

Peace, Stability, Strength, and Tradition: The Façade Of Nazi Identity At The 1937 Paris Exposition

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In 1937, Paris was host to the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*, one of a continuing line of grand world expositions held in Europe at the beginning of the 20th Century. Opened with the “spirit of international cooperation” and “necessity of ever-increasing freedom in the exchange of products and ideas” as its goals, the exposition was meant to show the strength of the new French government post World War I.¹ Unfortunately at its inauguration, almost the entire exposition was still under construction except for four pavilions, including that of Nazi Germany.² With the start of World War II only two years away and the Germans already in the process of remilitarization, the German pavilion at the exposition was one of many attempts by the Nazis to present to the world a very different story. Through the art, architecture, and design of the pavilion, the Germans hoped to portray a Germany deeply rooted in its folk past and united under one strong leader that was economically stable and working towards international peace. While initial reports of the pavilion and the exposition in French and American news identified these goals and accepted them, the minor success of the pavilion’s projected image was not able to fully screen the Nazi government’s actions deemed more

¹ P.J. Phillip, “Paris Exposition Is Inaugurated; Most Of Buildings Uncompleted,” *New York Times*, May 25th, 1937.

² Ibid.

negative by the international community. With the inadequacy of the exposition as a whole noted by upper level Nazi officials, the international community continued to look past the peaceful and prosperous front put up by the German Pavilion, and instead recognized the racism and totalitarianism becoming increasingly present in Hitler's regime.

By 1937, most nations around the world recognized the dangers of the Nazi party and began attempts to suppress National Socialist parties in their own countries. This largely stemmed from the fear of the Nazi doctrine of the "Germanization" of alien lands, as well as other imperialistic themes in *Mein Kampf*.³ In an attempt to counter this and show the world that National Socialism was not imperialistic, multiple expatriate organizations were created by the Nazi government to support Germans representing a positive and peaceful image abroad.⁴ Additionally, extensive treaties promoting peace and trade were made with organizations and governments elsewhere in Europe. An example of this is the Rotary International agreement between France and Germany giving over 2,000 children of industrial workers and Rotary members from each country an exchange vacation, intended to increase "cultural, artistic, and commercial exchanges" between the two countries.⁵ One of the most high profile efforts by the German government to put forth a strong, stable, and peaceful vision of the Nazi party, though, was their pavilion and other contributions to the Paris Exposition. With the help of the French government suppressing any anti-Nazi activities during the fair, the Germans were able to construct one of the largest and most impactful pavilions seen at the Exposition of 1937.⁶

The fact that this pavilion was one of the biggest attempts by the Nazi government to present a positive image to the world is why scholarship on this topic is important. While the art historical and design aspects of the pavilion have been studied by historians such as Karen A. Fiss, and a good deal of focus has been placed on the Nazi party itself (especially in the years leading up to World War II), what has been lacking from the scholarly conversation is a combination of these two. A key part of Nazi public image can be understood through the art, sculpture, and design of their various buildings. Therefore, art must be included in any discussion of the international response to Nazi identity. As one of the largest representations of Nazi identity, and among the last of such efforts before the outbreak of war, the Pavilion at the Paris

³ "Hitler Enlists The Germans Everywhere," *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 1937.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "France And Reich To 'Trade' Children," *New York Times*, June 9, 1937.

⁶ Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 52.

Exposition is the perfect way to understand the Nazi image through art, as well as its international reception.

The Paris Exposition officially opened on May 25th, 1937, with only the German, Russian, Belgian, and Italian pavilions complete. Not even the front gates were finished let alone the other national pavilions, most of which weren't expected to be completed for another two months.⁷ The construction had been greatly slowed by workers waiting for assurance from the French government that they would be hired after the fair was closed. The only reason the four previously mentioned pavilions were completed was the fact that they were built largely by workers from their own countries.⁸ The German pavilion was designed by Albert Speer, one of the top architects in Nazi Germany, and was one of the largest structures at the Exposition. The pavilion was located, symbolically, on the "Avenue of Peace," the primary axis of the exposition, and was directly across from the Soviet Russian pavilion.⁹ The structure was designed "to appear stoic, stable, and immutable," and rose much higher than the striding male and female workers atop the Russian multiplanar structure, instantly placing Nazi Germany in the position of a wall defending against Communism.¹⁰ The pavilion was meant to be "a monument, another symbol of German pride and achievement. It was to broadcast to the international world that a new powerful Germany and its technical achievements were the result of a mass will and restored national pride."¹¹ It consisted of a tall frontal tower with a windowless exhibition space extending behind it, all constructed of imported German limestone and marble. The pavilion was designed to allude to ancient Roman or Greek architecture, praised by Hitler as a "peerless aesthetic ideal."¹² The exterior also recalled elements of Romanesque and Germanic cathedral architecture such as attached bell towers and symmetrical portals, reflecting a German heritage.¹³

This sense of traditional design was also present in the interior of the pavilion, where the Nazis continued to employ a cathedral-inspired

⁷ Phillip, "Paris Exposition Is Inaugurated."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Karen A. Fiss, "In Hitler's Salon, The German Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale," in *Art, Culture, and Media Under the Third Reich*, ed. by Richard A. Etlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 318.

