

Original Paper

Mongolia's Road to Independence: The Power Bargains Between China and Russia

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Abstract

Since 1691, when the Qing Empire of China merged with Mongolia, the Chinese government always considered Mongolia an integral part of China. However, after the Qing Dynasty collapsed, Mongolia started to seek its independence, and finally be recognized as an independent regime from China in 1946. This article examines the question of how Mongolia achieved independence through the perspective of power bargains between great powers, China and Russia, in a historical context. Initially, this article analyzes how the Russian Empire expanded its sphere of influence in Mongolia after the mid-19th century and provoked the conflicts between Mongolians and the Qing Empire. In the meanwhile, the Qing empire's reformation in the late 19th century put sizable economic pressures on Mongolians, which exacerbated the relationship between the two sides further. Between 1911 to 1945, immediately after the Qing Empire collapsed, Mongolia claimed its sovereignty with the support of Russia, but the new Chinese government had never recognized Mongolia as an independent country during this period. It was not until the Yalta Conference, however, since the United States eagerly needed the Soviet Union to dispatch its troops against Japan, that Roosevelt pressured the Chinese Government to accept Stalin's requirement of recognition of Mongolia's sovereignty.

Keywords

Mongolian History, Sino-Russia Relations, Power Bargains

1. Introduction

Mongolia is a significant country bordered by China and Russia. The Mongolian people are the descendants of Genghis Khan. Mongolia has a glorious history and possesses strategic mineral resources. Throughout history, the Qing empire of China always considered this region as part of China's hegemony. Due to a series of historical events, Mongolia successfully achieved its independence from China in 1945.

In order to clearly understand the status quo in Mongolia today better, it is necessary to explore the reasons that caused Mongolia to achieve its independence from a historical context. Therefore, this essay will analyze and describe the crucial events and reasons that led to the independence of Mongolia through different historical periods.

This presentation will describe how Mongolia achieved independence through a series of bargains that were made between China and Russia. Historically, when we analyzed a nation's independence, we paid more attention to domestic factors. However, when analyzing Mongolia's independence movement, through the various bargains made between China and Russia, a new perspective emerges.

2. Research Design

This paper will discuss in depth three important historical periods, which led to Mongolia's independence. The first historical period occurred in the late 19th century until 1911. In this period, our report analyzes the origin of Russia's intervention in the region, which we now call Mongolia as well as how the Qing government mishandled its policy towards the Mongolian people. This caused the Mongolian people to become gradually dissatisfied with how the Qing Empire ruled the country. In 1911, the Qing dynasty was overthrown during the Xinhai Revolution. Russia seized this opportunity to provide Mongolia financial assistance and military support, so that Mongolians could launch the first step towards seeking independence. The second historical period impacting Mongolia's independence started in 1912 and concluded in the late 1920s. During this time period, China reasserted its dominance over Mongolia. However, the Chinese civil war, which broke out after Yuan Shikai's death in 1916, severely hampered the ability of the Chinese government to exert its control over Mongolia.

Chinese troops were forcibly withdrawn from Mongolia after the defeat by the White Russian army in 1919. With the assistance of the Soviet Union, a small group of Mongolian revolutionaries seized power in Mongolia and established the new regime that Mongolia was under the direct control of both the Russians and the Mongolians. Finally, the third historical period began in 1945 and ended in 1946. During this period, the Yalta Conference directly addressed the issue of the sovereignty of Mongolia and recognized that China no longer had control over Mongolia.

3. Research Method

This paper utilized the process-tracing method to deeply explore the historical development of Mongolia's independence. The process-tracing method enables us to examine different factors that led to Mongolian independence. In addition, in order to preserve the impartiality and the accuracy of the historical research, this paper used academic sources and historical writings from English, Chinese, Russian (in translation) and Mongolian (in translation).

4. The Brief History of the Sino-Mongolia Relations During Qing Dynasty

In order to understand the process leading to Mongolia's independence, it is important to introduce the historical background of Sino-Mongolia relations during the Qing Dynasty. Before the Qing dynasty was formally established in 1644, the geographic proximity enabled the Manchurians, who wielded unlimited power during the Qing Dynasty, to have deep interactions with the Mongolian people. In 1619, the Manchurians fought with the Mongolian tribes against the Ming Empire. The first ruler of the Qing Empire, Nurhaci, established a formal alliance with one of the Mongolian tribes, Khalkha. With the assistance of Khalkha, Nurhaci conquered one of the important cities of the Ming Dynasty, called Shenyang (Soni, n.d.). In the process of conquering the Ming Empire, the Manchurian alliance with Mongolians made huge contributions to winning the war against the Ming Empire.

