



Diocletian's Military Reforms

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Abstract. From among the many changes introduced by Diocletian, the military reforms were the most important. We can even say that some other changes were either direct or indirect results of this one. Of course, the introduction of the taxation system *capitatio-iugatio* was a result of the need to increase income for growing expenses, from which the biggest one was the army. Even the Price Edict – as in the introductory part Diocletian and his co-regent admitted – was a result of concern for soldiers. The established measures of the military reforms contributed to the stability of the state and mainly to the border protection of the Empire by stopping barbarian attacks – at least temporarily.

Good side of this reform was that the increased number of soldiers and the better organisation increased the state's defence power. Besides the larger number of soldiers, expenses were raised by the fast development and by cavalry participation, which involved much higher expenses than what was needed for the infantry. Was the state able to provide the necessary funds compared to those already existent, and if it was, for how long and in what way? The military reforms could not give any more permanent result.

Another bad result was the decline in quality of the military personnel. The recruiting system did not bring the best people into the legions. Probably latifundium owners gave their worse workers to the army.

Keywords: Diocletian's military reform, postclassical Roman public law, *limitanei*, *comitatenses*

I. Problems

The army was the Empire's protector from foreign enemies and internal rebellions as well as the support of throne pretenders. "The Empire's military defence became the ruler's main duty and other things were under their control".¹ That was probably a reason for the introduction of new measures, the military reorganisation that Diocletian dealt with, where major attention was paid to the border defense system.²

1 Rostovtzeff 1974, 462.

2 Zosimus 2, 34

Military division into two parts by which the effectiveness of the army and soldiers' number increased was without doubt Diocletian's innovation. According to Rostovtzeff: "The military reform was the central preoccupation and it was carried out in a few years, being finished by Constantine and his successors".³

A new problem was more powerful: latifundium owners (*potentiores*) and their private army were not always loyal to the Emperor.

The role of the army increased especially during the period that preceded Diocletian's rule. That was a time when internal conflicts and riots were common and when barbarian attacks against the borders of the Empire were getting more and more frequent and serious. Because of the throne conflicts the borders were often unprotected.

Army expenditures were huge. The garrisons existing in that time were strong and were situated where the fortifying efforts were concentrated. During the time when extensive works for the Pannonian strengthening were carried out, the nearby smithery in Sisak (today a town in Serbia) had to work overtime.⁴ Having been a decisive factor not only from the point of view of the Empire's defence but also from that of the seizure of the throne, the army had constantly increasing wages. In 183 A.D., Domitian increased the wages with one third, then Caracalla (211–217) added 70 million *denarii* to the military funds.⁵ All that together brought inflation. During the fights for the throne and the military anarchy, additional income was realised from robbery, and requisitions were made.

The great extent of attention that was paid to the army can be seen from the fact that military bases had the same comforts that other towns had: aqueducts, amphitheaters and public baths.⁶ Soldiers were judged in special courts that were favouring them.⁷

Besides problems that affected all areas, certain problems affected only the army. First of all, the discipline decreased; officers had to face several problems, such as the diminished number of soldiers as well as their decreased willingness.

One defect of the army was the lack of mobility; the army became almost immobile on the borders so mutual help was impossible. The fact that soldiers founded families with neighbours from across the borders contributed to this. The once excellent Roman roads got wasted during the economic crisis and increasing banditry. The famous bandit, Bulla Felix with his men managed to maintain his positions for a few years.⁸ Besides that, such improvised solutions added to the Empire's lack of defence, so barbarians and other rebelling people took advantage of that.

3 Rostovtzeff 1957, 510.

4 MacMullen 1988, 38.

5 Dio Cassius 67, 3, 5; 78, 36, 3.

6 Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 164.

7 Satirist Juvenal recommends to the one beaten by the soldier to stick his teeth and be quiet because the justice in court is hard to get (*Saturae* 16,100–112).

8 Cook 1939, 21.

What significance did the military have for Diocletian? According to the majority of the authors, it can be seen among the principal motives of establishing an edict and it was a protection from unscrupulous traders, about whom the introductory part of the edict contains some data.

