

**FOREIGN MILITARY FORMATIONS OF THE SS
– «EUROPEAN ARMY» OF THE THIRD REICH
(1939–1945)**

**ІНОЗЕМНІ ВІЙСЬКОВІ ФОРМУВАННЯ СС
– «ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКА АРМІЯ» ТРЕТЬОГО РЕЙХУ
(1939–1945 РР.)**

Hetmanchuk M. P.,

Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Lviv Polytechnic National University (Lviv, Ukraine), e-mail: hetmanchukm@ukr.net, ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-002-2627-8161>

Гетьманчук М. П.,

доктор історичних наук, професор кафедри політології та міжнародних відносин, Національний університет «Львівська політехніка» (Львів, Україна), e-mail: hetmanchukm@ukr.net, ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-002-2627-8161>

The policy of Nazi Germany on the creation and use of the foreign armed formations of the SS during the Second World War has been analyzed. The motives and purposes of foreign citizens being in the SS military formations have been highlighted. Particular attention has been paid to the issue of recruitment of foreign citizens in the divisions of the SS troops, their place in the aggressive plans of the Nazi leaders of the Third Reich.

Keywords: Second World War, Third Reich, collaborationism, SS troops, foreigners in SS troops.

Проаналізована політика нацистської Німеччини щодо створення та використання іноземних збройних формувань СС в роки Другої світової війни. Висвітлено мотиви й цілі перебування іноземних громадян у військових формуваннях СС. Особливу увагу приділено проблемі комплектування іноземними громадянами дивізій військ СС, їх місця в агресивних планах нацистського керівництва Третього Рейху.

Ключові слова: Друга світова війна, Третій Рейх, колабораціонізм, війська СС, іноземці у військах СС.

(стаття друкується мовою оригіналу)

Problem statement. The issue of use of «foreign volunteer formations» by Nazi Germany as part of its armed forces is the least investigated and the most debatable in the history of the Second World War. The status of such foreign military formations and their rights, to a large extent, were determined by the then state or non-state status of their peoples. Domestic researchers of the issue distinguish between the two categories of the national military in the German Third Reich troops: 1) allies – nominally independent, whose interests A. Hitler and his entourage should have taken into account in their aggressive foreign policy; 2) volunteers – considered as stateless persons (apatrides), representatives of stateless peoples of the occupied countries, especially representatives of those peoples whose lands were part of the USSR as of June 22, 1941 [3, p. 187]. In relation to the peoples of the USSR, A. Hitler formulated his policy in the mid-1920s: «We, National Socialists ... when we speak of the conquest of new lands in Europe, of course we mean, first and foremost, Russia and those subordinated states around it ...» [5, p. 664–665].

Research results. The most precise definition of the concept of «foreign volunteer formations in

the German Armed Forces» is presented in the work by B. Müller–Hillebrand, the former head of the organizational unit of the General Staff of the German Wehrmacht: «Foreign volunteer formations are the formations of foreign citizens and servicemen united within the German land, military air, naval forces and the SS, or in the form of separate military formations, most of which had German personnel, or were individually included in parts of the German operating army, aviation and fleet» [16, p. 86]. The process of attracting foreign volunteers to the SS was mainly influenced by the two factors: 1) political – had a propagandistic nature associated with the efforts of the Nazi leaders of the Third Reich to prove that Germany was supported by all the peoples of the world, since foreign volunteers fought on its side; 2) military – conditioned by the need to replenish the SS personnel after losses incurred in the line.

The researchers of the issue distinguish three stages of the involvement and participation of foreign volunteers on the side of Nazi Germany: 1) since the fall of 1940, SS troops began to enlist representatives of the so-called «Aryan» peoples –Dutch, Flemish, Danes, Swedes, Norwegians; 2) since June 1941, SS troops formed volunteers formations from Western European non-Aryan and Balkan peoples under the slogan of the «Crusade against Bolshevism» (volunteers from France, Belgium, Spain, Finland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Albania, Croatia, Bosnia); 3) in the fall of 1941, the so-called «Eastern forces» were formed under the slogan of the «Fight against Bolshevism» from among the prisoners of war of the Red Army and the civilian population of the occupied territories of the USSR [25, p. 14 to 15].