After the Manchurians achieved several victories in their battles with the Ming Empire, the Manchurian regime steadily stabilized. In the meantime, the Manchurian elites realized that without subjugating the Mongolians, they could not properly invade mainland China. Furthermore, after the beginning of the 17th century, the Mongolian Empire was split into several princedoms, which were hostile to each other, the Manchurians then decided to provoke internal conflicts against the princedoms (Bawden & Sanders, 2002). In 1632, under the leadership of Nurhaci's descendant, Abahai, Manchurians initiated various attacks on Mongolians. Mongolia's leader at the time, Lingden Khan, was defeated by the Manchurians in 1634. He fled to Qinghai Province afterward (Baabar & C Kaplonski, 2005). Following this victory, most of the Mongolian princedoms were conquered by the Manchurians. However, conflicts still ensued among the remaining princedoms. Not until 1691, was the Chinese emperor recognized as the great Khan by the Mongolians. This occurred after the Qing Empire responded to a request from the Khalkha regime and were then defeated Galdan Boshigt. Afterward, the whole Mongolian region was formally annexed under the control of the Qing Empire Soni, n.d.).

After Mongolia formally merged with the Chinese empire, in order to strengthen Chinese domination, the Chinese government granted a series of privileges to Mongolian nobles. This included allowing Chinese princesses to marry Mongolian elites, giving Mongolians tremendous economic benefits, and protecting the religious rights of monks in Mongolia (Hai, 2009). Before the Russian empire expanded its sphere of influence to East Asia, the reign of the Qing Empire in Mongolia was peaceful and stable.

5. From the Late 19th Century to 1911: Russia's Intervention and the Collapse of the Qing Empire

In 1842, after the Qing Empire was defeated by the British in the First Opium War, China started undergoing what is called the "Century of Humiliation". China lost a series of wars against other great powers (Exeter, 2019). During this period, the world's great powers forced China to sign many unequal treaties, which severely weakened the reign of the Qing Empire, especially along its border areas.

Due to the weakening of the Qing Empire, Russia began to expand its sphere of influence in Mongolia and attempted to take the area out of China's control. This became one of the major factors in the push toward Mongolia's independence. By signing a series of unequal treaties with Beijing, the Russian

Empire achieved many commercial and economic benefits in Mongolia. For example, in 1860, China and Russia signed the Treaty of Peking. According to this treaty, Russia was allowed access to extensive commercial privileges and trading opportunities in Mongolia. Russia was allowed to establish a consulate in Kunlun city, which provided Russia an opportunity to engage in spy-related activities in the region (Zhang, 2019). In 1862, China and Russia signed the Sino-Russian Overland Trade Charter. Through this Charter, Russia was granted the privilege of engaging in business activities in Mongolia without the imposition of any tariffs (Hai, 2009). As a result, this privilege allowed Russia to expand its influence in Mongolia by utilizing its economic status most efficiently. Russia also enlarged its sphere of influence in Mongolia by enhancing its relationship with Mongolia's upper class and established extensive bribery-related networks. When the leader of Mongolia, Jebuzundamba, the leading monarch, was still a child, the Russian counsel often presented gifts to him, which served to cultivate Jebuzanbamda as a friend and ally of Russia (Fan, 2015). Based on this close relationship that Mongolian leadership had with Russia, the Mongolian government always promoted a positive image of Russia and directly conveyed pro-Russian sentiment to the Mongolian people. Over a period, with Russia's assistance, the Mongolian leaders sought autonomy and then established a regime that was favorable to Russia (Li, 2006).

