

J. MICHAEL HAGOPIAN - A PROMINENT PROPAGANDIST IN ARMENIAN DOCUMENTARISM AND HIS QUESTIONABLE LEGACY

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If one wishes to observe the radical nationalist Armenian practice of using art with the aim of political propaganda, the documentaries of Armenian writer, filmmaker, and producer J. Michael Hagopian would be quite informative. Hagopian, who was born in 1913, in Harput, Elazığ, started Atlantis Productions Inc. in 1952, which produced many Armenian films. He also co-founded the Armenian Film Foundation (AFF) in 1979 with the help of several Armenian community leaders. His 1965 documentary, Where Are My People?, is presumed to be the first film to push the Armenian genocide accusations regarding the period of the 1915 Relocation and Resettlement. He was considered to be a precursor in the production of Armenian documentaries, and thus, was seen as an important personality in the Armenian propaganda film industry.

Among his most prominent work are his interviews conducted with Armenians of the years from the First World War. These interviews were one of the main pillars in Hagopians The Witnesses Trilogy [Consisting of the documentaries Voices from the Lake (2000), Germany and the Secret Genocide (2003) and The River Ran Red (2008)]. On April 13th, 2010, Hagopian, the AFF and the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute (USC - SFI) signed an agreement that would make Hagopians interview archives available for education purposes.

Hagopian and His Documentaries

Due to his overall conduct, Hagopian was known for his fanatical anti-Turkish bias and the AFF has been described as possibly the most prominent organization in terms of the utilization of art as a tool for Armenian political goals. With the aim of promoting Armenian films in the West, the organization has been setting up campaigns and is said to be playing an intermediary role for the Armenian communities donations to be spent on

artistic endeavors.[1]

One of Hagopians statements in his films was that the events before and during the period of the 1915 Relocation and Resettlement were a clash of civilizations, a clash of nationalities, defined by religion. Moreover, he added that, during the 19th century, the Armenians were influenced by European ideas, westernization, equality, freedom, justice and democracy and that the Turkish ruling class feared the Armenians would break up their empire. So they enflamed religious fanaticism to slaughter, deport, exterminate and wipe the Armenians off the face of the map.[2] However, he did not include in his statement that Turks and Armenians had lived together in peace for hundreds of years and that the influence of European ideas on the Armenians played an important role in the increasing Armenian insurrections. With regards to the state of the Ottoman Armenians in Istanbul before and during the 19th century, Jeremy Salt stated the following:

> In Istanbul, Armenians were part of the court circle. They mingled with the Muslims on the basis of equality; they served the sultan as senior bureaucrats; they were the architects of his palaces and even the guardians of his arsenal. The lines of division were socio-economic rather than sectarian: the Armenians of the amira (aristocratic) class in Istanbul and their patrician Muslim counterparts had far more in common with each other than with their impoverished coreligionists in eastern Anatolia.[3]

On the subject of the Armenian insurrectionists, Maxime Gauine explained that The Armenian revolutionaries neglected the demographic balance, ignored the lessons of the past and wrongly believed (after the independence of the Christian Balkan states, the Balkan Wars and the Ottoman defeat at Sarıkamış) that it was their turn. He expressed that, while localized instances of mass murder and intentional neglect against the Armenians did occur, Armenian revolutionary insurrections modeled themselves after uprisings in the Balkans, created mass terrorism, intended to cause bloody reprisals against innocent Armenian civilians, and thus, aimed to provoke foreign intervention. The Armenians' nationalist activities against the Ottoman state existed for five decades (1862-1913), before the continuation of the conflict during the 1915 period.[4]

While there were very few instances in Hagopians films in which the Turks were not depicted in a bad light (such as Hagopian mentioning that his parents were neighbours with a friendly Turkish family whom his father trusted), the Turkish government, soldiers, police and populace were portrayed as evil in varying degrees. Any Armenian fighting was presented as someone who acted in self-defense and claims were made that the Turks were asserting baseless accusations and propaganda when naming the Armenian fighters as rebels. Furthermore, he also claimed that Life went on as usual for the Turks, but for the Armenians, death seemed certain[5], as if the Turks did not suffer from the war losses, atrocities, famine and epidemics during the 1915 period; the reality is that approximately 2-3 million Turks died.