It is known that the first SS divisions were formed only from the members of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) and the SS (NSDAP security detachments), but after the defeat of the German troops under Stalingrad, the SS troops began to change and were fundamentally different from the SS troops of the first two years of the Second World War. If in 1940–1941 the number of SS troops equaled the quantity of one army of the Wehrmacht, and at the end of 1942 – the group of armies, in 1943–1944 SS troops formed a kind of «fourth branch of troops» of the Third Reich's Armed Forces. Indicative is a threefold growth of the number of SS divisions: 1) for the period from September 1939 to March 1943, eight SS divisions were formed; 2) by January 1944 – seventeen; 3) by the mid 1944 twenty three SS division had already been formed. H. Himmler called such an increase in the number of SS divisions in the autumn of 1943 just «impressive» [3, p. 391]. With the creation of the 13th Muslim SS division *Handshar* in 1943, the office of H. Himmler finally came to a compromise in racial issues and began using the Slavs in SS troops, especially the citizens of the USSR [9, p. 168].

In 1943–1944, most of the foreign SS formations were conventionally divided into several groups: 1) Northern and Western European foreign divisions of the SS; 2) Eastern, Southeastern European foreign divisions of the SS. Subsequently, observing the racial criteria, H. Himmler's office divided all the formation

of the SS into three groups: 1) purely German and Germanic, soldiers and officers of which were the SS members, and the «SS Division» became the approved name for them (e.g., Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5); 2) German and Germanic formations, each of which was treated as a voluntary SS division (e.g., Nos. 7, 11, 22, 23); 3) non-German and non-Germanic formations, the official name of which was originally simply the SS, and subsequently the annex «Waffen» SS (troops) was added (French, Albanian, Bosnian, Ukrainian, Russian, Baltic divisions, etc.). In order to distinguish German and Germanic divisions from all foreign SS formations, two Latvian (Nos. 15 and 19), Estonian (No. 20), Ukrainian (No. 14), Albanian (No. 21), Bosnian (No. 23) divisions of the SS troops were renamed. Each of them, instead of the volunteer SS division, began to be called the «Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS» [3, p. 393]. All the representatives of non-Germanic (non-Aryan) peoples, after their admission to the national SS formations (French, Bosnian, Albanians, Estonians, Latvians, Russians, Ukrainians, etc.) received military titles with the «Waffen» prefix.

Foreign citizens of different states serving in the SS national formations had a lot in common, but also in many respects differed from German soldiers and officers. Compared to German or Germanic (ethnic Germans – «Volksdeutsche») SS servicemen, they expressed the least desire to fight precisely for the interests of the Third Reich, since their stay in the SS foreign divisions was most often conditioned by their own idealistic or materialist motives [30, p. 28–31; 32, p. 601–612; 35, s. 9]. In addition, German generals often considered foreign soldiers of the SS divisions as faulty servicemen in comparison with the Germans. They took military oath that was different from the oath of the German SS soldiers (the words «in the fight against Bolshevism» were added to the oath of loyalty to A. Hitler). The linguistic and mental differences between foreign soldiers and SS officers mattered. Ideological propaganda in such formations was predominantly adapted to the political, national and religious aspirations of foreign military personnel. The majority of foreign volunteers joined the SS forces not because of commitment to the National Socialism, but mainly for anti-Bolshevik beliefs. The other part was forcibly mobilized to the SS formations in the occupied countries. Many such «volunteers» got into SS formations under pressure (Soviet prisoners of war, who were in German camps, were thus trying to save their lives). In general, foreign military SS formations did not have any kind of common and unifying ideology. It was after the war that L. Degrell (commander of the 28th SS Volunteer Grenadier Division Wallonia), the Belgian supporter of A. Hitler, branded it a major «European volunteer movement» to combat Bolshevism [6, p. 7–9].

