

How capitalism triumphed in East Germany

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The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was formed as part of the defensive reaction by the USSR to Marshall Aid. The latter was used by imperialism in an attempt to resuscitate capitalist forces in Eastern Europe.

A degenerate workers' state from the establishment of planning in 1951, the GDR served the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy and its local agents, the Soviet Military Administration (SMA) in Germany. In turn the SMA was backed by the Socialist Unity Party (SED), a party formed by fusion of the German Communist Party (KPD) and SPD (East), and then purged of all potential opposition groupings.

Consequently, the very existence of the state as a political and territorial entity, was closely bound up with both its political regime and its class character. Without the anti-capitalist structures of the economy the state would have remained capitalist and eventually this would have undermined the rule of the Soviet Union and its agents. Equally, without both Soviet backing and those anti-capitalist structures the bureaucracy of the GDR state would have been superfluous and short lived, since its existence was neither a consequence of the development of German society and class struggle nor a necessary component of the post-capitalist production relations.

This does not mean that the GDR was doomed to exist as a degenerate workers' state or not to exist at all. Both the Paris Commune and the Russian Socialist Federation of Soviet Republics¹ during the civil war and wars of intervention, showed that a revolutionary state can exist on a fraction of the territory of a previously bourgeois state. However, those same examples show, negatively and positively respectively, that revolutionary leadership of the masses is the decisive question. The GDR could have survived as a healthy workers' state had there existed a revolutionary leadership able to win the masses of the working class to a programme of political revolution.

The task of such a political revolution would be the overthrow of the bureaucratic regime by genuine, armed, workers' councils. They would create the political regime necessary both to defend the existence of the post-capitalist property relations and to energise those relations with proletarian democracy so that planning of production and distribution could be effectively democratically centralised in the interests of the working people. The victory of such a political revolution would immediately have posed the need to spread the revolution beyond the borders of the GDR, but the speed and direction of this would have been a matter of tactical consideration.

Without such revolutionary leadership, social counter-revolution—the re-establishment of capitalism—was inevitable, since Stalinist rule necessarily prevented the advance towards socialism. The restoration of capitalism in the GDR would, however, put in question the continued existence of the state itself. There was no internal capitalist class which would see any merit in the continued existence of a separate capitalist East Germany. On the contrary, the only German bourgeoisie, and a very powerful one, existed

in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and had a vested interest in the destruction of the GDR as a separate state. The huge gravitational pull of this most wealthy and dynamic of the European capitalist economies was bound to draw the GDR, whose leadership?overwhelmed by the consequences of Stalinist rule?decided to dismantle the anti-capitalist measures imposed bureaucratically in the 1940s. Unless there was to be a political revolution in the GDR, or a serious capitalist crisis in the FRG, absorption into the FRG was inevitable.

What we have witnessed in the last twelve months is the step by step confirmation of this analysis albeit from the negative side. The demise of Stalinism without even a fight, has given capitalism a tremendous political boost. Already it is becoming the accepted wisdom that ?socialism proved to be impossible? and ?planned economies have shown themselves inferior to the market?.

This unearned victory of the bourgeoisie could become a full scale rout of the working class movement unless Marxists prove themselves able to learn the lessons of the last period and use those lessons to enrich their own theoretical inheritance. By formulating an accurate analysis of what has happened we lay the basis upon which to win the working class to our programme in the period of instability and re-adjustment which is bound to follow from the July 1990 State Treaty, which re-established a bourgeois state and which must now undertake the implementation of a fully functioning capitalist economy.

Destabilisation of the monolith

Although many factors lay behind the terminal crisis of the GDR, the initial catalyst was the decision of Hungary to open its borders with Austria for its own citizens. Rumours that this might also apply to citizens of the GDR led to ever increasing numbers assembling by the Austro-Hungarian border. In a move calculated to pressurise Hungary to break with a Warsaw Pact ally, and designed to undermine the credibility of the GDR regime, Chancellor Kohl of the FRG demanded free exit for the refugees, reminding the world that all citizens of the GDR were automatically entitled to full citizenship and social security rights in the FRG. In this way Kohl acted both in the general interest of the NATO powers and stressed the continuing FRG commitment to German unity, a pledge hardly heard for two decades.