II. The Former System

The military reforms that Augustus had ordered established an organisation which lasted up to the 3rd century.⁹ The new military organisation enabled the Emperor to have complete rule over the Empire. For the sake of his reforms, Augustus directed a particular part of the state budget the financing of the entire military system, what represented the most important step for finance planning taken by the Romans in those times.¹⁰ As the army increased, the expenses became larger. For instance, Caracalla's military expenses increased up to 70 million *denarii*.¹¹ As the military expenses were constantly increasing, the financial problem of meeting these needs became more important. According to Finley: "The military requestments and expenses became the Emperor's constant care and their limited actions were maximal since they were taken from the taxes and citizen's forced work".¹²

During the period of Augustus, the formation of a permanent military machinery was completed. The main military formation was the legion and had 6.000 people. Regular army and legions were placed at the borders of the provinces and were often recruited from the areas they lived in.¹³ By the end of the rule of Augustus there existed 25 legions, 8 in both Germaniae along the Reus (Rayne/Rhine), 3 in Spain, 2 in Africa, 2 in Egypt, 4 in Syria, 2 in Pannonia, 2 in Dalmatia and 2 in Moesia.¹⁴ From the placement of the legions we can conclude that the most endangered positions were in the North, towards the Germans, and in Syria.

The next Emperors kept the arrangement of the legions; they just increased their number, what again was in accordance with the increased danger from barbarians, as well as with internal riots.

From the time of Septimius Severus the number of the legions was increased up to 33; the great importance of the army shows from his words addressed to his sons: "Get along very well, pay soldiers a lot and don't care for anything else".¹⁵

9 Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 163.

10 Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 163.

11 MacMullen 1988, 39.

12 Finley 1979, 235; Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 163.

13 Maskin 1982, 325; Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 163; Grimal 1968, 178.

14 Grimal 1968, 178.

15 Dio Cassius 66, 15, 2.

Besides the primary troops there were additional ones, which were added to the legions. Legions did not exist in Rome and in Italy but Augustus formed particular units: praetorian, civil and *cohortes vigiles*, whose task was the Emperor's personal security as well as protection from public rebellions.¹⁶ Praetorians had higher wages than common soldiers and even shorter serving terms, which usually lasted from 25 to 30 years. Until the rule of Septimius Severus, the Praetorian units consisted of Italians. After his death, the relation between Italians and other nations drastically changed; Praetorians come from other parts, especially from provinces along the Danube.¹⁷ The positions of the legions and Praetorians became equal. Even during the following period, under the rule of Diocletian, the role of the Praetorians was decisive in changing and pronouncing the Emperors. The considerable participation of the Praetorians in the politics of their times made some historians see it as a reason for the Roman failure.¹⁸

Besides their regular duty, soldiers were involved even in public works. Marcus Aurelius had some bridges built by his soldiers.¹⁹ Soldiers also inspected the land and the Emperor's military structure, too.²⁰ Those duties were not the only activities that soldiers had to undertake. They took part in the transportation of grain by ships; worked in mines, prisons, paper factories as well as in river guard. We are informed on all these operations from two papyri which contain lists of soldier activity, being duty reports related to the Danube region.²¹

With the introduction of some innovations in the military field, Alexander Severus tried to strengthen the system but this contributed to the barbarisation of the Roman army. His desire was to renew the Roman army, so he tried to form one legion which would be composed only of Italians but, at the same time, it consisted mostly of Illyrians.²² Besides that, his efforts to strengthen the cavalry were quite clear; in order to achieve this he used Parthians, Alans and Goths. This process aroused another new danger. It created the opportunity to have the barbarised Roman army side with the barbarians, which happened later.

16 Grimal 1968, 178.

17 Grimal 1968, 178.

18 Grimal 1968, 178.

19 Lindsay 1968. 219.

20 Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 166.