Furthermore, a major mistake of the Qing Empire was to move a significant number of Han Chinese to Mongolia and then reduced the privileges previously afforded to the Mongolians. This accelerated disengagement of Mongolia from China. When the Qing Empire was established, the Chinese government was highly focused on maintaining a stable relationship with the Mongolian elites. However, following the incursions from other countries, Chinese economic growth rapidly deteriorated. As a result, the Chinese government not only reduced many of Mongolia's economic benefits but also extracted more wealth from the region. In the late 19th century, except for general excise taxes, the Chinese government also forcibly collected more cattle, sheep, and tobacco from Mongolia to improve Beijing's financial situation. This created an onerous burden on the Mongolians (Zhang, 2019). In addition, the Chinese government forced the Mongolian ruling class to pay back the debt that Mongolia owed to China. This forced the ruling class to impose stringent economic measures on the Mongolian people (Hai, 2009). Therefore, these harsh economic measures led to increased animosity and hostility between Mongolia and China.

In order to improve economic growth, the Chinese government started encouraging many Han Chinese to move to Mongolia to reclaim uncultivated land. This caused several regions of Mongolia to become farming areas. The Mongolians felt their living areas were shrinking by this policy of the Chinese government. Besides this, the Chinese government set up special zones for Han Chinese in Mongolia under the direct jurisdiction of the central government that would be taxed by Beijing directly. Thus, the economic benefits of the Mongolian ruling class were impaired (Zhang, 2019). Jebuzanbamda expressed the complaints of Mongolian people to Beijing directly. Most Mongolians considered that the Qing Empire was trying to destroy the traditional way of living of the Mongolian people and thereby depriving

the Mongolians of their autonomy and sovereignty (Zlatskin, 1972). All these disparate factors led to the determination of the Mongolians to separate from China and sought independence.

In the early 20th century, due to a series of rebellions, the Qing government had to utilize more resources to suppress the revolutions. In 1911, following the Xinhai revolution, several southern provinces in China claimed independence from the Qing Empire, which distracted the Chinese from recognizing the internal animosity within Mongolia towards Chinese rule. Consequently, the Mongolian ruling class began to seek independence from China while the Qing Empire spiraled downward (Zhang, 2019). Russia also realized that this would be the best opportunity to get Mongolia out of China's control during this turbulent time during the Xinhai revolution. Thus, after the outbreak of the Xinhai Revolution, the Russian foreign minister to China immediately delivered a message to the Mongolian ruling class that, due to the internal unrest in China, it was the right time for Mongolia to seek independence. Russia then privately aided Mongolia's opposition to the Qing Empire (Fan, 2015). In the spring of 1911, the Mongolian ruling class delivered a letter to St. Petersburg, specifically, asking for arms and economic assistance against potential Chinese military intervention at repressing Mongolia's independence. In exchange, Mongolia agreed to grant Russia various significant economic interests in this country.

Following the Wuchang uprising of 1911, by the leadership of Jebtsundamba, Tögs-Ochiryn Namnansüren and other Mongolian nobles, a provisional government was established in November 1911. Mongolia was controlled by this new provisional government (Zhang, 2019). After the defeat of the Qing Empire by the Chinese revolutionary forces, the Qing army, which was stationed in Mongolia did not launch any large military operations in reaction to the establishment of the provisional government. Simultaneously, senior army officials of the Qing government, which were stationed in Mongolia, peacefully withdrew from the region (Burdukov, 1969). As a result, on December 1, 1911, the provisional government issued a general proclamation of independence. The Xinhai rebellion accelerated the collapse of the Qing Empire, so Mongolians decided to establish a new nation based on Mongolian traditional values. Simultaneously, Jebtsundamba Khutuktu was installed as the Bodg Khan (Fan, 2015).

6. From 1912 to 1920s: The Power Bargain of Mongolia Between China and Russia

In 1912, the Qing Empire was replaced by the new Chinese regime, the Republic of China. Even though the Mongolians claimed their independence, the new Chinese government refused to recognize the sovereignty of Bodg Khan's regime. One of the political ambitions of the president of the Republic of China, Sun Zhongshan, was building a harmonious country among the five Chinese major ethnic groups. Mongolia was an indispensable part of this plan. In order to ensure Mongolia was an indivisible part of China, the Chinese government made several political statements to exercise its sovereignty over the region (Chang, 2010). In 1912, Russia sent its Chinese ambassador to China to negotiate the issue of Mongolia's autonomy. The Chinese government not only refused Russia's proposal but also emphasized that the Mongolian issue was solely part of China's domestic affairs and should not be interfered with by any foreign power (Co-ed., 1958). In August 1912, the Chinese government proclaimed the Regulations

on Treatment in Mongolia. According to the Regulations, the new Chinese government would grant the Mongolian ruling class more economic interests, but the sovereignty of Mongolia would not be recognized (Chang, 2010). While China was seeking to reintegrate Mongolia through a policy of appeasement, it also planned to take Mongolia back by force, if necessary. However, due to concerns of potential Russian threat, the new regime dared not to engage in military action (Chang, 2010).