A fundamental difference from the purely German SS divisions has become the Institute of Military Chaplains for the Muslim and Christian foreign SS formations introduced by the Office of H. Himmell in 1943. The SS Command successfully used Islam, which promised the heaven to all who died in fights

with the infidels. Therefore, the Muslim divisions of the SS in the Balkans, as a rule, were used against Orthodox Serbs, communist guerrillas. After the Bosnian and Albanian Muslim divisions Waffen-SS were organized, the imam post was established in each of their squadrons, and mullah in each company [25, p. 129–130]. Military chaplains at the level of foreign Waffen-SS divisions received a military rank from Waffen-Sturmbannführer (major) to Waffen-Untersturmführer (lieutenant) [3, p. 394]. Some Muslim religious figures in the 13th division of the Waffen-SS *Handschar* were even awarded the German Iron Cross 2nd class, and the Bosnian mufti Halim Malkoč was awarded the honorary rank of the Lieutenant General of the SS Troops [14, p. 269; 10, p. 131]. The paradoxical situation surrounding the establishment of the Chaplain Institute was that all the leaders of the SS were constantly proud of their negative attitude and denial of any religion [34, p. 299–300].

The foreign military SS servicemen, naturally, had the question whether they really were a prototype of the New European Army and what place they would get in the «reformed» one by the Third Reich in the post-war Europe. In other words, what they would get for service in the SS troops. The very idea of the European cooperation and integration did not coincide with the some racist concepts of the NSDAP. At the same time, many senior NSDAP functionaries were advocates of close European integration [23, p. 259–260]. However, such proposals were confronted with the misunderstanding of A. Hitler. The special D department, dealing with the issues of foreign volunteers, was set up at the SS General Directorate. Along with this, it conducted works on the elaboration of the basic concepts of the post-war reconstruction of Europe. It was in this department that the so-called European Charter (the Declaration of Charlottenburg) was drafted in 1944, which proclaimed that the leadership of the Third Reich, together with the governments of friendly states – Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Bohemia and Moravia, Italy, France, Hungary, Romania and Croatia – decided to announce five fundamental rules, six fundamental freedoms and seven fundamental rights, which Europe will be built up on after the victory of its armies [20, p. 248–250].

According to the European SS concept, after the victory over communism in Europe, the European Reich would be created, which would exist in the form of the confederation. It was planned to introduce a single European currency and administration in it, create a joint police force and army, which would include national military formations. The theories of the SS functionaries developed this way had to be implemented by SS soldiers on the battlefield. It was in the SS troops that the principle of building a new united Europe was most consistently proclaimed. The Nazi SS ringleaders realized that foreign citizens in the SS were the representatives of their peoples, and the European unity could only be achieved for them through equality, not through the domination of the Third Reich over other nations. L. Degrell aptly described the process of transforming SS troops from a purely German organization into a pan-European one

with the following words: «Volunteers rushed from all parts of Europe to help their German brothers. It was then that the Third Great Waffen SS was born. The first was German, the second – Germanic, and the third one was the European Waffen-SS» [22, p. 274].

The senior leaders of the SS first of all focused their attention beyond the Third Reich, where hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans, citizens of different European states lived. In the H. Himmler's Office they were called «Volksdeutsche» in contrast to «Reichsdeutsche», who lived in Germany. Ethnic Germans («Volksdeutsche») were not united in divisions on a territorial basis, but were sent to all SS divisions. An exception was the military SS formation of «Volksdeutsche» who lived in the Balkans – the 7th Volunteer Division *Prinz Eugene*. Subsequently, new SS divisions were made from the «Volksdeutsche»: the 8th SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, the 22nd SS Volunteer Cavalry Division *Maria Theresia*, the 26th SS Grenadier Division *Hungaria*, SS Volunteer Grenadier Division *Bohemia and Moravia*, and others. Senior officers in such divisions were, as a rule, «Reichsdeutsche». Researchers state that 122,460 Volksdeutsche from different countries served in the SS troops by the end of year 1943. Given this, it can be argued that more than 180 thousand «Volksdeutsche» served in the SS troops [21, p. 175–176; 27, p. 225–226; 36, p. 24–25]: Denmark – 1,292 people; Slovakia – 5,390 people; Hungary – 40,125 people; Romania – 54,000 people; Serbia (including SS police forces) – 21,516 people; Croatia – 17,537 people; Poland – 5,000 people; Czech Republic – (including Slovakia) – 45,000 people; Western Europe – 16,000 people; France – 84 people; Scandinavian countries – 775 people; Great Britain – 10 people; USSR – 20,000 people; non-European countries – 32 people.