According to Yusuf Sarınay, an instruction of the Ottoman Army Supreme Military Command, delivered on February 27th, 1915 stated that loyal Armenians would not be harmed. Similarly, the Ministry of Interiors well-known circular of April 24th, 1915 emphasized that the authorities should not allow any kind of internal strife between the

Muslims and the Armenians. Sarınay expressed that the various sources he shared were in agreement that those arrested in Istanbul were not ordinary Armenians but insurrectionist committee members. Moreover, Sarınay added that, in between 1915-1916, 1673 individuals were tried by courts-martial for abuses against Armenians.[6] Gauin stated that around 500,000 Armenians were exempted from the relocation according to archival sources. Additionally, Armenians in various positions who were considered loyal (such as civil servants, family members of soldiers, Catholics, Protestants) were also absolved.[7]

It is worth noting that, during a National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) Armenian Studies Panel in 2009, Hagopian stated In 1976, both political parties of Dashnaksutyun and Ramgavar approached me. We were on a plane, coming to establish the Armenian Assembly. They asked will I make a film on genocide.[8] We understand that radical Armenian organizations or figures have approached him on numerous occasions and asked him to produce documentaries for the promotion of the *Hai Tahd* (Armenian Cause). As an Armenian elite in the field of Armenian art, it is expected that this kind of a proposal suited his filmmaking career. Since Hagopian is no exception to the common stance within the Armenian Diaspora of having sympathy and/or connections with radical Armenian organizations and figures, his depiction of Armenian insurgency as self-defense comes as no surprise.[9]

Hagopians documentaries utilize photos, videos, music, sound effects in a way that would raise emotions in Armenian, pro-Armenian and uninformed viewers. Hagopian himself confirmed that his documentaries aimed at pulling the viewers heartstrings. In the mentioned NAASR Armenian Studies Panel, he stated: I did not want you to watch the film as a spectator. I wanted you to be a participant. Thats why the film is perhaps more emotional than the other films that I made..[10] In the ending part of one of his documentaries, the message As a student, what can you do? is displayed. Additionally, his multiple films include the supposed quote that has been claimed to be said by Hitler on August 22nd, 1939 (Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?). This supposed Hitler reference to the Armenians has been debunked on numerous occasions.[11]

Armin Theophil Wegner - A Righteous Defender of Human Rights and Reliable Source?

Hagopian stated in an interview with the USC - SFI that his first interview was with Armin Theophil Wegner.[12] Wegner was a German writer, poet and medic who was stationed in a medical corps in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. He was branded as "the leading eyewitness" by the Armenians and was described as Hagopians inspiration for interviewing Armenian survivors for his documentaries on the events of 1915. Many of the photos that are used in pro-Armenian websites and films, including Hagopians, are claimed to be taken by Wegner during the 1915 Relocation and Resettlement. Short statements of Wegner can be found in the USC Shoah Foundation website and in some of Hagopians films. However, with regards to Wegner, Guenter Lewy stated that the scholar Tessa Hofmann, who was a sympathetic critic of Wegner, described Wegner as a poet who

was prone to "a highly dramatized self-absorption" and his work on the Armenian tragedy as having "pathos and passionate exaggeration". Similarly, German scholar Martin Tamcke expressed that Wegner's work does not constitute as an authentic source on the Armenian relocation and belonged not to history but to "the realm of legends."[13] As to Wegners photos, they are also described as unreliable and not properly documented.[14]

It is important to recall that Wegner testified during the 1921 trial of the Armenian Dashnaksutyun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation - ARF) terrorist, Soghomon Tehlirian.[15] It is also worth mentioning that Tehlirians first assassination (as a part of the Dashnak-planned "Nemesis" operation) victim was not Talat Pasha, but an Armenian named Harootyoun Mugurditchian (Artin Mugerditchian) who was declared to be a traitor by the Dashnaks.

