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In the Tyrants' Court: The Political Action of Alexandre Kojève

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Research Article

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Abstract

This essay reconstructs Alexandre Kojève's political engagement in a crucial period, the early 1940s, removing it both from the received vulgate and from reductively moralistic readings. Following a chronological path through a number of key texts – the appendices to *The Notion of Authority* (1942); the propaganda pamphlet drafted for the Resistance (October 1944); the *Esquisse d'une doctrine de la politique française*, i.e. the «Latin Empire» project (August 1945); the unpublished manuscript rediscovered in the Moysset archive (*Notice sur les néo-formations politiques au XXe siècle*, 1942-43); with the Russian-language text *Sophia* always present in the background – the article shows how Kojève placed his philosophy at the service of power. Any power whatsoever: Vichy, the Resistance, the postwar French administration. For Kojève, to philosophize means to participate in History, accepting the risk of compromise with ideologically controversial forces: his notion of authority, the confrontation with Leo Strauss on tyranny, the polemic with Bataille over "négativité sans emploi", and his affinity – closer than has hitherto been acknowledged – with Carl Schmitt are read as elements of a single project: thinking empire as a post-national political form capable of overcoming both liberalism and internationalism. Drawing on first-hand archival sources, the essay restores the image of a philosopher-counsellor to the prince, never a disengaged spectator but always a strategist of his own thought.

Introduction

After decades of grappling with the "myth," it is finally possible to confront the philosopher himself. Thanks to the work of discovery and publication of his works, manuscripts, and correspondence, Alexandre Kojève is no longer an unknown classic. This is not to say, however, that matters have become any simpler – indeed, at times it seems that reckoning with the myth was easier than reconstructing the complicated, exceedingly complicated plots woven by our philosopher.

Take Kojève's relationship with politics, one of the themes that has most captivated the philosopher's reception. His dialogue with Leo Strauss on tyranny; the vaguely scandalous and scandalized rumors about his admiration for Stalin (of whom he complacently claimed to be the "consciousness"), and the accusations of having been a KGB spy. Then the writings of the 1940s, suspended between the Resistance and the Vichy government – one need only think of the embarrassing appendices to *The Notion of Authority*, devoted to the National Revolution and to Marshal Pétain, head of the collaborationist Vichy government. Or again his relationship with Carl Schmitt, the only person worth talking to in 1960s Germany – words with which he left Jacob Taubes, who had invited him to Berlin, utterly dumbfounded (Taubes, 1987, pp. 23-24). Finally, the philosopher's natural bent for provocation.[1]

All of this has contributed to fueling debate over the philosopher's more "risqué" aspects. And yet Kojève appears wholly indifferent to any consideration of expediency. His imperturbable logic seems, with a certain hauteur, to ignore history and its dramas altogether. But to understand the political themes in Kojève's work, one must read them precisely within the historical context that generated them. In

particular, one must turn to the years of the Second World War, the early 1940s, when the philosopher found himself reckoning with history. And with tyrants.

Tyrannical Authority

It is the date of 16 May 1942 that appears on the manuscript on authority, drafted by Kojève in Marseille at the height of the Nazi occupation of northern France (Kojève, 2004). What appears curious is the presence of the two appendices. In the first, the author devotes himself to an analysis of the nature of Marshal Pétain's authority, head of the collaborationist Vichy government. In the second he proposes a kind of blueprint for the French «National Revolution». Although the text contains no specific indication bearing on the concrete reality of the years in which it was written (save for the observation that authority, as a human phenomenon, is always social and historical, and in this sense that of the Leader turns out to be *historically* predominant insofar as it is a «revolutionary» guide endowed with a «universal» project – and here, parenthetically, Stalin's name is invoked), the two appendices cast an unsettling shadow over the entire book. Why would Kojève have written, in 1942, at the very height of the Second World War, with the Vichy government aligned alongside the Nazi-fascist troops, an analysis of this kind?

