding of the past greatness of the religious and political center of the entire Muslim world.

So, who is right, after all, pessimists or optimists? Are there any architectural monuments in modern Baghdad that adequately reflect the most brilliant page of the medieval era in Iraq's history, the era of the rule of the caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty (813 AD)?

I must honestly admit that I do not consider myself to be either an expert in the Arab East or an expert in medieval Muslim architecture. And I didn't have much time for informative excursions in the Iraqi capital only a few days on each of our visits to the country. Nevertheless, one case helped my final transformation from a pessimist into an optimist.

In 1985, already on the return of our expedition to Baghdad, we met there very nice people,

compatriots, employees of our trade mission. And somehow we talked with them about the sights of Baghdad. Naturally, both positions described above regarding the legacy of caliphs in the modern Iraqi capital were immediately identified. Then, as the arbiter, our main Eastern expert Oleg Bolshakov intervened in the general dispute. We still had enough time before leaving home, and he suggested that on the next day off we should take everyone to all the medieval monuments of Baghdad. The proposal was accepted with enthusiasm. The trade mission willingly provided the future tourists with the necessary means of transportation, two comfortable limousines, and our extensive scientific knowledge of Dr. Bolshakov. This mini-trip, which took a little more than half a day in total, turned out to be a true revelation for all of us. And while earlier, by chance encountering medieval buildings on my way into Baghdad's commotion, I immediately forgot about them, now all these bright fragments of past eras have suddenly formed into a coherent overall picture. No, Baghdad of Thousands and one night did not die, and the shadows of the power-hungry caliphs still roam its streets and squares.”

“The history of Baghdad is inextricably linked with the history of the Arab conquest of Mesopotamia, with its transformation into an important part of the Muslim world. But long before the Arabs conquered Iraq, in the 1st millennium BC, quite significant groups of the Arab population constantly penetrated its southern and southwestern regions from the neighboring Arabian Peninsula. In 36 AD even a small Arab state of Lakhmids appeared on the Lower Euphrates. The overall Arabization of the country has increased immeasurably after the Islamic conquest, when a large number of nomadic Arabs migrated to Mesopotamia. The era of the Arab Caliphate, whose center was originally located in Damascus, began. However, in 750, the situation suddenly changed: the Abbasid dynasty came to replace the Syrian dynasty of the Umayyad caliphs, whose main territory was Iraq. The search for a place to build a new capital of the caliphate began. And soon such a place was found in the region of the Middle Tigris, where it comes closest to the Euphrates.

The prominent Arab geographer of the 9th century Ibn Jordadbeh in his treatise stressed the great role of Baghdad in the transit trade of Eastern countries. The book of ways and states: Merchants from the coast of the western (Mediterranean) sea depart from the mouth of the Orontes to Antioch. In three days, they reach the banks of the Euphrates and arrive in Baghdad. There they are loaded and sail down the Tigris to Obolla, and from there to Oman, to the Sunda Islands, to India and China. The same author informs us that Russians from the Slav tribe take out beaver furs and black-brown foxes from the most distant lands of the Slavic land. Sometimes it happens that they carry their goods from the Dzhur-jana (the Caspian Sea) through the Itil (the Volga) to Baghdad.”

In yet another place Gulyaev dwells on the one of world's most ancient universities of Al-Mustansiriya. “On the narrow trading street of al-Haraj, which is part of the souk, is one of the architectural masterpieces of the Abbasid era - the school (madrassa) Al-Mustansiriya, built in the first half of the 13th century by the thirty-sixth caliph - Al-Mustansir. The caliph's construction cost 700 thousand gold dinars, the sum simply huge for those times. This ruler in every way he patronized the development of science and art in the country, according to contemporaries, he did not regret for the construction of a school of huge for those times the sum of 700 thousand gold dinars. Today's Arab researchers rightly regard al-Mustansiriya as the first university in the world, since besides various branches of Islam, they also studied secular disciplines of philology, philosophy, grammar, arithmetic, algebra, mechanics and medicine. The number of school students in its heyday reached 150 people. And in the vaults of its library there were over eight thousand hand-written books. Even the Mongols, who seized and plundered Baghdad in 1258, spared this famous educational institution. The decline of al-Mustansiri began with the defeat of Tamerlane at the end of the 14th century and soon ended with its complete closure and destruction... The school building itself is beautifully described by O.G. Gerasimov: Inside, behind a high fence, there is a small courtyard with a swimming pool. On each side of the rectangular building there is a high pointed niche (aivan) with a luxurious stalactite arch and a facade in the form of a broken arch in the center, decorated with geometric patterns. This architectural type of a four-tailed mosque, the

classic example of which is the school of al-Mustansiriya, was developed on the basis of the traditions of Iranian-Sassanian architecture.”

We may conclude by saying that the emotive tonality of novels, expression, attitude to heroes and events are highly interested and positive. The interplay of close, omniscient and stylized fairy-tale narrators gives a true-to-life picture, as the narration and reader’s cognition moves from the particular to the general and from the general to the particular. Chronotopes open to the reader miraculous realm of the East. They are multidimensional, transmitting historical events and modernity, old and new realia. The assessments are quite unequivocal, although the political overtones are sometimes arbitrary. The love of the East is the main message of the Russian memoir and biographical-documentary prose on the topic. It shows that the Russians are keen on the study of Iraq and the East in general, on the development of cultural ties between our countries. One more important feature we have noticed is that while in the early post-Soviet-time book by Valery Gulyaev, the reference point is the West, in the later book by Maxim Ershov there is a clear denunciation of the aggressiveness, supremacism and double standards of the West. Ershov’s focus is solely on the Eastern wants, needs and aspirations and the relations of the East with Russia. In our view, this is a very welcome development.

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