Accounts of Foreign Diplomatic Officials

One needs to keep in mind that the opinions of the foreign diplomatic officials were greatly influenced by their local Armenian personnel. Similarly, due to the interpreters almost always being Armenian, the reliability of the Armenian accounts that reached the diplomatic corps was further diminished. The common instances of inordinate and inappropriate influence by Armenian assistants was also somewhat observable among the foreign officials. For instance, the American consul in Beirut between 1911 and 1917, Mr. Hollis, complained in a report about the excessive impact of the Armenian translator at the American embassy in Istanbul, Arshag K. Schmavonian. Concerning the Armenian functionaries in Istanbul, he also wrote that, regardless of which government they worked for, they had "a reputation throughout the Near East of being extremely slippery and much given to intrigue."[16]

The accounts of foreign diplomatic officials in the Ottoman Empire is among the main elements that was relied upon considerably in Hagopians films. His Voices From The Lake documentary frequently mentioned Leslie A. Davis, who served as the US Consul in Harput from 1914 to 1917. On the one hand, Lewy explained that Davis made repeated efforts to find out for himself what was going on[17], unlike his boss, US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau. On the other hand, similar to Morgenthau, Davis was significantly influenced by missionaries and his Armenian assistants. Regarding Davis claims of witnessing a large number of corpses in the region of Lake Gölcük, Michael M. Gunter is among those who expressed that Davis did not see how and by whom the said corpses were murdered. Davis witnessing of massacres after the fact, in addition to him also being reliant on his Armenian assistants and missionaries for gaining information, need to be taken into account before considering his claims as reliable eyewitness information on the 1915 Events.[18] Other points of contention towards Davis claims include his estimate of the deaths, how he managed to count thousands of corpses in a lake, the plausibility of Davis not taking his photos with him to the US and having his assistant, Garabet Bedrosian, bury them to be dug up afterwards. Davis wrote in his report on July 24th, 1915 that It is impossible to say how many Armenians have been killed, but it is estimated that the number is not far from a million. It is explained that this report was written only

54 days after the law of relocation was published by the Official Gazette.[19] Furthermore, while Davis did blame the murder of the relocated Armenians on Kurds, gendarmes and brigands, however, he suggested in his report that the brigands preyed upon all travelers, not just the Armenians.[20]

The US Consul in Aleppo, Jesse B. Jackson, is another consul mentioned in Hagopians films. Jackson was in contact with US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau and believed that the 1915 Events were ☀ carefully planned scheme to thoroughly extinguish the Armenian race. Jacksons witnessing and reporting of the horrible conditions of the relocated people are not enough to objectively claim an intent to annihilate the Armenian population. Moreover, Jackson has been stated to be an Armenophile and Turcophobe, making him another unreliable source.[21]

In Hagopians film, it is told that the German Consul in Erzurum, Scheubner-Richter, claimed that Turkish and German statements of Armenians being rebels were propaganda. Regarding the German Consul, Sean McMeekin makes a reference to a 1914 report of Scheubner-Richters Russian counterpart in Erzurum, A.A. Adamov. In his 1914 report, Adamov expressed that the Armenian population in many cities, villages and rural areas were awaiting with impatience the arrival of Russian troops who will free them from the Turkish yoke. Furthermore, the Dashnaks of Erzurum had always been wary of Russia and had cultivated strong ties with the German consul.[22]

The account of Henry Morgenthau is one of the most commonly used sources for defending the Armenian thesis. Although it has been concluded for some time that Morgenthaus reports are exaggerated, fallacious and a product of war-time propaganda, references to him can still be seen in current times. One of the works that discredited Morgenthau is Heath W. Lowrys book The Story Behind Ambassador Morgenthau's Story, who compared the Turcophobe Morgenthau's memoir book to the books sources. As a result, Lowry found many discrepancies between the events recorded in Morgenthaus sources and the description of the same meetings and discussions narrated in the book. Morgenthau's Armenian interpreter Schmavonian and Armenian secretary Hagop S. Hagom have also played a major role in the preparation of Morgenthaus book.[23]

It would be safe to say that, in a period of wartime conditions, widespread starvation and diseases (also suffered by the Turkish army), a large number of deaths and observed complicity of many local officials in the murders, mutual clashes and massacres between the Turks, Kurds, Circassians and Armenians (soldiers, tribesmen, brigands, fedayees, civilians), there will likely be some assertions of extermination[24], especially amongst the people who see events through biased eyes.