¹⁰ Ibid., 321.

¹¹ Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1992), 244.

¹² Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2002), 20.

¹³ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 62, 67.

aesthetic by creating a long hall with a raised altar at the end, which displayed examples of German architecture under a stained glass window.¹⁴ The exhibit hall itself evoked the feel of nineteenth-century museums or Victorian parlors by avoiding all representations of the modern.¹⁵ The walls were covered with wallpaper densely covered in a pattern of almost unrecognizable swastikas, a motif continued in the cloth lining the heavy wooden and glass vitrines which displayed the latest in German production, with larger items sitting on the floor under chandeliers resembling sculptures.¹⁶ The art of the pavilion continued the glorification of the ancient arts with bronze nudes, tapestries, large mosaics, and stained glass windows. As described by the tour booklet specifically created in regards to the latter two art forms,

Exactly as the mosaics in the churches of Rome, Venice, and Ravenna bear witness to the high artistic culture of the early Christian centuries, the glass paintings of the great Catholic cathedrals proclaim the magnificence and mental greatness of the Middle Ages. It is perfectly comprehensible therefore that the new Germany on the occasion of its appearance at the first big World's Fair after the war should avail itself of these twin arts as a medium to express its aims.¹⁷

This statement falls perfectly in line with Hitler's praise of the manual arts, glorification of the German past and folk culture, and statements such as, "The Third Reich will be a peasant Reich, or it will not be at all."¹⁸

In addition to these traditional manual arts displayed in the pavilion, the walls were lined with oil paintings focusing on aspects of German construction, industrialization, and modern transportation.¹⁹ This kept with the Nazi practice of depicting scenes of production devoid of humans, continuing to put the economic and industrial focus not on the individual, but on the abstract nation. The exhibit continued to extol the Nazi ideal of timelessness through traditional and handcrafted forms of art, making the pavilion extremely unique when

¹⁴ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁸ Christa Kamenetsky, "Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany," *Journal of American Folklore* 85, no. 337 (1972): 228, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/539497>.

¹⁹ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 80, 84.

compared to the other pavilions at the Exposition.²⁰ As opposed to the other nations, who constructed their pavilions using the most modern techniques of open glass interiors full of photographs, murals, and quotes extolling the greatness of the country represented, the German pavilion was almost archaic in its traditional forms of art and design. Though this could be considered an old fashioned approach on the part of the Nazis, their pavilion demonstrated the exact identity they intended to project to the world.

Regarding identity, the Germans had two hopes for their pavilion at the Exhibition. First, they wanted it to “be an ambassador of its country, bearing witness of its artistic endeavors and reflecting the strength and personality of the entire nation.”²¹ Additionally, the Nazis hoped the pavilion would work “to encourage other countries to recommence or augment trade relations with Germany” by presenting the country as a prosperous and peaceful nation.²² To achieve this, the Nazis employed a variety speeches and literature presented at the pavilion, as well as the previously described designs, aesthetics, and works of art present in the structure. At the opening of the pavilion, a shared desire for peace seemed evident between both French and German officials, with the French Commissaire general Labbé expressing his desire for the Exposition to “forge a ‘solid bridge of peace’ between the two countries” and the German Economic Minister Hjalmar Schacht asserting “that the grandeur of his country’s exhibit was a testimony to its commitment to international peace.”²³ Within the pavilion, an attempt was made to show a love of work and the importance of the noble worker, but in abstract fashion so as to create a positive image of Germany.²⁴ This could be seen in the two massive wall mosaics, *Work* and *Strength Through Joy*. *Work* depicted four shirtless men on pedestals in front of a miniature generic industrial landscape. Each man held a tool alluding to manual labor, described by the pavilion guidebook to represent the “ideal of powerful, healthy beauty of man and work.”²⁵ *Strength Through Joy* conversely depicted four women, two in folk outfits and two in Nazi uniform, participating in outdoor leisure activities such

²⁰ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 78

²¹ *Ibid*, 70.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Fiss, “In Hitler’s Salon, The German Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale,” 316.