It is interesting to note how, in those very same years, the Jesuit father Gaston Fessard – a great friend and admirer of Kojève, likewise a member of his Hegelian seminar – set out to study these same philosophico-political mechanisms, but with entirely different results. In his *Journal de la conscience française 1940-1944*, Father Fessard raises a series of central questions: was the Vichy government legitimate? Were the French obliged to obey Pétain's orders? Starting from theological questions, extended and deepened in terms of law and philosophy, Fessard places the emphasis on the legitimacy of the political, denying it to Marshal Pétain and to the Vichy regime. Indeed, more than that: it is precisely in relation to Pétain that the Jesuit will forge the concept of the «slave-Prince», to whom no legitimacy or authority whatsoever is granted. For only that Prince or that government is legitimate which, at the head of a State, is able to identify the «common good» of its people and possesses the force necessary to direct the will of all toward this one and only end (Fessard, 2001).[1]

Kojève appears indifferent to these considerations. We find them again, in another guise, in his confrontation with Leo Strauss over tyranny (Strauss, 1991). That debate sought the answer to a single, vertiginous question: faced with the impossibility of acting politically without renouncing philosophy, the philosopher abandons political action – but does he have grounds for doing so? Kojève's implicit answer is simple: the philosopher cannot and must not abandon political action. No recourse to virtue or morality, as Leo Strauss proposes, can change reality. On the contrary, Kojève sets against it «immorality», because it is history that takes it upon itself to «judge, through accomplishment or success, the actions of statesmen or tyrants». Modern tyrants included.

Not only that. Another debate should be recalled here as well, that with Georges Bataille. Both follow Hegel: action (the «doing») is negativity, but the point of arrival of this path differs for the two of them:

Bataille holds that there is nothing left to do, thereby opening the way to what he will call *unemployed negativity*. For him, Wisdom, in the Hegelian post-history, leads to Silence. Kojève, by contrast, still holds to the pure struggle that achieves recognition. For if the Hegelian story has come to an end, the historical cycle of Hegelianism that lives on in Marx, Lenin, and Stalin is by no means concluded. As he will write in a letter to Bataille, for "these people 'satisfaction' lies in the *future*. Therefore, for them, 'one continues to live, one cannot be certain, one must keep on...' – you say 'beseeching.' They say 'struggling.'" That is *the whole* difference between you and them. But do not say that they are merely 'a handle for a shovel.' Hegel believed himself to be one. But Stalin is a shovel, complete and finished, one that discharges its task very well" (Kojève, 1970, p. 62). This is why, commenting on the *Phenomenology*, Kojève had always read "Stalin" in place of "Napoleon," as an "Alexander of our world," an *industrialized* "Napoleon," capable of achieving a *worldly*, earthbound world empire – expressions he would use in addressing Carl Schmitt, to vindicate Hegel's conviction that history had come to an end after the historical Napoleon, while the doors were opening onto the path toward the universal and homogeneous State.[2]

Propaganda in Action

The second date to take into account is that of October 1944. To this period belongs an untitled pamphlet, bearing on its first page the indication "Außenpolitische Blätter" – "Foreign Policy Journal" (translated into both French and English): evidently the propaganda sheet had been conceived as a "journal" of the French Resistance and was meant to be the first in a series, to judge from the notation appearing at the foot of the first page – "Neue Folge n. 1, Oktober 1944" – even though no trace remains of further issues or of any continuation of the publishing project. The title page also bears the wording *Fortsetzung von "Documents libres"*, evidently a "continuation" of another French Resistance publication (cf. Kojève, 1944).

The second page carries a foreword printed in both French and German – both are given here in translation, since, although they appear nearly identical, the few differences between them are not negligible. Finally, the last page bears the signatures of the authors, the two "administrators" or "directors": J. Bass (André), who could by now sign with his real name in addition to his nom de guerre, and A. Kojève – Joseph Bass having headed a Jewish Resistance group in the south of France under the nom de guerre "André." And the fact that they signed with their real names testifies to how far the situation had by then deteriorated for the German army stationed in France, with the victory of the Resistance and the liberation of Paris, which had taken place only a few weeks earlier.

The text's first part deals with more strictly political questions (divided into the sections "Victories, Defeats, and Then?", "From the New German Press", "Intelligence or Character?"), while the second part concerns the Jews and Bolshevism and takes up the theme of German culture as historically oriented toward the East (the sections are titled: "The Werewolf 'Bolshevism," "And the Jews?" "Was Adolf Hitler Too Ambitious, or Not Ambitious Enough?" "West or East?").