Narratives of Missionaries

Another factor that was utilized often in the films was the explanations of some missionaries. Lewy confirmed that many missionaries had a strong commitment towards the Armenian Cause. Consequently, many of their writings were less than objective and often led them to push half-truths. Many missionaries devotion to help the Armenians

included reporting events that they could not possibly have observed in person as facts. From the commonly partisan lens of the missionaries, any instance of Armenians using guns was deemed as self-defense, while the Turkish troops were proclaimed as murderers when they used force. Lewy wrote the following description on the missionaries common stance:

> The picture of the Muslims that the missionaries presented frequently conformed to the centuries-old image of "the terrible Turk," while Armenians were regularly depicted as innocent victims and Christian heroes who could do no wrong.[25]

The July 10th, 1915 diary entry of US missionary Tacy Atkinson stating The German the Turk and the devil make a triple alliance not to be equaled in the World for cold blooded hellishness, which was read in Hagopians Germany and the Secret Genocide documentary, is an example reflecting such strong negative bias against the Turks by many missionaries. Another US missionary mentioned in Hagopians film was Mary L. Graffam. What was not included about her in the documentaries was that she wrote a report explicitly denying the involvement of the government or top-rank officials in any criminal acts against the Armenian population.[26] Graffam was one of the few missionaries who truthfully insisted that she had written "only what I have seen and know to be true.[27]

Regarding Armenian Survivor Testimonies and Pro-Armenian Eyewitness Statements

There is no doubt that the numerous statements of the Armenian survivors and pro-Armenian foreigners in Hagopians The Witnesses Trilogy have had a very compelling impact on much of its audiences. While the accounts of the Armenians who escaped from the 1915 Relocation and Resettlement or who survived throughout this period can be an important source of information. Nonetheless, both Armenian and Turkish explanations need to be evaluated objectively and critically. Not all statements may prove to be reliable and may involve discrepancies, obvious afterthoughts, and contradictions. Lewy stated that there was a strong tendency within the European powers to believe anything the suffering Armenians were saying and to disregard Turkish explanations.[28] It would also be plausible to argue that a significant percentage of the Armenian survivors memories may have been influenced by their devotion to the Armenian Cause.[29]

Much of the eyewitness reports on the suffering of the Armenians lacked accuracy of detail or historical context. In spite of this, such reports received wide publicity throughout the West as the war ended. The US High Commissioner Mark Bristol reported in 1920 that Armenian propaganda was flooding Europe and the US. He defined the propaganda as having a one-sided report of crimes, outrages and massacres, which are inaccurate, exaggerated and distorted with claims and statistics that are deceptive and misleading. Additionally, any information without a negative bias against the Turkish side was being suppressed or distorted.[30]

Reliable Scholars in the Documentaries?

The scholars who were quoted the most in Hagopians documentaries were Vahakn Dadrian and Hilmar Kaiser. Dadrian, as well as his apprentice Taner Akçam, earned a highly negative reputation for being inauthentic and conducting practices that were lacking scholarly ethics and overall integrity. Information has been spreading regarding the severe unreliability of Dadrians work on the 1915 Events. Numerous scholars, such as Maxime Gauine, Guenter Lewy, Michael M. Gunter, Andrew Mango, Norman Stone, Gilles Veinstein, Paul Dumont, and Erik Jan Zürcher have contested the authenticity of Dadrians work. Some Armenian and pro-Armenian authors, such as Hilmar Kaiser, Ronald Grigor Suny, Christopher Walker, have also occasionally voiced their skepticism towards Dadrian's studies.[31]