²⁴ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 84.

²⁵ Fiss, “In Hitler’s Salon, The German Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale,” 330-31.

as sport, hiking, and music. This mosaic not only emphasized the purity of the depicted “Aryan females,” but also Germany’s ability to successfully converge its pastoral tradition, racial integrity, and timelessness, while continuing to advance industrially, as symbolized by the new highway snaking through the traditional villages behind them.²⁶ Together, these two mosaics, as well as other figural depictions and landscapes in the pavilion, worked to show not only the renewed economic might of Germany through abstract depictions of work, progress, and the work place, but also the unity of the nation through connection to the land and folk culture. The German pavilion was able to complete this vision of an economically stable, united, and peace-seeking nation by playing down those symbols directly associated with the Nazi party, by this time already gaining a bad reputation for its basic ideologies. While eagles were present in some works of art as well as on top of the pavilion’s tower, symbols such as the swastika were subtly worked into the wall paper, fabrics, and railings, more or less camouflaging them in a seemingly Greek inspired motif which only subliminally hinted at a Nazi identity.²⁷ Additionally, and to the surprise of many visitors, Hitler never visited the pavilion, and no images of him were found inside, preventing a direct association between the pavilion and the political opinions of the German leader.²⁸

Despite the amount of effort put into creating a united and peaceful image at the pavilion and its high profile in the world’s eye, German government officials seemingly saw very little value in the Exposition in terms of political gain. This is especially evident in the diaries of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Propaganda Minister. While Goebbels did recognize the admiration directed at the German pavilion and praised it as Speer’s architectural masterpiece, his comments on the rest of the Exposition were not so kind.²⁹ Though the writings in his diaries are brief, Goebbels highlights the fact that the Exposition was incomplete at its opening, calling it “an international embarrassment.”³⁰ He then goes on to refer to it on many occasions as a farce. While this betrays a sense of German superiority, it also implies that Goebbels felt this endeavor was not important to the construction of a Nazi identity,

²⁶ Fiss, “In Hitler’s Salon, The German Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale,” 331-333.

²⁷ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁹ Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher Von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente*, Herausgegeben von Elke Fröhlich in auftrag des instituts für zeitgeschichte und in verbindung mit dem bundesarchiv, Teil 1, *Aufzeichnung 1924-1941 Band 3 1/1/1937-31/12/1939* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 1987), May 28, 1937.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, May 25, 1937.

and possibly not the right stage to seriously attempt the creation of a peaceful German image. Generally, it can be seen that Nazi officials were more worried about the negative effects of the fair on their image than the positive image they were attempting to create. Goebbels expressed in his diaries worries about the foreign press, saying that they are “there but only as agitators.”³¹ This was picked up on by Schacht at the opened the pavilion, who was reported in the *New York Times* as chiding reporters in Paris for stirring up rumors that his real reason for visiting was politics or in desperation for a loan, as opposed to the pavilion itself and the peace it represented.³² The thoughts of both Goebbels and Schacht betray the worry of Nazi officials that this exposure to the international community and press would do more to harm the Nazi image than the pavilion would do to help it, possibly another reason for Goebbels’ disdain for the Exposition. In an attempt to counteract their fears, the Nazi government worked hard to ensure that only the Germans they wished to visit the fair were allowed to. Goebbels specifically mentions that no Jews were to be allowed to visit, but additionally, no working class Germans were allowed, which seems odd for a pavilion attempting to glorify the economic progress of the country.³³ Additionally, the *New York Times* ran an article explaining that only loyal Nazis would be allowed to visit the fair to prevent German exiles in Paris from contacting those whose “political trustworthiness” was doubtful. This betrays the government’s worry that the wrong people would visit the fair, disturbing the peaceful image created by the pavilion, despite their assurances to the French that they were not attempting to limit attendance.³⁴ More importantly, though, this reveals the government’s worry about the strength of the pavilion’s created image to begin with.

Despite the Nazi Party’s disregard for the Paris Exhibition and simultaneous concern regarding the stability of their created identity, the general response to the pavilion itself among French and American sources was positive. The strongest praise came from the French, stemming from their own “sense of insecurity and political volatility” and “a growing French defeatism [which] seemed to predispose the public to tacitly accept Nazi assertions of national unity.”³⁵ French journalists praised the seriousness of the stone pavilion as opposed to the modern all-glass pavilions of other nations, and commended the perceived lack of

³¹ Goebbels, May 27, 1937.

³² “Dr. Schacht In Paris Takes Press To Task,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1937.