21 Boardman–Griffin–Murray 1991, 166.

22 Pareti 1967, 207.

III. Limitanei—Comitatenses

Diocletian was interested above all in border protection. During his rule, we can talk about the development of a defence system, which meant that the borders of the Empire were provided with levees, walls, fortresses and towers.²³ On the other hand, Constantine destroyed the defence system by removing the army from the borders to towns.²⁴

There are significant archaeological and epigraphic proofs of the building of strategic roads and of fortifying activity, the best ones are on the African, Syrian and Arabian borders, while some investigations found fortifications in the Rayne/Rhine and Danube regions.²⁵

Taking into consideration all troubles that an army had to face, in order to create an appropriate mobile army, Diocletian reorganised the Roman army dividing it into two parts, (groups) *comitatenses* and *limitanei*. According to Zosimus “it is sure that *comitatenses* as mobile forces were not the result of Constantine’s merits”,²⁶ but the fact is that Constantine finished many things Diocletian started. *Comitatenses* were mobile, terrain groups which were placed within the Empire. They were located on strategically suitable spots, always behind the important roads, which enabled an easy moving from one part of the state to another. In that way it was possible to offer help whenever it was necessary. The soldiers were younger men without families.

Another group, the *limitanei*, was formed as a border unit. These troops were immobile and represented a kind of village border police.²⁷ Their task was to defend certain parts of the border. On border sections which were exposed to frequent attacks, defensive fortifications were built. This was the case with the border that went down along the Danube, on present day Serbian territory. Roman authorities started to build these fortifications quite early, thus wall remainders that divided Roman Britain from the barbarians, close to the Anglo–Scottish border, are visible even today. These fortifications mark a turning point in Roman history, a transition from offensive to defensive. Soldiers lived on the border area. By cultivating that land they made a living for themselves and their families. The land that was cultivated by border troop soldiers had a particular character.²⁸ Thus the border defence system was created and given special attention.

The system of *limes* now changed and became a system of reasonably arranged fortifications and camps. The *limes* was in fact the border road, for the defence of which they built a complicated system of ditches, trenches and fortresses.

23 Jones 1966, 54.

24 Zosimus 2, 34.

25 Jones 1966, 55 f.

26 Zosimus, 2, 34, 2.

27 Sinigen 1978, 435.

28 C. Th. 7, 22, 1–12; C. 7, 15, 1 f.

Each of the above mentioned two groups took part in the defence of the Empire. The army consisted of frontiersmen, who were interested in the protection of their border section and at the same time by defending the borders from barbarian attacks, they defended their properties and families. Even though this army did not have the possibility to maneuver, they knew their territory and all of the priorities arising from this were used in the best way. This part of the army quite successfully managed to temporarily retain the enemy, until the arrival of the mobile and strong *comitatenses* troops. Such a system was taken over by the Byzantine Empire and adapted to its needs by creating the class of peasant-soldiers, called *stratiotes*.²⁹

The military advantages of this system were various; it was quite a wise action to use a considerable amount of untilled land along the borders and turn it into cultivable areas. Besides that it reduced pressure on state funds – there was not enough money to pay the entire bureaucracy and the more and more insatiable army.

With these measures, Diocletian improved the military situation in the Empire and provided for its better defence.

One more important thing related to the army of this period was the military profession as an obligation, a hereditary obligation of military service. It is not clear when that obligation appeared. It seems that before Diocletian there must have been some attempts of binding the soldiers to their profession. “A general tendency of binding people to their professions that started even before Diocletian, continued during his rule, and what is quite clear, had an influence on the soldiers.”³⁰ Soldier’s sons who were physically capable had to serve in the army just like their fathers; in case of incapability, they were involved in curial service.³¹

There are some authors who find a relation in respect of the military service with Constantine the Great, who ruled after Diocletian.³² It is possible that even before Diocletian there were some attempts to make military profession continual and hereditary. It seems likely that Constantine, in the case of breaking military prohibition regarding discharge, had to renew this order. But Diocletian made an excellent move. He provided the army with land. Land usage was restricted to military service, without formally binding soldiers to their profession. Not long after, he introduced the heredity of military profession.

Although divided into two groups, it can be stated that according to its structure, the army was a unitary body. Namely, the *comitatenses* as well as the *limitanei* consisted of infantry and cavalry units. During this period the role and significance of the cavalry increased so we can rightfully talk about

29 Ostrogorski 1959, 113.

30 Romac 1963, 54.

31 C. Th. 7, 22, 4–5, C. 12, 47.

32 Cary–Scullard 1974, 534.

its primacy.³³ An obligation of donating horses,³⁴ which was introduced in this period, makes one realize that during Diocletian's time people could not fight without the cavalry. The increased role of the cavalry was the consequence of a change in tactics and fighting strategy, which change was caused by the development of the equipment and fighting manners of barbarians. The border troops deteriorated under the several barbarian attacks, so rulers were supposed to strengthen even further the cavalry due to the large and capable cavalry of the enemy. It is possible to contribute this to the influence of Eastern people, whose army consisted mainly of cavalry.

