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MEMORIALIZING ROMANIAN-GERMAN GULAG VICTIMS IN THE USSR THROUGH HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS AND HISTORICAL FICTION

Abstract: This paper examines the memory of the Romanian-German victims of the Soviet Gulag as recorded in recent collections of testimonies and interviews, a museum exhibition, an audio-visual documentary project, and Herta Müller's 2009 novel *Atemschaukel*. It employs Alexander Etkind's notions of "soft memory" and "hard memory" to discuss some of the key historical and political events that have impeded the establishing of consensual remembrance policies of the Soviet Gulag in communist Romania. I show how both German and Romanian communities since 1990 have memorialized the Gulag and discuss *Atemschaukel* as a legitimate impulse to document both personal and collective trauma of the second and subsequent generations. I argue that in the absence of a crystallized, hard memory, the historical documents and the historical fiction analyzed serve as viable examples of soft memory that succeed in memorializing the forced labor camps experience in its collective and individual forms.

Keywords: *Romanian-German minority; Gulag; deportation; soft memory; memorialization; Herta Müller.*

In their 2013 volume *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Uilleam Blacker and Alexander Etkind note that cultural memory has "boomed" in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia since the collapse of the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and that "the immense space that used to be occupied by the Soviet Union and its involuntary satellites has no overarching political cohesion, cultural integrity, or even a geographical identity" (Blacker and Etkind 1). In the absence of a "neat border between communities of memory" across this region, "[c]omplex mnemonic conflicts have unfolded within, as well as between states" (1). Thus, the memories that inhabit the states

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of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe “may clash and divide” and are “in constant, often antagonistic contact with one another” resulting in “a form of entanglement, which has the potential to produce both conflict and solidarity” (1-2).

These intricate entanglements of memory, or “*noueds de mémoire*” — “knots of memory,” often focus in Eastern European memory on events like: “the nineteenth-century competition among the European empires; the emancipating, utopian, and ultimately enslaving revolutions” that have swept over Europe; the two world wars and their mechanisms of oppression; the Holocaust, followed by the division of Germany; the installation of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the reign of the Soviet Union that brought with it the expulsion, relocation, and forced labor camps, especially in the Soviet Union, along with forced collectivization and nationalization, and the terrors of political dictatorships that have ruined politically, economically, intellectually, culturally, emotionally, and environmentally people, countries, and landscapes.” (Rothberg 7; Blacker and Etkind 2)

Of all these harrowing occurrences that have swept over Eastern Europe, Aleida Assmann argues that two core events, the Holocaust and the Gulag, lie at the heart of European memory (27). Assmann further contends that while

the memory of the Nazi genocide has been transformed into a transgenerational and transitional memory, providing the EU with a ‘foundation myth’ and a moral yardstick for new members since 2005, the memory of Stalin’s terror has had a much contested and fragmented history, fuelling [sic!] the national narratives of victimhood of some post-Soviet states on the one hand and disappearing from Russian political memory almost entirely on the other. (27)

Moreover, as Brigid Haines notes, while “[t]he Nazi concentration camps were short-lived, increasingly genocidal, and end-stopped in 1945; [...] [t]he Gulags, by contrast were a much longer-lasting phenomenon with a high turnover and many more survivors” (Haines 118).

Since the demise of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, there has been little debate about the Gulags, “public recognition or awareness, and no ‘crystallization’ of the kind that has occurred in Germany” (118-9). While “Jewish victims have received growing public recognition for their suffering since the

1980s, the victims of Stalinism, who were deported, tortured, exploited as forced laborers and murdered en masse, have not yet been accorded a rightful place in Europe's historical memory and moral consciousness" (Assmann 31). Thus, "[i]n contrast to the memory of the Holocaust, which has become a joint memory of victims and perpetrators, Gulag memory, remains predominantly a victims' memory, which has been seized upon by various nations but still lacks the support of those who inflicted the violence or were responsible for the crimes" (31). As such, the memories of the Gulag "have remained largely locked up inside the victims, their families, and small sympathetic groups" (31).

