Comunicación DESDE LA CAPITAL DE LA REPÚBLICA. NOVES PERSPECTIVES I ESTUDIS SOBRE LA GUERRA CIVIL ESPANYOLA CONGRÉS INTERNACIONAL| Julian Rieck

Football as soft power during the Civil War
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Comunicación

Why a paper on football at a conference about the Spanish Civil War? Hadn’t the outbreak of the war changed the daily life of Spanish people so dramatically that there was no leisure time to play or watch games? Is football still important when it comes to war and mass-murder? And finally: Is sports in general connected to politics at all? In 1990, the sports journalist Carlos Fernández Santander criticized in his book on football during the civil war and francoism that it is often considered that football was suspended with the outbreak of the civil war.¹ The opposite is true. Football has been played during war times and often served as distraction of daily sorrows and struggle. There are several examples which confirm this thesis: The Colombian División Mayor became famous because of the signings of international stars e.g. Alfredo Di Stéfano while in the meantime the brutal civil war had already started in 1946. In Nazi-Germany the last final of the national Championship took place in June 1944. Although by then Berlin was heavily bombed by the airforces of the allies, 90,000 people attended this game in the sold-out Olympic Stadium. Even in the German concentration camps football games took place and in the case of the Theresienstadt concentration camp there existed even an organized league until summer 1944.² And of course, also during the Spanish Civil War football was played. Nevertheless, until today there is a lack of research on sports and football during the Civil War and Francoism even though first investigations are made.³ Not only several competitions organized in the Republican zone but also several tournaments in the National zone. The last game in Barcelona took place on January 8,1939 and thus eighteen days before the city fell to the francoist troops. In Valencia people could watch sports until March 1939.⁴ It seems quite obvious that football simulated normality to the

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population. However, the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 demonstrated the misleading power of sports and its exploitation by the Nazi Regime. Football played also a role when it came to International Relations during the Spanish Civil War. Teams from the Republican and the National side were formed and played abroad to represent either part of the fighting opponents. In this paper, I will analyse the role of Spanish football during the Civil War regarding to the international relations of both sides. How did football affect the international perception of the Civil War and the recognition of the emerging Francoist regime? Furthermore, should the strategies of both sides been examined when the case of who should be the legal representative of Spanish football was negotiated by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA). This paper is based on the documentation of the Archives of the FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Outbreak of the war

When in the broiling hot summer evening of June 21th 1936 Madrid FC defeated the FC Barcelona in the final of the Copa del Presidente de la República in the Mestalla Stadium in Valencia with score of 2:1, the famous picture of goalkeeper Ricardo Zamora saving the last attempt on the Madrid goal seems to foreshadow the events of the Civil War that broke out one month later. It connected the three cities which became capital during the conflict and Zamora stopped the last ball. After the failed coup against the Republic Zamora was immediately imprisoned for his articles in the catholic newspaper Ya. The newspaper ABC de Sevilla published an article shortly after the coup d’etat, claiming the death of Zamora. This false rumour also reached the members of the meeting of FIFA during the Olympic Games in Berlin in August 1936. According to the official Minutes of the Congress, FIFA-president Jules Rimet communicated the death, citing reports given by the German newspapers. Rimet “asked the Delegates to raise from their seats in memory of the deceased sportsman who was not only a remarkable player but also a great representative of our sport and of his country.” In fact Zamora managed it to escape to France with the help of the Argentinian embassy. He played some years in Nice together with the Barca-Legend José Samitier and when he returned to Spain after the war, he became coach of the Selección in 1952.

Several players were surprised by the outbreak of the Civil War during their summer vacation. They were cut off from their clubs and found themselves as thousands of other Spaniards on one of the sides quite accidentally. Albeit there was even a game in Galicia on the day of the coup, during the first chaotic days of the war no games took place. Not only the International Workers’ Olympiads in

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6 Julián A. GARCÍA CANDAU: El deporte..., p. 336
7 FIFA-archive, Minutes of the 23rd Congress held at Berlin on 13th and 14th August 1936, p. 10.
Barcelona, which were planned for the 19th of July 1936, but also the Primera División was suspended. At the outbreak of war, eight of the twelve teams that had participated in La Liga during the 1935-36 season were located within republican zones, two of them – Athletic Bilbao and Racing de Santander – completely isolated and surrounded by rebel forces in the north. But shortly after the stabilisation of the front, everyday life continued under the circumstances of war. The first game in Barcelona was dated on August 16, 1936, not yet a month after the failed coup and in the peak time of the Catalan revolution.  