Initially, Russia refused to recognize Mongolia as an independent country, because regarding possible interests that other countries had in China, especially Japan (Chang, 2010). Nevertheless, in 1912, after Russia signed the secret treaty with Japan that guaranteed Russia's interests in Mongolia, Russia and Mongolia signed the Russia-Mongol Treaty in November, which granted Russia a series of commercial rights as well as Russia's right to intervene Mongolian politics (Choibalsan, 1956). The Chinese were annoyed and upset by this treaty. In order to oppose Russia's expansion into Mongolia, the Chinese government started to openly oppose Russia's commodities trading and then accused Russia of violating Chinese sovereignty. Nevertheless, in 1913, a series of internal conflicts broke out within the Chinese government. Based on the situation, Russia directly contacted one of the Chinese most powerful leaders, Yuan Shikai. Russia promised Yuan that St. Petersburg could recognize Yuan's legitimacy of ruling China and would give him economic assistance in order to win the particular power bargain. However, in exchange, Yuan's regime needed to recognize Russia's economic interests in Mongolia (Zhao, 2000). Yuan Shikai decided to accept Russia's offer. Therefore, in November 1912, the Chinese government of Yuan Shikai and Russia signed the Sino-Russia Statement. This treaty recognized China's nominally sovereignty over Mongolia. However, the Chinese government had to respect the Russia-Mongol Treaty of 1912 and recognized the autonomy of Mongolia (Liu, 1986). After signing the treaty, the Chinese government paid more attention to their internal power structure within China.

During WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution of Russia, the Chinese government seized the opportunity to take back Mongolia. In 1918, while Russia was engaged in civil war, the Chinese government dispatched general Xu Shuzheng to lead an army into Mongolia. Without Russia's assistance, Bodg Khan's regime realized that they could not stop the Chinese army on their own. Thus, the Mongolian government had to acquiesce to the Chinese army entering Kulun. In the summer of 1919, the Chinese government held a negotiation regarding the cancellation of Mongolia's autonomy in Kulun. During this discussion, the Mongolian parliament insisted on keeping the autonomy rights. However, the Chinese government threatened Mongolia with force. Consequently, in November 1919, Bodg Khan approved the treaty, abandoning Mongolia's autonomy (Zhao, 2000).

However, only one year after the Chinese government regained control over Mongolia, China once again lost effective control. After Yuan Shikai's death in 1916, mainland China was falling into a civil war among various warlords. When the war broke out, General Xu Shuzheng had to pull most of his forces out of Mongolia. Only three thousand Chinese troops stayed in Kulun under the leadership of Zhu Qixiang and Gao Zaitian (Wang & Li, 2009). Concurrently, in 1920, a small contingent of forces controlled by the White Russian military, under the leadership of Semyonov, Ungern-Sternberg, and

several Japanese military advisors, crossed into Mongolia. With financial and military support from Japan, Semyonov and Ungern-Sternberg were seeking to establish a new regime in Mongolia to fight against the Red Army (Wang & Li, 2009). From December 1920 to February 1921, a sequence of fierce conflicts broke out between Chinese troops and the Russian White army in Kulun. Since the white army had superior weapons and troops over China, the Chinese army was easily defeated. The remaining Chinese forces had to withdraw from Mongolia surely after. On February 4, Kulun was fully occupied by the White Army. Under the control of Ungern-Sternburg, Bodg Khan became the nominal top monarch of Mongolia once again and reclaimed Mongolia's independence in 1921(Wang & Li, 2009).