If before 1989, memory was selectively suppressed by the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe while being internationally preserved by "American and European historians, activists, writers, politicians, and by Soviet and East European dissidents and memoirists," after the collapse of the Soviet Union "many areas of historical memory remained taboo" (Blacker and Etkind 3, 4). *Wall of Grief*, Russia's first monument to the millions of people executed, deported or imprisoned under Stalin's rule of terror is a case in point since it was unveiled only in 2017.³⁰

Analyzing the forms of memorialization of the Nazi concentration camps and of forced labor camps in the Soviet Union, Alexander Etkind distinguishes two categories of memory: "hard memory" and "soft memory" (39). The memory of the Nazi concentration camps, he argues, is "hard memory," because it is a memory that has achieved "relative consensus in the public sphere," which as Haines contends, is owed to the "the political rupture occasioned by the fall of the Third Reich [that] brought forced remembering under Allied pressure" (Etkind 56; Haines 118). The processes of memorialization in the Western part of Germany began after the end of the World War II as a result of the fact that the Allies preserved the concentration camps and later opened them to the public (Etkind 47). In time, increased "centralized memorialization" enabled the memory of the Nazi concentration camps to "crystallize" and harden into monuments (Haines 118; Etkind 47). "The crystallization of memory," Etkind explains, "means its transfiguration from public debates into memorial complexes" (47). Thus, "hard memory "consists primarily of monuments (and, sometimes, state laws and court decisions)" (39). By contrast, soft memory, is

³⁰ For a description of and reactions to the monument, see: "Wall of Grief: Putin opens first Soviet victims memorial." *BBC News*. Web. 3 Oct. 2021. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40948224>>.

memory that is “raw and on which little or no consensus has yet formed” (Haines 118). It consists of texts, including literary, historical, cinematic, and others (Etkind 39; Blacker and Etkind 5-6).

If monuments and museums are singular, being located in specific, often considered sacred spaces, literary and cinematic texts have largely a deterritorialized cultural memory, are mechanically or electronically reproduced, and are available in many places at once (Blacker and Etkind 5-6). Soft and hard memory are interdependent, because “monuments without inscriptions are mute, whereas texts without monuments are ephemeral” (Etkind 39). While manifestations of hard memory emerge due to “the consent of an all-time state power and consensual public opinion” and are “usually the responsibility of the state,” “soft memory is the domain of society” (Kiss 82; Etkind 56). As such, soft memory does not have an official ownership, “it remains text-based rather than monument-based, fluid, dispersed and varied” (Haines 119).

Monuments that immortalize the victories of a nation-state become “the body of the nation on display” and “represent the identity of the nation-state as a desired unity between the state, the people, and their common history” (Etkind 40). Moreover, such monuments produce “‘truth,’ imposing it upon citizens and observers” and “work as materialized forms of patriotic sentiment” and “sites of historical memory,” and are “visible and touchable bodies of nationalism, which has always created the future by distorting the past” (40). Since empires and countries “do not usually erect monuments that memorialize their guilt” and have the tendency to glorify those who won and ignore those who lost, “[t]he memory of the collateral suffering that resulted from national glory is more often preserved in oral or written texts than in monuments” (40-41).

In the following, I examine the memory of the Romanian-German victims of the Soviet Gulag by highlighting some of the major contributing factors that have impeded its “soft memory” to crystallize into a “hard memory.” I highlight some of the major historical and political events and factors that have led to the deportation of Romanian ethnic Germans, and analyze several recent collections of testimonies and interviews, a museum exhibition, an audio visual documentary project, and, Herta Müller’s 2009 novel *Atemschaukel* which function as soft memory, that, in the absence of a crystallized hard memory, succeed in memorializing historical experience in its collective and individual forms, offering relay stations for memories both living and inherited and public platforms for evoking, processing, exchanging, and memorializing the

experiences, stories, and histories of Romanian Germans deported in the Gulags.

The deportation into the Soviet Union of ethnic Germans was the result of the implementation of the concept of “collective guilt” of the Germans for the World War II crimes which were ascribed also to the ethnic German populations in Eastern Europe. Romania was both an ally and an enemy of Nazi Germany. Under the leadership of Marshal, Ion Antonescu, Romania joined the Axis powers on November 23, 1940 and participated along with the Axis army in the invasion of the Soviet Union that started on June 22, 1941. With the support of several Romanian political parties, King Michael I of Romania led a *coup d'état* on August 23, 1944 that removed Antonescu and his government. On August 24, 1944, King Michael I signed an armistice with the Soviet Union and joined the Allies.