With the effective blessing of Gorbachev, Hungary obliged the FRG and opened its borders to GDR citizens. The scale of the emigration was an embarrassment to Honecker and evidence of the illegitimacy of his regime. The Czechoslovakian decision to allow GDR citizens to leave by special trains to the FRG further inflamed the situation and highlighted the GDR?s isolation as a ?hardline Stalinist state?. Up to this point the internal SED opposition, which included a range of political currents, from Gorbachevite reform Stalinists to openly restorationist social democrats, had not been able to differentiate into clear groupings. But with Honecker on the defensive the opposition began to echo demands for democratic rights raised by various movements outside the Party. Although the right to travel was included, the chief demands were for freedom of association, speech and communication and these were presented as the means by which to save the GDR from a collapse caused by mass emigration. Drawing on the models of Hungary, Poland and even the Soviet Union, New Forum was formed on a programme aimed at reform of the state machine through negotiation with the government.

The announcement that New Forum had tried to register itself as an organisation, and that this had been refused by the government, heightened the tension within the GDR. Increasingly, the hopes of reformers were focused on the need for a change of personnel in government and the emergence of a leadership committed to glasnost. Consequently, Gorbachev?s visit to the Fortieth Anniversary ?celebrations? provided an opportunity to demonstrate the scale of hostility to Honecker?s government, whilst pleading continued loyalty to the state itself. Although subject to police brutality, the scale of the demonstrations gave new impetus to the opposition. This expressed itself in Leipzig in the 9 October demonstration and

again a week later. Divisions within the SED together with Soviet refusal to back repression prevented a bloodbath, and led directly to Honecker's resignation on 18 October.

Revolutionary crisis

The formation of the Krenz government marked the opening of the period of political revolutionary crisis. In this period it became abundantly clear that the old rulers could no longer rule in the old way and that the masses would no longer tolerate being ruled in the old way. The withdrawal of Soviet support, the impending economic crisis (rooted in both debts to the imperialist powers and the decline of the GDR's role within Comecon), and the hostility of the masses, dissolved the supposed monolithic unity of the SED and the chain of command within the state apparatus. Unable to coerce the people any longer, the government was forced to make concession after concession. The most dramatic of these was the opening of The Wall on 9 November.

Dual power

So rapid was the collapse of state control and internal discipline that the newly mobilised masses did not create permanent assemblies which embodied their own power—an embryonic form of a revolutionary state. Instead, they limited themselves to mass protests for democratic liberties and underlined their refusal to bow to the government. For this scale of mobilisation local 'citizens' committees were sufficient. Although in respect of the collapse of central state authority this period exhibited features of a classic 'dual power', the lack of a developing alternative source of legitimate power to the state justifies the characterisation of this period as, in Trotsky's apt phrase, one of 'dual powerlessness'.

The resolution of this unstable situation in favour of the revolutionary forces would have required the creation of workers' councils defended by a workers' militia. They would have completed the destruction of the state apparatus of repression, proclaimed the achievement of all the democratic rights demanded by the masses and imposed their own control over the faltering economy through the seizure of control over the planning mechanisms.

It cannot be doubted that revolutionary action like this would have come under attack from all reactionary forces—the remnants of the GDR state, the Soviet Armed Forces and in the west the NATO forces. The only defence for the revolution would have been the call for active support from the working class of the whole of Europe, east and west, but especially from the workers of the FRG.

This, together with the widespread recognition that modernisation of the economy of the GDR would require assistance from the more advanced FRG, made the call for a revolutionary re-unification of Germany essential. In simple terms this meant political revolution in the east and social revolution in the west. Such a perspective and programme could only have come from a Trotskyist party. The eradication of this tradition by Nazis and Stalinists alike, and the unwillingness of the centrist 'Trotskyists' to overcome this, ensured that this direction was not taken by the mass movement despite its overwhelmingly proletarian character.

Defending what?

Within the strategy of political revolution a vital distinction had to be drawn between defence of the post-capitalist property relations—obligatory for all Marxists—and illegitimate defence of the bureaucratic state apparatus, which was the principal enemy of the working class within the GDR. Failure to make this distinction lay at the heart of the impotence of the left wing opponents of the state. It led the majority of those who genuinely wanted to prevent the restoration of capitalism into identifying mass mobilisations

against the regime principally as attacks upon the property relations. By the same token, it also led them to see in the state apparatus a potential means of defending those property relations. An early variant of this was a utopian call for factory based workers' councils to gradually displace the existing state apparatus, a programme which was dominant in the United Left current.