Besides the ordinary army there was a particular army, the so called Empire's army, whose role was to protect the Emperor's people. In 312 A.D., Constantine dismissed the Praetorian Guard,³⁵ but before that already Diocletian reduced and cancelled their privileges.³⁶ Instead of the Praetorians, he chose two Illyrian legions, which under the new names of Iovianus and Herculianus had to serve as the Emperor's guard.³⁷ Constantine created a new guard, the *scholae palatinae*, which consisted of cavalry legions, mostly barbarians, about 500 persons.³⁸ There was also a certain number of young officers, the *protectores*³⁹ with new tasks such as soldier training, but at the same time, they served as the Emperor's protectors; they were called *domestici*.

Army supplying had great importance. Diocletian perfected the post office system (*cursus publicus*), to which he added transportation (*cursus claburalis*), which quite improved the military supply. So, the army on the borders received food that was requisitioned inside the country.⁴⁰ For the postal transportation they requisitioned horses and mules. The *curiales* had to take care about coachmen and companions.⁴¹

IV. The Number of Soldiers

In those insecure times, the army besides the new organisation also needed an increased number of soldiers as well as the improvement of discipline.

There is no proof of the change of military organisation after Alexander Severus, and the ones related to the time of his reign seem to be incomplete. Although

33 Cary–Scullard 1974, 534, Jones 1966, 55, Cook 1939, 398.

34 C. Th. 11, 17, 1–4.

35 Victor, *Epitome* 40, Zosimus, 2, 17.

36 Victor, *Epitome* 89, Lactantius, 26.

37 Gibbon 1978, 369.

38 Cary–Scullard 1974, 534; Jones 1966, 54.

39 C. Th. 6, 24; C. 12, 17.

40 Jones, 1966, 67; 830–834.

41 D. 50, 4, 18.

there are some data about the number of the legions, not much is known about the additional units.⁴²

The data from Diocletian's contemporaries about his army are quite insufficient too. There are a few inscriptions on marble plaques and papyrus; the size of the army can only be reconstructed through the analysis of a survived list (*Notitiae Dignitatum*) made one century later.⁴³ Any such data, however, can be quite unreliable.

Authors who have dealt with this problem talk about an increased number of soldiers.⁴⁴ But there is some disagreement concerning the common legions and the increased number of soldiers. Lactantius is of the opinion that the army of that period was "multiplied" taking into consideration the fact that each tetrarch had larger army than former *principes* had had.⁴⁵ This claim probably goes too far. We can hardly assume that the number of the troops was doubled, and it is even less possible to have been four times larger. It would be hard to understand/believe that a state, in times of demographic and economic decline, could organise an army four times larger than in earlier times.

Some authors think that the number of legions was doubled to 68 during the rule of Diocletian,⁴⁶ while others talk about a huge increase mentioning 60 legions.⁴⁷ Even though we can not find out the correct number, it is quite clear that the number of soldiers and that of legions was really increased. Judging by some survived data, soldiers were mostly placed on the borders; everything was still subordinated to border defence. Out of the 68 legions, 46 were placed on the borders, 16 were used as local reserve, while 6 were the general strategic reserves.⁴⁸ Along the Danube, instead of the 11 legions, 16 were placed; in Egypt there was only one but later on two more were added. Under the rule of Severus there were 34 legions. Probably all, except for one or two, existed before Diocletian succeeded to the throne; before Diocletian's abdication some 35 legions were added to this number. How many new legions were formed during the rule of Diocletian it can not be found out. Parallel to the number of legions, the number of soldiers increased too. The numbers mentioned are not identical. Some authors talk about 420,000 soldiers, while according to others Diocletian expanded the Roman army up to 500 or 600 thousands of soldiers.