³³ Goebbels, May 27, 1937.

³⁴ “Reich Curbs Visits To The Paris Fair,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1937.

³⁵ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 99, 104.

propaganda, or at least reduction thereof. In contrast to the blatant propaganda filling other national pavilions, such as the “portraits of leaders, oversized slogans, and didactic wall texts” of the Soviet and Italian pavilions, French writers appreciated the subtle approach taken by the Nazis in their pavilion’s aesthetics. Specifically, French sources noted the efforts to camouflage the swastika and the separation of Hitler from the event, which to them made the pavilion more impressive and cultural, leading to descriptions of the pavilion as “politically discreet and aesthetically harmonious,” and even refined and culturally superior.³⁶ These French writers seemingly bought into the Nazi image created by the pavilion, with a writer for the travel magazine *Mond et Voyages* saying “one finds in [the pavilion] only a certain love for completed work, solid, abundant, a love of national pride in the mechanical perfection of the most trivial object,” and a writer for the radical socialist paper *L'Oeuvre* saying that Germany had “cast off its warrior gear and was talking to the world through the voice of its intellectuals, engineers, and artists.”³⁷ Other sources though, especially those coming from outside of France, had a slightly different view. For example, the French painter Amédée Ozenfant, visiting from his job in London and writing for the magazine *Cahiers d'Art* recognized the strength and beauty of the pavilion, calling it admirable. However, Ozenfant also recounted his dismay at overhearing French youth praising both the pavilion and Hitler, saying that the monstrous size of the German pavilion and its on-time completion showed that Germany truly had a leader.³⁸ Here one can see that Ozenfant, as a French expatriate in England, recognized the power and beauty of the pavilion, but retained his disdain for the Nazis in his response to the French opinions around him. This division can be seen even more clearly from the American point of view, as written in the *New York Times*. Initial articles regarding the opening of the fair recognized the immensity of the German pavilion, as well as the efficiency and economic capability of Germany, especially since the American pavilion was not completed until mid-July. The same articles, though, commented on the fact that the view from the new Trocadero was spoiled by the size of the German pavilion, as well as the Soviet pavilion across from it.³⁹ The American press may have bought into

³⁶ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 105-106

³⁷ Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural seduction of France*, 106.

³⁸ Amédée Ozenfant, “Notes of a Tourist at the Exhibition, 1937,” in *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-45* compiled by John Willett (London: Oktagon in association with Hayward Gallery, 1995), 116.

³⁹ Phillip, “Paris Exposition Is Inaugurated; Most Of Buildings Uncompleted.”

some of the German attempts to create a peaceful identity, as seen in an odd article describing without satire or sarcasm a conversation between the president-elect of the International Chamber of Commerce and Hitler in which Hitler states, “there will be no war. No country wants war, no country can afford it. Certainly that is true of Germany.”⁴⁰ Generally though, the *New York Times* seemed disinterested in the fair as a whole, and specifically the German pavilion, completely excluding any reports on a German cultural week at the fair in September. Instead, very different articles were printed revealing the negative opinion of Nazi politics.

With the absence of reports on the Paris Exposition, the pages of the *New York Times* were filled with articles detailing some of the less savory activities of the Nazi party which went completely against the image put forth by the fair. For instance, in June of 1937, Hitler, described in the article as being “in an aggressive mood,” assured a large meeting of Nazis that “Germany had no intention of relinquishing her armed security,” and went on to say “if anyone thinks, because the German people is peace-loving, that bombs can be thrown on German ships... then we will show him we know how to defend ourselves.”⁴¹ This statement of military aggression is directly in contrast to the pavilion’s message of peace and its focus on unity and economic prosperity. Additionally, the *New York Times* ran multiple articles over the course of the exposition regarding the Nazi’s war on Christianity and negative dealings with the Pope. One such article, published on June 1st, 1937, explained the removal of Christian based schools, and the reformation of the Protestant church in Germany as Catholicism was eliminated out of fears of Papal influence and criticism of Nazi morals. This resulted in the anonymous disappearance of a large number of clergymen in Germany, as well as members of religious institutions and governing boards.⁴² Most prevalent, though, were articles regarding the Nazi’s ever increasing racism. Though these articles did demonstrate German cultural unity, it was against the Jews in a way not promoted by the pavilion itself. While many examples and issues are reported, one specific article on November 5th, 1937 described the anti-Semitic postcards issued in Germany in connection with an anti-Semitic exposition opening titled “The Eternal Jew,” which was devoted to demonstrating “that the Jew has been a source of evil through all

⁴⁰ “No War,’ Says Hitler To American Caller,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1937.