Seven months before the German capitulation, the text sets out to offer readers who see themselves as "Staatsmänner" – statesmen, men of government, simply politicians – a number of "key words" for tracing the conditions of peace within a new framework that might be called "non-anti-Bolshevik." The *vulnus* of the war, according to the pamphlet, is a cognitive deficit that must finally be recognized as such: readers are repeatedly invited to consider matters (alliances, spheres of influence, domestic and foreign policy) from a perspective less confined to the narrowness of *völkisch* strategy – an adjective that recurs three times in the text, always in a heavily derogatory register.

Despite the rigidly propagandistic aim of the twelve pages, the language, however blunt, remains fairly elevated – the distinctions drawn (State-people, East-West, intelligence-character), however loose, remain pitched at an educated readership. So too the reference to the reception of Dostoevsky, or expressions such as "Assyrian methods," scarcely accessible to the ordinary soldier. This suggests that the pamphlet was meant to end up in political – though still military, naturally, since we are still in October 1944 – hands already turning their attention to the post-Hitler era. The rhetorical device of German honor forever unblemished, amply deployed in the first part, alongside the – moreover widely held – reading of the disastrous effects of Versailles upon Weimar (from which Nuremberg would follow, in unbroken continuity), seems clearly aimed at readers of this kind, equipping them with arguments both pro-Russian and pro-Soviet at once, on the basis of a centuries-long reading of the history of relations between the two civilizations as a mutual failure to listen, a reading whose rhetorical climax comes in the passage on "Heinz," who kills his Russian "neighbor," "Ivan."

The text is of undoubted interest also in the context of other Kojèvian writings drafted in those same years. This brings us to the third date in this reconstruction.

The Imperial Project of a Latin Europe

27 August 1945: this is the date given on the final page of the text *Esquisse d'une doctrine de la politique française*, known as the *Latin Empire* (although an initial draft entitled *Le Trident* is dated 28 November 1944). Here the diagnosis is unambiguous, and rests on the defeat of Hitler's Germany as a historical proof: the nation-state is an exhausted political form. "The modern State," he writes, "requires broader foundations than those represented by nations properly so called – it is truly a State only if it is an empire." The effective political reality of the present, for Kojève, is to be found in three "confederations of imperial form and worldwide extension": the British Commonwealth, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The error, he charges, has been to conceive of modernity in terms of the opposition between bourgeois liberalism and internationalist socialism, when both positions miss the mark: "liberalism has the fault of seeing no political entity beyond nations, while internationalism sins in considering nothing short of humanity itself as politically effective." Between the nation, which ceases to be a political reality, and humanity, which remains an abstraction, lies the "intermediate political reality of empires." The gloss reads: "Before it is incarnated in humanity, the Hegelian Weltgeist, having abandoned the nations, resides in empires" (Kojève, 1945).

Faced with the alternative between an alliance to the West (the Anglo-Saxon empire) and one to the East (the Slavic-Soviet empire), Kojève points to a third way: looking South. He proposes a political union bringing together France, Italy, and Spain – countries united by a kinship of civilization, mentality, and political tradition – together with France's areas of interest in Africa, under the sign of "Latinity" and with its center of gravity in the western Mediterranean. This is the *Trident*, a constellation founded upon a customs union, a shared maritime force, the pooling of resources, and a progressive alignment of living standards. In this union Kojève assigns a decisive role to the Catholic Church, the only power in the West that retains a genuine universalism, capable of working "from within national particularisms" – just as, he observes when looking East, the Soviet Union had "rediscovered" the Orthodox Church as a factor of stabilization. The Latin Empire is conceived as an imperial order that is not imperialist: a higher unity in which, according to the dialectic set out in the *Esquisse d'une phénoménologie du droit*, victor and vanquished "recognize" one another reciprocally and merge into a federation, such that there is no longer, in the strict sense of the terms, either victor or vanquished (cf. Kojève, 1981). The imperial form, moreover, is the territorial consequence of the evolution of military technology? apparatus: in the age of air power, nation-states are simply too small in relation to the technical capacity for destruction.