How many soldiers did the Roman Empire have to support during the time of Diocletian? Lactantius estimated this to over a million but historians do not agree with the statement. Jones reduced this number to 645,000 and MacMullen to

42 Jones 1966, 56.

43 Jones 1966, 56.

44 Cook 1939, 397; Rostovtzeff 1957, 510; Cary-Scullard 1974, 534.

45 Lactantius, 7, 3.

46 Pareti 1967, 208; Finley 1979, 148; Sinigen 1978, 433.

47 Cook 1939, 397; Cary-Scullard 1974, 534.

48 Pareti 1967, 41; Sinigen 1978, 433.

400,000.⁴⁹ Besides the regular units, the number of soldiers grew in the additional units as well, so in the aforementioned times these consisted of about 150,000 soldiers.⁵⁰ During the time of Diocletian, the Roman Empire probably doubled the number of its legions and soldiers. However, this does not mean that the state's military power was doubled as well because, according to several sources, the new recruiting way did not bring the best people into the army.

This growth in the number of soldiers strengthened the Empire but increased the expenses of the state as well, so the former taxation system was unable to provide enough income.

V. The Recruiting System

This increased army was not made up only of Romans. For a long time Romans were in minority due to the expressed tendency of "provincialisation".⁵¹ From the times of Augustus until the rule of Caligula, Italians gave a smaller part of the legion. The soldiers were inhabitants of the Romanised provinces of the West or of the civilised Eastern provinces. With time, the number of provincials increased so that in 68 A.D. they almost made half of the number of the soldiers. A quite large part of the soldiers came from not that much Romanised provinces, especially from the Balkans.

During the time of Vespasian, every sixth legionary was Italian; in Hadrian's time the number of Italian soldiers was 1% of the total number, and the bulk of the army was made up of recruits from the Balkans and Africa. In such an army it was hard to establish the old Roman discipline.

Many sources, including the legal ones, show that many of the rulers, even Diocletian, populated the Roman land with barbarians as they realised, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, that they would have large advantages from the huge number of workers in agriculture and numerous good recruits.⁵² As barbarians came in this way to the Roman territory, the Roman army depended on barbarian volunteers. Such a structure had many dangers, among which the biggest one was the inability to control unbridled troops which consisted mostly of barbarians. The organisation devised by Diocletian could not stop these consequences. People were at the mercy of the army, and Rome was at the mercy of barbarians.

What regards the way of recruiting barbarians, there were three types of recruits. Some of them served voluntarily. Others were recruited from subordinated classes, which mostly inhabited the areas along the Northern border and the

49 Lactantius, 7, 2; Jones 1966, 680; MacMullen 1988, 41.

50 Pareti 1967, 41; Sinigen 1978, 433.

51 Stanojevic 1976, 27.

52 Ammianus Marcellinus, 25, 6, 10; 28, 1, 5; 31, 12, 6; C. Th. 5, 6, 3; 10, 12, 2; C. 48, 12.

Balkans. The third type of recruits came from the liberated tribes from outside of the Empire; those tribes were the allies of the Roman army. When they got money and food in return, these allies agreed to help the Romans fight other enemies.

Considering the increased number of soldiers, which was due to Diocletian, we should ask a question: Who could become a Roman soldier, more exactly, a soldier of the Roman army; when and in what way?

Until Diocletian's succession to the throne, the main way of forming the army was by recruiting volunteers, mostly barbarians.⁵³ These volunteers were professionals who served in the army for a salary because that was probably their only source of income. The army received poor people, peasants and liberated slaves. After Diocletian's reforms, a new way appeared what regards the formation of the army. The state institutionalised the recruiting system, which had always been relying on peasants. Arable lands were divided into units called *capitula* and every unit had to provide for a certain number of recruits, who – in exchange – would serve for indefinite time. In case some of these units did not have enough people to give the required number of recruits to the state, many of them associated in order to provide the appropriate number of recruits.⁵⁴

With this recruiting system the military quality decreased. That is, we can see that recruits were not chosen as it had been done in republican times, but they were sent by latifundium owners according to defined quota. We can assume that those who were the least valuable had to serve army, while the obligation of military service affected mostly the latifundium owners, who had to give a larger number of recruits.

Such a recruiting system rather strengthened the authority of latifundium owners by giving them more concessions besides many pretended and legal ones. This would be one more element which contributed to the destabilisation of the state, and it had serious consequences.