While the Stalinists, the social democrats, the centrists and the emerging mass leaders wavered, unsure of their next steps, the decisive elements in the imperialist camp were quicker to act. Recognising what was at stake, Kohl proposed his ten point programme for German unity which variously outraged and dismayed his domestic and foreign allies but established the destruction of the GDR as the German bourgeoisie's maximum programme. From then on opponents of the Krenz government were going to be measured against this yardstick.

Throughout November the mass movement spread. Instead of the generally reformist orientation of New Forum in September and early October, the mass movement was now more overtly opposed to the whole system. It was an anti-Stalinist, pro-democratic movement, spontaneously seeking revolutionary methods of achieving its goals. Organisations such as Democratic Awakening and Democracy Now were established in this period on relatively clear rightist platforms that called for the dismantling of the Stalinist regime, the opening of the border, political pluralism and new, free elections. However, it was the citizens' committees, especially in the south, which were the immediate organisers and leaders of the mass movement.

The demands of the movement as a whole also became sharper and more fundamental at this time. Chief among them were the surrender of the leading role of the party, free elections and the dissolution of the Stasi (secret police) and the bureaucratic apparatus. The movement gained added momentum from the revelations of the degenerate and parasitic lifestyle of the former leadership of state and party. The publicity given to these was an expression of the divisions that existed within the SED, as the reform faction around Modrow tried to distance itself from those who had been the lieutenants of the old leadership. Its effect was to shatter the organisational coherence of the two million strong party. In a matter of weeks some two-thirds of the party had resigned, adding their often prestigious voices to the demands for a total transformation and purging of the whole political system. However, quite a lot of careerists also used the opportunity as a pretext for leaving the party which had now become an obstacle to their aspirations. It was this new wave of mobilisation, against the background of a mass emigration to the west that showed no sign of halting, that led to resignation of the SED politburo and of Krenz as the Chairman of the party on 3 December, and to his resignation as President of the State Council on 8 December.

Modrow and the Round Table

The Modrow administration which succeeded Krenz was essentially a caretaker government created to provide a framework for the 'orderly' resolution of the 'dual powerlessness'. Restoration of order, it was hoped, would allow the SED to re-consolidate itself around a new programme. Modrow's strategy was to seek economic support from the FRG for a programme of controlled 'marketisation' similar to that adopted, for example, in Hungary. The main tactic was the convening of the 'Round Table' (from 7 December) as a forum for consultation between the government and the leaders of the newly-born opposition groupings. Participation in the Round Table implied acceptance of the need to demobilise the movement on the streets and to formulate the rules by which bourgeois parliamentary elections (scheduled initially for 6 May) could be held to establish a legitimate government. It was, therefore, a counter-revolutionary device which should have been denounced as such by revolutionaries.

Whilst counterposing to the Round Table the creation of workers' councils and a national congress of such

councils, revolutionaries could legitimately have related to illusions in the Round Table by demanding election of representatives to it by workers? assemblies and organisations on the basis of direct accountability and recallability. This could have acted as a means of exposing the Round Table?s true political character.

Both the Stalinists and the imperialists decided to try to regain the initiative in mid December. The Stalinists convened an extraordinary congress of the SED which decided to rename the party (now SED-PDS) and adopt an overtly restorationist programme around which to try to consolidate the remaining 35% of its membership.

At the same time, calls for a national referendum on ?reunification? raised by New Forum groups in the south, were decisively rejected by the New Forum leadership in Berlin, despite strikes to support the demand. This marked the beginning of the end for New Forum?s leadership of the mass movement in the south and the steady transfer of support to the right, first to the SPD but eventually to the CDU and DSU.

Following his class instincts Kohl headed for Dresden to endorse the ever more frequently raised slogan of ?Germany, the one Fatherland!? At the same time the citizens? committees in both Dresden and Leipzig decided to make support for reunification a condition of membership. Rapidly growing support, especially in the south, for overtly nationalist slogans, gave a great boost to the morale of the extreme right and the fascists of the FRG. Their forces had been strengthened in recent years by standing in elections which created a veneer of ?respectability? and promoted organisations in which fascist cadre could collaborate with and recruit from both the ?traditional? right wing and the lumpenised youth.