The text is sent to Robert Marjolin, who rejects it without mincing words: he acknowledges its lucidity regarding the crisis of the nation state, but rejects the idea of a "predominantly agricultural" Latin bloc, preferring instead a union of the states of Western Europe. And yet, even though he rejects the text (writing to Kojève that it bears the echoes of Vichy propaganda), this will not prevent Marjolin from later giving a position to the philosopher within the French administration. The fact remains that the writing on the Latin Empire anticipates, with remarkable acuity, developments that would only become evident much later, and that it constitutes the theoretical foundation of the philosopher's entire subsequent European engagement: the organization of Western Europe as a phase of "regional empires (or common markets)" destined to precede the universal and homogeneous empire. The very form of the European Community – as Kojève would tell Aron – belongs to this intermediate phase of the end of history (Aron, 2010).

And it is worth recalling that, as with all the other writings drafted during the war, Kojève wrote for someone: whether for the Vichy government minister Henri Moysset, or for the captains or generals of the Nazi troops stationed in France, or for Marjolin.

In these years, then, with great nonchalance, Kojève moves from writing texts for the founding of the State born of Pétain's National Revolution to propaganda pamphlets for the Resistance. Double-dealing? A determination always to be at the tyrant's court, at the court of whatever power happens to be in charge? Base opportunism?

Political Action: a Thought

One final text, by way of an attempt to answer these questions.

Indeed, two unpublished manuscripts by Kojève have recently been rediscovered, of whose existence researchers had been unaware until now, in the archives of Moysset. These are two texts of interest not only because they shed light on the relationship with Moysset, the Vichy minister, but because they help to render less obscure and less vague Kojève's intellectual engagement with politics during the Second World War – an engagement that led him from *Sophia*, conceived for Stalin and the Soviet Union, to these texts conceived for Moysset (Pétain) and the Vichy government. The two unpublished pieces were composed by Kojève between 1942 and 1943 and must be contextualized within the framework of a broader project, or rather within the perspective of Kojève's political engagement during these years, and they must be read alongside *The Notion of Authority* and the *Esquisse d'une phénoménologie du droit*.

Not only was Moysset, who encouraged the philosopher to set down his analyses in writing, the one who commissioned these texts, but he also paid him fees for his work, as the correspondence between the two men attests (cf. Kender 2025).

These two works are entitled *Notice sur les néo-formations politiques au XXe siècle* and *La notion du travail*. It is the first that concerns us here: a work to be placed without reservation within the ideological horizon of the Vichy government, as indeed is also true of *The Notion of Authority*, and one that in a certain sense develops and deepens certain intuitions already formulated there. In particular, it is the fundamental role of political authority in the structuring of the modern State that we find again in these pages. From the introduction onward, the intention is clear:

The study of neo-formations properly so called, by contrast, is of capital interest, for it reveals possibilities of political existence which the historical past did not disclose, thereby contributing to a fuller and deeper understanding of the political phenomenon as such. Now, only the philosophical *understanding* of the political phenomenon renders its application – that is, political *action* – truly conscious and voluntary, indeed rational and thereby genuinely effective. In practical terms, the political neo-formations of the twentieth century are reducible to the achievements realized by the communists in Russia, the fascists in Italy, and the National Socialists in Germany. In these three cases we witness the formation of States that are genuinely *new*, in the sense that they realize political *principles* or *ideas* which, even if previously known, have never yet been put into practice (Kojève 1942-1943).

What the philosopher achieves in this comparative and conceptual analysis of the Nazi, Fascist, and Soviet regimes turns out in practice to be a eulogy of their statist origin, while simultaneously expressing a clear distrust of parliamentary institutions. Kojève groups the three regimes of the twentieth century under the category of «neo-political formations»: regimes characterized not so much by their brutality as by their ideological modernity. Each chapter explores the historical conditions, sociological foundations, and methods of legitimation of these regimes, highlighting their capacity to produce a new form of political unity.