One of the developments was the introduction of the possibility of giving money instead of recruits, this is the so called *aurum tyronum*. This obligation for payment of a certain compensation instead of military service was a concession practised just in some provinces.⁵⁵ Later, this concession was given as a privilege to certain classes of the Roman aristocracy, to senators, who had the possibility of choosing between military service and compensatory payment.⁵⁶

The logic of this payment (*aurum tyronum*) was that in case of not getting recruits, the state could demand money in order to rent soldiers from among the barbarians and the poor.

53 Zosimus 2, 15.

54 C. Th. 6, 13, 1–2; C. 12, 43, 1–3.

55 C. Th. 7, 13, 2; Lactantius 7, 5.

56 C. Th. 7, 13, 13.

VI. Military Commanding

During the Republic and the early period of the Empire, military commanding was not separated from state ruling. Some high officials (*consules*, *dictatores* and *praetores*), besides certain liberties had a right to command over military units. Later the two functions became more separated except for the case of the rulers, who still were the supreme civil and military commanders. Under the rule of Diocletian that process became even faster. Civil authority became more separated from the military one, and on both sides the senators's and cavalry's classes lost their former significance. Acquiring the highest positions in the army and in the official hierarchy did not depend on their approved abilities and merits. Although in those times privileges related to origin and wealth existed, but also the possibilities of progress based on capability were greater. Any soldier who showed certain progress could become a guard and centurion, this latter's task was to command over 100 people. As a next step, one could become commander of the whole province, and finally supreme commander of the entire army. In order to reach all those positions, one certainly had to show some military skills such as bravery and loyalty to the Emperor. In this way the former senators of aristocratic origin lost their influence in the army. A new aristocracy based on military and civil services was created. This aristocracy was made up of the military classes and the guard.

A change that emphasised capability and not origin was certainly good. It contributed to the state's defence power.

The *magister peditum* and *magister equitum* were at the head of the army, *duces* were subordinated to them and commanded over the *limitanei* units. In some areas a few *duces* were under control of another higher ranking officer who had the title of *comes*, and their units were placed at the border fortifications with additional forces under the command of the *praefectus*.⁵⁷ As military governors, they had their *officium*.⁵⁸ The ordinary army consisted of legions, which were commanded over by a *praefectus legionis*, of cavalry units's *vexillationes*, whose commanders were the *praefecti alarum*, and of the *auxilia*. *Comitatenses* had higher salaries and more privileges than the people on borders, who (as result of their localisation) were considered as second class troops.

57 Nótári 2011, 94 f.

58 C. Th. 6, 14.

VII. Wages

The 3/4 of their wages, soldiers received in kind. Besides goods for their family, the wages could include arms, horses and fodder. Sometimes these goods were replaced by a certain amount of money. The amount of wages as well as the term of the service depended on the position of the army.

Military service lasted for 20 years for *comitatenses* and 24 for the frontier soldiers, but these latter were paid less than the *comitatenses*.

As it has already been mentioned, frontier soldiers had smaller wages probably because of the land they were given, and they were treated as second class troops who had easier task to do, and their service term was longer.

Besides their wages, soldiers, especially veterans had certain privileges such as reduced taxes for their family, and they even got certain plots of land as gift. Since the 3rd century, veteran soldiers had been given some land in the border area, however with required frontier service.⁵⁹

VIII. Estimate

From among the many changes introduced by Diocletian, the military reforms were the most important. We can even say that some other changes were either direct or indirect results of this one. Of course, the introduction of the taxation system *capitatio-iugatio* was a result of the need to increase income to face growing expenses, from which the biggest one was the army. Even the Price Edict, as in the introductory part Diocletian and his co-regent admitted, was a result of concern for soldiers. The established measures of the military reforms contributed to the stability of the state and mainly to the border protection of the Empire by stopping barbarian attacks – at least temporarily.

Good side of this reform was that the increased number of soldiers and the better organisation of the army increased the state's defence power. Besides the larger number of soldiers, expenses were raised by the fast development and by cavalry participation, which involved much higher expenses than what was needed for the infantry. Was the state able to provide the necessary funds compared to those already existent, and if it was, for how long and in what way? The military reforms could not give any more permanent result.

Another bad result was the decline in quality of the military personnel. The recruiting system did not bring the best people into the legions. Probably latifundium owners gave their worse workers to the army.

59 C. Th. 7, 1.

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