While Kaiser is a supporter of the Armenian thesis, his actions show that he was somewhat of an ambiguous case. He has made criticism towards advocates of the Armenian thesis such as Dadrian, Akçam, and Raymond Kevorkian. Gauin conveyed that Kaiser admitted the diversity of the situations and the efficiency of the protective measures taken by Cemal Pasha in western Syria and Lebanon.[32] On the other hand, he has supported nonsensical Armenian claims and has disregarded evidence that did not suit his aims. These claims included the Andonian Documents, the self-defense of Armenian insurgents in Van, the ARF being loyal to the Ottomans.[33] This is in spite of him having worked in the Turkish archives with much access to reliable historical evidence. There is a possibility that an important factor in Kaisers stance is connected to his grievances over finance and the recognition he has received within the genocide industry he has been serving.[34]

A Good Statement By Hagopian Followed By Non-Reconciliatory Actions

Interestingly, one of the statements made by Hagopian in his introductory video of the AFF website's page titled "Founder" is You cannot create understanding if you do not tell the truth.[35] When Hagopians films contain many claims that are utterly false, debatable, extremely one-sided, and lacking historical context and objectivity, the overall situation seems like his legacy did not act in accordance with his own words. Political propaganda has long continued under the guise of calls for humanity, prevention of violence, seeking justice and understanding. If the AFF and other artistic Armenian organizations are to take heed of the importance of truth and understanding, they would need to prioritize the implementation of objective historical analysis and separate it from the influence of political motivations and incentives. The long-standing method in the radical segments of the Armenian Diaspora of using art as a political propaganda tool is one of the many impediments preventing the normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey.

The relations between the two countries have been going through a constructive and hopeful period from the middle of 2021 onto the beginning of 2022. Normalization between the two neighbours seems to be within reach. Assigned emissaries from both

countries are working hard to bring the two neighbours together. Good neighbourliness between Turkey and Armenia can be achieved, not with the falsification of historical truth, but with the presenting of the facts in an objective manner.

Photograph: J. Michael Hagopian

[1] Sedat Laçiner and Şenol Kantarcı, Art And Armenian Propaganda – Ararat As A Case Study, (*ASAM Institute for Armenian Research, 2002*), pp. 17-18.

[2] The River Ran Red documentary (J. Michael Hagopian) [Timestamp 16:27], youtube.com/watch?v=logrqyLfjyk&t=986s

[3] Jeremy Salt, A Lawyers Blundering Foray Into History, *Review of Armenian Studies, Issue 31, (2015)*, p. 328.

[4] Maxime Gauin, Uneven repression: The Ottoman state and its Armenians, in *A Global History of Relocation in Counterinsurgency Warfare*, ed. Edward J. Erickson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 116-122, 129.

[5] Voices from the Lake documentary (J. Michael Hagopian), [Timestamp 50:30], youtube.com/watch?v=WxXgKzhHb-4&t=3031s

[6] Yusuf Sarınay, What Happened on April 24, 1915?: The Circular of April 24, 1915, and the Arrest of Armenian Committee Members in Istanbul, *International Journal of Turkish Studies Vol. 14, Nos. 1 & 2, 2008*, pp. 75-78.

[7] Gauin, *Uneven repression: The ...,*, p. 126

[8] NAASR Armenian Studies Panel – The River Ran Red [Part 2] 2009 (Timestamp 7:17), youtube.com/watch?v=lSduHInH5Sw&t=436s

[9] For additional information regarding the reverance of terrorism among radical Armenian circles, please see: Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, The Armenian Diaspora And The Veneration Of Terrorists, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM),* Commentary No : 2020 / 2, January 23rd, 2020, avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/THE-ARMENIAN-DIASPORA-AND-THE-VENERATION-OF-TERRORISTS , Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Armenia And The Veneration Of Terrorists – II, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM),* Analysis No : 2019 / 21, September 16th, 2019, avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/ARMENIA-AND-THE-VENERATION-OF-TERRORISTS-II

[10] NAASR Armenian Studies Panel – The River Ran Red [Part 4] 2009 (Timestamp 5:50), youtube.com/watch?v=dxjgcFv9DMc&t=349s

[11] Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey – A Disputed Genocide*(The University of Utah Press, 2005), pp. 264-265.