Before and during the war, many ethnic Germans left Romania and went into the Reich as a result of three major factors: (1) the expansionist policy of the Third Reich, particularly the 1935 *Reichsarbeitsdienstgesetz* (the Reich's labor service law) by which all German males and females under the age of 25, including those outside of Germany, had to perform compulsory labor for the National Socialist State; (2) heavy Nazi propaganda efforts and initiatives among ethnic Germans in Romania; and (3) the 1943 interstate Romanian-German agreement that resulted in “the mass enrollment of Romanian Germans in the infamous *Waffen-SS*” (Şandru 419-22; Cercel 51). It is estimated that by 1943 some 214,630 ethnic Germans had emigrated in the Reich, many of which enlisted in the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS*³¹ (Şandru 424).

At the end of the war, the Soviet Union demanded war reparations for the damage inflicted by Nazi Germany during the campaigns of the European Axis powers. Following the arrival of the Red Army in Romania in 1944, ethnic Germans were targeted and put into roughly two categories according to their past political activities: former members of Nazi military organizations were sent into prisoner of war camps, and those with no political activity were initially pressed into public labor (Betea et al. 11). However, the situation of ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe quickly worsened following the 7161 Order of December 16, 1944 issued by the USSR State Defense Committee by which ethnic Germans residing in Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and

³¹ Paul Milata estimates that between 61,880 and 65, 240 Romanian ethnic Germans were enlisted in the *Waffen SS* (217).

Czechoslovakia were declared forced laborers as a part of German war reparations (12).

In Romania, the deportations started on January 6, 1945. Between 60,000 and 70,000 German civilians, namely, men between the ages of 17 and 45 and women between 18 and 30 were deported (Betea et al. 13; Baier 23). Initially, pregnant women with children less than a year old were excluded (Rusnac). Nonetheless, thanks to the 1945 formal protest of Romania's Prime Minister General Nicolae Rădescu to the Soviet General Vinogradov, several categories were excluded from deportation: German women married to Romanian men, industry workers, nuns, and those unable to do physical labor (Betea et al. 13). Between 1948 and 1949, about 40,000 deportees returned to Romania (Rusnac). The discrepancy between the number of those who left and the ones who returned is owed to the internees' death, early repatriation due to illness and work-related accidents, and relocation in Germany and Austria by the Soviet authorities (Rusnac).

Today, the historical, cultural, collective, and individual trauma of the Soviet Gulag is commemorated in oral narratives, written texts, documentaries, cultural events, exhibitions that feature photos, objects, and documents of the deportation period, and, more recently, commemorative plaques and some memorials, which are privately funded and inadequately in scale being the products of private or civic initiatives. To the date, there are no national memorials or museums memorializing Romanian-German victims of the Soviet Gulag and no effective consensual remembrance policies. This is complicated by the fact that Soviet Gulag forced-labor camps and political prisoners continued to exist until the mid-80s, and, as a Soviet satellite state, communist Romania developed its own ghastly Soviet-type labor camps, prisons, and reduction camps collectively known as the "Romanian Gulag" ("Introduction: Stalin's Gulag").

Unlike Holocaust survivors who started to express their horrific experiences in the early 1950s, it took fifty years for ethnic Germans survivors of the Soviet Gulag to openly talk about their plight. When they returned to their homes in Romania at the end of the 1940s, they found themselves in a communist state whose political and economic situation was closely monitored by the Soviet Union who brutally silenced any attempts to expose its horrific force labor camps. Moreover, during the communist dictatorships in both the Soviet Union and Romania, the "official history," privileged "the ideological mechanisms of

comparative and competitive trivialization of the Holocaust and the Gulag” (Kiss 81). Silenced and marginalized, many victims and their families immigrated to West Germany during the 70s and 80s, resulting in both a “demographic and psychological aftermath” (83). The absence of the deportees’ testimonies and the scarcity of visual and textual documentation of the cultural memory of the Gulag explain, in part, the “general lack of scholarly or historiographical interest in the experiences” of the Romanian-German Gulag experiences prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ceaușescu’s dictatorship at the end of the 1980s (Kiss 83, 82). In 2020, it was estimated that there were 180 camp survivors in Romania (“Erinnerung an die Deportation”).

