When should we stop excusing the Russian invasion?

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been met with strange responses on the part of segments of the USA Left and among many progressives. While, generally speaking, there has been a strong condemnation of the Russian invasion, there has simultaneously been a tendency to excuse the Russian invasion and place the responsibility for the aggression solely on the US government (and NATO). Not only is such an analysis factually inaccurate, but it arises from an analytical error rooted in a downplaying of the entire issue of the right of nations to self-determination.

As two African Americans and one Chicano, we have concluded that it is time to speak out against a misconstruing of what has been unfolding in Ukraine and an inclination to either excuse Russian aggression or to advance a position of neutrality. As individuals who are socialists and have been integrally involved in our respective people's struggles for democracy and self-determination, we simply cannot remain silent, even though this puts us at odds with some comrades we have known, respected, and loved for years.

We submit this paper in order to promote more extensive discussion and debate. By no means do we assume our views to be the final words on this question. We do believe, however, that the failure to address the *national question* has led to errors in analysis, strategy, and response by many on the broad Left and progressive movements in the USA.

Which side are you on?

The actions of the Russian government cannot be construed as a "special military operation." They represented an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country. It is critical that we understand this and not waver. Russian troops, and *not* NATO troops, crossed the border into the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Ukraine never threatened Russia.

There is no question but that NATO expansionism has been *uncalled for*. In fact, we would argue that NATO, which was never a defensive alliance, should have been dissolved as soon as the Cold War ended. NATO expansion was opposed by various Russian regimes and was unnecessarily provocative.

Yet what is rarely discussed in US Left circles was the desire of countries in the former Soviet bloc to link to NATO out of fear of post-USSR Russian intentions. We, on the U.S. Left, can and should be critical of NATO, but we must understand what the underlying fears and concerns were on the part of former Soviet bloc countries.

It is additionally the case that there was opposition within NATO to the inclusion of Ukraine. Not only had there been little support within Ukraine—prior to 2014—to entrance into NATO, but preceding the Russian invasion of 2022, there was opposition within NATO to the inclusion of

Ukraine. Since NATO inclusion had to be unanimous, it was unlikely that any steps would have been taken. The Putin regime knew this.

The Putin regime claims that it was coming to the aid of the secessionist regions of the eastern Ukraine. There are a few problems with this assertion, beginning with the fact that in 2014 Russia invaded Ukraine and seized Crimea, and in addition provoked secessionist revolts in the eastern region, including the supplying of unmarked military personnel.

Some of our friends have argued that the Russians seized Crimea in response to an alleged US-sponsored coup in Ukraine, i.e., the Maiden uprising. They also say that the revolts in the eastern region were entirely self-motivated.

First things first. There is little evidence that Maiden 2014 was a US-sponsored uprising. This was not Chile in 1973. There was a mass movement that included a variety of forces ranging from the far Right to the Left—and many in between—engaged in a revolt against the oligarchs, corruption, and the reversal of the administration's decision to build a relationship with the European Union. This was an internal matter of Ukraine. One can have an opinion on the causes and outcomes, but the suggestion that this was primarily driven by the machinations of the USA turns the Ukrainian people into simple puppets of outsiders which flies in the face of reality. While the USA may have supported a particular outcome of the Maiden uprising, such support is not the same as being the source of the revolt.

Second, the seizure of Crimea was a blatant violation of the Budapest Accords (1994) whereby Ukraine turned over its nuclear weapons—to Russia—in exchange for a commitment that Russia would NEVER attack Ukraine. The notion that Russia had a right to seize Crimea disregarded the fact that the territory had been part of Ukraine since 1954. There has also been a very strange silence by segments of the USA Left on another part of the Crimea question: the ignoring or the disregard of the question of the Crimean Tatars—the indigenous population—and their replacement/removal by the Russian settlers (going back to the days of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin). Yes, prior to 1954 Crimea was part of Russia. But it is also the case that Russian settlers displaced the relocated Crimean Tatars, thereby further complicating how one must understand the 'Crimean Question.'

As a side note, it has been suggested that the referendum held in the aftermath of the Russian seizure of Crimea somehow made the seizure legitimate. This, we find to be an interesting position. To believe that a referendum on the future relationship of Crimea to Russia could be held freely while Russian troops are deployed in full force is, quite literally, *incredible*.