At the beginning of October, the Campionat de Catalunya started with several Catalan teams.  

10 Madrid FC and Atlético Madrid asked for permission to join the competition but they were rejected. The circumstances are still controversial.

Later during the war, the Lliga Mediterrània and the Copa de la España Libre were introduced in the Republican Zone. With the exception of Sevilla, the cities in which the uprising had been successful did not count as football strongholds. The most important city of Spanish football as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Bilbao and San Sebastián staid loyal to the Republic. Nevertheless, a first tournament in the Nationalist zone, the Campeonato Gallego, started in October in Galicia.  

11 The Valencian team UD Lavante won the Copa de la España Libre in 1937 which was also mentioned in the exhibition „Tot està per fer. València Capital de la República (1936-37)“. Toni Morant y Ariño: Tot està per fer. València Capital de la República (1936-37), Valencia, Catàlegs d’Exposicions, 2016.

What came to rest were games of the national team even though the Seleccion wanted to participate in the 1938 World Cup in France. But the separation due to the war, the circumstances of the revolution taking place in the Republican zone and the fact that some of the best players – forced or coincidentally – found themselves on the Nationalist side, made it impossible to play international matches during the first month of the war. The organization of such games were obviously considered to be less important, but it was assumed that Spain would participate in the FIFA World Cup 1938. Few expected a long and exhausting war.

International Dimension

In April 1937 representative teams for Catalunya and Basque Country left Spain to play exhibition games abroad. Due to place restriction, I will focus here on the Basque Team. In addition, the history of this team is more revealing for the topic of the conference because the team was sent abroad by the Basque Government which was already exiled in Paris at that time whereas the Barcelona Team followed an invitation of a Catalan businessmen.  

12 Carlos Fernández Santander: El fútbol..., p. 22.

The so-called Euskadi went on a voyage through Europe to collect money for the victims of the Civil War and promote the Basque Government. The day before German and Italian Bombers destroyed the holy Basque city of Guernica, the team played

13 For the Basque Team see the letter of Ricardo de Irezabal, Comision Deportiva del Gobierno de Euskadi in Paris Schricker (13th of August 1937), FIFA Archive, Correspondence with national associations (Spain 1935-50), page 130-2, for the Team of Barcelona Josep M. Solé i Sabaté y Jordi Finestres: El Barça en guerra, p. 119.
his first exhibition game in Paris on April 25, 1937, where they met the President of the Basque government in exile. After having played several more games in France, Czechoslovakia and Poland, the players received the message of the fall of Bilbao on July 19, 1937 in Moscow. For most of them, this meant that there was no way to go back home. They continued their trip via Oslo and Copenhagen and came back to France where they got the offer to return to Francoist side without punishment. Only two players accepted the offer. The rest of the team started another tour to Latin America and arrived in Mexico in autumn 1937.  

The international success of the Euskadi team was obviously considered a problem to the Francoist-Propaganda. The amnesty-offer was not the only attempt to stop the team. Meanwhile in San Sebastián, a nationalist Football Federation was established conflicting with the Republican one. In a letter to the FIFA from August 13, 1937, the new president of the rebel’s football association, Julián Troncoso, declared that the “new Executive Committee has been composed” and that “on the same occasion, I want to let you know that our current address is Calle Churrucu n.2, entresol, San Sebastian”.  