That the former deportees were ready and eager to talk about their Gulag experiences after the fall of communism attest several volumes comprising victims’ interviews, testimonies, letters, poems, and archival material (facsimiles of camp documents, postcards, letters, drawings, and sketches) which are accompanied by critical analyses, essays, chronologies, and commentaries published shortly after the fall of the communist regime in Romania by scholars, historians, and journalists.³² Some of these volumes are structured chronologically featuring the departure to the USSR, the time in the camps, and the return to Romania. In other collections, the interviews and the archival material are structured thematically addressing: the arrest, the journey to the Soviet Union, living and working conditions, food, hunger, illness, death, the locals, cultural and socializing, events, etc.

Among these volumes, several make it a point in highlighting their memorializing objective. Thus, the 2000 volume *Tief in Russland bei Stalino*, [Deep in Russia at Stalino], specifies on the opening page that it commemorates 55 years since the beginning of the deportation and 50 since the victims’ return from the Gulag. The volume was translated into Romanian and published in 2003 under the title *Departe în Rusia, la Stalino*. Similarly, *Der weite Weg ins Ungewisse*, [The Long Way to Nowhere] which is the 2015 German translation and expanded version of the 2012 volume *Lungul drum spre nicăieri* was launched at the 70th commemoration of the deportation in Ulm, Germany in 2015. *Lager Lyrik*, the

³² See Georg Weber et al., *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger Sachsen in die Sowjetunion 1945 – 1949*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1995; Helmut Berner, *Helmut and Doru Radosav, Und keiner weiß warum Donbaß, eine deportierte Geschichte*. Ravensburg: Landsmannschaft der Sathmarer Schwaben, 1996; Hannelore Baier, *Tief in Russland bei Stalino. Erinnerungen und Dokumente zur Deportation in die Sowjetunion 1945*. Bukarest: ADZ Verlag, 2000.

2015 anthology features on its cover the term *Gedenkbuch* (commemorative book) along with the inscription “70 years since the deportation of Germans from Southeast Europe in the Soviet Union.”³³

A significant and necessary shift in remembering and memorializing the experiences of the Gulag internees marks the volume *Lungul drum spre nicăieri*, which comprises interviews with survivors, and also with their descendants, i.e., the second and third generations, as well as testimonies of the interviewees demonstrating that “the twentieth-century traumas of the German minority in Romania are transgenerational ones which form a constellation of convergent narratives that can be (or have to be) told jointly by all the generations involved,” and, I would add, also by cultures and languages, in this case, Romanian and Romanian-German as made evident by the translations into German and Romanian of some of the volumes noted above (Kiss 83). This shows the need and importance to memorialize Gulag victims across generations, cultures, and languages.

Another noteworthy approach to memorializing the deportation presents the volume *Lager Lyrik* [Camp Lyric] in which the victims’ experiences are not told through interviews or testimonials, but through their poems, sketches, drawings, songs, rhymes, and photos of internees, places, and landscapes. Other than a short preface, the anthology does not include editorial comments, but only information as to the author’s name, birth and death dates and places, the place, where an artifact was produced, and the source that provides it. Given its structure and minimal commentaries, the volume offers the reader an unmediated interaction with the victims’ memories and artifacts that, in my view, could be conducive to a deep contemplative and commemorative experience.

The special exhibition *...skoro damoi! Hoffnung und Verzweiflung. Siebenbürger Sachsen in sowjetischen Arbeitslagern 1945-1949*³⁴ [...skoro damoi! Hope and Disappointment: Transylvanian Saxons in Work Camps 1945-1949], which, to my knowledge, is the first of its kind, aimed to commemorate 75 years since the deportation of Transylvanian Germans in the Soviet Union. The exhibition, which was shown in 2020 and 2021 in Gundelsheim and Dinkelsbühl,

³³ My translation of: *70 Jahre seit der Deportation der Deutschen aus Südosteuropa in die Sowjetunion*.