When the SS started recruiting «Volksdeutsche», this led to a significant increase in the number of recruits. The process of recruitment of «Volksdeutsche» into the SS troops can be divided into two stages: 1) voluntary (1941–1943); 2) forced (1943–1945). It should be noted that it caused many problems. Despite their ethnic roots, many Volksdeutsche recruits had only elementary knowledge of German, and strict discipline, which was typical for the SS troops, often made their motivation lower than that of soldiers of the Western foreign legions. Some Volksdeutsche units fought bravely, but, in general, the reputation of ethnic Germans («Volksdeutsche») was ambiguous [1, p. 18–19]. Officers of the SS divisions noted that some part of Volksdeutsche did not consider the war to be theirs and did not want to consider their service in the SS troops as a duty to German people [31, p. 404].

The Reichsführer–SS H. Himmler, in turn, accused the SS generals and officers of not being able to prepare Volksdeutsche for service in the SS troops [19, p. 340]. In 1943–1944 the bulk of the «Volksdeutsche» was sent for replenishment of the striking panzer and panzer-grenadier SS divisions. Only the 2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich* received replenishment of 9,000 «Volksdeutsche» – ethnic Germans from Hungary, Romania and Alsace, in the spring of 1944. The representatives of 14 different nationalities served

in this elite SS division [4, p. 305]. Despite some difficulties in the process of their training, most of them showed resilience and courage in the battlefield in 1944–1945 [33, p. 141]. During the Second World War, 18 ethnic Germans – «Volksdeutsche» earned Knight's Crosses, and one of them was the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves [21, p. 230–231]. A total of six divisions were established in the SS troops, whose personnel consisted mostly of ethnic Germans – «Volksdeutsche».

Prior to the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, three volunteer legions and corps of foreign citizens were set up in the SS. They constituted SS units from one battalion to the regiment: 1) SS – *Standarte Nordwest*, the formation of which began on April 3, 1941 in Hamburg; 2) SS Volunteer Legion *Nederland*, the creation of which began on June 12, 1941 in the area of Krakow; 3) Finnish Volunteer Battalion of the SS, whose volunteers began to come from Finland to Germany in May 1941 [25, p. 324–335]. In this period, only the SS Panzer Division *Wiking* was considered a single unique formation in the SS in 1940, since it consisted of foreign volunteers of Aryan origin from the occupied countries of Northern Europe. Norwegians and Danes arrived in the summer of 1940 to serve in the SS Regiment *Nordland*, and the Dutch and Belgians participated in the formation of SS Regiment *Westland* [24, p. 52].

After the attack on the USSR, the SS leadership began to form new corps and legions of foreign volunteers from the occupied countries of Western Europe already in 1941: 1) SS Volunteer Legion *Flandern* (August 1941); 2) SS Volunteer Corps *Denmark* (July 1941); 3) SS Volunteer Reserve Battalion (December 1941); 4) SS Volunteer Legion *Norway* (August 1941). Having started recruiting among the members of the far right European parties in 1941, H. Himmler's Office proposed to join the «crusade» against Bolshevism, promised to grant German citizenship and prospects after the termination of service in the SS under the contract. In 1943, the stated foreign legions after the great loss of personnel were withdrawn from the Eastern Front. The SS commanders began forming the Volunteer Grenadier divisions of the SS on their base: the 11th SS Division *Nordland*, the 23rd SS Division *Netherlands*, the 27th SS Division *Langemarck*, the 28th SS Division *Wallonia*, and the 34th SS Division *Landsturm Nederland* [11, p. 208–21, 240–247, 250–260].

The formation of the French volunteers of the 33rd Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS *Charlemagne* also had some features. Unlike the Dutch, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes and British, the Nazi authorities did not recognize the French as «aryan» (Germanic) nation. Therefore, until 1944, French volunteers served in the German Wehrmacht [2, p. 41, 267–295]. In August 1944, A. Hitler ordered to transfer all foreign military formations of the Wehrmacht to the SS. Due to the redistribution of French volunteers from the Wehrmacht and the SS units, the Grenadier Division of the SS *Charlemagne* was formed on February 2, 1945 [1, p. 160].