[12] *University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute*, Day 25 of 30 Days of Testimony: Karen Jungblut on the testimony of Michael Hagopian, sfi.usc.edu/video/day-25-30-days-testimony-karen-jungblut-testimony-michael-hagopian

[13] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", pp. 135-136.

[14] When a reporter from ATA-USA Magazine inquired about the documentation of the Wegner photos to the director of the German museum where the Wegner photo originals are housed (Stutgart's Schiller-Nationalmuseum Deutsches Literaturarchiv), the director replied: Unfortunately, we do not have any indication regarding when or in what country the Wegner photographs were taken. As a result, the dating, and sites depicted must be determined by whoever uses the photos. , *Tall Armenian Tale*, "The Photographic 'Evidence' of Armin Theophil Wegner", tallarmeniantale.com/armin-wegner.htm . On Wegner's 1921 falsification of the "The Apotheosis of War" (Apetheos Vaynt) painting by Vassili Vereshchagin in 1871, also see: Türkkaya Ataöv, Armenian Falsifications, (*Okey Enterprises, 2008*), pp. 11-19.

[15] *TASC TV*, Episode 30 – Armin Theophil Wegner – The Photographer with Blinders and Bias, tasc.tv/episode-30-armin-theophil-wegner-the-photographer-with-blinders-and-bias/

[16] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", p. 146.

[17] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", p. 139.

[18] Michael M. Gunter, *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. 52.

[19] Kemal Çiçek, Relocation Of The Ottoman Armenians In 1915: A Reassessment, *Review of Armenian Studies, Issue 22,* (2010), p. 124.

[20] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", p. 227.

[21] *Tall Armenian Tale*, PBS: The Armenian Genocide (Part II), tallarmeniantale.com/PBS-Armenian-genocide2.htm

[22] Sean McMeekin – *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 164.

[23] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", pp. 141-142.

[24] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", pp. 250-251.

[25] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", pp. 142-144.

[26] Maxime Gauin, Aram Andonians Memoirs of Naim Bey and the Contemporary Attempts to Defend their Authenticity , *Review of Armenian Studies, Issue 23,* (2011), p. 286.

[27] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", p. 144.

[28] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", p. 144.

[29] *Tall Armenian Tale*, The Kaiser Defect, tallarmeniantale.com/GS-Kaiser.htm

[30] Lewy, "*The Armenian Massacres ...*", p. 146.

[31] Gauin, Aram Andonians Memoirs ..., pp. 234-236.

[32] Gauin, *Uneven repression: The ...,*, p. 127.

[33] For more information on the Andonian Documents, please see: Maxime Gauin, Aram Andonians Memoirs of Naim Bey and the Contemporary Attempts to Defend their Authenticity , *Review of Armenian Studies, Issue 23,* (2011), pp. 233-292, concerning the self-defense claim for Armenian insurgents in Van: Ahmet Can Öktem, A Review Of The 1915 Van Revolt - Before And After, Arguments And Distortions, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2021 / 63, September 6th, 2021, avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/A-REVIEW-OF-THE-1915-VAN-REVOLT-BEFORE-AND-AFTER-ARGUMENTS-AND-DISTORTIONS, with regards to the claim of the ARF being loyal to the Ottomans: Ahmet Can Öktem, Co-Founder Of The Armenian Revolutionary Federation And One Of The Precursors Of Armenian Terrorism: Kristapor Mikaelyan, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2021 / 34, April 14th, 2021, avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/CO-FOUNDER-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-REVOLUTIONARY-FEDERATION-AND-ONE-OF-THE-PRECURSORS-OF-ARMENIAN-TERRORISM-KRISTAPOR-MIKAELYAN

[34] *Tall Armenian Tale*, The Kaiser Defect, tallarmeniantale.com/GS-Kaiser.htm

[35] *Armenian Film Foundation*, Founder, armenianfilm.org/drupal/founder

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