Treptow

The intervention of, in particular, the far right Republikaner group into the events in the GDR provided Modrow with a focus around which to try to consolidate not only the remains of the SED-PDS but broader layers of the left. Whether or not the state used agents provocateurs to exaggerate the impact of the Republikaner in the GDR, the SED-PDS were able to mobilise a demonstration of some 200,000 in response to the desecration of Soviet war memorials. This 3 January demonstration at Treptow was a considerable political success in the campaign to consolidate support for the government.

It also tended to confirm the left in their view that support for national unification was tantamount to support for Nazism, a Fourth Reich. This sectarian attitude served to deepen the gulf already existing between the mass movement and the left. Revolutionaries had to support the Treptow demonstration but, simultaneously, warn of the intention of the SED-PDS to strengthen the Stalinist state apparatus. It was essential for revolutionaries to call for independent working class mobilisations against both the fascists and the state.

Hoping to build on this success, Modrow proposed a ?new? security service to guard against the fascist threat and the possible instability caused by developing economic crisis in the wake of continued mass emigration. This announcement was a decisive turning point in the political revolutionary crisis. The prospect of a return of the Stasi led to an almost immediate spontaneous mass mobilisation. The storming of the Stasi HQ in Berlin and their offices across the country on 15 January was the most celebrated of these.

This re-assertion of mass hostility to the whole governmental system immediately clarified the whole political situation. The period of revolutionary crisis had not been ended by Modrow?s machinations. The power of the masses was still not constituted into permanent organisations, but it remained strong enough to thwart this brazen attempt to re-establish the status quo ante. The mobilisations also threw a vivid light

upon the pattern of political allegiance. The leaders of the 'left' in the Round Table talks called for the restoration of order; that is, they opposed the masses and defended the state. The various right wing groups announced their support for an electoral alliance based on commitment to speedy re-unification. Chancellor Kohl insisted that there would be no economic assistance until after elections had produced a legitimate government.

Resolution of the revolutionary crisis

Thrown onto the defensive by the mass movement and politically crippled by the scale of mass emigration (3,000 per day), Modrow began to attend the Round Table discussions. Following this, at the end of January he invited representatives of both left and right from the Round Table to enter the Government of National Responsibility itself, which met on 5 February. Modrow then brought forward the elections to 18 March in a desperate attempt to take advantage of the continued existence of the party and state machine and before his opponents were able to organise themselves.

All that he achieved was the domination of the electoral campaign by the established parties of the FRG. Kohl, having gained Gorbachev's agreement in Moscow on 10 February, announced the abandonment of his Ten Point Programme in favour of proposed immediate economic and monetary union in consultation with the government when it was elected. On this basis he obliged the still disunited right wing parties to form the Alliance for Germany and himself took the lead in electoral campaigning on its behalf.

The SPD, too, were quick to take over responsibility for their sister party's campaign. Expecting to capitalise on the tradition of support for social democracy and on fears of the effect that rapid unification would have on jobs and living standards, the SPD campaigned for a more cautious process in which the new government of the GDR would negotiate, over time and as an equal partner, a new constitution for a united Germany.

It was the bringing forward of the elections which demobilised the mass movement and signalled the end of the revolutionary crisis. With the electoral campaign the masses were satisfied that they had achieved their aim. Whatever the result, the old regime was now finished, its illegitimacy had been publicly acknowledged and a new government, 'properly' elected, would take its place. Although dominated by the western parties, the election campaign underlined the overwhelming support of the people of the GDR for a parliamentary-style solution.

This implied from the beginning that the resulting government would have a 'democratic mandate' to carry out its programme. It also meant that there were no grounds upon which revolutionaries could have called for a boycott of the election. However, none of the mass-based parties, including the PDS, stood for defence of the post-capitalist property relations, or even unequivocally for the continued sovereignty of the state.

Equally, none of the smaller parties and groups had an adequate programme for the political revolution as the means of defending post-capitalist property. Consequently, revolutionaries had to call on the working class to abstain from supporting any party in the elections and to spoil their ballot paper as a mark of opposition to all counter-revolutionary programmes.