On the other hand, after the Bolshevik achieved victory in the Russian civil war, the Soviet government also hoped to expand its sphere of influence to Mongolia. In 1920, through the help of the Communist International, a small group of Mongolian communist revolutionaries, led by Sükhbaatar and Choibalsan, entered Mongolia in order to subvert Ungern-Sternburg's regime. However, after the revolutionaries arrived in Mongolia, the White Russian Army had rapidly expanded to 20,000. After realizing the urgent situation, the Mongolian revolutionaries, Sükhbaatar and Choibalsan, cannot defeat Ungern-Sternburg on their own. Therefore, in November 1920, Sükhbaatar and Choibalsan, asked the Soviet's government to dispatch the Red Army to Mongolia directly. In March 1921, the red army crossed the Mongolian border to unilaterally assist the Mongolian revolutionaries. The White Army was crushed in July with the military assistance provided by the Soviet Union. The new Mongolian government was established in the same month. On August 10, 1921, the Soviet Union declared that the Red Army would stay in Mongolia until the remaining White army was wiped out completely. Mongolia was under Russia's control again (Wang & Li, 2009).

Since the Soviet Union was isolated from the international world order and sought to get China's help to defend against any potential invasion by Japan, the Soviets pursued a friendly relationship with the Chinese government. Therefore, the Soviet's government made several public statements to convince the Chinese government that the Red Army would withdraw from Mongolia and would return the regions' control to China immediately after the remaining enemy was destroyed (Wang, 2019). Furthermore, in 1924, both countries signed the Agreement on Settlement of Outstanding Issues between China and Russia. In this agreement, the Soviet government emphasized Chinese sovereignty over Mongolia and reassured that the Soviet Union would move troops out of Mongolia as soon as possible (Sun, 1999). Nevertheless, under the table, the Soviet Union signed the Agreement On Diplomatic Relations between the Soviet Union and Mongolia, which recognized Sükhbaatar and Choibalsan's regime as the only legitimate government of Mongolia. Both governments established formal diplomatic relations, established consulates, and sent ambassadors to each country (Wang & Li, 2009). After 1924, China was getting engaged into a civil war again, then Japan invaded China in the early 1930s. The Chinese government pivoted attention from Mongolia's region over the next two decades. Without Chinese opposition, the Soviet Union deeply enhanced its control and influence over Mongolia (Sun, 1999).

7. From 1945 to 1946: The Yalta Conference and the Republic of China's formal Recognition of Mongolia's Sovereignty

From the mid-1920s to the end of WWII, China underwent a series of catastrophic wars, so the Chinese government did not have adequate capabilities to bargain with the Soviet Union over the Mongolian issue. However, Mongolia was still nominally part of China. Not until 1945, during the Yalta Conference did Mongolia's sovereignty resurface between China and the Soviet Union.

In 1945, before the Yalta Conference, WWII was nearing its end. Only two months after the Yalta Conference, both Germany and Italy surrendered. However, Japan still insisted on fighting against the Allies. Based on the estimation of the United States, the U.S. troops still needed to fight an extra 18 months to defeat Japan even after Nazi Germany surrendered. At least 1 million American soldiers would die in battle. Therefore, before the nuclear weapons were successfully used by the United States, Washington had the urgent need for the Soviet Union to attack Japan as part of the second front (W Averell Harriman, 2007). Stalin accepted America's request to attack Japan. In exchange, he needed the United States to accept several of his demands. One of the demands of Stalin was to preserve the status quo of Mongolia. In other words, because Mongolia's practical control was already held by the Soviet Union and Mongolia already, China needed to recognize Mongolia's independence (Zhao, 2000). In Stalin's opinion, Mongolia had geopolitical importance. Once China controlled Mongolia, it could easily cut through the trans-Siberian railroads of Russia, which severely threatened the Soviet Union's project capabilities from Europe to Asia. On the other hand, if Mongolia was controlled by the Soviet Union, Russia could rapidly deploy its troops to China's Xinjiang province and invade the political center of northern China most efficiently (You, 2015). Therefore, it was crucial for the Soviet Union to maintain a pro-Russia regime in Mongolia. Although the United States worried about increasing the Soviet Union's expansion, for the purpose of quickly ending the war, Roosevelt had to accept all of Stalin's demands. Because Roosevelt worried that Stalin's demands might discourage China from fighting Japan, he planned to not leak the content of the agreement finalized as part of the Yalta Conference until Japan surrendered. However, American Ambassador to China, Patrick J. Hurley, over Roosevelt's objection, informed the Chinese government of the agreement between the Soviet Union and America in advance (You, 2015). The Chinese President, Chiang Kai-shek, was shocked by the agreement between Stalin and Roosevelt. He realized that if Mongolia was to be recognized as an independent nation, it would lead to a nationalist backlash that would threaten his power. On the other hand, this issue would also bring about extra obstacles for China to defeat the remaining Japanese troops. Therefore, Chiang Kai-shek sent a message to the Chinese ambassador in America immediately, hoping the ambassador would convince the new American president, Truman, to withdraw from the agreement (Wu, 1998, p. 463). Yet, Truman made it clear that he would not go back on the agreement that was finalized during the Yalta Conference, since the United States still needed the help of the Soviet Union to crush Japan. Instead, he suggested the Chinese government immediately hold unilateral negotiation with the Soviet Union in order to bargain for complete control over the Chinese territories.