FIFA-President Jules Rimet, to whom the letter was addressed, was obviously surprised because the FIFA was in constant touch with Ricardo Cabot, the General Secretary of the Federación Española de Futbol (FEF). Cabot, who was domiciled in Barcelona, was in dealing not only with the topic of the Basque Team but also with the translation of the statutes of the FIFA in Castilian. Because of that, Rimet left the letter and the attempt to gather recognition by San Sebastián unanswered. It is important to notice that the FIFA only allowed one national association for each country. The FIFA needed to figure out what was going on in Spain and which association was legal. Answering San Sebastian would have implied recognition of the Francoist football association. Already in May of the same year there was a newspaper article published in the ABC de Sevilla which condemned the treasurer of the Madrids FEF, Ángel Rodríguez García, of fixing games and the entire board of the republican association of “making politics”, which was considered as a serious accusation in the eyes of the FIFA-functionaries. And also regarding the upcoming events it seemed as if Franco-Spain had tried to disavow the existing Association in Madrid. The first reaction to the Nationalists’ attempt to take the power over the Spanish football was a letter sent by the recently established Consejo Nacional

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15 Letter from Julian Troncoso to the President of FIFA (13th of august 1937), FIFA Archive, Correspondence with national associations (Spain 1935-50), page 121.
16 Both used the abbreviation FEF. For a better understanding the different Federation will be called either San Sebastian or nationalists for the rebels and Madrid/Barcelona or republican for the one republicans one.
17 Several Letters between General Secretary Dr. Ivo Schricker and Ricard Carbot, General Secretary of FEF in Madrid/Barcelona, FIFA Archive, Correspondence with national associations (Spain 1935-50), pages 104-120.
de Educación Física in Valencia from August 15, 1937. In this letter, the Republican side announced the recent establishment of the institution and explained why they had been unable to return to normal business during the first months of the war. They let the FIFA know about their future activity to demonstrate their legal capacity and to see how the FIFA would react and how the relation between the Consejo and the FIFA would look like. The FIFA did not answer either the Republicans nor the Nationalists. Meanwhile the general secretary of the Republican federation, Ricardo Cabot, tried to maintain the communication with the FIFA. At the beginning of September, he wrote a letter to Ivo Schricker, the general secretary of the FIFA, in which he referred to the annulment of all games held by Spanish teams that was apparently declared by FIFA. He regretted that the games played by the Catalan and Basque teams did not receive a provisional authorisation and emphasized that the authorisation given by the Spanish Association was legal. In Cabot’s words the worry of being sanctioned or even dismissed by the FIFA resonates. That preoccupation can also be observed at the end of his letter when he begged Schricker to let him know about the next FIFA Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting at least one month ahead because it might take several weeks to get a permission to leave the besieged Republic. He also stressed that Schricker should assure that his name was on the invitation. Cabot obviously was in fear that he might miss the meeting and the Republicans’ association would thus lose international recognition. He must have known that there had been another Association established by the Nationalists because the creation of this association had been communicated to the public by ABC de Sevilla on August, 27 1937. In his answering letter Schricker did not mention the urgent points of Cabot’s interests and conformed that he would let him know when the Meeting of the ExCom was scheduled. Obviously, the FIFA was seeking to gain time because it was not willing to solve the Spanish problem before their ExCom meeting in November. Finally, the federations of both the Republican and the Nationalist side were invited to Paris. They were obliged to send their point of view to Schricker in paper form before arriving. These letters are stored in the FIFA’s archive and are typical examples of how both sides tried to achieve international recognition in regard of who was representing the “authentic Spain”.

The Republican narrative goes as following: The Military uprising in July 1936 caused “a revolution of chaotic type with disastrous consequences for the country which were not been regulated until the