Third, the secessionist movements in the Donbas region are reflective of internal challenges of Ukraine. There have been clear regional and linguistic challenges within Ukraine for quite some time (in the post-Soviet era). Rightwing forces in Ukraine attempted to suppress the use of the Russian language. In the so-called People's Republics (in the eastern region), efforts were undertaken to erase the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian history. But there is no evidence that these so-called "People's Republics," established in 2014 with the assistance of Russia, have anything to do with a legitimate, popular demand for separation; in fact, their level of popular support is highly questionable. It should be noted that it was only Russia that recognized these so-called People's Republics, and that recognition came on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine. This reminds one of the Bantustan/independent "republics" established by apartheid South Africa as a means of legitimating population relocation and total control over South Africa.

Fourth, according to international law (and the Budapest Accords) there was no right for the Russians to invade Ukraine in either 2014 or 2022. The rationale used by the Putin regime of

neutralization and *de-nazification* is nothing more than sophistry. The internal political situation in Ukraine was and is a matter to be faced by the Ukrainian people, not by any outsider. The US Left should be clear on that, particularly considering its opposition to the USA aggression against Afghanistan and, later, Iraq.

Fifth, Putin gave away his hole card on the night of the invasion when he described Ukraine as "national fiction" and went on to dispute the very right of Ukraine to exist (including by polemicizing against the theories on national self-determination elaborated by Lenin and Stalin).

Finally, the appeal to a defense or legitimation of Russia's alleged regional strategic interests is almost comical on at least two grounds. First and foremost, the last time that we checked, the Left was not supposed to be proponents of *spheres of influence* by countries or empires. When the USA described the Cuban Revolution, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and other Latin American and Caribbean (e.g., Grenada) radical movements and governments as a threat to USA interests, we laughed uncontrollably and fought the various Democratic *and* Republican administration who articulated such nonsense, tooth and nail. Yet, in the case of Ukraine, there are respectable leftists who suggests that Russia's alleged geographic interests should be respected when there has been no threat to them from Ukraine.

There is a second component to this point, however. The issue of borders carried militarily strategic implications in the pre-nuclear era when massive land-based military operations were being conducted, e.g., Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of the USSR in 1941). Today, a massive land-based invasion of a nuclear power is highly unlikely. Rather, the greater danger rests in tactical and strategic nuclear weaponry and their delivery systems, along with the threat of chemical and biological warfare. Russia has the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet and a delivery system to reinforce the point. For nuclear powers, borders are next to irrelevant, at least at the military level. When it comes to politics and economics, however, borders can be very relevant, pointing us in the direction of some of the real motivations of the Russian aggression.

There are no defenses of the Russian invasion that pass the straight-face test. Efforts to justify the invasion based on criticisms of the post-1991 Ukrainian regimes ignore international law prohibition on such invasions. Only a United Nations sanctioned invasion would have been justified, as anyone familiar with the debates in the lead up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq would well know.

What about the National Question?

Lost on many US leftists was the significance of Putin's tirade against Lenin and Stalin on the matter of national self-determination. Unless one was up on the history of early communist movement, it could sound like an exploration of medieval Christian theology.

The pre-1917 Russian communist movement found itself facing several dilemmas, one of the most critical being the Russian Empire itself, what was once described as a "prison house of nations." The Russian Empire had grown through the forced absorption of myriad nationalities stretching from what is now Poland to the Pacific Ocean. This empire was not a federation but was a formation dominated by the so-called "Great Russians," i.e., the Russian ethnicity and their monarchical/capitalist ruling class.

Lenin commissioned Stalin to elaborate a theory on what was called the "national question," i.e., understanding the exceptional circumstances of nations of people who had suffered a special oppression and domination, in this case by Russia. The complexities and issues contained in Stalin's conclusions go way beyond the scope of this paper except in one particular arena: the notion that nations and peoples who had suffered oppression and domination *as nations* (including language

discrimination; terror; subordination in all spheres compared with the Russian ethnicity; lack of political power) were entitled to the *right to national self-determination*. To put it another way, whether they were Finns, Ukrainians, or the peoples of the former Turkestan, amongst others, they had a right to determine their own future without the interference of outside forces.