The researchers rightly point out that one of the most important aspects of studying the issue of

foreigners' participation in the SS is the establishment of their number for the period of 1938–1945. Given the difference in the calculations, one can agree, in general, with the figures provided by the Russian researcher K. Semenov. He argues that the number of all foreign citizens of different countries in the SS troops during the Second World War, including the ethnic Germans – «Volksdeutsche», amounted to about 530 thousand people [27, p. 210–239; 36, p. 27–28]: the Dutch – 25,000 people; the Walloons – 7,825 people; the French – 10,000 people; the Italians – 20,000 people; the Danes – 6,000 people; the Finns – 1,300 people; the Swedes 120 people; the Swiss – 800 people; the Spanish – 500 people; the English – 60 people; the Indians – 3,000 people; Iceland, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Faroe Islands, Poland – 3,000 people; the Albanians – 9,275 people; the Croats – 29,000 people; the Serbs – 9,000 people; the Bulgarians – 800 people; the Romanians – 5,700 people; the Hungarians – 41,000 people; the Czechs – 900 people; the Latvians – 45,000 people; the Estonians – 25,000 people; the Ukrainians – 28,000 people; the Cossacks – 35,000 people; the Russians and Byelorussians – 28,000 people; the Asians and Turks – 8,500 people.

In total, according to relevant studies about 2 million foreign citizens – most voluntarily, and the rest as a result of various conscription campaigns, served in the German Armed Forces during the Second World War [17, p. 282]. 1.2 to 1.5 million citizens of the USSR among them participated in various units of the German Armed Forces. Most likely, this figure is 1,178,000 of Soviet citizens who served in the German forces in Wehrmacht, the SS and the police [7, p. 523–524; 13, p. 151–176; 18].

It is also necessary to consider the participation of foreign citizens in special units of the SS and the General Directorate of Imperial Security – RSHA. These formations, though they were part of the SS, were subordinate to the RSHA. A large number of foreigners were sent to special units of the SS during the war [10, p. 803]. In 1942, the RSHA set up special courses *Oranienburg* to train foreigners from the SS to sabotage and guerilla activities, which in April 1943 was headed by the Hauptsturmführer SS O. Skorzeny. He reformed the courses and in August 1943 renamed them into a *Fridental* special unit [28, p. 185, 571]. Foreigners from special purpose units of Abver – «*Brandenburg – 800*» were included in the structure of such special units of the SS in 1943–1944. Ten foreign companies were transferred from the *Brandenburg – 800* to the special units of the SS: *France – West, France – North, France – South, Italy*, companies of snipers *Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Baltics*, battalion *Yugoslavia*. The main task of this union was the preparation of saboteurs for conducting special operations along the front line [29, p. 347–348; 12, p. 58–60].

In autumn of 1944, it was decided to unite all SS sabotage units into the SS fighter unions. Several sabotage fighter unions were formed on its basis under the direction of the operational headquarters *Fridental*: 1) SS *Mitte (Center)* union (headquarters, machine gun, 3 German and 4 foreign companies); 2) SS

Nordwest union (4 German and 4 foreign companies (the Belgians, the Flemish, the Danes, the French, the Norwegians), and 3) SS *Ost (East)* union consisting of three divisions: the Baltics – *Ostland*; Russian – *Russia*; Polish – *Poland*; 4) SS *Südost* union consisting of 6 units: Slovak, Serbian – Croatian, Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Albanian; 5) SS fighter squad *Danube* (made of the Hungarians and soldiers of the Russian Liberation Army), and 6) SS *Südwest* union, created on the basis of the sabotage corps *Southern France* (consisting of the *Pyrenees* group and the 23rd Russian SD battalion [8, p. 805–811].