20 Letter from the President of Consejo Nacional de Educación Física y Deportes to FIFA (August 25, 1937) FIFA Archive, Correspondence with national associations (Spain 1935-50), page 124.
21 Letter from the General Secretary of the FEF in Barcelona Ricardo Cabot to Ivo Schricker, General Secretary of FIFA (September 6, 1937) FIFA Archive, Correspondence with national associations (Spain 1935-50), page 127.
23 Letter from Schricker, to Cabot (23rd of september 1937) FIFA Archive, Correspondence with national associations (Spain 1935-50), page 128.
constitution of the Negrín Government in last May [1937].” In this situation the board took the power of the Spanish football association in Madrid to prevent it from being taken over by “uncontrolled and irresponsible elements”. The dire circumstances of the Civil War impelled the new board to create a Militia which was financed by the Football Association. This Battalion was integrated in the Republican Army under the name of “Batallón Deportivo”. With the Negrín Government in power – according to the Republican’s point of view – “there was the attempt to canalize the movement and establish a socially advanced democracy”. The current board was making “titanic efforts” to restore order and discipline. Concerning the reproach on interfering sports with politics – as already been mentioned one of the heaviest accusation in the eyes of the FIFA –, the Association from Madrid answered as following: “The Spanish Federation has not, is not and will never practice politics with sport” because they were inspired by “the ideal of international brotherhood and national unity, which sports teaches, propagates and symbolizes. Therefore, sportsmen of both sides could never cease to be and to see us as brothers throughout all political differences which at the moment or later on could separate the people of our country.” Even if the association would have had “sectarian intentions after the incidents of 1936”, it would have been “incapable of suspending the clubs that have been disloyal to the government”. These actions would have been in the conformity with the rules. But “that has not even been considered at all, because “in the eyes of the federation all [clubs] belong to their own, torn, but physiologically and spiritually entire and unique body.” For the Association there was no doubt, that they were the only legal one because it was accepted by the Government of the republic which has been recognized by the League of Nations. At the end of the letter, the Republican association proposed four points for a solution:

1. Due to the separation of the country no national competition could be provided, but all regional federations were allowed to play games within the national borders.

2. Regarding the fact that Spain was suffering a fratricidal war, it was impossible to form a single team which could represent Spain as a whole. Because of that, no match could be played until the circumstances would allow „to build a team, that represents the nation in its entirety“.

3. Nevertheless games between regional teams or cities with Spanish or foreign teams are allowed.

4. To organize all current affairs of the Spanish football, a delegation built by the Republican Association should be formed in Paris in order to represent Spain towards foreign and international associations.24

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This statement shows that it was very important for the Madrid Association to stress that they were the one and only legal Football Federation on Spanish soil and that after the revolution during the summer 1936 everything was channelled into calm waters by the new government led by Negrín. They knew that the pictures of revolution taking place in Spain had and still were perceived as a huge threat by the FIFA-functionaries. So, they tried to refute that the anarchist revolution, which was identified with chaos and violence, continued. Furthermore, they tried to convince the members of the ExCom that “order and stability” were restored.

Meanwhile, the Nationalists continued their tactics of accomplishing facts as they had already done in their first letter to the FIFA mentioned above. They argued that the Republicans board had come to power by breaking the rules of the Spanish Football Association and thus was illegal. They accused the Madrid’s association of acting on behalf of the “Party of the Popular Front” and therefore violating the Fifa’s sports ideal. In their letter, they characterized the Madrid’s association as “external” and “foreign” which was acting against the interests of Spanish football. No prove of that was given at all but it matched with the Francoist discourse of the uprising as a struggle of national liberation against a “Bolshevik” and thus “foreign” invasion. In this argumentation, the Republican’s Association formed on August 8, 1936 was illegitimate because the elected board resigned from office and the current board has never been voted for. Naturally, the rebel’s association did not mention the coup against the elected republican government and the circumstances that arose with the outbreak of the war. Instead, they questioned the legitimacy of the new board because it could have only elected by the majority of an assembly. Therefore, the current board “had usurped their functions”. The only resort for this “illegal situation” should be convening an extraordinary meeting which could be achieved by 25 per cent of the votes. On the basis of the dispositions given, an extraordinary assembly was hold in San Sebastian July 12, 1937. The next passage is being quoted entirely because it highlights and summarizes the argumentation exemplarily: “By this assembly, legally convened, legally hold and lawfully constituted, the nomination of an executive board was agreed which composes of personalities who served the National Football for many years and which is requesting from the FIFA under the umbrella of their representation and according to article 9 of the [association’s] statutes the recognition of [the board’s] origin and condition as legal representatives of the Spanish Football Association and the fact that it moves within strict justice.”

25 Xosé M. NÚÑEZ SEIXAS: Fuera el invasor! Nacionalismos y movilización bélica durante la guerra civil española (1936-1939), Madrid, Marcial Pons Historia, 2013.
In the manuscript of the association from San Sebastian both repetitive arguments can be extracted: The legalistic argumentation line and the war against “anarchist chaos” as well as “Bolshevik violence”. Both can not only be found in this case but also in general Francoist discourses when it comes to justify the Franco regime.