⁴¹ “Arms Help Peace, Hitler Tells Nazis,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1937.

⁴² “Nazis War On Catholic Church To Make Dictatorship Complete,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1937.

history.”⁴³ A similar exposition, which opened two days earlier, sought to prove that Eastern European culture is a direct result of German cultural influence, showing that “wherever the German has appeared in Eastern Europe he has brought with him the principle of order.”⁴⁴ The chief of the Bureau for the Support of German Literature stated at the opening of this exposition that this connection gave the Germans a justification “in having a word in the settlement of Eastern European questions,” possibly hinting at the future invasion of Eastern Europe by the Nazis during World War II.⁴⁵ An article about a speech given by Dr. Hans Frank, the Reich Commissioner for Justice and Minister without Portfolio, included a telling Nazi justification for this racism, which read,

We created the Nuremberg laws for the protection of our race, not because we hate the Jews but because we love the German people... The world criticizes our attitude toward the Jews and declares it too harsh. But the world has never worried about how many honest Germans have been chased from home and hearth by the Jews in the past.⁴⁶

While this statement does again fall in line with the pavilion's image of a united German people worried about the preservation of their folk culture, it also reveals the international concern regarding the treatment of Jews in Germany, a feeling picked up on in articles in the *New York Times*.

American protests of Nazi ideology reported in *The New York Times* ranged from small events, such as the tearing down of the Nazi flag at the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, to larger protests more expected by the modern reader with a knowledge of events to come.⁴⁷ Protests by Jewish societies were reported across America, such as a meeting of the American Jewish Congress calling on the international community to intervene in anti-Semitic actions in Europe, stating that the rise of totalitarian governments was a threat not only to Jews but also Democracy.⁴⁸ Additionally, the American Jewish Congress held an Anti-Nazi week beginning November 21st, 1937, calling on the

⁴³ “Plan Anti-Semitic Stamp,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1937.

⁴⁴ “Nazis Open Exhibits On Eastern Europe,” *New York Times*, November 3, 1937.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Denies Nazis Curb Jews From Hatred,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1937.

⁴⁷ “Nazi Flag Is Torn Down In San Francisco Protest,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1937.

⁴⁸ “Asks World Front To Protect Jews,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1937.

Jewish youth of America to help in the boycotting of Nazi Germany.⁴⁹ Jewish lawyer Samuel Untermyer additionally called on Catholics and Protestants in America to join this boycott following the increased persecution of these groups under the Nazis.⁵⁰ The oddest representation of this anti-Nazi attitude in America, though, was an article detailing a series of short plays presented by 8-12 year old children at Madison House in New York. These plays dealt with various forms of oppression, with one scene depicting a boy in Nazi uniform separating “Aryan” and Jewish children who had until then been playing together onstage.⁵¹

These New York Times articles reveal a strong anti-Nazi movement already present in America at the time of the Paris Exposition. Though each article is written in a neutral voice, the fact that almost no discussion of the exposition appeared during the months it was open while multiple articles were written regarding racism and persecution in Germany shows what was important to American readers of *The New York Times*. This points towards the ultimate failures of the German Pavilion at the Paris Exposition. The pavilion as an individual entity can be called a success. Writings specifically about the opening of the fair and the pavilion itself, specifically those of French visitors, recognized all the values infused into the pavilion by the Germans, specifically those of a culturally unified and economically sound nation focused on peace. With the lack of interest and belief in the fair by the Nazi government in favor of concern for bad press, though, the identity created by the government was easily forgotten when the pavilion was not the center of attention. One of the most telling articles in *The New York Times* was one explaining the cause of the upset in phone service at the German pavilion. The article reports that one of the switchboard girls, who was of pure Aryan decent, fell in love with a non-Aryan Swiss visitor resulting in her dismissal from work. Though she was given a ticket to return to her home in Berlin, she would likely not use it since her marriage to the Swiss man put her in violation of the new racial laws which were punishable by imprisonment.⁵² This is a perfect example of the conflict found at the German Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition. In spite of Nazi Germany's attempts to create a pavilion that highlighted Germany's industry, unity, and peaceful nature, the international media, and specifically that of America, continued to look past this created identity

⁴⁹ “Youth Asked To Aid In Anti-Nazi Week,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1937.

⁵⁰ “Untermyer Urges Wide Nazi Boycott,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1937.

⁵¹ “Children Portray Fascist Oppression,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1937.

⁵² “Phone Service Upset At German Pavilion,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1937.

to the true and negatively viewed actions of the Nazi government taking place in within The Third Reich.

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