It is safe to assert that by the end of the Second World War, the number of foreign citizens in the SS (530,000 people) significantly exceeded the number of imperial Germans. Among the 38 SS divisions, only 20 were purely German [20, p. 226]. It should be noted that a large number of foreigners also served in these German divisions of the SS [15, p. 407–411; 26, p. 109–257]. It is worth stating that three out of 18 foreign SS divisions were formed twice with citizens from different countries: 1) the 23rd division of the SS *Kama* (Croatian No. 2) was formed on June 17, 1944, from volunteers – «Volksdeutsche», Croats and Bosnian Muslims. However, on September 29, 1944 it was disbanded and the number was transferred to the 23rd SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division *Nederland*; 2) the 29th Grenadier Division of the SS troops was created in August 1944 from the servicemen of the Russian Liberation Army, but it was disbanded already in the fall and the number was handed over to the 29th Italian Grenadier Division of the SS; 3) The 30th Grenadier Division of the SS (Russian No. 2) was created on the basis of the *Siegling* Police Brigade in August 1944, but it was disbanded. In March 1945, the Belarusian 30th Grenadier Division of the SS was set up on its basis [1, p. 148–158]. The vast majority of foreign SS divisions were formed from citizens of Eastern Europe and the USSR. Eight of them were formed as Grenadier divisions of the SS troops. These may include the 14th, 15th, 19th, 20th, 25th, 26th, 29th, 30th divisions of the SS troops. The peculiarity of these SS divisions was that they, unlike other SS divisions, consisted of three regiments. Volunteer Grenadier SS Divisions – 27th, 28th, 34th were formed from citizens of Western Europe [27, p. 228–229].

Most foreign divisions and individual units of the SS, with a few exceptions, were used by the German Command only on the Eastern Front. Only 3 foreign divisions fought against the Allied troops on the Western Front: 1) the Dutch 10th Volunteer Brigade of the SS *Landstorm Nederland* (since February 1945 the 34th Volunteer Grenadier Division of the SS *Landstorm Nederland*); 2) the Italian 29th Grenadier Division of the SS; 3) the Russian 30th Grenadier Division of the SS (from the second half of 1944 participated in the battles in France). The 7th Division of the SS *Prinz Eugen*, the 13th *Handshar*, the 21st *Scanderbeg*, the 23rd *Kama*, the Serbian Volunteer Corps of the SS, the Indian Legion of the SS formed in the Balkans fought against the guerrillas [1, p. 122–133, 143–162, 185].

It should be emphasized that the personnel of the West European divisions and units of the SS was

distinguished in the battles with the enemy by its courage and fanaticism. This was particularly evident in 1944 during hostilities against the Red Army in Narva and in Pomerania. Subsequently, historians will call the battle of Narva «The Battle of European SS», since there participated the subdivisions of all Western European SS formations: 1) the 5th SS Volunteer Assault Brigade *Wallonia*; 2) the 6th SS Volunteer Assault Brigade *Langemarck*; 3) the 4th SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Brigade *Nederland*; 4) the 11th SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division *Nordland*; 5) the Estonian 20th Grenadier Division of the SS [24, p. 189]. The Baltic Grenadier Division of the SS (Latvian 15th and 19th, Estonian 20th) fought fierce battles with the Red Army during 1943–1944.

Conclusions. Military collaborationism, along with its other manifestations, has a special place in the study of the history of the Second World War. It should be noted that until now, no uniform principle has been developed for defining military collaborationism in relation to various categories of foreign citizens who fought in the SS. For example, Hungarian, Romanian, Croatian, and Finnish volunteers in the SS troops should not fall under the definition of collaborationism at all, because their countries were closely connected with Nazi Germany by treaties and allied relations. Cooperation with the enemy for representatives of European nations with states was, first of all, a choice that violated the civic duty towards their own state. There was no classical collaborationism on the territory of the USSR. The cooperation of the peoples of the USSR (Belarusians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Estonians, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Tatars, etc.) with the Nazis was considered collaborationism only in the Soviet historiography. They did not betray their states, because these states did not exist. The question is to what extent the behavior of the representatives of these peoples was voluntary, and to what extent it was forced and to what extent it reflected the attitude of the society towards the German invaders. The foreign volunteers became a powerful source of replenishment of the elite military formations of the SS. The SS troops also most consistently proclaimed and embodied the Nazi principle of building the «New Unified Europe» under the auspices of the Third Reich.

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