It is evident that, through these pages, the philosopher seeks to achieve at least two objectives: on the one hand, to offer the Vichy regime and its representatives a lesson, a kind of manual for grasping what can be drawn from the regimes under study; on the other, Kojève theoretically aspires to construct a

conceptual framework that transcends the traditional moral or ideological oppositions. He seeks, in fact, to demonstrate that what he calls “political neo-formations” constitute coherent attempts to reconfigure the relationship between the governed and the governing on the basis of explicitly anti-liberal principles. This is Kojève’s most Schmittian text in its resonances and its philosophico-political perspectives; the German jurist is evoked as early as the first page, explicitly, in connection with the friend/enemy dialectic – even though, curiously, his name is cited with a spelling mistake, «Karl Schmidt» instead of Carl Schmitt. Conversely, one can also identify a similarity with another text of twentieth-century political thought, namely Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – although this similarity is confined to the object of research alone, Kojève’s reading of totalitarianism insisting less on repression than on the pursuit of the total integration of the citizen into the State. What matters is the political authority that these new state formations must institute, including, as Kojève writes, through propaganda:

The new States, by contrast, are *conscious* of the fact that they are nothing other than particular forms of the realization and manifestation of *political Authority* as such. Consequently the *political* phenomenon manifests and realizes itself in these States (both in their Constitutions and through their acts) in a far purer, far more adequate manner than in “classical” States. And within this political phenomenon, the element of *Authority* appears in these States in a far more explicit form than previously. One *knows* that, in order to govern a State, one must appeal to political Authority; and one says so. It is because one *knows* this that so large a place is given to “propaganda” (the formation of “Ministries of Propaganda” and the like): for to wish to found a State on “propaganda” is to *know* that it can only be founded on an *Authority*. And one *says* so, since this “propaganda” itself explicitly appeals to Authority, attempting to create a demand for Authority while demonstrating that supply corresponds indeed to demand. Moreover, the content of the “propaganda” is such that it is evident one consciously has in view an Authority that is purely and specifically *political*, and not religious, moral, or otherwise (Kojève, 1942-1943).

In sum, in this text Kojève seeks to reformulate the categories of modern political philosophy. The authoritarian regime becomes the site where authority is recognized, this authority going beyond mere coercion. Dictatorship is presented as a moment of truth of politics: a phase in which authority manifests itself without deviation. As for totalitarianism, it is viewed as an attempt to abolish every reality external to the State, in particular social class and the family. At bottom, this provocative reconfiguration allows Kojève to federate the three regimes around a single logic: the realization of a new type of citizenship through the restructuring of social institutions. To this end, Pétain’s France would need to bear several indispensable pieces of advice in mind:

One may attribute a positive value to the fact that the three neo-formations in question constituted themselves as *authoritarian* States, in the sense I have given to this term in the general part of this study. France therefore has only to follow it along this path. The new French State must be founded not on force and violence, nor on mere inertia, but on a positive political Authority. And it must do so voluntarily, consciously, and openly. In other words, the State sees its first duty in the political or civic education of all its citizens: men and women, children, young people and adults, peasants and city-dwellers, civilians

and military personnel. It is in its interest that the political Authority of the State be complete, involving the four “pure” types of Authority (Kojève, 1942-1943).

And further:

It seems that the *dictatorial* (personal) form is not essential to the neo-formations under study. It also seems that, all things considered, one should see in it a defect rather than an advantage, notably from the standpoint of the transmission of Authority, that is, of the indefinite stability of the State. In any case, the imprecision of existing authoritarian *Constitutions* is a very grave political defect. France must therefore try, from the outset, to draw up a well-defined and correctly formulated Constitution, one that would be in perfect accord with the type of Authority the French State will adopt, as well as with its authoritarian character. Which is to say that the Constitution must not only explicitly lay down the principle of State “demagogy” and “propaganda,” but must itself possess a pedagogical value as propaganda. [...] Now the study of the neo-formations under consideration seems to show that the authoritarian State cannot in fact be quite so *ideological*. It must therefore try to dominate the *entire* political “domain”. But it must avoid encroaching upon the other “domains”, insofar as these are recognized as “legitimate.” The State must therefore possess a system of political thought with a philosophical, even metaphysical, basis, from which its conduct in all concrete cases may be deduced (*Ibid.*)

Kojève’s text culminates in an apology for empire, considered as the principal form of human political unification. In a certain sense, the *Notice* anticipates certain central elements of the *Esquisse d’une doctrine de la politique française*, namely the idea of a “Latin Empire” led by France, capable of federating the nations of southern Europe, united by culture and by spirit, within a logic of equilibrium on an international scale. Kojève opposes to this vision the failure of the Nazi model: the defeat of Germany seemed to him inevitable, precisely because the Third Reich had failed to integrate the conquered peoples, preferring their annihilation or brutal exploitation to any form of genuine unity. This ambiguous position – neither praise nor categorical condemnation – lends the text its complexity: it is thus not confined to a typological survey of contemporary authoritarian regimes but appears as a mirror held up to the Vichy authorities, in which they were invited to read an encouragement toward reform.