The initial Soviet approach to the right of national self-determination was innovative; indeed, revolutionary. It was crystalized in the notion that the post-revolutionary society needed to be a *Union* of Soviet Socialist *Republics*.

Putin was correct that the Stalin regime was inconsistent—at best—in its approach to the national question and there is no doubt that there was Russian domination of the Soviet state, but that domination was periodically challenged. Once in power, Stalin evidenced little interest in consistent national self-determination. The Stalin regime's implementation of national question policy ranged from innovative— "national territorial delimitation" (the creation of nation-states where peoples had previously lived in semi-feudal conditions, though no practical right to secession)—to outright *criminal,* e.g., relocating and removing the nationhood (or autonomous) status of fifteen nationalities during World War II (including the Crimean Tatars!) for alleged anti-Soviet behavior. This latter behavior contradicted the stated intent of Lenin for a voluntary union of equal republics.

Putin's tirade demonstrated several things which are worth mentioning in this context. First, NATO was *not* the main issue. Even an incompetent communications consultant would have known to have recommended that Putin focus entirely on NATO as his justification for the invasion as a way of winning, or at least neutralizing global public opinion. Instead, Putin chose, at the most inopportune of moments, to challenge the national legitimacy of an internationally recognized nation-state. One must ask, why?

Second, Putin articulated his vision of the Russian future. This is a future of the Russian ethnicity united in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This is not a multi-ethnic Russia, but rather the articulation of an *ethno-nationalist* Russia. This vision is completely consistent with the thoroughly reactionary politics of the Putin regime.

Third, Putin himself is a product of the former Soviet apparatus. He was not a Marxist, however, but someone who always wanted to be in the KGB. He used the training and experience of the KGB in order to build the sort of network and political platform necessary for the rise to power. His tirade against Lenin and Stalin demonstrates his abhorrence for the political project that Lenin was attempting to put into place in order to remedy the reality of the 'prison house of nations.' The tirade demonstrated something else, i.e., the *revanchism* of the Putin regime. That is, the fury of the Putin regime in response to the USSR's defeat in the Cold War, on top of which Russia not being fully accepted into the global capitalist bloc. Putin's revanchism is analogous to that which dominated rightwing circles in post-World War I Germany where, in the aftermath of the war, the loss of colonies, and the reparations it was compelled to pay, there was a demand for scapegoats and a desire for Germany to retrieve what rightwing circles believed to have been stolen from them.

Thus, the Russian aggression seems to have derived from specific geo-political ambitions of the Putin regime (fueled by revanchism) combined with an ethno-nationalist critical image of the future, a critical image that shares more in common with that of the Russian "White" forces," i.e., the counter-revolutionary, restorationist movement after the Russian Revolution, than with the socialist experiment that was attempted.

The relevance of this analysis is that it focuses on the forces internal to Russia that have driven this aggression rather than viewing Russia as a clumsy minor imperialist power subject to the whims and machinations of the USA and NATO. Additionally, in reviewing what the Putin regime has written

and said, it becomes clear that its ambitions have little to do with neutralizing Ukraine; they concern the neutralizing of Ukrainians. As such, it appears the Ukrainians have no rights that the Putin regime is bound to respect.

Two camps vs. opposition to national oppression?

Much of the debate within the USA Left begins—and ends—by looking at the USA. The framework is simple: the USA is the main enemy of the world's people; the USA permitted/encouraged the expansion of NATO; the Russians opposed NATO expansion; therefore, the USA/NATO provoked the Russian invasion.

The essence of this analysis is that because the USA is the main enemy of the world's people this must mean that it is the only significant enemy and further, that in each circumstance, should the USA be involved, it must be the main perpetrator of nefarious activities.

This is not an analysis. It is sophistry. And a particular sort of sophistry that views the struggles on planet Earth as being between the USA and its allies, on the one hand, and those who oppose USA imperialism on the other. All other issues are subordinate to this contradiction. Implicit in this analysis is the notion that anyone opposing—verbally or practically—US imperialism must be a friend of the oppressed and, therefore, should be supported.