In the week before the election, Kohl promised that the savings of GDR citizens would be exchanged 1 : 1 for Deutschmarks as soon as monetary and economic union could be agreed. He suggested that this could be done within three months. This apparent concretisation of the CDU programme of unification was enough to win them the election. However, their majority was not large enough to do without opposition support for the key constitutional measures necessary for the fulfilment of the CDU programme. After slight

hesitation the SPD agreed to take part in a coalition which would ensure this.

Resolution of the dual power

The result of the election, therefore, was a popular front government, that is, a bourgeois government whose aim was to end the period of mass mobilisations and which was committed to the restoration of capitalism. In this popular front government the SPD represented the working class.

However, insofar as the SPD had only embryonic links with the GDR working class, this government was only a coalition with the 'shadow of the working class'. The task of this government was the re-establishment of the hegemony of the market economy and its law of value via unification with the FRG. That this bourgeois government came to office in a still existing, but much weakened, degenerate workers' state, is certainly a contradiction, but a real one born of living forces, and accurately captured by Marxist terminology.

The election finally brought to an end the fracturing of state power and the resulting 'dual power' that had begun with the fall of Honecker. It provided a solution which was both practicable and acceptable to all the major forces which had undermined the old regime.

The most important of these was the working class of the GDR, which had been violently and bureaucratically stripped of its own political organisations at the end of the war and excluded from any independent role in the overthrow of capitalism between 1949 and 1951. Militarily suppressed when it rose in revolt in 1953 and imprisoned behind The Wall when it tried to escape, this working class finally concluded that the post-capitalist property relations were not worth defending.

The Stalinist bureaucracy had been the only section of society which had consistently benefited from the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism. With that bureaucracy now demoralised by the withdrawal of support from the Soviet forces present in the country, and paralysed with a sense of its own bankruptcy, no serious obstacle remained to prevent the government ceding power to the institutions of the imperialist FRG.

Capitalist restoration

The sole raison d'être of the post-18 March government of the GDR was to oversee the dismantling of the GDR and its absorption into the FRG. Although most emphasis has been placed on the constitutional procedure by which this would take place, the first priority of the FRG was to replace the post-capitalist property forms of the GDR by those of capitalism.

For Marxists the class character of a state is defined by the property relations it defends. The class character of the GDR was determined neither by its constitutional claims nor by its territorial sovereignty. Rather it was the state's guardianship of an economy regulated by planning, albeit bureaucratic and inadequate, that had marked out the GDR as a degenerate workers' state.

On 18 May, the GDR and FRG signed a State Treaty which formally abolished, as of 2 July 1990, every aspect of planned regulation of the economy of the GDR. It repealed all GDR statutes which contradicted the laws concerning the operation of capital and labour in the FRG. Specifically, the Treaty removed all controls on capital movement and trade and introduced the Deutschmark as the sole currency under the control of the Bundesbank. GDR labour laws were replaced by those of the FRG and gave control over public spending and credits to the Finance Minister of the FRG.

Therefore, from 2 July the GDR economy, even where it remained nationalised, was not regulated by the plan but by the law of value as determined by the imperialist institutions of the FRG. The GDR ceased to

be even a degenerate form of the workers' state after that date.

The State Treaty, however, has not resolved all the issues raised by the collapse of Stalinist rule. In the economy attempts to restructure industry to achieve profitability and measures to integrate this industry into the economy of the FRG will bring with them instability and conflict. Politically, the dismantling of the GDR as a separate national state and the development of a reliable Federal Republic administration will generate conflicts that will find expression in the political parties. Above all, the aspirations of the masses towards higher living standards and democratic rights will come into conflict with the harsh realities of 'really existing capitalism'.

Capitalism: the new danger for GDR workers

Adopted by the International Secretariat, 5 August 1990

Between March and July 1990 the East German working class suffered a historic defeat. Even though Stalinist bureaucratic dictatorship smashed, the proletarian property forms, monopoly of foreign trade and planning have been dismantled. In short, the degenerate workers' state has been overthrown.

Parties loyal to the West German bourgeoisie took office and in July surrendered control of the economy to the financial institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Their next step is to rush the country into an undemocratic unification which will increase the soaring unemployment, the wave of privatisations and the attacks on social rights and conditions of workers, women and immigrants.