³⁴ “Skoro damoi” is a phrase that the deportees often heard from local Russians. It translates as: „You will go home soon!” See <https://www.ikgs.de/sonderausstellung-skoro-damoi-hoffnung-und-verzweiflung-siebenbuenger-sachsen-in-sowjetischen-arbeitslagern-1945-1949>.

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Germany, features a remarkable collection of documents, photos, and articles of clothing, as well as hand-made tools, utensils, and art objects such as: miniature sculptures in coal, wood, metal, and stone; jewelry made of Russian coins; drawings; paintings; and greeting cards that bear testimony to the life, work, and plight but also to the artistic talents of the deportees and their ardent desire to survive and reaffirm their dignity as human beings with distinct individualities. The 312-page catalogue, *skoro damoi! Hoffnung und Verzweiflung. Siebenbürger Sachsen in sowjetischen Arbeitslagern 1945-1949* published in 2020, as well as an online video tour of the exhibition enable its world-wide circulation and access.

In an attempt to lend voice to voiceless Gulag victims and reflect the collective memory of the deportation, Marc Schroeder, a Luxembourg-based photographer, launched the documentary project, *Order 7161* which comprises photographs and video recordings of interviews and testimonies of 40 ethnic Romanian-German deportees as well as landscape shots collected between 2012 and 2015 (“Erinnerung an die Deportation;” “Order 7161: Photo Book”). The project was awarded the 2013 *Europa Grant for Cultural Journalists* by the Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest (Schroeder “Order 7161”). Selections of the exhibition were shown in various cities in Romania and Germany and in Berlin in 2020 marking 75 years since the beginning of the deportations of ethnic Germans from Romania in the Soviet Union (“Order 7161: Photo Book;” “Erinnerung an die Deportation”). *Order 7161* has been published in 2021 as photo books both in German and English offering much-needed empirical documentation of the Soviet Gulag camp system. Selections of the video recordings of the survivors’ testimonies that are available on Schroeder’s personal website and on *Kickstarter*, hopefully, pique the interest of the internet-savvy younger generations who are more likely to watch a video clip or gather information online instead of buying or borrowing printed books about the Gulag camps, which are often difficult to obtain.

Published to high critical acclaim, Herta Müller’s 2009 *Atemschaukel* (*The Hunger Angel*, 2012) engages with the “general theme, still relatively contentious and underexplored in literature and culture, of Germans in the mid-twentieth century as victims” (Haines 118). The first text for Müller in which she departs from autobiographically tinged topics, *Atemschaukel* presents the fictionalized story of the Romanian-German poet Oskar Pastior, Müller’s close friend. The author’s interest in the deportation of ethnic Germans was also motivated, by her mother’s experience as a deportee, who returned home three years before Müller

was born, and was unwilling and unable to talk about her camp experiences (Yaggi). Her mother's trauma had deep, emotionally damaging effects on the writer. Yet, Müller is also concerned about the official neglect of the Gulag legacy and the rapid disappearance of camp survivors (Holden, "Interview" 324-5).

The novel received high critical acclaim and it "presumably constituted the final piece of evidence" that convinced the Nobel Prize jury of "the outstanding quality" of Müller's writing (Haines 117). Over several years, Müller filled several notebooks based on her discussions with Pastior who shared with her episodes from his time in the camps, and the trip that the two writers took to Ukraine where they visited the two camps where the poet was interned. Although they had intended to write the novel together, Pastior's sudden death in 2006 ended their plan. The novel, which Müller rewrote from scratch, became her heartfelt memorial and her "work of mourning" [*Trauerarbeit*] to her poet-friend (Holden, "Interview" 326).