On November 6, 1937, the bizarre situation arose in which the two delegations, consisting of Ricard Cabot (General Secretary) and Jean B. Roca (representative for the FIFA) of the Republican association as well as Luciano Urquijo (General Secretary) and Santiago de la Riva (Treasurer) of the rebels’ association, who were representing the fighting parties of the Civil War, were meeting each other in the same room in Paris. The FIFA-ExCom – amongst others – was composed of its President Jules Rimet, the Vice-presidents Giovanni Mauro from Italy and the Belgian Rodolphe Williams Seeldrayers, as well as the Members Rudolf Pelikan from Czechoslovakia and the General Secretary Ivo Schricker. The urgency of the Spanish case can be drawn from the fact that it was agenda topic number 4 in the two-days-meeting directly following the organization of the World Cup 1938 in France which would take place just eight months later. Both reports – quoted and summarized above – had been read to the members of the ExCom before meeting the Spanish representatives. Also, had both parties the chance to present their argumentation separately in a hearing. The republican delegation was asked if there were sporting relation between both associations which was negated. Pelikan asked if it would be possible establishing a single representation of both entities in Paris. Cabot replied that this would be “very difficult.” Seeldrayers then wanted to know if it would be possible to form a national team consisting of players from both sides. Cabot answered that it “might be possible and that FIFA maybe should demand it.” At first glance it seems surprising that the association of the besieged republic took it into consideration to find a compromise on the topic of a unified national team. For Cabot’s reason one can only speculate: Maybe he found himself in a weak position and tried to strengthen it by showing good will towards FIFA. Or he really believed in coming to a compromise with the rebel’s association and that sports could help to overcome the differences between both “fratricidal” parties. What sounds farfetched and so much out of sync with reality, might have played a role in the thinking of the sports functionary of that time. Certainly, he was convinced that the association he was representing had the explicit claim of sole legitimate representation for Spanish football and thus should be consist of all Spanish players, even those under rebel’s control. The picture of the torn but unique body let no doubt about this interpretation. In his eyes the consequences of regarding football as apolitical were, that one team should represent Spain as a whole and the legal, internationally recognized representative was the Republic.

After Cabot and Roca had left the room, the rebel’s delegation was sent in. They highlighted their argument that the vast majority of the subfederations (by now 14 of 18) and clubs of Spanish football
(600 of 800) were now under their control without mentioning by what means this was made possible: Not by free will, namely deciding to which federation they want to belong but by being forced as consequence of being conquered by the Francoist army. The question if it would be possible to establish a representation combined of both parties was negated by the representatives of the Francoist side. After the hearings, the ExCom-members discussed the case by themselves. President Rimet stated that a collaboration of both association was impossible and that the “internal situation in Spain does not matter to us”. Thus, he came up with the proposal to recognize both associations. Mauri, who regarding to the official FIFA-History “always gave strong support to the Franco Movement”27, supported the president’s idea. Only Seeldrayers was concerned that it might “not be very wise to retract the former decision [he refers to first rule of FIFA-Statutes that just allows the recognition of one single association for each country] and that it might create a dangerous precedential case”. Seeldrayers intervention was not successful and the final decision of the ExCom was to recognize two football associations in Spain. Then, both delegations entered the room together and were informed about the result. Unfortunately, the minutes do not describe the reaction on the FIFA decision. For the republican association, this decision was a huge defeat because it included the recognition of the rebel’s federation and thus an equation of both. Why did the FIFA decide this way? Did they try to support the Francoists? In the documentation there is no evident of such attempts. Even if the functionaries of the FIFA were rather conservative, bourgeois or aristocratic and probably did not have too much sympathy with the left republic, it is more plausible that they really believed in the apolitical and peace-bringing function of football or sports in general even if the Olympics in Berlin one year ago must have shown them the opposite. Literature about the functionaries of the FIFA is few. They would help to approach the answer to the question why they decided how they did. The estimate of the world view of General Secretary Ivo Schricker described in the short biography “Dr. Ivo Schricker. Ein Deutscher in Diensten des Weltfußballs” by Henry Wahlig28 might help to understand it. Following this characterisation Schricker was an „always carefully weighing, diplomatically-correct acting“ and “cosmopolitan” person who defended FIFAs independence against attempts to take over the power by the Nazi-Germany.29 These people – as other actors in international politics as for example in the League of Nations – hoped that peace could be preserved by negotiations and balance of power. The might have underestimated the consequences of this apolitical world view and that throughout their acting they allowed the exploitation of sports by the fascists who were being on the rise everywhere in Europe. In the Spanish case, on one hand, it would be too farfetched that the