This framework does not look at the particularities of any one situation and does not look at the internal factors in any one country (or in countries in conflict), instead it privileges the external factors. At the philosophical level this is a violation of dialectics which always seeks first an understanding of the internal contradictions and then looks at the broader context.

In the case of Ukraine, sections of the USA Left have sought answers only through the activities of the USA but have failed to analyze the potential (or actual) motivations of the Putin regime. Interestingly, most of the Left was entirely wrong about Putin's preparations for an invasion of Ukraine, suggesting for months that Putin was only hard-bargaining and that the USA and Britain were attempting to provoke the situation by suggesting that a Russian invasion was pending. Comrades really got that wrong.

The internal contradictions would also involve looking at the particular and historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, listening carefully to Putin's words and those of his propagandists becomes so important. The Putin regime has gone to great measure to reconfigure the history of the relationship of Russia and Ukraine. Its was in this context that Putin polemicized against Lenin and Stalin. Putin does not believe that Ukraine is and ever has been a nation; for him it is part of a *Greater Russia*.

Those who ignore Putin's words are, in effect, complicit in calling for the elimination of Ukraine. They are also ignoring a long-running debate within Russia and Ukraine regarding Ukrainian nationhood and self-determination. More perilously, segments of the Left are approaching a point of embracing *ethno-nationalism* or failing to distinguish it from *revolutionary nationalism*.

Ethno-nationalism is an important current within rightwing populism and its subset, fascism. It identifies nationhood with ethnicity rather than territory, culture, and history. Hitler used ethno-nationalism to orchestrate the Anschluss (annexation of Austria) in 1938, as well as the demands for the cession of Sudetenland to Germany by Czechoslovakia (also in 1938). More recently, ethno-nationalism ripped apart the former multinational socialist republic of Yugoslavia and was instrumental in the Rwanda genocide conducted against the Tutsis and their allies among the Hutus.

The Putin regime articulates ethno-nationalism and has displayed expansionist ambitions. It seeks

to unite the Great Russian ethnicity, as well as reestablish the borders of the former Russian Empire. It has a name for this: *Eurasian-ism*. This centers on the notion of the development of a pole independent of the "Atlantic" bloc of USA, Canada, and Britain. While this is a multi-polar notion, it is a multi-polar proposal for a rightwing authoritarian future, not vastly different than that described in George Orwell's *1984*.

The fight for a multi-polar world has been inherent in capitalism and particularly once it reached its imperialist stage. While at various moments one or another imperialist state held hegemony, there has always been cooperation and contention among capitalist states, much as there is between capitalist corporations. Putin's repositioning Russia is completely consistent with this.

Thus, the question that immediately emerges is whether the contention between imperialist states, and specifically, the emergence of anti-US imperialist states *ipso facto* imply that the rising contentious forces are somehow progressive and anti-imperialist? This is not a new question and there is an historical analogue worth noting, which we shall address in a moment.

It is worth adding that one of the responses to the Russian invasion, offered by many sincere leftists, is that while the Russian invasion was wrong, we should focus on the role of the USA/NATO since there is little that can be done to influence the Putin regime, but we can influence the US government.

Regardless of intent, this is effectively an isolationist argument draped as internationalism. Leftists have historically opposed imperialist adventures by the USA, but also those of other countries where there was no direct US involvement. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia, in 1935, had nothing to do with the USA, yet leftists (of various stripes and ethnicities), Pan Africanists and Black nationalists responded. The 1936-39 Spanish Civil War also brought forward global leftist demands for the USA, Britain, and France—each a colonial power—to provide military assistance to the Spanish government in its fight not only against domestic fascists, but against the illegal intervention of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. This call was made even though each of these imperialist powers was conducting its own forms of colonial rule. Indeed, one could have made an argument that nothing should have been demanded or asked of these governments precisely because of their character. Yet, the demands were made based on an assessment of the Fascist/Nazi intervention and the broader implications of both the intervention and the resistance to it.

Japanese Imperialism and the "Pacific Movement of the Eastern World"

In the aftermath of the Japanese victory over the Russian Empire in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) a reverberation was felt within the politics of the colonial and semi-colonial world. A "non-white" people had decisively defeated a European imperialist power with a sophisticated use of strategy and modern military technology.