In *Atemschaukel*, Müller shows the immense power of language that enables the protagonist to articulate unthinkable depths of despair and suffering when his "body is broken and his spirit is almost silenced" (Holden, "Cultural Identity" 193). "The outstanding poetic quality of Müller's language is particularly evident in the prose poems dedicated to hunger and loneliness," the "odes to Ukrainian weeds," and in the "condensing and estranging compound nouns," like the enigmatic title, *Atemschaukel*, literal translation "breath-swing" (Holden, "Cultural Identity" 194; "Herta Müller: *Atemschaukel/Everything I Own...;*" Haines 126). In response to critics who take issue with the novel's densely poetic style, Müller argues that, "if we deny deported people their individuality, we put ourselves in the same position as the camps" (Jaggi).

Written in the first person, *Atemschaukel* is comprised of short chapters structured in a loose chronological order. The novel opens with the protagonist, Leopold (Leo) Auberg, preparing to leave for camp followed by episodes and vignettes from camp life that include some memorable portraits of inmates, and it ends with Leo's release and return to his family and hometown Sibiu in Transylvania, Romania. The form of the novel is "at once fragmentary and cumulative," providing a striking picture of camp life "dominated by inhumane working conditions, inadequate clothing, illness, lice, and the ever-present, dehumanizing, all-consuming hunger" (Haines 128). Being "scrupulously researched," the novel "achieves vital memory work in its depiction of Germans as victims, in being one of the first extensive accounts, fictional or otherwise of

the deportations of Romanian-Germans in 1945,” as well as “in giving fictional form to the lasting trauma of both those who survived and of the second generation” (Haines 119).

Atemschaukel “breaks new ground in German, Romanian, and Russian memory culture” and the discussion of the deportations of ethnic Germans which was taboo because, as Müller often explains, it would have been a reminder that Romania had been fascist up to 1944 (Haines 119; Jaggi). Even though the novel offers fictionalized camp memories based on “learned recollections” authored by writers who had not had first-hand camp experiences, it represents the still “raw, partly buried, contested” and “life-defining memories” by writers with a very personal interest in the material (Haines 126, 118, 127). Furthermore, this novel belongs to what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory,” which are experiences that are not one’s own, but have been passed across generations in narratives, artifacts, and memories of places (Hirsch 1997).

Unlike Müller’s mother, who after reading *Atemschaukel*, told Müller: “That’s how it was,” some critics and children of camp survivors objected that only those with first-hand, direct experience should write about the camps (Jaggi). In response to such objections, Müller counters that: “Anything in literature, including memory, is second-hand,” because, “the second generation will be involved through the damage done to their parents” (Jaggi). This sentiment echoes James E. Young’s argument by which scrupulously researched novels about the Holocaust should be viewed in the light of “the legitimate impulse to document events and the manner in which ‘real past events’ are inevitably fictionalized by any narrative that gives them form” (Young 213). Thus, Young’s argument could just as well apply to the fictionalized testimonies of the Gulag, including Müller’s well-documented novel, *Atemschaukel*.

While probing and debating the authenticity of the material presented in the novel, a growing number of Romanian-Germans employ Müller’s novel, along with other fictionalized accounts of the Gulag, as a viable platform, that enables them to open up, reflect, and discuss their parents’ (or relatives’) and their own trauma following the deportations in the Soviet Gulag. *Atemschaukel* is prominently featured at various cultural memory events such as: reunions of former camp internees, commemorations of deportation campaigns, artifacts and literary exhibitions, and scholarly conferences. Likewise, the novel functions as a startup point for discussions and debates on various social media platforms and

forums such as literary cafés and salons and blogs. Furthermore, *Leagănul respirației*, the 2010 Romanian translation of *Atemschaukel*, has been serving as a launching pad of discussions and debates among historians, literary critics, journalists, and deportees and political prisoners.

In the absence of a public sphere like a national place of mourning or a national museum dedicated to the Romanian-German Gulag victims, the volumes of interviews and historical documents, the museum exhibition, the audio visual documentary project, and Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* discussed here, succeed in memorializing the victims' plight and in breaking the decades-long amnesia, silence, guilt, and "incapacity to testify" (Kiss 85). These manifestations of soft memory enhance our understanding of a dark period, (re)shape both national and individual cultural memory and personal identity serving as viable examples of soft memory that illuminate our past, create space for remembering, mourning, and honoring victims, and offer central points of reference for memories to be shared, processed, appropriated, memorialized, and transmitted to future generations.

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