This defeat was not recognised by the working class, nor was its movement smashed because it surrendered the nationalised planned economy into the hands of the exploiters without a fight. The reason for this lay in the crisis of leadership caused by forty years of Stalinist oppression. Millions of East German workers voted for unification under the illusion that they would thereby achieve economic prosperity, democracy and national unity. Now, however, it is becoming clear to section after section of workers that this unification means mass unemployment and the loss of legal protection and social gains.

A short lived opportunity exists to counter-attack before the united German imperialism is consolidated. The waves of struggles against unemployment and the attacks on social welfare must be generalised into a conscious class wide defence of workers' gains, and pass over into an offensive to stop the undemocratic capitalist unification and establish a workers' and farmers' government, acting as a spark for an all-German workers' fightback.

The task of our action programme is to develop this potential, to unleash social revolution before the rule of capital has been consolidated. For this it is necessary to mobilise workers around immediate and transitional, economic and political demands which relate to and, if fought for, can explode the widespread illusions in capitalism and bourgeois democracy.

The working class must not pay for the western bosses' Anschluss!

No to unemployment! For the right to work!

? No factory closures; spread available work amongst those presently employed at no loss of pay

? Average pay for those out of work

? For full wage parity with western workers and a sliding scale of wages against inflation

? Occupy all factories and firms announcing closure or redundancies

Defend nationalised property, social ownership and state provision of education, health and housing!

? Halt privatisation. All firms in the hands of the Treuhand to be put under workers? control.

? For a programme of public work, under workers? control, to put the unemployed back to work and to repair the years of neglect of the German Democratic Republic?s (GDR) infrastructure and to meet the needs of the consumers and workers

? For workers? control of all enterprises

? For workers? inspection of all dangerous processes and enterprises

? Open the books to workers? inspection; against business secrecy, reveal all the deals done between the government and FRG multinationals behind the backs of the workers

? Demand that the GDR government reject all FRG claims for re-instatement or compensation for nationalised property

Defend the small farmers from the economic Anschluss!

? No to the break up of the co-operative farm

? No to the de-nationalisation of the land

? For the right of the co-operatives to trade their produce directly; for joint commissions of workers and farmers to ensure production and distribution of food

? For the expansion of state credits to the collective farmers

Defend and extend the social provisions of the DDR!

? No to the closure of the nurseries and kindergartens

? Defend the abortion laws, no Section 218 in the GDR; for free abortion and contraception on demand

? Defend equal pay and the equal right to work for women

? Down with privileged access to education, down with the reactionary FRG education laws

Organise the working class to fight!

? For sovereign mass meetings in all plants and enterprises

? For workers? defence units to protect the plants and the workers? organisations and districts

? Elect factory councils of recallable and accountable delegates to lead the fight on every front

? Build workers? defence squads to defend the factories. Agitate among the police and army to join with the workers? in the defence of their livelihoods and to refuse to obey the orders of the bourgeois government

? Build direct links with the rank and file of the FRG working class.

? Keep out the bureaucrats of east and west. For democratically controlled, all-German industrial unions

Defend the oppressed communities!

? For workers? and immigrant self-defence against the racist and anti-Semitic attacks

No platform for fascists; for a workers? united front to prevent the growth of fascist organisation and influence

? Defend lesbians and gay men from assault

Down with the imperialist Anschluss!

? No to the undemocratic imposition of unification

? No to the forced acceptance of the FRG?s undemocratic constitution

? For the removal of the troops of the Warsaw Pact and NATO from Germany

? For a general strike to stop the capitalist offensive. Smash the July State Treaty.

? Down with the bourgeois government of Maiziere

? PDS and SPD: break with the government of unification

? For a workers? and farmers? government based on the fighting organisations of the proletariat

? For free elections, without restrictions, to an all-German constituent assembly

? For a United Socialist Germany as a step to the Socialist United States of Europe

The crisis of leadership of the working class can only be overcome in the struggle against Stalinist betrayal and capitalist offensive. To the extent that the workers fight for their own class interests they will generate their own new leadership. But for this leadership to be won to the programme of social revolution requires the intervention of revolutionary Trotskyists and the forging of a Trotskyist party in Germany as a section of a new revolutionary International.

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