Despite the fact that the emerging Japanese empire had ironically accepted its designation as 'Asian Aryans' (a designation encouraged by US President Theodore Roosevelt and later adopted by Hitler), 'colored peoples' around the world, i.e., those colonized or semi-colonized, in what we think of today as the global South, by Western imperialism (including but not limited to the USA), saw in Japan a source of inspiration. One did not need to dig too deeply, however, to understand that the Japanese were constructing their own empire. This became clearer with the Japanese annexation of Taiwan, Korea, their role in World War I—supporting the Western allies against the Germans, thereby obtaining island bases in the Pacific—and later, with the invasion and annexation of Manchuria, followed by the invasion of the rest of China.

Despite Japan's aggressiveness, there remained an appeal that they offered not only in Asia, but also

in the United States. Within Black America pro-Japanese sentiment emerged influencing various forces including, and surprisingly, the great W.E.B. Dubois. Many apologists for Japan saw it as a strong state standing up to Western imperialism and were prepared to dismiss Japanese oppression and what can only be described as Japanese *racism* against other Asian populations, despite the Japanese call for a *Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.*

Within the United States, the *Pacific Movement of the Eastern World* became an organizing center for pro-Japanese sentiment. A frequently overlooked movement largely based in Missouri, it was studied and explored by Dr. Ernest Allen of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Though this movement collapsed in the context of World War II, its ideological legacy has surpassed its organizational existence. Interestingly, it was Asian communists in countries such as China, the Philippines, Korea, and Indochina who unmasked the imperialist objectives of the upstart Japanese Empire, pointing out that Japanese imperialism did not represent a path to liberation. In the USA, the Communist Party was also among those who challenged this pro-Japanese sentiment.

The underlying notion that the enemy of my enemy is my friend led to unfortunate acts of collaboration in various countries that the Japanese occupied beginning in 1931. And the blindness to Japanese atrocities, e.g., the rape of Nanjing, is strangely reminiscent of the manner in which a segment of the US Left has been prepared to turn a blind eye to Russian imperialism, whether in the atrocities in Chechnya, atrocities committed through the Russian intervention on the side of the tyrannical Assad regime in the Syrian democratic uprising, or most recently, in the context of the invasion of Ukraine. The failure to understand the objectives of the Putin regime is drawing segments of the Left dangerously close to the position taken by those who saw in the Japanese empire the salvation of the colonial and semi-colonial world.

The 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' view need not be as extreme as that held by those who would have collaborated with and/or justified Japanese imperialism. In the post-World War II environment, national liberation movements and national populist projects (to borrow the term from the late Samir Amin) in the global South were often deeply influenced by the international communist movement and by leftist politics more generally. Many leaders of these movements received training from the USSR, China, and later Cuba, among others.

Frequently these nationalist movements in the global South sought independence from both the USA—and its allies—and the USSR—and its allies. The movements asserted the need for independence and freedom, but in all too many of these countries the social movements for liberation failed to enact a fully transformative platform.

Leaders in some of these states, e.g., Qaddafi in Libya; Mugabe in Zimbabwe, chose to walk a tightrope in the Cold War, alternating their allegiances and interests between the US-led bloc; the USSR; and, in some cases, the Chinese, all the while proclaiming "non-alignment." Internally, their projects were a very mixed bag. An over reliance on the export of natural materials, e.g., oil, was able to sustain, for a period, some of the national populist projects. Given uneven national economic investments, a failure to redistribute the wealth, and a lack of economic diversity, not to mention an ambivalence—at best—to people power, this proved to be very risky.

Thus, there were regimes that had leftist or left-leaning rhetoric, particularly on international issues, but domestically were following a different and frequently non-revolutionary/non-radical course. In fact, they could be outright repressive. Zimbabwe is a case in point where the Mugabe government accepted structural adjustment, even though structural adjustment was anathema to the stated politics of the government and its ruling political party. In the face of protest, there was repression. More recently a similar phenomenon came on display in Nicaragua with the shell of the former FSLN (Sandinistas) leading the country and following a very conservative approach to social

issues and the economy, not to mention, the carrying out of repression of dissent.