On July 27, 1945, a group of Chinese senior officials went to Moscow to negotiate regarding Stalin's various demands in the Yalta Conference, and the Mongolian sovereignty issue was the top priority. In Chiang Kai-shek's opinion, China could accept Mongolia's autonomy over Mongolia, but this region still needed some nominal control by China (You, 2015). Even though the United States did not interfere in the negotiations, the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union messaged the Chinese government that Washington hoped China would immediately accept all conditions imposed by the Soviet Union since America was facing large pressures against Japan. At the beginning of the negotiations, both China and Russia could not come to a compromise about the Mongolian issue. The Chinese government highly emphasized that losing Mongolia was unacceptable for the Chinese on an emotional level. The Soviet Union claimed that maintaining an independent Mongolia was extremely important for the Soviet geopolitical security (Taylor & Lin, 2012).

Finally, because of both American and Soviet demands, Chiang Kai-shek had to abandon his initial stance. Nevertheless, Chiang Kai-shek asked Stalin to compromise on several other issues. After Japan was defeated, the Soviet Union needed to recognize Kuomintang (Chiang's party)'s sovereignty and integrity over Manchuria. The Soviet Union could not provide any arms or financial support to the Chinese communist party. Mongolia's independence had to be decided by a referendum of the Mongolian people (Sun, 1999). Besides this, the stability of Chiang Kai-shek's regime was imperative due to China's engagement with Japan. Stalin promised that he would not raise the Mongolian issue in public until the war was over. Based on these agreements, China and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Friendship and Alliances on August 14, 1945 (Wang, 1990). As a result, on October 20, 1945, more than 90 percent of the Mongolian people voted for independence in the referendum. In January 1946, the Chinese government formally recognized Mongolia's independence. After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the new government formally recognized the treaty's legitimacy (You, 2015). In the end, China lost the bargain of power with Russia over the Mongolian region.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this report discussed how Mongolia achieved its independence from China through the perspective of the power bargain between China and Russia. Three important historical periods were analyzed and explored. From the late 19th century, by signing different treaties with China, Russia rapidly expanded its sphere of influence over Mongolia. Gradually, Mongolian ruling class became Russia's ally. On the other hand, the Chinese government mishandled the policy towards Mongolia, which made Mongolia feel that their autonomy was being threatened. As a result, Mongolia was more hostile to the Qing Empire. By 1911, the Xinhai Revolution had broken out, Mongolia began its independence path with the assistance of Russia. From 1912 to the 1920s, China took back Mongolia for a short time. However, because of the Chinese civil war that broke out in 1916, most of the troops that deployed to Mongolia were pulled out, which caused the remaining troops to be crushed by the Russian White Army. Simultaneously, a small number of Mongolian revolutionaries that were supported by the Soviet Union

defeated the White Army and established a new regime. In order to appease China, the Soviet Union still recognized Mongolia as part of China, but secretly established diplomatic relations with Mongolia. Finally, from 1945 to 1946, due to the exigent need of the United States to ensure the Soviets' help to defeat Japan, the American government accepted all Stalin's demands in the Yalta Conference. Maintaining Mongolia's independence was one of Stalin's demands. Under the Soviet and America's pressure, Chiang Kai-shek had to make concessions regarding the Mongolia issue. After Mongolia's referendum in 1945, the Chinese government formally recognized the independence of Mongolia.

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