These texts invite us to reconsider the chronology of Kojève’s political engagement: well before his official entry into the service of the State, in February 1945, as a senior official of the Ministry of the Economy, Kojève was already playing the role of political and philosophical consultant. His thought represented an explicit attempt to influence, if only from a distance, the wartime ideological reorganization of the French State (meanwhile, the Vichy government had been replaced by the Fourth Republic) – just as, with *Sophia*, the manuscript written in Russian and dated 8 June 1941, he wished to participate, from a distance, in the construction of Soviet society and culture (cf. Kojève, 2025).

These are themes that in some way connect Kojève with another philosopher, Carl Schmitt, far more than has hitherto been supposed or written. Among Kojève’s books there survives a heavily used and densely

annotated issue of the journal «Politische Wissenschaft», in which Carl Schmitt published an early – though not the first – version of «Der Begriff des Politischen» in 1928. It was a special issue devoted to "problems of democracy."

As so often, Jacob Taubes had a brilliant insight that never went beyond the stage of a remark tossed off in correspondence: "to my mind, the celebrated interpretation of Hegel that Kojève provided in 1933-35 is furrowed by a concept of the political derived from Carl Schmitt. I obviously only realized this after my meeting with Kojève in Berlin. Schmitt had personally approached Kojève, who at once represented for him a turning point [...]. In our conversations, Schmitt already took it for granted that everything else was mere academic chatter about Hegel" (Taubes-Schmitt 2012).

One might say that from the very outset the shadow of the *Kronjurist* looms large over the shared landscape of knowledge and influences between Taubes and Kojève, as can also be inferred from the correspondence between the latter and Schmitt: "[...] today I received a letter from America – a university assistant from New York, of Israeli [sic!] origin (Jacob Taubes), writes to me saying that his lectures on Hegel *à la Kojève* have aroused great interest among the students" (Kojève 1998, p. 111).[1]

Among the participants in Kojève's seminar, there could have been little doubt that Schmitt was an important interlocutor from the very start. Is not the entire Kojèvian reading of Hegel in the 1930s a communist reappropriation of the «Concept of the Political» – one that values, aspires to, and works toward the very things Schmitt feared: the world State, the end of politics, and a sphere of entertainment, leisure, and eroticism destined to replace it? At least these are the passages Kojève underlines in his copy of "Politische Wissenschaft," sometimes adding «cf. Marx» or «cf. Hegel».

For Kojève, to philosophize is to participate in History, with all that this entails (even at the cost of compromises with politically and ideologically controversial forces). Kojève is not afraid to place his thought at the service of the tyrant, of an authoritarian order, or even of a reactionary political enterprise, insofar as this seems to him philosophically coherent or historically operative. This is, moreover, why his works cannot be regarded as pure speculation, detached from reality; no, they are always interventions in which thought becomes strategist, naturally taking the risk of compromising itself.

And the question of power, which interested Schmitt so greatly. It was he who, not by chance, in sending Kojève as a gift his "little book on power" (*Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber*) – as he himself had called it – accompanied it with this dedication: «*Wer keine Macht hat, braucht viele Süßigkeiten*», "He who has no power needs many sweets" (Schmitt 1954).[2]

Footnotes

1. On the biographical and intellectual events of the philosopher's life, cf. Filoni, 2025.
2. Cf. Jacobs-Saliba, 2026.
3. Cf. Kojève, 1998, p. 103.

4. On the relationship between Kojève and Schmitt, cf. Palma 2022 and Palma 2024.
5. Kojève's copy of Schmitt's book is held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: (Res-Z Kojève-987); the curious thing about the dedication is that it is in fact a phrase by Max Nettlau, an anarchist born in Vienna to a Prussian family, one of the principal historians of the anarchist movement, whom Schmitt had evidently read.

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