Much of the US Left has been influenced by the rhetoric of alleged anti-imperialist regimes in a manner comparable to that of so many political forces in the pre-1941 period who were influenced by the "anti-imperialist" rhetoric of Japanese imperialism. It was only when one dug beneath the surface that one could begin to get a better sense of reality.

It is unclear how many times the US Left must re-learn this lesson. In the 1970s, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) presented itself to US Left audiences as a Marxist-Leninist-led national liberation movement. When the Portuguese withdrew from Angola, in 1975, UNITA demonstrated that they were instead allies of the apartheid South African regime and an enemy of progress. Yet they had been successful in influencing many Black leftists until that point. The lack of a concrete analysis resulted in erroneous conclusions.

Looking at Ukraine; looking at the world

The conclusions from this are straight forward. First and foremost, begin with the facts on the basis of a concrete analysis. Look, specifically, at the factors on the ground that are key to understanding a situation. This means examining the state of the class struggle and the other struggles against oppression.

A second conclusion is that external forces cannot bring about liberation even with the best of intentions. This conclusion was reached by the then Russian Bolsheviks in 1921 when they sought to spread the Russian Revolution by invading Poland. Specifically, the conditions for a revolution did not exist in Poland and the Red Army would not be able to do anything about that other than—had it been successful—*imposing its will*. Indeed, after World War II that is precisely what happened in those East European countries that had not liberated themselves (Yugoslavia and Albania had, however).

The third is that an invasion immediately should call attention to international law and the national question. International law, particularly after World War II, is clear about wars of aggression, which is precisely why the response by the USA to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is hypocritical when contrasted with their stand on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the imposition of apartheid, as well as the Moroccan occupation of two-thirds of the Western Sahara.

A fourth conclusion is that Putin has done more than any leader in the recent past to *strengthen* NATO. As of this writing, Sweden and Finland are entertaining the possibility of entering NATO. NATO was, itself, the target of various social movements in Europe who, correctly, saw it as both unnecessary and belligerent. We now have a situation where NATO is being heralded and military budgets in the Western World are being expanded—rather than contracting—with the result being that resources that are desperately needed for social concerns are being slighted in order to favor the 'gun'. Further, the Russian invasion has been a setback to efforts to address the climate catastrophe with greater calls for fossil fuels rather than efforts to eliminate the use of fossil fuels (and eliminate the fossil fuel industry!).

A fifth conclusion is that the Putin regime is expanding the threat of nuclear war. Through oblique references to major retaliatory actions, and through displays of intercontinental threats, the Putin regime is articulating what can only be viewed as an insane game of 'chicken' with NATO, asserting directly and indirectly, what it *might* do under the right conditions. This may be analogous to Richard Nixon's famous reference that it *was in the interest of the United States that the USSR and China thought him to be a little crazy*. The problem is that when perceived as 'crazy' there are many potential responses. One response is a renewed nuclear weapons race, the conditions for which

exist particularly in light of the various treaties from which former President Trump withdrew.

In addition to matters of international law and the threats of further escalation, it remains vitally important to identify the historical relationship between belligerents. Given the long history of Russian domination over Ukraine, including what can only be described as a settler-colonial relationship at certain junctures, the Russian invasion cannot be viewed as a benevolent step by an otherwise disinterested party. Rather, it is the act of aggression by a power which has historically occupied and oppressed the people of Ukraine.

In that sense, the Left must stand with the Ukrainian people against aggression and occupation. This is not encouraging a supposed 'fight to the last Ukrainian'—as if the Ukrainians are simply stupid puppets of outsiders—but, instead, supporting the Ukrainian struggle against aggression and for self-determination, including the right to self-defense. Solidarity with Ukrainians is not standing with the West and its hypocritical posture on when an occupation is an occupation. Standing with Ukrainians is an act of international solidarity of the oppressed. And that solidarity must also include solidarity with those in Russia who are opposing the Putin regime's repression and aggression.

To paraphrase Bishop Tutu, there is no room for neutrality in the face of oppression. Or to put it in a different, though equally familiar way, ***workers and oppressed peoples of the world, unite!***

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