29 Ibid. p. 197, p. 199 and p. 201.
recognition of the Francoist Association could be seen in direct line with the international recognition by France and England on February 27, 1939. On the other hand, official football matches surely functioned as means to accustom the population in the rebel zones to new gestures, ceremonies as well as rituals and thus to the new circumstances. This argument can be reinforced by taking the contemporary newsletter articles into consideration which describe quite vivid how fascists salute, hymns, march-past etcetera were introduced via football matches. With the permission by the FIFA, the rebels’ team was now allowed to play international games as they did for example in Vigo against Portugal on November 28, 1937 or in matches against regional teams within the Francoists zone. The territory conquered by the rebels was not yet “una, grande y libre” but, from then on, the Francoist football association was a member of an internationally respected organization with around 50 members. This could have functioned as source for gathering further recognition and attention. Furthermore, the interfering of the Association from San Sebastián also showed another success: The rebels association avoided that a Spanish national team could be sent to France to represent the Republic internationally.

The situation obviously was different in the case of the Spanish National Olympic Committee (Comité Olímpico Español, COE) where the General Secretary Josep Mesalles Estivill left Barcelona to first find refuge in fascist Italy and later entered theFrancoist zone to establish a new COE also in San Sebastian. The IOC in Lausanne was aware of the plans of Mesalles by April 21, 1937 at the latest and supported him as far as they could. Probably they ignored attempts to get in touch with them by the republican COE from Barcelona which was official still member of the IOC. When Mesalles arrived in San Sebastian, he organized the establishment of a new National Committee at the end of November 1937 which was recognized by the IOC shortly after. Here it is obvious that the IOC promoted the rebel’s governing sports body. At this time it could count as a huge victory regarding the fact, that until then the Olympics had gained much more prestige than a potentially participation at the football World

32 See Carlos Fernández Santander: El fútbol durante la guerra civil y el franquismo and Julián A. García Candau: El deporte en la guerra civil which are mainly based on newspaper articles.
33 Alfonso del Castillo: “1938. La gira del equipo nacional por Andalucía y Norte de Africa (I)”, Revista de CIEFE, 76 (2016).
34 Letter from the President Henri de Baillet-Latour to General Secretary (April 21, 1937) and vice versa (June 21, 1937), IOC-Archive, Sign.: PT-BAILL-CORR - 1937.
35 Letters from President Henri de Baillet-Latour to the General Secretary (September 14, 1937), IOC-Archive, Sign.: PT-BAILL-CORR – 1937. In that letter the IOC-President told his General Secretary not to answer a wire because it might be from “the reds, do not send them anything.”
Cup, even if the Spanish athletes did not belong to the promising candidates to win gold medals. Here the acting of the IOC was much more an intentional interfering in the valuation of the Francoist side.

Conclusion

This paper – adopting a micro-perspective on multinational sports federations – argues that sports in general and football in this particular case can be seen as one means to gather international prestige and recognition. The apolitical discourse of the FIFA and the admission of the Francoist Football Association as a second member of the same country in the world federation enabled the rebels to exploit football for political ends. The Francoist side used a legalistic argumentation and represented themselves as the only force capable to maintain law and order with the intention to be recognized by the FIFA as the legitim representative of Spanish Football. Without overestimating the role of football in international politics this strategy has been one of the first attempts of the rebels to gain international recognition and to be regarded as the new ruling power in Spain. Thus, this investigation also provides an important complement to the latest research on the alternative diplomacy during early Francoism because it shows that the means of gaining international recognition already begun during the Civil War and were not just forced by the boycott of Spain by the United Nations 1946.37

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Archives
FIFA Archive Zurich
IOC Archive Lausanne

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